

Science Fiction

Push No More

By Robert Silverberg


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COVER DESIGN BY CHRIS HARDWICK

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I PUSH ... and the shoe moves. Will you look at that? It really moves! All I have to do is give a silent inner nudge, no hands, just reaching from the core of my mind, and my old worn-out brown shoe, the left one, goes sliding slowly across the floor of my bedroom. Past the chair, past the pile of beaten-up textbooks (Geometry, Second Year Spanish, Civic Studies, Biology, etc.), past my sweaty heap of discarded clothes. Indeed the shoe obeys me. Making a little swishing sound as it snags against the roughness of the elderly linoleum floor tiling. Look at it now, bumping gently into the far wall, tipping edge-up, stopping. Its voyage is over. I bet I could make it climb right up

the wall. But don't bother doing it, man. Not just now. This is hard work. Just relax, Harry. Your arms are shaking. You're perspiring all over. Take it easy for a while. You don't have to prove everything all at once.

What have I proven, anyway?

It seems that I can make things move with my mind. How about that, man? Did you ever imagine that you had freaky powers? Not until this very night. This very lousy night. Standing there with Cindy Klein and finding that terrible knot of throbbing tension in my groin, like needing to take a leak only fifty times more intense, a zone of anguish spinning off some kind of fearful energy like a crazy dynamo implanted in my crotch. And suddenly, without any conscious awareness, finding a way of tapping that energy, drawing it up through my body to my head, amplifying it, and... *using* it. As I just did with my shoe. As I did

a couple of hours earlier with Cindy. So you aren't just a dumb gawky adolescent schmuck, Harry Blaufeld. You are somebody very special.

You have power. You are potent.

How good it is to lie here in the privacy of my own musty bedroom and be able to make my shoe slide along the floor, simply by looking at it in that special way. The feeling of strength that I get from that! Tremendous. I am potent. I have power. That's what potent means, to have power, out of the Latin *potentia* derived from *posse*. To be able. I am able. I can do this most extraordinary thing. And not just in fitful unpredictable bursts. It's under my conscious control. All I have to do is dip into that reservoir of tension and skim off a few watts of *push*. Far out! What a weird night this is.

* * * *

Let's go back three hours. To a time when I know nothing of this *potentia* in me. Three hours ago I know only from horniness. I'm standing outside Cindy's front door with her at half past ten. We have done the going-to-the-movies thing, we have done the cappucino-afterward thing, now I want to do the makeout thing. I'm trying to get myself invited inside, knowing that her parents have gone away for the weekend and there's nobody home except her older brother, who is seeing his girl in Scarsdale tonight and won't be back for hours, and once I'm past Cindy's front door I hope, well, to get invited inside. (What a coy metaphor! You know what I mean.) So three cheers for Casanova Blaufeld, who is suffering a bad attack of inflammation of the cherry. Look at me, stammering, fumbling for words, shifting my weight from foot to foot, chewing on my lips, going red in the face. All my pimples light up like beacons when I

blush. Come on, Blaufeld, pull yourself together. Change your image of yourself. Try this on for size: you're twenty-three years old, tall, strong, suave, a man of the world, veteran of so many beds you've lost count. Bushy beard that girls love to run their hands through. Big drooping handlebar mustachios. And you aren't asking her for any favors. You aren't whining and wheedling and saying please, Cindy, let's do it, because you know you don't need to say please. It's no boon you seek: you give as good as you get, right, so it's a mutually beneficial transaction, right? Right? Wrong. You're as suave as a pig. You want to exploit her for the sake of your own grubby needs. You know you'll be inept. But let's pretend, at least. Straighten the shoulders, suck in the gut, inflate the chest. Harry Blaufeld, the devilish seducer. Get your hands on her sweater for starters. No one's around; it's a dark night. Go for the boobs, get her hot.

Isn't that what Jimmy the Greek told you to do? So you try it. Grinning stupidly, practically apologizing with your eyes. Reaching out. The grabby fingers connecting with the fuzzy purple fabric.

