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Small Town

BY PHILIP K. DICK

The theme of "the man who played God" has been used many ways in many stories, but never with more tense and chilling effect than in this tight little yarn by the very able Mr. Dick. You'll like it, we're sure.
VERNE HASKEL crept miserably up the front steps of his house, his overcoat dragging behind him. He was tired. Tired and discouraged. And his feet ached.

"My God," Madge exclaimed, as he closed the door and peeled off his coat and hat. "You home already?"

Haskel dumped his briefcase and began untying his shoes. His body sagged. His face was drawn and gray.

"Say something!"

"Dinner ready?"

"No, dinner isn't ready. What's wrong this time? An-
other fight with Larson?"

Haskel stumped into the kitchen and filled a glass with warm water and soda. "Let's move," he said.

"Move?"

"Away from Woodland. To San Francisco. Anywhere." Haskel drank his soda, his middle-aged flabby body supported by the gleaming sink.

"I feel lousy. Maybe I ought to see Doc Barnes again. I wish this was Friday and to-
morrow was Saturday."

"What do you want for dinner?"

"Nothing. I don't know."

"I suggest we go out to Don’s Steakhouse. On Monday they have good sirloin."

"No. I’ve seen enough human faces today."

"I suppose you’re too tired to drive me over to Helen Grant’s."

"The car’s in the garage. Busted again."

"If you took better care of it—"

"What the hell you want me to do? Carry it around in a cellophane bag?"

"Don’t shout at me, Verne Haskel!" Madge flushed with anger. "Maybe you want to fix your own dinner."

Haskel got wearily to his feet. He shuffled toward the cellar door. "I’ll see you."

"Where are you going?"

"Downstairs in the basement."

"Oh, Lord!" Madge cried wildly. "Those trains! Those toys! How can a grown man, a middle-aged man—"

Haskel said nothing. He was already half way down the stairs, feeling around for the basement light.

The basement was cool and moist. Haskel took his engineer’s cap from the hook and fitted it on his head. Excitement and a faint surge of renewed energy filled his tired body. He approached the great plywood table with eager steps.

Tracks ran everywhere. Along the floor, under the coal bin, among the steam pipes of the furnace. The tracks converged at the table, rising up on carefully graded ramps. The table itself was littered with transformers and signals and switches and heaps of equipment and wiring. And—

And the town.

The detailed, painfully accurate model of Woodland. Every tree and house, every store and building and street and fireplug. A minute town, each facet in perfect order. Constructed with elaborate care throughout the years. As long as he could remember. Since he was a kid, building and glueing and working after school.

Haskel turned on the main transformer. All along the track signal lights glowed. He fed power to the heavy Lionel engine parked with its load of freight cars. The engine sped smoothly into life, gliding along the track. A flashing dark projectile of metal that
made his breath catch in his throat. He opened an electric switch and the engine headed down the ramp, through a tunnel and off the table. It raced under the work bench.

Haskel turned up the power. The train gained speed. Its whistle sounded. It turned a sharp curve and grated across a cross-track. More speed. Haskel's hands jerked convulsively at the transformer. The train leaped and shot ahead. It swayed and bucked as it shot around a curve. The transformer was turned up to maximum. The train was a clattering blur of speed, rushing along the track, across bridges and switches, behind the big pipes of the floor furnace.

It disappeared into the coal bin. A moment later it swept out the other side, rocking wildly.

Haskel slowed the train down. He was breathing hard, his chest rising painfully. He sat down on the stool by the workbench and lit a cigarette with shaking fingers.

The train, the model town, gave him a strange feeling. It was hard to explain. He had always loved trains, model engines and signals and buildings. Since he was a little kid, maybe six or seven. His father had given him his first train. An engine and a few pieces of track. An old wind-up train. When he was nine he got his first real electric train. And two switches.

He added to it, year after
year. Track, engines, switch-es, cars, signals. More power-
ful transformers. And the beginnings of the town.
He had built the town up carefully. Piece by piece. First, when he was in junior
high, a model of the Southern Pacific Depot. Then the taxi
stand next door. The cafe
where the drivers ate. Broad
Street.

And so on. More and more. Houses, buildings, stores. A
whole town, growing under
his hands, as the years went
by. Every afternoon he came
home from school and worked.
Glued and cut and painted and
sawed.

