

V I N T A G E

eBooks



NOW WAIT FOR LAST YEAR

PHILIP K. DICK

V I N T A G E

eBooks



NOW WAIT FOR LAST YEAR

PHILIP K. DICK

PHILIP K. DICK

**NOW WAIT FOR
LAST YEAR**

VINTAGE BOOKS
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York

PHILIP K. DICK NOW WAIT FOR LAST YEAR

Philip K. Dick was born in Chicago in 1928 and lived most of his life in California. He briefly attended the University of California, but dropped out before completing any classes. In 1952, he began writing professionally and proceeded to write thirty-six novels and five short-story collections. He won the Hugo Award for best novel in 1962 for *The Man in the High Castle* and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for best novel of the year in 1974 for *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*. Philip K. Dick died on March 2, 1982, in Santa Ana, California, of heart failure following a stroke.

Novels by Philip K. Dick

Clans of the Alphane Moon
Confessions of a Crap Artist
The Cosmic Puppets
Counter-Clock World
The Crack in Space
Deus Irae (with Roger Zelazny)
The Divine Invasion
Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?
Dr. Bloodmoney
Dr. Futurity
Eye in the Sky
Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said
Galactic Pot-Healer
The Game-Players of Titan
The Man in the High Castle
The Man Who Japed
Martian Time-Slip
A Maze of Death
Now Wait for Last Year
Our Friends From Frolix 8
The Penultimate Truth
Radio Free Albemuth
A Scanner Darkly
The Simulacra
Solar Lottery
The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch
Time Out of Joint
The Transmigration of Timothy Archer
Ubik
The Unteleported Man
VALIS
Vulcan's Hammer
We Can Build You
The World Jones Made
The Zap Gun

To Don Wollheim—

Who has done more for science fiction
than any other single person.

Thank you, Don, for your faith in us over the years.

And God bless you.

The apteryx-shaped building, so familiar to him, gave off its usual smoky gray light as Eric Sweetscent collapsed his wheel and managed to park in the tiny stall allocated him. Eight o'clock in the morning, he thought drearily. And already his employer, Mr. Virgil Ackerman, had opened TF&D Corporation's offices for business. Imagine a man whose mind is most sharp at eight a.m., Dr. Sweetscent mused. It runs against God's clear command. A fine world they're doling out to us; the war excuses any human aberration, even the one of a man's.

Nonetheless he started toward the in-track—only to be halted by the calling of his name. “Say, Mr. Sweetscent! Just a moment, sir!” The twangy—and highly repellent—voice of the robant; Eric stopped reluctantly, and now the thing coasted up to him, all arms and legs flapping energetically. “Mr. Sweetscent of Tijuana Fur & Dye Corporation?”

The slight got across to him. “Dr. Sweetscent. Please.”

“I have a bill, doctor.” It whipped a folded white slip from its metal pouch. “Your wife Mrs. Katherine Sweetscent, charged this three months ago on her Dreamland Happy Time For All account. Sixty-five dollars plus sixteen per cent charges. And the law, now; you understand. I regret delaying you, but it is, ahem, illegal.” It eyed him alertly as he, with massive reluctance, fished out his checkbook.

“What's the purchase?” he asked gloomily as he wrote the check.

“It was a Lucky Strike package, doctor. With the authentic ancient green. Circa 1940 before World War Two when the package changed. ‘Lucky Strike green has gone to war,’ you know.” It giggled.

He couldn't believe it; something was wrong. “But surely,” he protested, “that was supposed to be put on the company account.”

“No, doctor,” the robant declared. “Honest injun. Mrs. Sweetscent made it absolutely clear that this purchase was for her private use.” It managed to add, then, an explanation which he knew at once to be spurious. But whether it originated in the robant or with Kathy—that he could not tell, at least not immediately. “Mrs. Sweetscent,” the robant stated piously, “was building a Pitts-39.”

“The hell she is.” He tossed the made-out check at the robant; as it strove to catch the fluttering bit of paper he continued on, toward the in-track.

A Lucky Strike package. Well, he reflected grimly, Kathy is off again. The creative urge which can only find an outlet in spending. And always above and beyond her own salary—which, he had to admit to himself, was a bit greater than his own, alas. But in any case, what hadn't she told him? A major purchase of that sort ...

The answer, of course, was obvious. The bill itself pointed out the problem in all its depressing sobriety. He thought, Fifteen years ago I would have said—did say—that the combined incomes of Kathy and me would be enough and certainly *ought* to be enough

maintain any two semireasonable adults at any level of opulence. Even taking into account the wartime inflation.

However, it had not quite worked out that way. And he felt a deep, abiding intuition that just never quite would.

Within the TF&D Building he dialed the hall leading to his own office, squelching the impulse to drop by Kathy's office upstairs for an immediate confrontation. Later, he decided. After work, perhaps at dinner. Lord, and he had such a full schedule ahead of him; he had no energy—and never had had in the past—for this endless squabbling.

“Morning, doctor.”

“Hi,” Eric said, nodding to fuzzy Miss Perth, his secretary; this time she had sprayed herself a shiny blue, inlaid with sparkling fragments that reflected the outer office's overhead lighting. “Where's Himmel?” No sign of the final-stage quality-control inspector, and already he perceived reps from subsidiary outfits pulling up at the parking lot.

“Bruce Himmel phoned to say that the San Diego public library is suing him and he may have to go to court and so he'll probably be late.” Miss Perth smiled at him engagingly, showing spotless synthetic ebony teeth, a chilling affectation which had migrated with her from Amarillo, Texas, a year ago. “The library cops broke into his conapt yesterday and found over twenty of their books that he'd stolen—you know Bruce, he has that phobia about checking things out ... how is it put in Greek?”

He passed on into the inner office which was his alone; Virgil Ackerman had insisted on this as a suitable mark of prestige—in lieu of a raise in salary.

And there, in his office, at his window, smoking a sweet-smelling Mexican cigarette and gazing out at the austere brown hills of Baja California south of the city, stood his wife Kathy. This was the first time he had met up with her this morning; she had risen an hour ahead of him, had dressed and eaten alone and gone on in her own wheel.

“What's up?” Eric said to her tightly.

“Come on in and shut the door.” Kathy turned but did not look toward him; the expression on her exquisitely sharp face was meditative.