Her face, flushed and big-eyed. Her mouth, thin-lipped and wide. Her voice, harsh and wire-edged. She says, "Don't be disgusting, Harry. Don't be *silly*." Silly. Backing away from me like I've turned into a monster with eight eyes and green fangs. Don't be disgusting. She tries to slip into the house fast, before I can paw her again. I stand there watching her fumble for her key, and this terrible rage starts to rise in me. Why disgusting? Why silly? All I wanted was to show her my love, right? That I really care for her, that I relate to her. A display of affection through physical contact. Right? So I reached out. A little caress. Prelude to tender intimacy. "Don't be disgusting," she said.

"Don't be *silly*." The trivial little immature bitch. And now I feel the anger mounting. Down between my legs there's this hideous pain, this throbbing sensation of anguish, this purely sexual tension, and it's pouring out into my belly, spreading upward along my gut like a stream of flame. A dam has broken somewhere inside me. I feel fire blazing under the top of my skull. And there it is! The power! The strength! I don't question it. I don't ask myself what it is or where it came from. I just push her, hard, from ten feet away, a quick furious shove. It's like an invisible hand against her breasts—I can see the front of her sweater flatten out—and she topples backward, clutching at the air, and goes over on her ass. I've knocked her sprawling without touching her. "Harry," she mumbles. "Harry?"

My anger's gone. Now I feel terror. What have I done? How? *How?* Down on her ass, *boom*. From ten feet away!

I run all the way home, never looking back.

* * * *

Footsteps in the hallway, *clickety-clack*. My sister is home from her date with Jimmy the Greek. That isn't his name. Aristides Pappas is who he really is. Ari, she calls him. Jimmy the Greek, I call him, but not to his face. He's nine feet tall with black greasy hair and a tremendous beak of a nose that comes straight out of his forehead. He's twenty-seven years old and he's laid a thousand girls. Sara is going to marry him next year. Meanwhile they see each other three nights a week and they screw a lot. She's never said a word to me about that, about the screwing, but I know. Sure they screw. Why not? They're going to get married, aren't they? And they're adults. She's nineteen years old, so it's legal for her to screw. I won't be nineteen for

four years and four months. It's legal for me to screw now, I think. If only. If only I had somebody. If only.

Clickety-clickety-clack. There she goes, into her room. *Blunk.* That's her door closing. She doesn't give a damn if she wakes the whole family up. Why should she care? She's all turned on now. Soaring on her memories of what she was just doing with Jimmy the Greek. That warm feeling. The afterglow, the book calls it.

I wonder how they do it when they do it.

They go to his apartment. Do they take off all their clothes first? Do they talk before they begin? A drink or two? Smoke a joint? Sara claims she doesn't smoke it. I bet she's putting me on. They get naked. Christ, he's so tall, he must have a dong a foot long. Doesn't it scare her? They lie down on the bed together. Or on a couch. The floor, maybe? A thick fluffy carpet?

He touches her body. Doing the foreplay stuff. I've read about it. He strokes the breasts, making the nipples go erect. I've seen her nipples. They aren't any bigger than mine. How tall do they get when they're erect? An inch? Three inches? Standing up like a couple of pink pencils? And his hand must go down below, too. There's this thing you're supposed to touch, this tiny bump of flesh hidden inside there. I've studied the diagrams and I still don't know where it is. Jimmy the Greek knows where it is, you can bet your ass. So he touches her there. Then what? She must get hot, right? How can he tell when it's time to go inside her? The time arrives. They're finally doing it. You know, I can't visualize it. He's on top of her and they're moving up and down, sure, but I still can't imagine how the bodies fit together, how they really move, how they do it.

She's getting undressed now, right across the hallway. Off with the shirt, the slacks, the bra, the panties, whatever the hell she wears. I can hear her moving around. I wonder if her door is really closed tight. It's a long time since I've had a good look at her. Who knows, maybe her nipples are still standing up. Even if her door's open only a few inches, I can see into her room from mine, if I hunch down here in the dark and peek.

But her door's closed. What if I reach out and give it a little nudge? From here. I pull the power up into my head, yes ... reach ... *push* ... ah ... yes! Yes! It moves! One inch, two, three. That's good enough. I can see a slice of her room. The light's on. Hey, there she goes! Too fast, out of sight. I think she was naked. Now she's coming back. Naked, yes. Her back is to me. You've got a cute ass, Sis, you know that? Turn around, turn around, turn around ... ah. Her nipples look the same as always.