Now it was virtually com-
plete. Almost done. He was
forty-three years old and the
town was almost done.

Haskel moved around the
big plywood table, his hands
extended reverently. He
touched a miniature store
here and there. The flower
shop. The theater. The Tele-
phone Company. Larson’s
Pump and Valve Works.

That, too. Where he worked.
His place of business. A per-
fect miniature of the plant,
down to the last detail.

Haskel scowled. Jim Lar-
son. For twenty years he had
worked there, slaved day after
day. For what? To see others
advanced over him. Younger
men. Favorites of the boss.
Yes-men with bright ties and
pressed pants and wide,
stupid grins.

Misery and hatred welled
up in Haskel. All his life
Woodland had got the better
of him. He had never been
happy. The town had always
been against him. Miss
Murphy in high school. The
frats in college. Clerks in the
snooty department stores. His
neighbors. Cops and mailmen
and bus drivers and delivery
boys. Even his wife. Even
Madge.

He had never meshed with
the town. The rich, expensive
little suburb of San Francisco,
down the peninsula beyond
the fog belt. Woodland was
too damn upper-middle class.
Too many big houses and
lawns and chrome cars and
deck chairs. Too stuffy and
sleek. As long as he could re-
member. In school. His job—

Larson. The Pump and
Valve Works. Twenty years
of hard work.

Haskel’s fingers closed over
the tiny building, the model
of Larson’s Pump and Valve
Works. Savagely, he ripped
it loose and threw it to the
floor. He crushed it underfoot,
grinding the bits of glass and
metal and cardboard into a
shapeless mass.
God, he was shaking all over. He stared down at the remains, his heart pounding wildly. Strange emotions, crazy emotions, twisted through him. Thoughts he never had had before. For a long time he gazed down at the crumpled wad by his shoe. What had once been the model of Larson's Pump and Valve Works.

Abruptly he pulled away. In a trance he returned to his workbench and sat stiffly down on the stool. He pulled his tools and materials together, clicking the power drill on.

It took only a few moments. Working rapidly, with quick, expert fingers, Haskel assembled a new model. He painted, glued, fitted pieces together. He lettered a microscopic sign and sprayed a green lawn into place.

Then he carried the new model carefully over to the table and glued it in the correct spot. The place where Larson's Pump and Valve Works had been. The new building gleamed in the overhead light, still moist and shiny.

WOODLAND MORTUARY

Haskel rubbed his hands in an ecstasy of satisfaction. The Valve Works was gone. He had destroyed it. Obliterated it. Removed it from the town. Below him was Woodland—without the Valve Works. A mortuary instead.

His eyes gleamed. His lips twitched. His surging emotions swelled. He had got rid of it. In a brief flurry of action. In a second. The whole thing was simple—amazingly easy.

Odd he hadn't thought of it before.

Sipping a tall glass of ice-cold beer thoughtfully, Madge Haskel said, "There's something wrong with Verne. I noticed it especially last night. When he came home from work."


"But he's getting worse. Him and his trains. Those damn model trains. My God, Paul! Do you know he has a whole town down there in the basement?"

Tylcr was curious. "Really? I never knew that."

"All the time I've known him he's had them down there. Started when he was a kid. Imagine a grown man playing with trains! It's—it's disgust-
ing. Every night the same thing.”

“Interesting.” Tyler rubbed his jaw. “He keeps at them continually? An unvarying pattern?”

“Every night. Last night he didn’t even eat dinner. He just came home and went directly down.”

Paul Tyler’s polished features twisted into a frown. Across from him Madge sat languidly sipping her beer. It was two in the afternoon. The day was warm and bright. The living room was attractive in a lazy, quiet way. Abruptly Tyler got to his feet. “Let’s take a look at them. The models. I didn’t know it had gone so far.”

“Do you really want to?” Madge slid back the sleeve of her green silk lounge pajamas and consulted her wristwatch. “He won’t be home until five.” She jumped to her feet, setting down her glass. “All right. We have time.”

“Fine. Let’s go down.” Tyler caught hold of Madge’s arm and they hurried down into the basement, a strange excitement flooding through them. Madge clicked on the basement light and they approached the big plywood table, giggling and nervous, like mischievous children.