He closed the door. “Thanks for welcoming me into my own office.”

“I knew that damn bill collector would intercept you this morning,” Kathy said in a faraway voice.

“Almost eighty greens,” he said. “With the fines.”

“Did you pay it?” Now for the first time she glanced at him; the flutter of her artificial dark lashes quickened, revealing her concern.

“No,” he said sardonically. “I let the robant gun me down where I stood, there in the parking lot.” He hung his coat in his closet. “Of course I paid it. It's mandatory, ever since the Mole obliterated the entire class of credit-system purchasing. I realize you're not interested in this, but if you don't pay within—”

“Please,” Kathy said. “Don't lecture me. What did it say? That I'm building a Pitts-39?”

lied; I got the Lucky Strike green package as a gift. I wouldn't build a babyland without telling you; after all, it would be yours, too."

"Not Pitts-39," Eric said. "I never lived there, in '39 or any other time." He seated himself at his desk and punched the viscombox. "I'm here, Mrs. Sharp," he informed Virgil's secretary. "How are you today, Mrs. Sharp? Get home all right from that war-bond rally last night? No warmongering pickets hit you on the head?" He shut off the box. To Kathy he explained, "Lucile Sharp is an ardent appeaser. I think it's nice for a corporation to permit its employees to engage in political agitation, don't you? And even nicer than that is the fact that it doesn't cost you a cent; political meetings are free."

Kathy said, "But you have to pray and sing. And they do get you to buy those bonds."

"Who was the cigarette package for?"

"Virgil Ackerman, of course." She exhaled cigarette smoke in twin gray trails. "You suppose I want to work elsewhere?"

"Sure, if you could do better."

Kathy said thoughtfully, "It's not the high salary that keeps me here, Eric, despite what you think. I believe we're helping the war effort."

"Here? *How?*"

The office door opened; Miss Perth stood outlined, her luminous, fuzzy, horizontal, inclined breasts brushing the frame as she turned toward him and said, "Oh, doctor, sorry to bother you but Mr. Jonas Ackerman is here to see you—Mr. Virgil's great-grandnephew from the Baths."

"How are the Baths, Jonas?" Eric said, holding out his hand; the great-grandnephew of the firm's owner came toward him and they shook in greeting. "Anything bubble out during the night shift?"

"If it did," Jonas said, "it imitated a workman and left by the front gate." He noticed Kathy then. "Morning, Mrs. Sweetscent. Say, I saw that new config you acquired for our Wash-3 that bug-shaped car. What is that, a Volkswagen? Is that what they were called?"

"An air-flow Chrysler," Kathy said. "It was a good car but it had too much unsprung metal in it. An engineering error that ruined it on the market."

"God," Jonas said, with feeling. "To know something really thoroughly; how that must feel. Down with the fliegemeier Renaissance—I say specialize in one area until—" He broke off, seeing that both the Sweetscents had a grim, taciturn cast about them. "I interrupted?"

"Company business takes priority," Eric said, "over the creature pleasures." He was glad of the intervention by even this junior member of the organization's convoluted blood hierarchy. "Please scram out of here, Kathy," he said to his wife, and did not trouble himself to make his tone jovial. "We'll talk at dinner. I've got too much to do to spend my time haggling over whether a robant bill collector is mechanically capable of telling lies or not." He escorted his wife to the office door; she moved passively, without resistance. Softly, Eric said, "Like everyone else in the world it's busy deriding you, isn't it? They're all talking." He shut the door after her.

Presently Jonas Ackerman shrugged and said, "Well, that's marriage these days. Legalized

hate.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Oh, the overtones came through in that exchange; you could feel it in the air like the chill of death. There ought to be an ordinance that a man can’t work for the same outfit as his wife; hell, even in the same city.” He smiled, his thin, youthful face all at once free of seriousness. “But she really is good, you know; Virgil gradually let go all his other antique collectors after Kathy started here ... but of course she’s mentioned that to you.”

“Many times.” Almost every day, he reflected caustically.

“Why don’t you two get divorced?”

Eric shrugged, a gesture designed to show a deep philosophical nature. He hoped it truly did so.

The gesture evidently fell short, because Jonas said, “Meaning that you like it?”

“I mean,” he said resignedly, “that I’ve married before and it was no better, and if I divorce Kathy I’ll marry again—because as my brainbasher puts it I can’t find my identity outside the role of husband and daddy and big butter-and-egg-man wage earner—and the next damn one will be the same because that’s the kind I select. It’s rooted in my temperament.” He raised his head and eyed Jonas with as good a show of masochistic defiance as he could manage. “What did you want, Jonas?”

“Trip,” Jonas Ackerman said brightly. “To Mars, for all of us, including you. Conference. You and I can nab seats a good long way from old Virgil so we won’t have to discuss company business and the war effort and Gino Molinari. And since we’re taking the big boat it’ll be six hours each way. And for God’s sake, let’s not find ourselves standing up all the way to Mars and back—let’s make sure we do get seats.”

“How long will we be there?” He frankly did not look forward to the trip; it would separate him from his work too long.

“We’ll undoubtedly be back tomorrow or the day after. Listen; it’ll get you out of your wife’s path; Kathy’s staying here. It’s an irony, but I’ve noticed that when the old fellow actually at Wash-35 he never likes to have his antique experts around him ... he likes to slice into the, ahem, magic of the place ... more so all the time as he gets older. When you’re one hundred and thirty you’ll begin to understand—so will I, maybe. Meanwhile we have to put up with him.” He added, somberly, “You probably know this, Eric, because you are his doctor. He never will die; he’ll never make the hard decision—as it’s called—no matter what fails and has to be replaced inside him. Sometimes I envy him for being—optimistic. For liking life that much; for thinking it’s so important. Now, we puny mortals; at our age—” He eyed Eric. “At a miserable thirty or thirty-three—”

“I’ve got plenty of vitality,” Eric said. “I’m good for a long time. And life isn’t going to get the best of me.” From his coat pocket he brought forth the bill which the robant collector had presented to him. “Think back. Did a package of Lucky Strike *with the green* show up at Wash-35 about three months ago? A contribution from Kathy?”

