

STARTLING

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*She noticed the change
in her husband—
but she had married for
better or worse!*

HUMAN IS

By **PHILIP K. DICK**

JILL HERRICK'S blue eyes filled with tears. She gazed at her husband in unspeakable horror. "You're—you're hideous!" she wailed.

Lester Herrick continued working, arranging heaps of notes and graphs in precise piles.

"Hideous," he stated, "is a value judgment. It contains no factual in-

formation." He sent a report tape on Centauran parasitic life whizzing through the desk scanner. "Merely an opinion. An expression of emotion, nothing more."

Jill stumbled back to the kitchen. Listlessly, she waved her hand to trip the stove into activity. Conveyor belts in the wall hummed to life, hurrying

food from the underground storage lockers for the evening meal.

She turned to face her husband one last time. "Not for even a *little* while?" she begged. "Not even—"

"Not even for a month. When he comes you can tell him. If you haven't the courage, I'll do it. I can't have a child running around here. I have too much work to do. This report on Betelgeuse XI is due in ten days." Lester dropped a spool on Fomalhautan fossil implements into the scanner. "What's the matter with your brother? Why can't he take care of his own child?"

Jill dabbed at swollen eyes. "Don't you understand? I *want* Gus here! I begged Frank to let him come. And now you—"

"I'll be glad when he's old enough to be turned over to the Government." Lester's thin face twisted in annoyance. "Damn it, Jill, isn't dinner ready yet? It's been ten minutes! What's wrong with that stove?"

"It's almost ready." The stove showed a red signal light. The robant waiter had come out of the wall and was waiting expectantly to take the food.

Jill sat down and blew her small nose violently. In the living room, Lester worked on unperturbed. His work. His research. Day after day. Lester was getting ahead; there was no doubt of that. His lean body was bent like a coiled spring over the tape scanner, cold gray eyes taking in the information feverishly, analyzing, appraising, his conceptual faculties operating like well-greased machinery.

Jill's lips trembled in misery and resentment. Gus—little Gus. How could she tell him? Fresh tears welled up in her eyes. Never to see the chubby little fellow again. He could never come back—because his childish laughter and play bothered Lester. Interfered with his research.

The stove clicked to green. The food slid out, into the arms of the robant. Soft chimes sounded to announce dinner.

"I hear it," Lester grated. He snapped off the scanner and got to his feet. "I suppose he'll come while we're eating."

"I can vid Frank and ask—"

"No. Might as well get it over with." Lester nodded impatiently to the robant. "All right. Put it down." His thin lips set in an angry line. "Damn it, don't dawdle! I want to get back to my work!"

Jill bit back the tears.

LITTLE GUS came trailing into the house as they were finishing dinner.

Jill gave a cry of joy. "Gussie!" She ran to sweep him up in her arms. "I'm so glad to see you!"

"Watch out for my tiger," Gus muttered. He dropped his little gray kitten onto the rug and it rushed off, under the couch. "He's hiding."

Lester's eyes flickered as he studied the little boy and the tip of gray tail extending from under the couch. "Why do you call it a tiger? It's nothing but an alley cat."

Gus looked hurt. He scowled. "He's a tiger. He's got stripes."

"Tigers are yellow, and a great deal bigger. You might as well learn to classify things by their correct names."

"Lester, please—" Jill pleaded.

"Be quiet," her husband said crossly. "Gus is old enough to shed childish illusions and develop a realistic orientation. What's wrong with the psych testers? Don't they straighten this sort of nonsense out?"

Gus ran and snatched up his tiger. "You leave him alone!"

Lester contemplated the kitten. A strange, cold smile played about his lips. "Come down to the lab some time, Gus. We'll show you lots of cats. We use them in our research. Cats, guinea pigs, rabbits—"

"Lester!" Jill gasped. "How can you!"

Lester laughed thinly. Abruptly he broke off and returned to his desk. "Now clear out of here. I have to finish these reports. And don't forget to tell Gus."

Gus got excited. "Tell me what?" His cheeks flushed. His eyes sparkled. "What is it? Something for me? A secret?"

Jill's heart was like lead. She put her hand heavily on the child's shoulder. "Come on, Gus. We'll go sit out in the garden and I'll tell you. Bring—bring your tiger."

A click. The emergency vidsender lit up. Instantly Lester was on his feet. "Be quiet!" He ran to the sender, breathing rapidly. "Nobody speak!"

Jill and Gus paused at the door. A confidential message was sliding from the slot into the dish. Lester grabbed it up and broke the seal. He studied it intently.

"What is it?" Jill asked. "Anything bad?"