Not standing up at all. I guess they must go back down after it's all over. *Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies.* (I don't really read the Bible a lot, just the dirty parts.) Cindy's got bigger ones than you, Sis, I bet she has. Unless she pads them. I couldn't tell tonight. I was too excited to notice whether I was squeezing flesh or rubber.

Sara's putting her housecoat on. One last flash of thigh and belly, then no more. Damn. Into the bathroom now. The sound of water running. She's getting washed. Now the tap is off. And now ... *tinkle, tinkle, tinkle.* I can picture her sitting there, grinning to herself, taking a happy piss, thinking cozy thoughts about what she and Jimmy the Greek did tonight. Oh, Christ, I hurt! I'm jealous of my own sister! That she can do it three times a week while I ... am nowhere ... with nobody ... no one ... nothing

Let's give Sis a little surprise.

Hmm. Can I manipulate something that's out of my direct line of sight? Let's try it. The toilet seat is in the right-hand corner of the bathroom, under the window. And the flush knob is—let me think—on the side closer to the wall, up high—yes. Okay, reach out, man. Grab it before she does. *Push*... down ... *push*. Yeah! Listen to that, man! You flushed it for her without leaving your own room!

She's going to have a hard time figuring that one out.

* * * *

Sunday: a rainy day, a day of worrying. I can't get the strange events of last night out of my mind. This power of mine—where did it come from, what can I use it for? And I can't stop fretting over the awareness that I'll have to face Cindy again first thing tomorrow morning, in our Biology class. What

will she say to me? Does she realize I actually wasn't anywhere near her when I knocked her down? If she knows I have a power, is she frightened of me? Will she report me to the Society for the Prevention of Supernatural Phenomena, or whoever looks after such things? I'm tempted to pretend I'm sick, and stay home from school tomorrow. But what's the sense of that? I can't avoid her forever.

The more tense I get, the more intensely I feel the power surging within me. It's very strong today. (The rain may have something to do with that. Every nerve is twitching. The air is damp and maybe that makes me more conductive.) When nobody is looking, I experiment. In the bathroom, standing far from the sink, I unscrew the top of the toothpaste tube. I turn the water taps on and off. I open and close the window. How fine my control is! Doing these things is a strain: I tremble, I

sweat, I feel the muscles of my jaws knotting up, my back teeth ache. But I can't resist the kick of exercising my skills. I get riskily mischievous. At breakfast, my mother puts four slices of bread in the toaster; sitting with my back to it, I delicately work the toaster's plug out of the socket, so that when she goes over to investigate five minutes later, she's bewildered to find the bread still raw. "How did the plug slip out?" she asks, but of course no one tells her. Afterward, as we all sit around reading the Sunday papers, I turn the television set on by remote control, and the sudden blaring of a cartoon show makes everyone jump. And a few hours later I unscrew a light bulb in the hallway, gently, gently, easing it from its fixture, holding it suspended close to the ceiling for a moment, then letting it crash to the floor. "What was that?" my mother says in alarm. My father inspects the hall. "Bulb fell out of the fixture and

smashed itself to bits." My mother shakes her head. "How could a bulb fall out? It isn't possible." And my father says, "It must have been loose." He doesn't sound convinced. It must be occurring to him that a bulb loose enough to fall to the floor couldn't have been lit. And this bulb had been lit.

How soon before my sister connects these incidents with the episode of the toilet that flushed by itself?

* * * *

Monday is here. I enter the classroom through the rear door and skulk to my seat. Cindy hasn't arrived yet. But now here she comes. God, how beautiful she is! The gleaming, shimmering red hair, down to her shoulders. The pale flawless skin. The bright, mysterious eyes. The purple sweater, same one as Saturday night. My hands have touched that sweater. I've touched that sweater with my power, too.

I bend low over my notebook. I can't bear to look at her. I'm a coward.