After a long pause Jonas Ackerman said, “You poor suspicious stupid creak. That’s all you can manage to brood about. Listen, doctor; if you can’t get your mind on your job, you’re

finished; there're twenty artiforg surgeons with applications in our personnel files just waiting to go to work for a man like Virgil, a man of his importance in the economy and with his effort. You're really just plain not all that good." His expression was both compassionate and disapproving, a strange mixture which had the effect of waking Eric Sweetscent abruptly. "Personally, if my heart gave out—which it no doubt will do one of these days—I wouldn't particularly care to go to you. You're too tangled in your own personal affairs. You live for yourself, not the planetary cause. My God, don't you remember? We're fighting a life-and-death war. And we're losing. We're being pulverized every goddam day!"

True, Eric realized. And we've got a sick, hypochondriacal, dispirited leader. And Tijuana Fur & Dye Corporation is one of those vast industrial props that maintain that sick leader that manage just barely to keep the Mole in office. Without such warm, high-placed, personal friendships as that of Virgil Ackerman, Gino Molinari would be out or dead or in an old folks rest home. I know it. And yet—individual life must go on. After all, he reflected, I didn't choose to get entangled in my domestic life, my boxer's clinch with Kathy. And if you think I did or do, it's because you're morbidly young. You've failed to pass from adolescent freedom into the land which I inhabit: married to a woman who is economically, intellectually, and even this, too, even erotically my superior.

Before leaving the building Dr. Eric Sweetscent dropped by the Baths, wondering if Bruno Himmel had shown up. He had; there he stood, beside the huge reject-basket full of defective Lazy Brown Dogs.

"Turn them back into groonk," Jonas said to Himmel, who grinned in his empty, disjointed fashion as the youngest of the Ackermans tossed him one of the defective spheres which had rolled off TF&D's assembly lines along with those suitable for wiring into the command guidance structure of interplanetary spacecraft. "You know," he said to Eric, "if you took a dozen of these control syndromes—and not the defective ones but the ones going into shipping cartons for the Army—you'd find that compared with a year ago or even six months ago their reaction time has slowed by several microseconds."

"By that you mean," Eric said, "our quality standards have dropped?"

It seemed impossible. TF&D's product was too vital. The entire network of military operations depended on these head-sized spheres.

"Exactly." It did not appear to bother Jonas. "Because we were rejecting too many units. We couldn't show a profit."

Himmel stammered, "S-sometimes I wish we were back in the Martian bat guano business."

Once the corporation had collected the dung of the Martian flap bat, had made its first returns that way and so had been in position to underwrite the greater economic aspects of another nonterrestrial creature, the Martian print amoeba. This august unicellular organism survived by its ability to mimic other life forms—those of its own size, specifically—and although this ability had amused astronauts and UN officials, no one had seen an industrial usage until Virgil Ackerman of bat guano fame had come upon the scene. Within a matter of hours he had presented a print amoeba with one of his current mistresses's expensive fur coat. The print amoeba had faithfully mimicked it, whereupon, for all intents and purposes

between Virgil and the girl two mink stoles existed. However, the amoeba had at last grown tired of being a fur and had resumed its own form. This conclusion left something to be desired.

The answer, developed over a period of many months, consisted of killing the amoeba during its interval of mimicry and then subjecting the cadaver to a bath of fixing-chemicals which had the capacity to lock the amoeba in that final form; the amoeba did not decay and hence could not later on be distinguished from the original. It was not long before Virgil Ackerman had set up a receiving plant at Tijuana, Mexico, and was accepting shipments of ersatz furs of every variety from his industrial installations on Mars. And almost at once he had broken the natural fur market on Earth.

The war, however, had changed all that.

But, then, what hadn't the war changed? And who had ever thought, when the Pact of Peace was signed with the ally, Lilistar, that things would go so badly? Because according to Lilistar and its Minister Freneksey, this was the dominant military power in the galaxy; its enemy, the reegs, was inferior militarily and in every other way and the war would undoubtedly be a short one.

War itself was bad enough, Eric ruminated, but there was nothing quite like a losing war to make one stop and think, to try—futilely—to second-guess one's past decisions—such as the Pact of Peace, to name one example, and an example which currently might have occurred to quite a number of Terrans, had they been asked. But these days their opinions were not being solicited by the Mole or by the government of Lilistar itself. In fact it was universal and believed—openly noised about at bars as well as in the privacy of living rooms—that even the Mole's opinion was not being asked.

As soon as hostilities with the reegs had begun, Tijuana Fur & Dye had converted from the luxury trade of ersatz fur production to war work, as, of course, had all other industrial enterprises. Supernaturally accurate duplication of rocket-ship master syndromes, the ruling monoad Lazy Brown Dog, was fatalistically natural for the type of operation which TF&D represented; conversion had been painless and rapid. So here now, meditatively, Eric Sweetscent faced this basket of rejects, wondering—as had everyone at one time or another in the corporation—how these substandard and yet still quite complex units could be put to some economic advantage. He picked one up and handled it; in terms of weight it resembled a baseball, in terms of size a grapefruit. Evidently nothing could be done with these failures which Himmel had rejected, and he turned to toss the sphere into the maw of the hopper which would return the fixed plastic into its original organic cellular form.

“Wait,” Himmel croaked.

Eric and Jonas glanced at him.

“Don't melt it down,” Himmel said. His unsightly body twisted with embarrassment; his arms wound themselves about, the long, knobby fingers writhing. Idiotically, his mouth gaped as he mumbled, “I—don't do that any more. Anyhow, in terms of raw material the unit's worth only a quarter of a cent. That whole bin's worth only about a dollar.”

“So?” Jonas said. “They still have to go back to—”

Himmel mumbled, “I'll buy it.” He dug into his trouser pocket, straining to find his wallet.

it was a long and arduous struggle but at last he produced it.

“Buy it for what?” Jonas demanded.

“I have a schedule arranged,” Himmel said, after an agonized pause. “I pay a half cent apiece for Lazy Brown Dog rejects, twice what they’re worth, so the company’s making profit. So why should anyone object?” His voice rose to a squeak.

Pondering him, Jonas said, “No one’s objecting. I’m just curious as to what you want for.” He glanced sideways at Eric as if to ask, “What do you say about this?”

Himmel said, “Um, I use them.” With gloom he turned and shambled toward a nearby door. “But they’re all mine because I paid for them in advance out of my salary,” he said over his shoulder as he opened the door. Defensively, his face dark with resentment and with the corrosive traces of deeply etched phobic anxiety, he stood aside.

