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ERSATZ ETERNAL

Grayson removed the irons from the other's wrists and legs . "Hart!" he said sharply.

The young man on the cot did not stir. Grayson hesitated and then deliberately kicked the man. "Damn you, Hart, listen to me! I'm releasing you- just in case I don't come back "

John Hart neither opened his eyes nor showed any awareness of the blow he had received. He lay inert; and the only evidence of life in him was that he was limp, not rigid. There was almost no color in his cheeks . His black hair was damp and stringy.

Grayson said earnestly, "Hart, I'm going out to look for Malkins. Remember, he left four days ago, intending only to be gone twenty-four hours."

When there was no response, the older man started to turn away , but he hesitated and said, "Hart, if I don't come back, you must realize where we are, This is a new planet, understand. We've never been here before. Our ship was wrecked, and the three of us came down in a lifeboat, and what we need is fuel. That's what Malkins went out to look for , and now I'm going out to look for Malkins ."

The figure on the cot remained blank. And Grayson walked reluctantly out the door and off toward the hills. He had no particular hope.

Three men were down on a planet God-only-knew-where - and one of those men was violently insane.

As he walked along, he glanced around him in occasional puzzlement. The scenery was very earthlike: trees, shrubs, grass, and distant mountains misted by blue haze. It was still a little odd that when they had landed Malkins and he had had the distinct impression that they were coming down onto a barren world without atmosphere and without life.

A soft breeze touched his cheeks. The scent of flowers was in the air. He saw birds flitting among the trees, and once he heard a song that was startlingly like that of a meadow lark.

He walked all day and saw no sign of Malkins. Nor was there any habitation to indicate that the planet had intelligent life. Just before dusk he heard a woman calling his name.

Grayson turned with a start, and it was his mother, looking much younger than he remembered her in her coffin eight years before. She came up, and she said severely, "Billie, don't forget your rubbers."

Grayson stared at her with eyes that kept twisting away in disbelief. Then, deliberately, he walked over and touched her. She caught his hand, and her fingers were warm and lifelike.

She said, "I want you to go tell your father that dinner is ready."

Grayson released himself and stepped back and looked tensely around him. The two of them stood on an empty, grassy plain. Far in the distance was the gleam of a silver shining river.

He turned away from her and strode on into the twilight. When he looked back, there was no one in sight. But presently a boy was moving in step beside him. Grayson paid no attention at first, but presently he

stole a glance at his companion.

It was himself at the age of fifteen.

Just before the gathering night blotted out any chance of recognition, he saw that a second boy was now striding along beside the first. Himself, aged about eleven.

Three Bill Graysons, thought Grayson. He began to laugh wildly.

Then he began to run. When he looked back, he was alone. Sobbing under his breath, he slowed to a walk, and almost immediately heard the laughter of children in the soft darkness. Familiar sounds, yet the impact of them was stunning.

Grayson babbled at them, "All me, at different ages. Get away! I know you're only hallucinations."

When he had worn himself out, when there was nothing left to his voice but a harsh whisper, he thought, Only hallucinations? Am I sure?

He felt unutterably depressed and exhausted. "Hart and me," he said aloud wearily, "we belong in the same asylum."

Dawn came, cool; and his hope was that sunrise would bring an end to the madness of the night. As the slow light lengthened over the land, Grayson looked around him in bewilderment. He was on a hill, and below him spread his home town of Calypso, Ohio.

He stared down at it with unbelieving eyes, and then, because it looked as real as life, he started to run toward it.

It was Calypso, but as it had been when he was a boy. He headed for his own house. And there he was; he'd know that boy of ten anywhere. He called out to the youngster, who took one look at him, turned away, and

ran into the house.

Grayson lay down on the lawn, and covered his eyes. "Someone," he told himself "something is taking pictures out of my mind and making me see them."

It seemed to him that if he hoped to remain sane - and alive - he'd have to hold that thought.

It was the sixth day after Grayson's departure. Aboard the lifeboat, John Hart stirred and opened his eyes. "Hungry," he said aloud to no one in particular. He waited he knew not for what and then wearily sat up, slipped off the cot, and made his way to the galley. When he had eaten, he walked to the lock-door, and stood for a long time staring out over the earthlike scene that spread before him. It made him feel better, vaguely.

He jumped abruptly down to the ground and began to walk toward the nearest hilltop. Darkness was falling rapidly but it did not occur to him to turn back.

Soon the ship was lost in the night behind him.

A girlfriend of his youth was the first to talk to him. She came out of the blackness and they had a long conversation. In the end they decided to marry.

The ceremony was immediately completed by a minister who drove up in a car and found both families assembled in a beautiful home in the suburbs of Pittsburgh. The clergyman was an old man whom Hart had known in his childhood.

The young couple went to New York City and to Niagara Falls for their honeymoon, then headed by aere-taxi for California to make their home.

Suddenly there were three children, and they owned a hundred-thousand-acre ranch with a million cattle on it, and there were cowboys who dressed like movie stars,

For Grayson, the civilization that sprang into full-grown existence around him on what had originally been a barren, airless planet had nightmarish qualities. The people he met had a life expectancy of less than seventy years. Children were born in nine months and ten days after conception.

He buried six generations of one family that he had founded. And then, one day as he was crossing Broadway - in New York City - the small sturdiness, the walk, and the manner of a man coming from the opposite direction made him stop short.

"Henry!" he shouted. "Henry Malkins!"

"Well, I'll be - Bill Grayson."

They shook hands, silent after the first excited greeting. Malkins spoke first. "There's a bar around the corner."

During the middle of the second drink John Hart's name came up.

"A life force seeking form used his mind" said Grayson matter-of-factly. "It apparently has no expression of its own. It tried to use me -" He glanced at Malkins questioningly.

The other man nodded. "And me!" he said,

"I guess we resisted too hard."

Malkins wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "Bill," he said, "it's all like a dream. I get married and divorced every forty years. I marry what seems to be a twenty-year-old girl. In a few decades she looks

fivehundred."

"Do you think it's all in our minds?"

"No no-nothing like that. I think all this civilization exists -
whatever I mean by existence." Malkins groaned. "Let's not get into that .
When I read some of the philosophy explaining life, I feel as if I'm on
the edge of an abyss. If only we could get rid of Hart, somehow."

Grayson was smiling grimly. "So you haven't found out yet?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you got a weapon on you?"

Silently, Malkins produced a needle-beam projector. Grayson took it ,
pointed it at his own right temple, and pressed the curved firing pin - as
Malkins grabbed at him frantically but too late.

The thin, white beam seemed to penetrate Grayson's head. It burned a
round, black, smoldering hole in the woodwork beyond. Coolly, the unhurt
Grayson pointed the triangular muzzle at his companion.

"Like me to try it on you?" he asked jovially.

The older man shuddered and grabbed at the weapon. "Give me that!" he
said.

He calmed presently and asked, "I've noticed that I'm no older. Bill,
what are we going to do?"

"I think we're being held in reserve," said Grayson.

He stood up and held out his hand . "Well, Henry, it's been good
seeing you. Suppose we meet here every year from now on and compare notes."

"But -"

Grayson smiled a little tautly. "Brace up, my friend. Don't you see ?
This is the biggest thing in the universe. We're going to live forever.

We're possible substitutes if anything goes wrong."

"But what is it? What's doing it?"

"Ask me a million years from now. Maybe I'll have an answer."

He turned and walked out of the bar. He did not look back.