But I force myself to look up. She's standing in the aisle, up by the front of the room, staring at me. Her expression is strange—edgy, uneasy, the lips clamped tight. As if she's thinking of coming back here to talk to me but is hesitating. The moment she sees me watching her, she glances away and takes her seat. All through the hour I sit hunched forward, studying her shoulders, the back of her neck, the tips of her ears. Five desks separate her from me. I let out a heavy romantic sigh. Temptation is tickling me. It would be so easy to reach across that distance and touch her. Gently stroking her soft cheek with an invisible fingertip. Lightly fondling the side of her throat. Using my special power to say a tender hello to her. See, Cindy? See what I can do to show my love? Having imagined it, I find

myself unable to resist doing it. I summon the force from the churning reservoir in my depths; I pump it upward and simultaneously make the automatic calculations of intensity of push. Then I realize what I'm doing. Are you crazy, man? She'll scream. She'll jump out of her chair like she was stung. She'll toll on the floor and have hysterics. Hold back, hold back, you lunatic! At the last moment I manage to deflect the impulse. Gasping, grunting, I twist the force away from Cindy and hurl it blindly in some other direction. My random thrust sweeps across the room like a whiplash and intersects the big framed chart of the plant and animal kingdoms that hangs on the classroom's left-hand wall. It rips loose as though kicked by a tornado and soars twenty feet on a diagonal arc that sends it crashing into the blackboard. The frame shatters. Broken glass sprays everywhere. The class is thrown into panic. Everybody yelling,

running around, picking up pieces of glass, exclaiming in awe, asking questions. I sit like a statue. Then I start to shiver. And Cindy, very slowly, turns and looks at me. A chilly look of horror freezes her face.

She knows, then. She thinks I'm some sort of freak. She thinks I'm some sort of monster.

* * * *

Poltergeist. That's what I am. That's me.

I've been to the library. I've done some homework in the occultism section. So: Harry Blaufeld, boy poltergeist. From the German, *poltern*, "to make a noise," and *geist*, "spirit." Thus, *poltergeist* = "noisy spirit." Poltergeists make plates go smash against the wall, pictures fall suddenly to the floor, doors bang when no one is near them, rocks fly through the air.

I'm not sure whether it's proper to say that I *am* a poltergeist, or that I'm merely the host for one. It depends on which theory you prefer. True-blue occultists like to think that poltergeists are wandering demons or spirits that occasionally take up residence in human beings, through whom they focus their energies and play their naughty tricks. On the other hand, those who hold a more scientific attitude toward paranormal extrasensory phenomena say that it's absurdly medieval to believe in wandering demons; to them, a poltergeist is simply someone who's capable of harnessing a paranormal ability within himself that allows him to move things without touching them. Myself, I incline toward the latter view. It's much more flattering to think that I have an extraordinary psychic gift than that I've been possessed by a marauding demon. Also less scary.

Poltergeists are nothing new. A Chinese book about a thousand years old called *Gossip from the Jade Hall* tells of one that disturbed the peace of a monastery by flinging crockery around. The monks hired an exorcist to get things under control, but the noisy spirit gave him the works: "His cap was pulled off and thrown against the wall, his robe was loosed, and even his trousers pulled off, which caused him to retire precipitately." Right on, poltergeist! "Others tried where he had failed, but they were rewarded for their pains by a rain of insolent missives from the air, upon which were written words of malice and bitter odium."

The archives bulge with such tales from many lands and many eras. Consider the Clarke case, Oakland, California, 1874. On hand: Mr. Clarke, a successful businessman of austere and reserved ways, and his wife and adolescent daughter and eight-

year-old son, plus two of Mr. Clarke's sisters and two male house guests. On the night of April 23, as everyone prepares for bed, the front doorbell rings. No one there. Rings again a few minutes later. No one there. Sound of furniture being moved in the parlor. One of the house guests, a banker named Bayley, inspects, in the dark, and is hit by a chair. No one there. A box of silverware comes floating down the stairs and lands with a bang. (*Poltergeist* = "noisy spirit.") A heavy box of coal flies about next. A chair hits Bayley on the elbow and lands against a bed. In the dining room a massive oak chair rises two feet in the air, spins, lets itself down, chases the unfortunate Bayley around the room in front of three witnesses. And so on. Much spooked, everybody goes to bed, but all night they hear crashes and rumbling sounds; in the morning they find all the downstairs furniture in a scramble. Also the front door, which was locked

and bolted, has been ripped off its hinges. More such events the next night. Likewise on the next, culminating in a female shriek out of nowhere, so terrible that it drives the Clarkes and guests to take refuge in another house. No explanation for any of this ever offered.