Within the room—a storeroom, evidently—small carts rolled about on silver-dollar-size wheels; twenty or more of them, astutely avoiding one another in their zealous activity.

On board each cart Eric saw a Lazy Brown Dog, wired in place and controlling the movements of the cart.

Presently Jonas rubbed the side of his nose, grunted, said, “What powers them?” Stooping he managed to snare a cart as it wheeled by his foot; he lifted it up, its wheels still spinning futilely.

“Just a little cheap ten-year A-battery,” Himmel said. “Costs another half cent.”

“And *you* built these carts?”

“Yes, Mr. Ackerman.” Himmel took the cart from him and set it back on the floor; once more it wheeled industriously off. “These are the ones too new to let go,” he explained. “They have to practice.”

“And then,” Jonas said, “you give them their freedom.”

“That’s right.” Himmel bobbed his large-domed, almost bald head, his horn-rimmed glasses sliding forward on his nose.

“Why?” Eric asked.

Now the crux of the matter had been broached; Himmel turned red, twitched miserably, and yet displayed an obscure, defensive pride. “Because,” he blurted, “they deserve it.”

Jonas said, “But the protoplasm’s not alive; it died when the chemical fixing-spray was applied. You know that. From then on it—all of these—is nothing but an electronic circuit, dead as—well, as a robot.”

With dignity Himmel answered, “But I consider them alive, Mr. Ackerman. And just because they’re inferior and incapable of guiding a rocketship in deep space, that doesn’t mean they have no right to live out their meager lives. I release them and they wheel around for, I expect, six years or possibly longer; that’s enough. That gives them what they’re entitled to.”

Turning to Eric, Jonas said, “If the old man knew about this—”

“Mr. Virgil Ackerman knows about this,” Himmel said at once. “He approves of it.” He amended, “Or rather, he lets me do it; he knows I’m reimbursing the company. And I buy

the carts at night, on my own time; I have an assembly line—naturally very primitive, but effective—in my conapt where I live.” He added, “I work till around one o’clock every night.”

“What do they do after they’re released?” Eric asked. “Just roam the city?”

“God knows,” Himmel said. Obviously that part was not his concern; he had done his job by building the carts and wiring the Lazy Brown Dogs in functioning position. And perhaps he was right; he could hardly accompany each cart, defend it against the hazards of the city.

“You’re an artist,” Eric pointed out, not sure if he was amused or revolted or just what. Himmel was not impressed; that much he was sure of: the entire enterprise had a bizarre, zany quality—it was absurd. Himmel ceaselessly at work both here and at his conapt, seeing to it that the factory rejects got their place in the sun ... what next? And this, while everyone else sweated out the folly, the greater, collective absurdity, of a bad war.

Against that backdrop Himmel did not look so ludicrous. It was the times. Madness haunted the atmosphere itself, from the Mole on down to this quality control functionary who was clearly disturbed in the clinical, psychiatric sense.

Walking off down the hall with Jonas Ackerman, Eric said, “He’s a poog.” That was the most powerful term for aberrance in currency.

“Obviously,” Jonas said, with a gesture of dismissal. “But this gives me a new insight into old Virgil, the fact that he’d tolerate this and certainly not because it gives him a profit—that’s not it. Frankly I’m glad. I thought Virgil was more hard-boiled; I’d have expected him to bounce this poor nurt right out of here, into a slave-labor gang on its way to Lilistar. Good what a fate that would be. Himmel is lucky.”

“How do you think it’ll end?” Eric asked. “You think the Mole will sign a separate treaty with the reegs and bail us out of this and leave the ’Starmen to fight it alone—which is what they deserve?”

“He can’t,” Jonas said flatly. “Freneksey’s secret police would swoop down on us here on Terra and make mincemeat out of him. Kick him out of office and replace him overnight with someone more militant. Someone who *likes* the job of prosecuting the war.”

“But they can’t do that,” Eric said. “He’s our elected leader, not theirs.” He knew, however, that despite these legal considerations Jonas was right. Jonas was merely appraising their ally realistically, facing the facts.

“Our best bet,” Jonas said, “is simply to lose. Slowly, inevitably, as we’re doing.” Himmel lowered his voice to a rasping whisper. “I hate to talk defeatist talk—”

“Feel free.”

Jonas said, “Eric, it’s the only way out, even if we have to look forward to a century of occupation by the reegs as our punishment for picking the wrong ally in the wrong war at the wrong time. Our very virtuous first venture into interplanetary militarism, and *how* we picked it—how the Mole picked it.” He grimaced.

“And we picked the Mole,” Eric reminded him. So the responsibility, ultimately, came back to them.

Ahead, a slight, leaflike figure, dry and weightless, drifted all at once toward them, calling

in a thin, shrill, voice, "Jonas! And you, too, Sweetscent—time to get started for the trip to Wash-35." Virgil Ackerman's tone was faintly peevish, that of a mother bird at her task; in his advanced age Virgil had become almost hermaphroditic, a blend of man and woman into one sexless, juiceless, and yet vital entity.

Opening the ancient, empty Camel cigarettes package, Virgil Ackerman said as he flattened its surfaces, “Hits, cracks, taps, or pops. Which do you take, Sweetscent?”

“Taps,” Eric said.

The old man peered at the marking stamped on the inside glued bottom fold of the now two-dimensional package. “It’s cracks. I get to cork you on the arm—thirty-two times.” He ritualistically tapped Eric on the shoulder, smiling gleefully, his natural-style ivory teeth pale and full of animated luster. “Far be it from me to injure you, doctor; after all, I might need a new liver any moment now ... I had a bad few hours last night after I went to bed and I think—but check me on this—it was due to toxemia once again. I felt loggy.”

In the seat beside Virgil Ackerman, Dr. Eric Sweetscent said, “How late were you up and what did you do?”

“Well, doctor, there was this girl.” Virgil grinned mischievously at Harvey, Jonas, Ralf and Phyllis Ackerman, those members of the family who sat around him in his thin, tapered interplan ship as it sped from Terra toward Wash-35 on Mars. “Need I say more?”

His great-grandniece, Phyllis, said severely, “Oh Christ, you’re too old. Your heart’ll give out again right in the middle. And then what’ll she—whoever she is—think? It’s undignified to die during you know what.” She eyed Virgil reprovingly.