"Bad?" Lester's face shone with a deep inner glow. "No, not bad at all." He glanced at his watch. "Just time. Let's see, I'll need—"

"What is it?"

"I'm going on a trip. I'll be gone two or three weeks. Rexor IV is into the charted area."

"Rexor IV? You're going there?" Jill clasped her hands eagerly. "Oh, I've always wanted to see an old system, old ruins and cities! Lester, can I come along? Can I go with you? We never took a vacation, and you always promised—"

Lester Herrick stared at his wife in amazement. "You?" he said. "You go along?" He laughed unpleasantly. "Now hurry and get my things together. I've been waiting for this a long time." He rubbed his hands together in satisfaction. "You can keep the boy here until I'm back. But no longer. Rexor IV! I can hardly wait!"

"YOU have to make allowances," Frank said. "After all, he's a scientist."

"I don't care," Jill said. "I'm leaving him. As soon as he gets back from Rexor IV. I've made up my mind."

Her brother was silent, deep in thought. He stretched his feet out, onto

the lawn of the little garden. "Well, if you leave him you'll be free to marry again. You're still classed as sexually adequate, aren't you?"

Jill nodded firmly. "You bet I am. I wouldn't have any trouble. Maybe I can find somebody who likes children."

"You think a lot of children," Frank perceived. "Gus loves to go visit you. But he doesn't like Lester. Les needles him."

"I know. This past week has been heaven, with him gone." Jill patted her soft blonde hair, blushing prettily. "I've had fun. Makes me feel alive again."

"When'll he be back?"

"Any day." Jill clenched her small fists. "We've been married five years and every year it's worse. He's so—so inhuman. Utterly cold and ruthless. Him and his work. Day and night."

"Les is ambitious. He wants to get to the top in his field." Frank lit a cigarette lazily. "A pusher. Well, maybe he'll do it. What's he in?"

"Toxicology. He works out new poisons for Military. He invented the copper sulphate skin-lime they used against Callisto."

"It's a small field. Now take me." Frank leaned contentedly against the wall of the house. "There are thousands of Clearance lawyers. I could work for years and never create a ripple. I'm content just to be. I do my job. I enjoy it."

"I wish Lester felt that way."

"Maybe he'll change."

"He'll *never* change," Jill said bitterly. "I know that, now. That's why I've made up my mind to leave him. He'll always be the same."

LESTER HERRICK came back from Rexor IV a different man.

Beaming happily, he deposited his anti-grav suitcase in the arms of the waiting robot. "Thank you," he smiled. "Thank you."

Jill gaped speechlessly. "Les! What—"

Lester removed his hat, bowing a little. "Good day, my dear. You're

looking lovely. Your eyes are clear and blue. Sparkling like some virgin lake, fed by mountain streams." He sniffed. "Do I smell a delicious repast warming on the hearth?"

"Oh, Lester." Jill blinked uncertainly, faint hope swelling in her bosom. "Lester, what's happened to you? You're so—so different."

"Am I, my dear?" Lester moved about the house, touching things and sighing. "What a dear little house. So sweet and friendly. You don't know how wonderful it is to be here. Believe me."

"I'm afraid to believe it," Jill said.

"Believe what?"

"That you mean all this. That you're not the way you were. The way you've always been."

"What way is that?"

"Mean. Mean and cruel."

"I?" Lester frowned, rubbing his lip. "Hmm. Interesting." He brightened. "Well, that's all in the past. What's for dinner? I'm faint with hunger."

Jill eyed him uncertainly as she moved into the kitchen. "Anything you want, Lester. You know our stove covers the maximum select-list."

"Of course." Lester coughed rapidly. "Well, shall we try sirloin steak, medium, smothered in onions? With mushroom sauce. And white rolls. With hot coffee. Perhaps ice cream and apple pie for dessert."

"You never seemed to care much about food," Jill said thoughtfully.

"Oh?"

"You always said you hoped eventually they'd make intravenous intake universally applicable." She studied her husband intently. "Lester, what's happened?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all." Lester carelessly took his pipe out and lit it rapidly, somewhat awkwardly. Bits of tobacco drifted to the rug. He bent nervously down and tried to pick them up again. "Please go about your tasks and don't mind me. Perhaps I can help you prepare—that is, can I do anything to help?"

"No," Jill said. "I can do it. You

go ahead with your work, if you want."

"Work?"

"Your research. In toxins."

"Toxins!" Lester showed confusion. "Well, for heaven's sake! Toxins. Devil take it!"

"What, dear?"