“See?” Madge said, squeez-
upstairs where it’s warm. It’s so cold down here.”

“But as the boy grows up, he gets bigger and stronger. He can shed the model-symbol. Master the real object, the real train. Get genuine control over things. Valid mastery.” Tyler shook his head. “Not this substitute thing. Unusual, a grown person going to such lengths.” He frowned. “I never noticed a mortuary on State Street.”

“A mortuary?”

“And this. Steuben Pet Shop. Next door to the radio repair shop. There’s no pet shop there.” Tyler cudgeled his brain. “What is there? Next to the radio repair place.”


Tyler laughed. “Okay, sissy.” He headed toward the stairs, frowning again. “I wonder why. Steuben Pets. Never heard of it. Everything is so detailed. He must know the town by heart. To put a shop there that isn’t—” He clicked off the basement light. “And the mortuary. What’s supposed to be there? Isn’t the—”

“Forget it,” Madge called back, hurrying past him, into the warm living room.

“You’re practically as bad as he is. Men are such children.”

Tyler didn’t respond. He was deep in thought. His suave confidence was gone; he looked nervous and shaken.

Madge pulled the venetian blinds down. The living room sank into amber gloom. She flopped down on the couch and pulled Tyler down beside her. “Stop looking like that,” she ordered. “I’ve never seen you this way.” Her slim arms circled his neck and her lips brushed close to his ear. “I wouldn’t have let you in if I thought you were going to worry about him.”

Tyler grunted, preoccupied. “Why did you let me in?”

The pressure of Madge’s arms increased. Her silk pajamas rustled as she moved against him. “Silly,” she said. Big red-headed Jim Larson gaped in disbelief. “What do you mean? What’s the matter with you?”

“I’m quitting.” Haskel shoveled the contents of his desk into his briefcase. “Mail the check to my house.”

“But—”

“Get out of the way.” Haskel pushed past Larson, out into the hall. Larson was stunned with amazement. There was a fixed expression on Haskel’s face. A glazed
look. A rigid look Larson had never seen before.

"Are you—all right?" Larson asked.

"Sure." Haskel opened the front door of the plant and disappeared outside. The door slammed after him. "Sure I'm all right," he muttered to himself. He made his way through the crowds of late-afternoon shoppers, his lips twitching. "You damn right I'm all right."

"Watch it, buddy," a laborer muttered ominously, as Haskel shoved past him.

"Sorry." Haskel hurried on, gripping his briefcase. At the top of the hill he paused a moment to get his breath. Behind him was Larson's Pump and Valve Works. Haskel laughed shrilly. Twenty years — cut short in a second. It was over. No more Larson. No more dull, grinding job, day after day. Without promotion or future. Routine and boredom, months on end. It was over and done for. A new life was beginning.

He hurried on. The sun was setting. Cars streaked by him, businessmen going home from work. Tomorrow they would be going back—but not him. Not ever again.

He reached his own street. Ed Tildon's house rose up, a great stately structure of concrete and glass Tildon's dog came rushing out to bark. Haskel hastened past. Tildon's dog. He laughed wildly.

"Better keep away!" he shouted at the dog.

He reached his own house and leaped up the front steps two at a time. He tore the door open. The living room was dark and silent. There was a sudden stir of motion. Shapes untangling themselves, getting quickly up from the couch.

"Verne!" Madge gasped. "What are you doing home so early?"

Verne Haskel threw his briefcase down and dropped his hat and coat over a chair. His lined face was twisted with emotion, pulled out of shape by violent inner forces.

"What in the world!" Madge fluttered, hurrying toward him nervously, smoothing down her lounge pajamas. "Has something happened? I didn't expect you so—" She broke off, blushing. "I mean, I—"

Paul Tyler strolled leisurely toward Haskel. "Hi there, Verne," he murmured, embarrassed. "Dropped by to say hello and return a book to your wife."

Haskel nodded curtly. "Afternoon." He turned and
headed toward the basement door, ignoring the two of them. "I'll be downstairs."

"But Verne!" Madge protested. "What's happened?"

Verne halted briefly at the door. "I quit my job."

"You what?"

"I quit my job. I finished Larson off. There won't be anymore of him." The basement door slammed.