Virgil screeched, “Then the dead man’s control in my right fist, carried for such emergencies, would summon Dr. Sweetscent here, and he’d dash in and right there on the spot, without removing me, he’d take out that bad, collapsed old heart and stick in a brand new one, and I’d—” He giggled, then patted away the saliva from his lower lip and chin with a folded linen handkerchief from his breast coat pocket. “I’d continue.” His paper-thin flesh glowed and beneath it his bones, the outline of his skull, fine and clearly distinguishable, quivered with delight and the joy of tantalizing them; they had no entree into this world of his, the private life which he, because of his privileged position, enjoyed even now during the days of privation which the war had brought on.

“*‘Mille tre,’*” Harvey said sourly, quoting Da Ponte’s libretto. “But with you, you’d cracknit, it’s-however you say a billion and three in Italian. I hope when I’m your age—”

“You won’t ever be my age,” Virgil chortled, his eyes dancing and flaming up with the vitality of enjoyment. “Forget it, Harv. Forget it and go back to your fiscal records, you’re walking, droning-on abacus. They won’t find you dead in bed with a woman; they’ll find you dead with a—” Virgil searched his mind. “With an, ahem, inkwell.”

“Please,” Phyllis said drily, turning to look out at the stars and the black sky of ’twelve space.

Eric said to Virgil, “I’d like to ask you something. About a pack of Lucky Strike green. About three months ago—”

“Your wife loves me,” Virgil said. “Yes, it was for me, doctor; a gift without strings. So please ease your feverish mind; Kathy’s not interested. Anyhow, it would cause trouble. Women can get; artiforg surgeons—well ...” He reflected. “Yes. When you think about it I can get that, too.”

“Just as I told Eric earlier today,” Jonas said. He winked at Eric, who stoically did not show any response.

“But I like Eric,” Virgil continued. “He’s a calm type. Look at him right now. Sublime, reasonable, always the cerebral type, cool in every crisis; I’ve watched him work many times for Jonas; I ought to know. And willing to get up at any hour of the night ... and that sort of thing you don’t see much.”

“You pay him,” Phyllis said shortly. She was, as always, taciturn and withdrawn; Virgil’s attractive great-grandniece, who sat on the corporation’s board of directors, had a piercing raptorlike quality—much like the old man’s, but without his sly sense of the peculiar. To Phyllis, everything was business or dross. Eric reflected that had she come onto Himmel there would be no more little carts wheeling about; in Phyllis’ world there was no room for the harmless. She reminded him a little of Kathy. And, like Kathy, she was reasonably sexy; she wore her hair in one long braided pigtail dyed a fashionable ultramarine, set off by autonomic rotating earrings and (this he did not especially enjoy) a nose ring, sign of nubile with the higher bourgeois circles.

“What’s the purpose of this conference?” Eric asked Virgil Ackerman. “Can we start discussing it now to save time?” He felt irritable.

“A pleasure trip,” Virgil said. “Chance to get away from the gloomy biz we’re in. We have a guest meeting us at Wash-35; he may already be there ... he’s got a Blank Check; I’ve opened my babyland to him, the first time I’ve let anybody but myself experience it freely.”

“Who?” Harv demanded. “After all, technically Wash-35 is the property of the corporation and we’re on the board.”

Jonas said acidly, “Virgil probably lost all his authentic Horrors of War flipcards to that person. So what else could he do but throw open the gates of the place to him?”

“I never flip with my Horrors of War cards or my FBI cards,” Virgil said. “And by the way I have a duplicate of the Sinking of the Panay. Eton Hambro—you know, the fathead who was board chairman of Manfrex Enterprises—gave it to me on my birthday. I thought everybody knew I had a complete file but evidently not Hambro. No wonder Freneksy’s boys are running his six factories for him these days.”

“Tell us about Shirley Temple in *The Littlest Rebel*, ” Phyllis said in a bored tone, still looking out at the panorama of stars beyond the ship. “Tell us how she—”

“You’ve seen that.” Virgil sounded testy.

“Yes, but I never get tired of it,” Phyllis said. “No matter how hard I try I still can’t find anything but engrossing, right down to the last miserable inch of film.” She turned to Harv. “Your lighter.”

Rising from his seat, Eric walked to the lounge of the small ship, seated himself at the table, and picked up the drink list. His throat felt dry; the bickering that went on within the

Ackerman clan always made him dully thirsty, as if he were in need of some reassuring fluid. ... perhaps, he thought, a substitute for the primordial milk: the *Urmilch* of life. I deserve my own babyland, too, he thought half in jest. But only half.

To everyone but Virgil Ackerman, the Washington, D.C., of 1935 was a waste of time, since only Virgil remembered the authentic city, the authentic time and place, the environment now so long passed away. In every detail, therefore, Wash-35 consisted of a painstakingly elaborate reconstruction of the specific limited universe of childhood which Virgil had known, constantly refined and improved in matters of authenticity by his antique procurer—Kathy Sweetscent—without really ever being in a genuine sense changed: it had coagulated and cleaved to the dead past ... at least as far as the rest of the clan were concerned. But to Virgil it of course sprouted life. There, he blossomed. He restored his flagging biochemical energy and then returned to the present, to the shared, current world which he eminently understood and manipulated but of which he did not psychologically feel himself a native.

And his vast regressive babyland had caught on: become a fad. On lesser scales other than industrialists and money-boys—to speak in a brutal and frank way, war profiteers—had made life-size models of their childhood worlds, too; Virgil's now had ceased to be unique. None, of course, matched Virgil's in complexity and sheer authenticity; fakes of antique items, not the actual surviving articles, had been strewn about in vulgar approximations of what had been the authentic reality. But in all fairness, it had to be realized, Eric reflected, no one possessed the money and economic know-how to underwrite this admittedly uniquely expensive and beyond all others—imitations all—utterly impractical venture. This—in the midst of the dreadful war.

But still it was, after all, harmless, in its quaint sort of way. A bit, he reflected, like Bruce Himmel's peculiar activity with his many clanky little carts. It slaughtered no one. And that could hardly be said for the national effort ... the jihad against the creatures from Proxima.

On thinking of this, an unpleasant recollection entered his mind.