"I mean, I really feel too tired, just now. I'll work later." Lester moved vaguely around the room. "I think I'll just sit and enjoy being home again. Off that awful Rexor IV."

"Was it awful?"

"Horrible." A spasm of disgust crossed Lester's face. "Dry and dead. Ancient. Squeezed to a pulp by wind and sun. A dreadful place, my dear."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I always wanted to visit it."

"Heaven forbid!" Lester cried feelingly. "You stay right here, my dear. With me. The—the two of us." His eyes wandered about the room. "Two, yes. Terra is a wonderful planet. Moist and full of life." He beamed happily. "Just right."

"I DON'T understand it," Jill said.

"Repeat all the things you remember," Frank said. His robot pencil poised itself alertly. "The changes you've noticed in him. I'm curious."

"Why?"

"No reason. Go on. You say you sensed it right away? That he was different?"

"I noticed it at once. The expression on his face. Not that hard, practical look. A sort of mellow look. Relaxed. Tolerant. A sort of calmness."

"I see," Frank said. "What else?"

Jill peered nervously through the back door into the house. "He can't hear us, can he?"

"No. He's inside playing with Gus. In the living room. They're Venusian otter-men, today. Your husband built an otter slide down at his lab. I saw him unwrapping it."

"His talk."

"His what?"

"The way he talks. His choice of

words. Words he never used before. Whole new phrases. Metaphors. I never heard him use a metaphor in all our five years together. He said metaphors were inexact. Misleading. And —

"And what?" The pencil scratched busily.

"And they're *strange* words. Old words. Words you don't hear any more."

"Archaic phraseology?" Frank asked tensely.

"Yes." Jill paced back and forth across the small lawn, her hands in the pockets of her plastic shorts. "Formal words. Like something—"

"Something out of a book?"

"Exactly! You've noticed it?"

"I noticed it." Frank's face was grim. "Go on."

Jill stopped pacing. "What's on your mind? Do you have a theory?"

"I want to know more facts."

She reflected. "He plays. With Gus. He plays and jokes. And he—he eats."

"Didn't he eat before?"

"Not like he does now. Now he *loves* food. He goes in the kitchen and tries endless combinations. He and the stove get together and cook up all sorts of weird things."

"I thought he'd put on weight."

"He's gained ten pounds. He eats, smiles and laughs. He's constantly polite." Jill glanced away coyly. "He's even—romantic! He always said *that* was irrational. And he's not interested in his work. His research in toxins."

"I see." Frank chewed his lip. "Anything more?"

"One thing puzzles me very much. I've noticed it again and again."

"What is it?"

"He seems to have strange lapses of—"

A burst of laughter. Lester Herrick, eyes bright with merriment, came rushing out of the house, little Gus close behind.

"We have an announcement!" Lester cried.

"An anounzelmen," Gus echoed.

Frank folded his notes up and slid them into his coat pocket. The pencil hurried after them. He got slowly to his feet. "What is it?"

"You make it," Lester said, taking little Gus' hand and leading him forward.

Gus' plump face screwed up in concentration. "I'm going to come live with you," he stated. Anxiously he watched Jill's expression. "Lester says I can. Can I? Can I, Aunt Jill?"

Her heart flooded with incredible joy. She glanced from Gus to Lester. "Do you—do you really mean it?" Her voice was almost inaudible.

Lester put his arm around her, holding her close to him. "Of course we mean it," he said gently. His eyes were warm and understanding. "We wouldn't tease you, my dear."

"No teasing!" Gus shouted excitedly. "No more teasing!" He and Lester and Jill drew close together. "Never again!"

Frank stood a little way off, his face grim. Jill noticed him and broke away abruptly. "What is it?" she faltered. "Is anything—"

"When you're quite finished," Frank said to Lester Herrick, "I'd like you to come with me."

A chill clutched Jill's heart. "What is it? Can't I come, too?"

Frank shook his head. He moved toward Lester ominously. "Come on, Herrick. Let's go. You and I are going to take a little trip."

THE three Federal Clearance Agents took up positions a few feet from Lester Herrick, vibro-tubes gripped alertly.

Clearance Director Douglas studied Herrick for a long time. "You're sure?" he said finally.

"Absolutely," Frank stated.

"When did he get back from Rexor IV?"

"A week ago."

"And the change was noticeable at once?"

"His wife noticed it as soon as she saw him. There's no doubt it occurred

on Rexor." Frank paused significantly. "And you know what that means."

"I know." Douglas walked slowly around the seated man, examining him from every angle.