A man named Charles Fort, who died in 1932, spent much of his life studying poltergeist phenomena and similar mysteries. Fort wrote four fat books which so far I've only skimmed. They're full of newspaper accounts of strange things like the sudden appearance of several young crocodiles on English farms in the middle of the nineteenth century, and rainstorms in which the earth was pelted with snakes, frogs, blood, or stones. He collected clippings describing instances of coal-heaps and houses and even human beings suddenly and spontaneously bursting into flame. Luminous objects sailing through the sky. Invisible

hands that mutilate animals and people. "Phantom bullets" shattering the windows of houses. Inexplicable disappearances of human beings, and equally, inexplicable reappearances far away. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I gather that Fort believed that most of these phenomena were the work of beings from interplanetary space who meddle in events on our world for their own amusement. But he couldn't explain away everything like that. Poltergeists in particular didn't fit into his bogeymen-from-space fantasy, and so, he wrote, "Therefore I regard poltergeists as evil or false or discordant or absurd" Still, he said, "I don't care to deny poltergeists, because I suspect that later, when we're more enlightened, or when we widen the range of our credulities, or take on more of that increase of ignorance that is called knowledge, poltergeists may become assimilable. Then they'll be as reasonable as trees."

I like Fort. He was eccentric and probably very gullible, but he wasn't foolish or crazy. I don't think he's right about beings from interplanetary space, but I admire his attitude toward the inexplicable.

Most of the poltergeist cases on record are frauds. They've been exposed by experts. There was the 1944 episode in Wild Plum, North Dakota, in which lumps of burning coal began to jump out of a bucket in the one-room schoolhouse of Mrs. Pauline Rebel. Papers caught fire on the pupils' desks and charred spots appeared on the curtains. The class dictionary moved around of its own accord. There was talk in town of demonic forces. A few days later, after an assistant state attorney general had begun interrogating people, four of Mrs. Rebel's pupils confessed that they had been tossing the coal around to terrorize their teacher. They'd done most of the dirty

work while her back was turned or when she had had her glasses off. A prank. A hoax. Some people would tell you that all poltergeist stories are equally phony. I'm here to testify that they aren't.

One pattern is consistent in all genuine poltergeist incidents: an adolescent is invariably involved, or a child on the edge of adolescence. This is the "naughty child" theory of poltergeists, first put forth by Frank Podmore in 1890 in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*. (See, I've done my homework very thoroughly.) The child is usually unhappy, customarily over sexual matters, and suffers either from a sense of not being wanted or from frustration, or both. There are no statistics on the matter, but the lore indicates that teenagers involved in poltergeist activity are customarily virgins.

The 1874 Clarke case, then, becomes the work of the adolescent daughter, who—I would guess—had a yen for Mr. Bayley. The multitude of cases cited by Fort, most of them dating from the nineteenth century, show a bunch of poltergeist kids flinging stuff around in a sexually repressed era. That seething energy had to go somewhere. I discovered my own poltering power while in an acute state of palpitating lust for Cindy Klein, who wasn't having any part of me. Especially *that* part. But instead of exploding from the sheer force of my bottled-up yearnings I suddenly found a way of channeling all that drive outward. And pushed ...

Fort again: "Wherein children are atavistic, they may be in rapport with forces that most human beings have outgrown." Atavism: a strange recurrence to the primitive past. Perhaps in Neanderthal times we were all poltergeists, but most of us lost it

over the millennia. But see Fort, also: "There are of course other explanations of the 'occult power' of children. One is that children, instead of being atavistic, may occasionally be far in advance of adults, foreshadowing coming human powers, because their minds are not stifled by conventions. After that, they go to school and lose their superiority. Few boy-prodigies have survived an education."