On Terra at the UN capital city, Cheyenne, Wyoming, in addition to those in POW camps there existed a herd of captured, defanged reegs, maintained on public exhibition by the Terran military establishment. Citizens could file past and gawk and ponder at length the meaning of these exoskeletoned beings with six extremities in all, capable of progressing linearly at a great rate on either two or four legs. The reegs had no audible vocal apparatus; they communicated beewise by elaborate, dancelike weavings of their sensory stalks. With Terrans and 'Starmen they employed a mechanical translation box, and through this the gawkers had an opportunity to question their humbled captives.

Questions, until recently, had run to a monotonous, baiting uniformity. But now a new interrogation had begun by subtle stages to put in its very ominous appearance—ominous at least from the standpoint of the Establishment. In view of this inquiry the exhibit had abruptly terminated, and for an indefinite time. *How can we come to a rapprochement?* The reegs, oddly, had an answer. It amounted to: live and let live. Expansion by Terrans into the Proxima System would cease; the reegs would not—and actually had not in the past—invented the Sol System.

But as to Lilistar: The reegs had no answer there because they had developed none for themselves; the 'Starmen had been their enemies for centuries and it was too late for anyone

to give or take any advice on this subject. And anyhow 'Star "advisers" had already managed to take up residence on Terra for the performance of security functions ... as if a four-armed antlike organism six feet high could pass unnoticed on a New York street.

The presence of 'Star advisers, however, easily passed unnoticed; the 'Starmen were phycomycetous mentally, but morphologically they could not be distinguished from Terrans. There was a good reason for this. In Mousterian times a flotilla from Lilistar's Alpha Centaurus Empire had migrated to the Sol System, had colonized Earth and to some extent Mars. A fracas with deadly overtones had broken out between settlers of the two worlds and a long, degenerating war had followed, the upshot of which had been the decline of both subcultures to acute and dreary barbarism. Due to climatic faults the Mars colony had at last died out entirely; the Terran, however, had groped its way up through historical ages and last back to civilization. Cut off from Alpha by the Lilistar-reeg conflict, the Terran colony had again become planet-wide, elaborated, bountiful, had advanced to the stage of launching first an orbiting satellite, and then an unmanned ship to Luna, and at last a manned ship—and was, as a chef-d'oeuvre, able once more to contact its system of origin. The surprise, of course, had been vast on both sides.

"Cat got your tongue?" Phyllis Ackerman said to Eric, seating herself beside him in the cramped lounge. She smiled, an effort which transfigured her thin, delicately cut face; she looked, for a moment, appealingly pretty. "Order me a drink, too. So I can face the world of bolo bats and Jean Harlow and Baron von Richtofen and Joe Louis and—what the hell is it?" She searched her memory, eyes squeezed shut. "I've blocked it out of my mind. Oh yes. Tom Mix. And his Ralston Straightshooters. With the Wrangler. That wretched Wrangler. And the cereal! And those eternal goddam box tops. You know what we're in for, don't you? Another session with Orphan Annie and her li'l decoder badge ... we'll have to listen to ads for Ovaltine and then those numbers read out for us to take down and decode—to find out what Annie does on Monday. God." She bent to reach for her drink, and he could not resist peering with near-professional interest as the top of her dress gave way to show the natural line of her small, articulated pale breasts.

Put by this spectacle in a reasonably good mood, Eric said playfully but cautiously, "One day we'll jot down the numbers the fake announcer gives over the fake radio, decode them with the Orphan Annie decoder badge, and—" The message will say, he thought glumly, *Make a separate peace with the reegs. At once.*

"I know," Phyllis said, and thereupon finished for him. "It's hopeless, Earthmen. Give up now. This is the Monarch of the reegs speaking; looky heah, y'all: I've infiltrated radio station WMAL in Washington, D.C., and I'm going to destroy you." She somberly drank from her tall stemmed glass. "And in *addition* the Ovaltine you've been drinking—"

"I wasn't going to say precisely that." But she had come awfully darn close. Nettled, Eric said, "Like the rest of your family you've got a gene that requires you to interrupt before nonblooder—"

"A *what?*"

"That is what we call you," he said grimly. "You Ackermen."

"Go ahead, then, doctor." Her gray eyes lit with amusement. "Say your tiny say."

Eric said, "Never mind. Who's the guest?"

The great pale eyes of the woman had never seemed so large, so composed; they dominated and commanded with their utter inner universe of certitude. Of tranquility created by absolute, unchanging knowledge of all that deserved to be known. "Suppose we wait and see." And then, not yet affecting the changelessness of her eyes, her lips began to dance with a wicked, teasing playfulness; a moment later a new and different spark ignited within her eyes and thereupon the expression of her entire face underwent a total change. "The door," she said wickedly, her eyes gleaming and intense, her mouth twitching in a mirth-ridden giggle almost that of an adolescent girl, "flies open and there stands a silent delegate from Proxima. Ah, what a sight. A bloated greasy enemy reeg. Secretly, and incredibly because of Freneksy's snooping secret police, a reeg here officially to negotiate for a—" She broke off and then at last in a low monotone finished, "—a separate peace between us and them." With a dark and moody expression, her eyes no longer lit by any spark whatsoever, she listlessly finished her drink. "Yes, that'll be the day. How well I can picture it. Old Virgil sits there beaming and cackling as usual. And sees his war contracts, every frugging last one of them slither down the drain. Back to fake mink. Back to the bat crap days ... when the whole factory stank to high heaven." She laughed shortly, a brisk bark of derision. "Any minute now, doctor. Oh *sure*"

"Freneksy's cops," Eric said, sharing her mood, "as you pointed out yourself, would swoop down on Wash-35 so dalb fast—"

"I know. It's a fantasy, a wish-fulfillment dream. Born out of hopeless longing. So it hardly matters whether Virgil would decide to mastermind—and try to carry off—such an encounter or not, does it? Because it couldn't be done successfully in a million light-years. It could be tried. But not done."

"Too bad," Eric said, half to himself, deep in thought.

"Traitor! You want to be popped into the slave-labor pool?"

Eric, after pondering, said cautiously, "I want—"

"You don't know what you want, Sweetscent; every man involved in an unhappy marriage loses the metabiological capacity to know what he does want—it's been taken away from him. You're a smelly little shell, trying to do the correct thing but never quite making it because your miserable little long-suffering heart isn't in it. Look at you now! You've managed to squirm away from me."