Lester Herrick sat quietly, his coat neatly folded across his knee. He rested his hands on his ivory-topped cane, his face calm and expressionless. He wore a soft gray suit, a subdued necktie, French cuffs, and shiny black shoes. He said nothing.

"Their methods are simple and exact," Douglas said. "The original psychic contents are removed and stored—in some sort of suspension. The injection of the substitute contents is instantaneous. Lester Herrick was probably poking around the Rexor city ruins, ignoring the safety precautions—shield or manual screen—and they got him."

The seated man stirred. "I'd like very much to communicate with Jill," he murmured. "She surely is becoming anxious."

Frank turned away, face choked with revulsion. "God. It's still pretending."

Director Douglas restrained himself with the greatest effort. "It's certainly an amazing thing. No physical changes. You could look at it and never know." He moved toward the seated man, his face hard. "Listen to me, whatever you call yourself. Can you understand what I say?"

"Of course," Lester Herrick answered.

"Did you really think you'd get away with it? We caught the others—the ones before you. All ten of them. Even before they got here." Douglas grinned coldly. "Vibro-rayed them one after another."

The color left Lester Herrick's face. Sweat came out on his forehead. He wiped it away with a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket. "Oh?" he murmured.

"You're not fooling us. All Terra is alerted for you Rexorians. I'm surprised you got off Rexor at all. Herrick must have been extremely careless. We

stopped the others aboard ship. Fried them out in deep space."

"Herrick had a private ship," the seated man murmured. "He by-passed the check station going in. No record of his arrival existed. He was never checked."

"Fry it!" Douglas grated. The three Clearance agents lifted their tubes, moving forward.

"No." Frank shook his head. "We can't. It's a bad situation."

"What do you mean? Why can't we? We fried the others—"

"They were caught in deep space. This is Terra. Terran law, not military law, applies." Frank waved toward the seated man. "And it's in a human body. It comes under regular civil laws. We've got to *prove* it's not Lester Herrick—that it's a Rexorian infiltrator. It's going to be tough. But it can be done."

"How?"

"His wife. Herrick's wife. Her testimony. Jill Herrick can assert the difference between Lester Herrick and this thing. She knows—and I think we can make it stand up in court."

IT WAS late afternoon. Frank drove his surface cruiser slowly along. Neither he nor Jill spoke.

"So that's it," Jill said at last. Her face was gray. Her eyes dry and bright, without emotion. "I knew it was too good to be true." She tried to smile. "It seemed so wonderful."

"I know," Frank said. "It's a terrible damn thing. If only—"

"Why?" Jill said. "Why did he—did it do this? Why did it take Lester's body?"

"Rexor IV is old. Dead. A dying planet. Life is dying out."

"I remember, now. He—it said something like that. Something about Rexor. That it was glad to get away."

"The Rexorians are an old race. The few that remain are feeble. They've been trying to migrate for centuries. But their bodies are too weak. Some tried to migrate to Venus—and died instantly. They worked out this system

about a century ago."

"But it knows so much. About us. It speaks our language."

"Not quite. The changes you mentioned. The odd diction. You see, the Rexorians have only a vague knowledge of human beings. A sort of ideal abstraction, taken from Terran objects that have found their way to Rexor. Books, mostly. Secondary data like that. The Rexorian idea of Terra is based on centuries-old Terran literature. Romantic novels from our past. Language, custom, manners from old Terran books.

"That accounts for the strange archaic quality to it. It had studied Terra, all right. But in an indirect and misleading way." Frank grinned wryly. "The Rexorians are two hundred years behind the times—which is a break for us. That's how we're able to detect them."

"Is this sort of thing—common? Does it happen often? It seems unbelievable." Jill rubbed her forehead wearily. "Dreamlike. It's hard to realize that it's actually happened. I'm just beginning to understand what it means."

"The galaxy is full of alien life-forms. Parasitic and destructive entities. Terran ethics don't extend to them. We have to guard constantly against this sort of thing. Lester went in unsuspectingly—and this thing ousted him and took over his body."

Frank glanced at his sister. Jill's face was expressionless. A stern little face, wide-eyed, but composed. She sat up straight, staring fixedly ahead, her small hands folded quietly in her lap.

"We can arrange it so you won't have to actually appear in court," Frank went on. "You can vid a statement and it'll be presented as evidence. I'm certain your statement will do it. The Federal courts will help us all they can, but they have to have *some* evidence to go on."

Jill was silent.

"What do you say?" Frank asked.

"What happens after the court makes its decision?"

"Then we vibro-ray it. Destroy the Rexorian mind. A Terran patrol ship

on Rexor IV sends out a party to locate the—er—original contents."