"Good Lord!" Madge shrieked, clutching at Tyler hysterically. "He's gone out of his mind!"

Down in the basement, Verne Haskel snapped on the light impatiently. He put on his engineer's cap and pulled his stool up beside the great plywood table.

What next?

Morris Home Furnishings. The big plush store. Where the clerks all looked down their noses at him.

He rubbed his hands gleefully. No more of them. No more snooty clerks, lifting their eyebrows when he came in. Only hair and bow ties and folded handkerchiefs.

He removed the model of Morris Home Furnishings and disassembled it. He worked feverishly, with frantic haste. Now that he had really begun he wasted no time. A moment later he was glueing two small buildings in its place. Ritz Shoeshine. Pete's Bowling Alley.

Haskel giggled excitedly. Fitting extinction for the luxurious, exclusive furniture store. A shoeshine parlor and a bowling alley. Just what it deserved.

The California State Bank. He had always hated the Bank. They had once refused him a loan. He pulled the Bank loose.

Ed Tildon's mansion. His damn dog. The dog had bit him on the ankle, one afternoon. He ripped the model off. His head spun. He could do anything.

Harrison Appliance. They had sold him a bum radio. Off came Harrison Appliance.

Joe's Cigar and Smoke Shop. Joe had given him a lead quarter in May, 1949. Off came Joe's.

The Ink Works. He loathed the smell of ink. Maybe a bread factory, instead. He loved baking bread. Off came the Ink Works.

Elm Street was too dark at night. A couple of times he had stumbled. A few more streetlights were in order.

Not enough bars along High Street. Too many dress shops and expensive hat and fur shops and ladies' apparel. He ripped a whole handful loose
and carried them to the work-
bench.

At the top of the stairs the
door opened slowly. Madge
peered down, pale and fright-
ened. "Verne?"

He scowled up impatiently.
"What do you want?"

Madge came downstairs
hesitantly. Behind her Doctor
Tyler followed, suave and
handsome in his gray suit.
"Verne — is everything all
right?"

"Of course."

"Did—did you really quit
your job?"

Haskell nodded. He began to
disassemble the Ink Works,
ignoring his wife and Doctor
Tyler.

"But why?"

Haskell grunted impatiently.
"No time."

Doctor Tyler had begun to
look worried. "Do I under-
stand you're too busy for your
job?"

"That's right."

"Too busy doing what?"

Tyler's voice rose; he was
trembling nervously. "Work-
ing down here on this town
of yours? Changing things?"

"Go away," Haskell mutter-
ed. His deft hands were as-
sembling a lovely little
Langendorf Bread Factory.
He shaped it with loving care,
 sprayed it with white paint,
brushed a gravel walk and
shrubs in front of it. He put
it aside and began on a park.
A big green park. Woodland
had always needed a park.
It would go in place of the
State Street Hotel.

Tyler pulled Madge away
from the table, off in a corner
of the basement. "Good God."
He lit a cigarette shakily. The
cigarette flipped out of his
hands and rolled away. He
ignored it and fumbled for
another. "You see? You see
what he's doing?"

Madge shook her head
mutely. "What is it? I
don't—"

"How long has he been
working on this? All his
life?"

Madge nodded, white-faced.
"Yes, all his life."

Tyler's features twisted.
"My God, Madge. It's enough
to drive you out of your mind.
I can hardly believe it. We've
got to do something."

"What's happening?"

Madge moaned. "What—"

"He's losing himself into
it." Tyler's face was a mask
of incredulous disbelief. "Fas-
ter and faster."

"He's always come down
here," Madge faltered. "It's
nothing new. He's always
wanted to get away."

"Yes. Get away." Tyler
shuddered, clenched his fists
and pulled himself together. He advanced across the cellar and stopped by Verne Haskel.

“What do you want?” Haskel muttered, noticing him.

Tyler licked his lips. “You’re adding some things, aren’t you? New buildings.”

Haskel nodded.

Tyler touched the little bread factory with shaking fingers. “What’s this? Bread? Where does it go?” He moved around the table. “I don’t remember any bread factory in Woodland.” He whirled. “You aren’t by any chance improving on the town? Fixing it up here and there?”

“Get the hell out of here,” Haskel said, with ominous calm. “Both of you.”

“Verne!” Madge squeaked.