"Have not."

"—So we're no longer touching physically. Especially thighwise. Oh, perish thighwise from the universe. But it is hard, is it not, to do it, to squirm away in such close quarters ... here in the lounge. And yet you've managed to do it, haven't you?"

To change the subject Eric said, "I heard on TV last night that the quateologist with that funny beard, that Professor Wald, is back from—"

"No. He's not Virgil's guest."

"Marm Hastings, then?"

"That Taoist spellbinding nut and crank and fool? You manufacturing a joke, Sweetscent?"

that it? You suppose Virgil would tolerate a marginal fake, that—” She made an obscene upward-jerking gesture with her thumb, at the same time grinning in a show of her white clean, and very impressive clear teeth. “Maybe,” she said, “it’s Ian Norse.”

“Who’s he?” He had heard the name; it had a vaguely familiar sound to it, and he knew that in asking her he was making a tactical error; still he did it: this, if anything, was his weakness in regard to women. He led where they followed—sometimes. But more than once, especially at critical times in his life, in the major junctions, he followed guilelessly where they led.

Phyllis sighed. “Ian’s firm makes all those shiny sterile new very expensive artificial organs you cleverly graft into rich dying people; you mean, doctor, you’re not clear as to who you’re indebted?”

“I know,” Eric said, irritably, feeling chagrin. “With everything else on my mind I forgot momentarily; that’s all.”

“Maybe it’s a composer. As in the days of Kennedy; maybe it’s Pablo Casals. God, he would be old. Maybe it’s Beethoven. Hmm.” She pretended to ponder. “By God, I do think he said something about that. Ludwig von *somebody*; is there a Ludwig von Somebodyelse other than —”

“Christ,” Eric said angrily, weary of being teased. “Stop it.”

“Don’t pull rank; you’re not so great. Keeping one creepy old man alive century after century.” She giggled her low, sweet, and very intimate warm giggle of delighted mirth.

Eric said, with as much dignity as he could manage, “I also maintain TF&D’s entire workforce of eighty thousand key individuals. And as a matter of fact, I can’t do that from Mars so I resent all this. I resent it very much.” You included, he thought bitterly to himself.

“What a ratio,” Phyllis said. “One artiforg surgeon to eighty thousand patients—eighty thousand and one. But you have your team of robants to help you ... perhaps they can make do while you’re absent.”

“A robant is an it that stinks,” he said, paraphrasing T. S. Eliot.

“And an artiforg surgeon,” Phyllis said; “is an it that grovels.”

He glowered at her; she sipped her drink and showed no contrition. He could not get at her; she simply had too much psychic strength for him.

The omphalos of Wash-35, a five-story brick apartment building where Virgil had lived as a boy, contained a truly modern apartment of their year 2055 with every detail of convenience which Virgil could obtain during these war years. Several blocks away lay Connecticut Avenue, and, along it, stores which Virgil remembered. Here was Gammage’s, a shop which Virgil had bought Tip Top comics and penny candy. Next to it Eric made out the familiar shape of People’s Drugstore; the old man during his childhood had bought a cigarette lighter here once and chemicals for his Gilbert Number Five glass-blowing and chemistry set.

“What’s the Uptown Theater showing this week?” Harv Ackerman murmured as their ship coasted along Connecticut Avenue so that Virgil could review these treasured sights. He peered.

It was Jean Harlow in *Hell's Angels*, which all of them had seen at least twice. Harv groaned.

“But don't forget that lovely scene,” Phyllis reminded him, “where Harlow says, ‘I think I go slip into something more comfortable,’ and then when she returns—”

“I know, I know,” Harv said irritably. “Okay, that I like.”

The ship taxied from Connecticut Avenue onto McComb Street and soon was parking before 3039 with its black wrought-iron fence and tiny lawn. When the hatch slid back however, Eric smelled—not the city air of a long-gone Terran capital—but the bitterly thin and cold atmosphere of Mars; he could hardly get his lungs full of it and he stood gasping, feeling disoriented and sick.

“I'll have to goose them about the air machinery,” Virgil complained as he descended the ramp to the sidewalk, assisted by Jonas and Harv. It did not seem to bother him, however; he spryly hiked toward the doorway of the apartment building.

Robants in the shape of small boys hopped to their feet and one of them yelled authentically, “Hey Virg! Where you been?”

“Had to do an errand for my mother,” Virgil cackled, his face shining with delight. “How are ya, Earl? Hey, I got some good Chinese stamps my dad gave me; he got them at his office. There's duplicates; I'll trade you.” He fished in his pocket, halting on the porch of the building.

“Hey, you know what I have?” a second robant child shrilled. “Some dry ice; I let Bob Rougy use my Flexie for it; you can hold it if you want.”

“I'll trade you a big-little book for it,” Virgil said as he produced his key and unlocked the front door of the building. “How about *Buck Rogers and the Doom Comet*? That's real keen.”

As the rest of the party descended from the ship, Phyllis said to Eric, “Offer the children a mint-condition 1952 Marilyn Monroe nude calendar and see what they'll give you for it. At least half a popsicle.”

As the apartment house door swung aside, a TF&D guard belatedly appeared. “Oh, Mr. Ackerman; I didn't realize you'd arrived.” The guard ushered them into the dark, carpeted hall.

“Is he here yet?” Virgil asked, with sudden apparent tension.

“Yes sir. In the apt resting. He asked not to be disturbed for several hours.” The guard, too, seemed nervous.

Halting, Virgil said, “How large is his party?”

“Just himself, an aide, and two Secret Service men.”

“Who's for a glass of ice-cold Kool-Aid?” Virgil said reflexively over his shoulder as he led the way.

“Me, me,” Phyllis said, mimicking Virgil's enthusiastic tone. “I want imitation fruit raspberry lime; what about you, Eric? How about gin bourbon lime or cherry Scotch vodka? Or didn't they sell those flavors back in 1935?”

To Eric, Harv said, “I'd like a place to lie down and rest, myself. This Martian air makes

me weak as a kitten.” His face had become mottled and ill-looking. “Why doesn’t he build a dome? Keep *real* air in here?”

“Maybe,” Eric pointed out, “there’s a purpose in this. Prevents him from retiring here for good; makes him leave after a short while.”