Jill gasped. She turned toward her brother in amazement. "You mean—"

"Oh, yes. Lester is alive. In suspension, somewhere on Rexor. In one of the old city ruins. We'll have to force them to give him up. They won't want to, but they'll do it. They've done it before. Then he'll be back with you. Safe and sound. Just like before. And this horrible nightmare you've been living will be a thing of the past."

"I see."

"Here we are." The cruiser pulled to halt before the imposing Federal Clearance Building. Frank got quickly out, holding the door for his sister. Jill stepped down slowly. "Okay?" Frank said.

"Okay."

WHEN they entered the building, Clearance agents led them through the check screens, down the long corridors. Jill's high heels echoed in the ominous silence.

"Quite a place," Frank observed.

"It's unfriendly."

"Consider it a glorified police station." Frank halted. Before them was a guarded door. "Here we are."

"Wait." Jill pulled back, her face twisting in panic. "I—"

"We'll wait until you're ready." Frank signaled to the Clearance agents to leave. "I understand. It's a bad business."

Jill stood for a moment, her head down. She took a deep breath, her small fists clenched. Her chin came up, level and steady. "All right."

"You ready?"

"Yes."

Frank opened the door. "Here we are."

Director Douglas and the three Clearance agents turned expectantly as Jill and Frank entered. "Good," Douglas murmured, with relief. "I was beginning to get worried."

The sitting man got slowly to his feet, picking up his coat. He gripped his

ivory-headed cane tightly, his hands tense. He said nothing. He watched silently as the woman entered the room, Frank behind her. "This is Mrs. Herrick," Frank said. "Jill, this is Clearance Director Douglas."

"I've heard of you," Jill said faintly.

"Then you know our work."

"Yes. I know your work."

"This is an unfortunate business. It's happened before. I don't know what Frank has told you—"

"He explained the situation."

"Good." Douglas was relieved. "I'm glad of that. It's not easy to explain. You understand, then, what we want. The previous cases were caught in deep space. We vibro-tubed them and got the original contents back. But this time we must work through legal channels." Douglas picked up a vid-tape recorder. "We will need your statement, Mrs. Herrick. Since no physical change has occurred we'll have no direct evidence to make our case. We'll have only your testimony of character alteration to present to the court."

He held the vid-tape recorder out. Jill took it slowly.

"Your statement will undoubtedly be accepted by the court. The court will give us the release we want and then we can go ahead. If everything goes correctly we hope to be able to set up things exactly as they were before."

Jill was gazing silently at the man standing in the corner with his coat and ivory-headed cane. "Before?" she said. "What do you mean?"

"Before the change."

Jill turned toward Director Douglas. Calmly, she laid the vid-tape recorder down on the table. "What change are you talking about?"

Douglas paled. He licked his lips. All eyes in the room were on Jill. "The change in *him*." He pointed at the man.

"Jill!" Frank barked. "What's the matter with you?" He came quickly toward her. "What the hell are you doing? You know damn well what change we mean!"

"That's odd," Jill said thoughtfully.

"I haven't noticed any change."

Frank and Director Douglas looked at each other. "I don't get it," Frank muttered, dazed.

"Mrs. Herrick—" Douglas began.

Jill walked over to the man standing quietly in the corner. "Can we go now, dear?" she asked. She took his arm. "Or is there some reason why my husband has to stay here?"

THE man and woman walked silently along the dark street.

"Come on," Jill said. "Let's go home."

The man glanced at her. "It's a nice afternoon," he said. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs. "Spring is coming—I think. Isn't it?"

Jill nodded.

"I wasn't sure. It's a nice smell. Plants and soil and growing things."

"Yes."

"Are we going to walk? Is it far?"

"Not too far."

The man gazed at her intently, a serious expression on his face. "I am very indebted to you, my dear," he said.

Jill nodded.

"I wish to thank you. I must admit I did not expect such a—"

Jill turned abruptly. "What is your name? Your *real* name."

The man's gray eyes flickered. He smiled a little, a kind, gentle smile. "I'm afraid you would not be able to pronounce it. The sounds cannot be formed. . . ."

Jill was silent as they walked along, deep in thought. The city lights were coming on all around them. Bright yellow spots in the gloom. "What are you thinking?" the man asked.

"I was thinking perhaps I will still call you Lester," Jill said. "If you don't mind."

"I don't mind," the man said. He put his arm around her, drawing her close to him. He gazed down tenderly as they walked through the thickening darkness, between the yellow candles of light that marked the way. "Anything you wish. Whatever will make you happy."