“I’ve got a lot to do. You can bring sandwiches down about eleven. I hope to finish sometime tonight.”

“Finish?” Tyler asked.

“Finish,” Haskel answered, returning to his work.

“Come on, Madge.” Tyler grabbed her and pulled her to the stairs. “Let’s get out of here.” He strode ahead of her, up to the stairs and into the hall. “Come on!” As soon as she was up he closed the door tightly after them.

Madge dabbed at her eyes hysterically. “He’s gone crazy, Paul! What’ll we do?”

Tyler was deep in thought. “Be quiet. I have to think this out.” He paced back and forth, a hard scowl on his features. “I’ll come soon. It won’t be long, not at this rate. Sometime tonight.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“His withdrawal. Into his substitute world. The improved model he controls. Where he can get away.”

“Isn’t there something we can do?”

“Do?” Tyler smiled faintly. “Do we want to do something?”

Madge gasped. “But we can’t just—”

“Maybe this will solve our problem. This may be what we’ve been looking for.” Tyler eyed Mrs. Haskel thoughtfully. “This may be just the thing.”

It was after midnight, almost two o’clock in the morning, when he began to get things into final shape. He was tired—but alert. Things were happening fast. The job was almost done.

Virtually perfect.

He halted work a moment, surveying what he had accomplished. The town had
been radically changed. About ten o'clock he had begun basic structural alterations in the lay-out of the streets. He had removed most of the public buildings, the civic center and the sprawling business district around it.

He had erected a new city hall, police station, and an immense park with fountains and indirect lighting. He had cleared the slum area, the old run-down stores and houses and streets. The streets were wider and well-lit. The houses were now small and clean. The stores modern and attractive—without being ostentatious.

All advertising signs had been removed. Most of the filling stations were gone. The immense factory area was gone, too. Rolling countryside took its place. Trees and hills and green grass.

The wealthy district had been altered. There were now only a few of the mansions left—belonging to persons he looked favorably on. The rest had been cut down, turned into uniform two-bedroom dwellings, one story, with a single garage each.

The city hall was no longer an elaborate, rococo structure. Now it was low and simple, modeled after the Parthenon, a favorite of his.

There were ten or twelve persons who had done him special harm. He had altered their houses considerably. Given them war-time housing unit apartments, six to a building, at the far edge of town. Where the wind came off the bay, carrying the smell of decaying mud-flats.

Jim Larson's house was completely gone. He had erased Larson utterly. He no longer existed, not in this new Woodland—which was now almost complete.

Almost. Haskel studied his work intently. All the changes had to be made now. Not later. This was the time of creation. Later, when it had been finished, it could not be altered. He had to catch all the necessary changes now—or forget them.

The new Woodland looked pretty good. Clean and neat—and simple. The rich district had been toned down. The poor district had been improved. Glaring ads, signs, displays, had all been changed or removed. The business community was smaller. Parks and countryside took the place of factories. The civic center was lovely.

He added a couple of playgrounds for smaller kids. A small theater instead of the
enormous Uptown with its flashing neon sign. After some consideration he removed most of the bars he had previously constructed. The new Woodland was going to be moral. Extremely moral. Few bars, no billiards, no red light district. And there was an especially fine jail for undesirables.

The most difficult part had been the microscopic lettering on the main office door of the city hall. He had left it until last, and then painted the words with agonizing care:

Mayor
Vernon R. Haskel

A few last changes. He gave the Edwards a ’39 Plymouth instead of a new Cadillac. He added more trees in the downtown district. One more fire department. One less dress shop. He had never liked taxis. On impulse, he removed the taxi stand and put in a flower shop.

Haskel rubbed his hands. Anything more? Or was it complete... Perfect... He studied each part intently. What had he overlooked?

The high school. He removed it and put in two smaller high schools, one at each end of town. Another hospital. That took almost half an hour. He was getting tired. His hands were less swift. He mopped his forehead shakily. Anything else? He sat down on his stool wearily, to rest and think.

All done. It was complete. Joy welled up in him. A bursting cry of happiness. His work was over.

“Finished!” Verne Haskel shouted.

He got unsteadily to his feet. He closed his eyes, held his arms out, and advanced toward the plywood table. Reaching, grasping, fingers extended, Haskel headed toward it, a look of radiant exaltation on his seamed, middle-aged face.