I feel reassured, knowing I'm just a statistic in a long-established pattern of paranormal behavior. Nobody likes to think he's a freak, even when he is a freak. Here I am, virginal, awkward, owlish, quirky, precocious, edgy, uncertain, timid, clever, solemn, socially inept, stumbling through all the standard problems of the immediately post-pubescent years. I have pimples and wet dreams and the sort of fine fuzz that isn't worth shaving, only I shave it anyway. Cindy Klein thinks I'm silly and

disgusting. And I've got this hot core of fury and frustration in my gut, which is my great curse and my great supremacy. I'm a poltergeist, man. Go on, give me a hard time, make fun of me, call me silly and disgusting. The next time I may not just knock you on your ass. I might heave you all the way to Pluto.

* * * *

An unavoidable humiliating encounter with Cindy today. At lunchtime I go into Schindler's for my usual bacon-lettuce-tomato; I take a seat in one of the back booths and open a book and someone says, "Harry," and there she is at the booth just opposite, with three of her friends. What do I do? Get up and run out? Poltergeist her into the next county? Already I feel the power twitching in me. Mrs. Schindler brings me my sandwich. I'm stuck. I can't bear to be here. I hand her the money and mutter, "Just remembered, got to make a phone call." Sandwich

in hand, I start to leave, giving Cindy a foolish hot-cheeked grin as I go by. She's looking at me fiercely. Those deep green eyes of hers terrify me.

"Wait," she says, "Can I ask you something?"

She slides out of her booth and blocks the aisle of the luncheonette. She's nearly as tall as I am, and I'm tall. My knees are shaking. God in heaven, Cindy, don't trap me like this, I'm not responsible for what I might do.

She says in a low voice, "Yesterday in Bio, when that chart hit the blackboard. You did that, didn't you?"

"I don't understand."

"You made it jump across the room."

"That's impossible," I mumble. "What do you think I am, a magician?"

"I don't know. And Saturday night, that dumb scene outside my house—"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

"I would. How did you do that to me, Harry? Where did you learn the trick?"

"Trick? Look, Cindy, I've absolutely got to go."

"You pushed me over. You just looked at me and I felt a push."

"You tripped," I say. "You just fell down."

She laughs. Right now she seems about nineteen years old and I feel about nine years old. "Don't put me on," she says, her voice a deep sophisticated drawl. Her girlfriends are peering at us, trying to overhear. "Listen, this interests me. I'm involved. I want to know how you do that stuff."

"There isn't any stuff," I tell her, and suddenly I know I have to escape. I give her the tiniest push, not touching her, of course, just a wee mental nudge, and she feels it and gives ground, and I rush miserably past her, cramming my sandwich into my mouth. I flee the store. At the door I look back and see her smiling, waving to me, telling me to come back.

* * * *

I have a rich fantasy life. Sometimes I'm a movie star, twenty-two years old with a palace in the Hollywood hills, and I give parties that Peter Fonda and Dustin Hoffman and Julie Christie and Faye Dunaway come to, and we all turn on and get naked and swim in my pool and afterward I make it with five or six starlets all at once. Sometimes I'm a famous novelist, author of the book that really gets it together and speaks for My Generation, and I stand around in Brentano's in a glittering

science-fiction costume signing thousands of autographs, and afterward I go to my penthouse high over First Avenue and make it with a dazzling young lady editor. Sometimes I'm a great scientist, four years out of Harvard Medical School and already acclaimed for my pioneering research in genetic reprogramming of unborn children, and when the phone rings to notify me of my Nobel Prize I'm just about to reach my third climax of the evening with a celebrated Metropolitan Opera soprano who wants me to design a son for her who'll eclipse Caruso. And sometimes—

But why go on? That's all fantasy. Fantasy is dumb because it encourages you to live a self-deluding life, instead of coming to grips with reality. Consider reality, Harry. Consider the genuine article that is Harry Blaufeld. The genuine article is something pimply and ungainly and naive, something that shrieks with

every molecule of his skinny body that he's not quite fifteen and has never made it with a girl and doesn't know how to go about it and is terribly afraid that he never will. Mix equal parts of desire and self-pity. And a dash of incompetence and a dollop of insecurity. Season lightly with extrasensory powers. You're a long way from the Hollywood hills, boy.