Coming up to them, Jonas said, “Personally I enjoy coming to this anachronistic place Harv. It’s a fnugging museum.” To Eric he said, “In all fairness, your wife does a superb job of providing artifacts for this period. Listen to that—what’s it called?—that radio playing in that apt.” Dutifully they listened. It was “Betty and Bob,” the ancient soap opera, emanating from the long-departed past. And even Eric found himself impressed; the voices seemed alive and totally real. They were here *now*, not mere echoes of themselves. How Kathy had achieved this he didn’t know.

Steve, the huge and handsome, masculine Negro janitor of the building—or rather herobant simulacrum—appeared then, smoking his pipe and nodding cordially to them as if he were a doctor. “Morning, doctor. Little nip of cold we having these days. Kids be getting they sleds soonly. My own boy, Georgie, he saving for a sled, he say little while ago to me.”

“I’ll chip in a 1934 dollar,” Ralf Ackerman said, reaching for his wallet. In a *sotto voce* aside to Eric he said, “Or does old papa Virgil have it that the colored kid isn’t entitled to a sled?”

“That no nevermind, Mr. Ackerman,” Steve assured him. “Georgie, he earn he sled; he no want tips but real and troo pay.” The dignified dark robant moved off then and was gone.

“Damn convincing,” Harv said presently.

“Really is,” Jonas agreed. He shivered. “God, to think that the actual man’s been dead for a century. It’s distinctly hard to keep in mind that we’re on Mars, not even on Earth in our own time—I don’t like it. I like things to appear what they really are.”

A thought came to Eric. “Do you object to a stereo tape of a symphony played back in the evening when you’re at home in your apt?”

“No,” Jonas said. “But that’s totally different.”

“It’s not,” Eric disagreed. “The orchestra isn’t there, the original sound has departed, the hall in which it was recorded is now silent; all you possess is twelve hundred feet of iron oxide tape that’s been magnetized in a specific pattern ... it’s an illusion just like this. Once this is complete.” Q.E.D., he thought, and walked on then, toward the stairs. We live with illusion daily, he reflected. When the first bard rattled off the first epic of a sometime battle, the illusion entered our lives; the *Iliad* is as much a “fake” as those robant children trading postage stamps on the porch of the building. Humans have always striven to retain the past to keep it convincing; there’s nothing wicked in that. Without it we have no continuity; we have only the moment. And, deprived of the past, the moment—the present—has little meaning, if any.

Maybe, he pondered as he ascended the stairs, that’s my problem with Kathy. I can’t remember our combined past: can’t recall the days when we voluntarily lived with each other ... now it’s become an involuntary arrangement, derived God knows how from the past.

And neither of us understands it. Neither of us can puzzle out its meaning or its motivating mechanism. With a better memory we could turn it back into something we could fathom.

He thought, Maybe this is the first sign of old age making its dread appearance. And for m
at thirty-four!

Phyllis, halting on the stair, waiting for him, said, "Have an affair with me, doctor."

Inwardly he quailed, felt hot, felt terror, felt excitement, felt hope, felt hopelessness, fe
guilt, felt eagerness.

He said, "You have the most perfect teeth known to man."

"Answer."

"I—" He tried to think of an answer. Could words respond to this? But this had come in th
form of words, had it not? "And be roasted into a cinder by Kathy—who sees everything th
goes on?" He felt the woman staring at him, staring and staring with her huge, star-fixe
eyes. "Hmm," he said, not too cleverly, and felt miserable and small and exactly precise
right to the last jot and tittle what he ought not to be.

Phyllis said, "But you need it."

"Umm," he said, wilting under this unwanted, undeserved female psychiatric examinatio
of his evil, inner soul; she had it—his soul—and she was turning it over and over on h
tongue. Goddam her! She had figured it out; she spoke the truth; he hated her, he longed
go to bed with her. And of course she knew—saw on his face—all this, saw it with h
accursed huge eyes, eyes which no mortal woman ought to possess.

"You're going to perish without it," Phyllis said. "Without true, spontaneous, relaxe
physical sheer—"

"One chance," he said hoarsely. "In a billion. Of getting away with it." He managed, the
actually to laugh. "In fact our standing here right now on these damn stairs is folly. But wh
the——do you care?" He started on, then, actually passed her, continued on up to the secon
floor. What do you have to lose? he thought. It's me; I'd be the one. You can handle Kath
just as easily as you can yank me around at the end of that line you keep paying out an
reeling back.

The door of Virgil's private, modern apt stood open; Virgil had gone inside. The balance
the party straggled after him, the blood clan first, of course, then the mere titled officers
the firm.

Eric entered—and saw Virgil's guest.

The guest; the man they had come here to see. Reclining, his face empty and slack, lip
bulging dark purple and irregular, eyes fixed absently on nothing, was Gino Molinar
Supreme elected leader of Terra's unified planetary culture, and the supreme commander
its armed forces in the war against the reegs.

His fly was unbuttoned.

- [*read A Conflict of Interest pdf*](#)
- [read The Collected Stories online](#)
- [**download Financial Planning DIY Guide: Everything You Need to Successfully Manage Your Money and Invest for Wealth Creation online**](#)
- [read Jerky Everything: Foolproof and Flavorful Recipes for Beef, Pork, Poultry, Game, Fish, Fruit, and Even Vegetables \(Countryman Know How\) book](#)
- [read Mother's Only Child](#)
- [click A Life Decoded: My Genome: My Life](#)

- <http://berttrotman.com/library/Raven-s-Gate--The-Graphic-Novel--The-Power-of-Five---The-Gatekeepers--Book-1---UK-Edition-.pdf>
- <http://schroff.de/books/100-Great-Artists.pdf>
- <http://www.experienceolvera.co.uk/library/Financial-Planning-DIY-Guide--Everything-You-Need-to-Successfully-Manage-Your-Money-and-Invest-for-Wealth-Creat>
- <http://paulczajak.com/?library/Jerky-Everything--Foolproof-and-Flavorful-Recipes-for-Beef--Pork--Poultry--Game--Fish--Fruit--and-Even-Vegetab>
- <http://www.celebritychat.in/?ebooks/Names-on-the-Land--A-Historical-Account-of-Place-Naming-in-the-United-States--4th-Edition-.pdf>
- <http://www.netc-bd.com/ebooks/Quo-Vadis-Quantum-Mechanics---The-Frontiers-Collection-.pdf>