Upstairs, Tyler and Madge heard the shout. A distant booming that rolled through the house in waves. Madge winced in terror. “What was that?”

Tyler listened intently. He heard Haskel moving below them, in the basement. Abruptly, he stubbed out his cigarette. “I think it’s happened. Sooner than I expected.”

“It? You mean he’s—”

Tyler got quickly to his feet. “He’s gone, Madge. Into his other world. We’re finally free.”

Madge caught his arm.
“Maybe we’re making a mistake. It’s so terrible. Shouldn’t we—try to do something? Bring him out of it—try to pull him back.”

“Bring him back?” Tyler laughed nervously. “I don’t think we could, now. Even if we wanted to. It’s too late.” He hurried toward the basement door. “Come on.”

“It’s horrible.” Madge shuddered and followed reluctantly. “I wish we had never got started.”

Tyler halted briefly at the door. “Horrible? He’s happier, where he is, now. And you’re happier. The way it was, nobody was happy. This is the best thing.”

He opened the basement door. Madge followed him. They moved cautiously down the stairs, into the dark, silent basement, damp with the faint night mists.

The basement was empty.

Tyler relaxed. He was overcome with dazed relief. “He’s gone. Everything’s okay. It worked out exactly right.”

“But I don’t understand,” Madge repeated hopelessly, as Tyler’s Buick purred along the dark, deserted streets. “Where did he go?”

“You know where he went,” Tyler answered. “Into his substitute world, of course.” He screeched around a corner on two wheels. “The rest should be fairly simple. A few routine forms. There really isn’t much left, now.”

The night was frigid and bleak. No lights showed, except an occasional lonely streetlamp. Far off, a train whistle sounded mournfully, a dismal echo. Rows of silent houses flickered by on both sides of them.

“Where are we going?” Madge asked. She sat huddled against the door, face pale with shock and terror, shivering under her coat.

“To the police station.”

“Why?”

“To report him, naturally. So they’ll know he’s gone. We’ll have to wait; it’ll be several years before he’ll be declared legally dead.” Tyler reached over and hugged her briefly. “We’ll make out in the meantime, I’m sure.”

“What if—they find him?”

Tyler shook his head angrily. He was still tense, on edge. “Don’t you understand? They’ll never find him—he doesn’t exist. At least, not in our world. He’s in his own world. You saw it. The model. The improved substitute.”

“He’s there?”

“All his life he’s worked on it. Built it up. Made it real.
He brought that world into being—and now he’s in it. That’s what he wanted. That’s why he built it. He didn’t merely dream about an escape world. He actually constructed it—every bit and piece. Now he’s warped himself right out of our world, into it. Out of our lives.”

Madge finally began to understand. “Then he really did lose himself in his substitute world. You meant that, what you said about him—getting away.”

“It took me awhile to realize it. The mind constructs reality. Frames it. Creates it. We all have a common reality, a common dream. But Haskel turned his back on our common reality and created his own. And he had a unique capacity—far beyond the ordinary. He devoted his whole life, his whole skill to building it. He’s there now.”

Tyler hesitated and frowned. He gripped the wheel tightly and increased speed. The Buick hissed along the dark street, through the silent, unmoving bleakness that was the town. “There’s only one thing,” he continued presently. “One thing I don’t understand.” “What is it?” “The model. It was also gone. I assumed he’d—shrink, I suppose. Merge with it. But the model’s gone, too.” Tyler shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.” He peered into the darkness. “We’re almost there. This is Elm.”

It was then Madge screamed. “Look!”

To the right of the car was a small, neat building. And a sign. The sign was easily visible in the darkness.

WOODLAND MORTUARY

Madge was sobbing in horror. The car roared forward, automatically guided by Tyler’s numb hands. Another sign flashed by briefly, as they coasted up before the city hall.

STEUBEN PET SHOP

The city hall was lit by recessed, hidden illumination. A low, simple building, a square of glowing white. Like a marble Greek temple.

Tyler pulled the car to a halt. Then suddenly shrieked and started up again. But not soon enough.

The two shiny-black police cars came silently up around the Buick, one on each side. The four stern cops already had their hands on the door. Stepping out and coming toward him, grim and efficient.