* * * *

Is there some way I can harness my gift for the good of mankind? What if all these ghastly power plants, belching black smoke into the atmosphere, could be shut down forever, and humanity's electrical needs were met by a trained corps of youthful poltergeists, volunteers living a monastic life and using their sizzling sexual tensions as the fuel that keeps the turbines spinning? Or perhaps NASA wants a poltergeist-driven spaceship. There I am, lean and bronzed and jaunty, a

handsome figure in my white astronaut suit, taking my seat in the command capsule of the *Mars One*. *T* minus thirty seconds and counting. An anxious world awaits the big moment. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Lift-off. And I grin my world-famous grin and coolly summon my power and open the mental throttle and *push*, and the mighty vessel rises, hovering serenely a moment above the launching pad, rises and climbs, slicing like a giant glittering needle through the ice-blue Florida sky, soaring up and away on man's first voyage to the red planet

Another experiment is called for. I'll try to send a beer can to the moon. If I can do that, I should be able to send a spaceship. A simple Newtonian process, a matter of attaining escape velocity; and I don't think thrust is likely to be a determining quantitative function. A push is a push is a push, and so far I haven't noticed limitations of mass, so if I can get it up with a

beer can, I ought to succeed in throwing anything of any mass into space. I think. Anyway, I raid the family garbage and go outside clutching a crumpled Schlitz container. A mild misty night; the moon isn't visible. No matter. I place the can on the ground and contemplate it. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Lift-off. I grin my world-famous grin. I coolly summon my power and open the mental throttle. *Push*. Yes, the beer can rises. Hovering serenely a moment above the pavement. Rises and climbs, end over end, slicing like a crumpled beer can through the muggy air. Up. Up. Into the darkness. Long after it disappears, I continue to push. Am I still in contact? Does it still climb? I have no way of telling. I lack the proper tracking stations. Perhaps it does travel on and on through the lonely void, on a perfect lunar trajectory. Or maybe it has already tumbled down, a block away, skulling some hapless cop. I shot a beer can into the air,

it fell to earth I know not where. Shrugging, I go back into the house. So much for my career as a spaceman. Blaufeld, you've pulled off another dumb fantasy. Blaufeld, how can you stand being such a silly putz?

* * * *

Clickety-clack. Four in the morning, Sara's just coming in from her date. Here I am lying awake like, a worried parent. Notice that the parents themselves don't worry: they're fast asleep, I bet, giving no damns about the hours their daughter keeps. Whereas I brood. She got laid again tonight, no doubt of it. Possibly twice. Grimly I try to reconstruct the event in my imagination. The positions, the sounds of flesh against flesh, the panting and moaning. How often has she done it now? A hundred times? Three hundred? She's been doing it at least since she was sixteen. I'm sure of that. For girls it's so much

easier; they don't need to chase and coax, all they have to do is say yes. Sara says yes a lot. Before Jimmy the Greek there was Greasy Kid Stuff, and before him there was the Spade Wonder, and before him ...

Out there tonight in this city there are three million people at the very minimum who just got laid. I detest adults and their easy screwing. They devalue it by doing it so much. They just have to roll over and grab some meat, and away they go, in and out, ooh ooh ooh ahhh. Christ, how boring it must get! If they could only look at it from the point of view of a frustrated adolescent again. The hungry virgin, on the outside peering in. Excluded from the world of screwing. Feeling that delicious sweet tension of wanting and not knowing how to get. The fiery knot of longing, sitting like a ravenous tapeworm in my belly, devouring my soul. I magnify sex. I exalt it. I multiply its

wonders. It'll never live up to my anticipations. But I love the tension of anticipating and speculating and not getting. In fact, I think sometimes I'd like to spend my whole life on the edge of the blade, looking forward always to being deflowered but never quite taking the steps that would bring it about. A dynamic stasis, sustaining and enhancing my special power. Harry Blaufeld, virgin and poltergeist. Why not? Anybody at all can screw. Idiots, morons, bores, uglies. Everybody does it. There's magic in renunciation. If I keep myself aloof, pure, unique

Push

I do my little poltergeisty numbers. I stack and restack my textbooks without leaving my bed. I move my shirt from the floor to the back of the chair. I turn the chair around to face the wall. Push ... push ... push

Water running in the john. Sara's washing up. What's it like, Sara? How does it feel when he puts it in you? We don't talk much, you and I. You think I'm a child; you patronize me, you give me cute winks, your voice goes up half an octave. Do you wink at Jimmy the Greek like that? Like hell. And you talk husky contralto to him. Sit down and talk to me some time, Sis. I'm teetering on the brink of manhood. Guide me out of my virginity. Tell me what girls like guys to say to them. Sure. You won't tell me shit, Sara. You want me to stay your baby brother forever, because that enhances your own sense of being grown up. And you screw and screw and screw, you and Jimmy the Greek, and you don't even understand the mystical significance of the act of intercourse. To you it's just good sweaty fun, like going bowling. Right? Right? Oh, you miserable bitch! Screw you, Sara!

A shriek from the bathroom. Christ, what have I done now? I better go see.

Sara, naked, kneels on the cold tiles. Her head is in the bathtub and she's clinging with both hands to the bathtub's rim, and she's shaking violently.

"You okay?" I ask. "What happened?"

"Like a kick in the back," she says hoarsely. "I was at the sink, washing my face, and I turned around and something hit me like a kick in the back and knocked me halfway across the room."

"You okay, though? You aren't hurt?"

"Help me up."

She's upset but not injured. She's so upset that she forgets that she's naked, and without putting on her robe she cuddles up against me, trembling. She seems small and fragile and scared. I stroke her bare back where I imagine she felt the blow.

Also I sneak a look at her nipples, just to see if they're still standing up after her date with Jimmy the Greek. They aren't. I soothe her with my fingers. I feel very manly and protective, even if it's only my cruddy dumb sister I'm protecting.

"What could have happened?" she asks. "You weren't pulling any tricks, were you?"

"I was in bed," I say, totally sincere.

"A lot of funny things been going on around this house lately," she says.

* * * *

Cindy, catching me in the hallway between Geometry and Spanish: "How come you never call me any more?"

"Been busy."

"Busy how?"

"Busy."

"I guess you must be," she says. "Looks to me like you haven't slept in a week. What's her name?"

"Her? No her. I've just been busy." I try to escape. Must I push her again? "A research project."

"You could take some time out for relaxing. You should keep in touch with old friends."

"Friends? What kind of friend are you? You said I was silly. You said I was disgusting. Remember, Cindy?"

"The emotions of the moment. I was off balance. I mean, psychologically. Look, let's talk about all this some time, Harry. Some time soon."

"Maybe."

"If you're not doing anything Saturday night—"

I look at her in astonishment. She's actually asking *me* for a date! Why is she pursuing me? What does she want from me? Is

she itching for another chance to humiliate me? Silly and disgusting, disgusting and silly. I look at my watch and quirk up my lips. Time to move along.

"I'm not sure," I tell her. "I may have some work to do."

"Work?"

"Research," I say. "I'll let you know."

* * * *

A night of happy experiments. I unscrew a light bulb, float it from one side of my room to the other, return it to the fixture, and efficiently *screw it back in*. Precision control. I go up to the roof and launch another beer can to the moon, only this time I loft it a thousand feet, bring it back, kick it up even higher, bring it back, send it off a third time with a tremendous accumulated kinetic energy, and I have no doubt it'll cleave through space. I pick up trash in the street from a hundred yards away and throw

it in the trash basket. Lastly—most scary of all—I polt *myself*. I levitate a little, lifting myself five feet into the air. That's as high as I dare go. (What if I lose the power and fall?) If I had the courage, I could fly. I can do anything. Give me the right fulcrum and I'll move the world. O, *potentia!* What a fantastic trip this is!

* * * *

After two awful days of inner debate I phone Cindy and make a date for Saturday. I'm not sure whether it's a good idea. Her sudden new aggressiveness turns me off, slightly, but nevertheless it's a novelty to have a girl chasing me, and who am I to snub her? I wonder what she's up to, though. Coming on so interested in me after dumping me mercilessly on our last date. I'm still angry with her about that, but I can't hold a grudge, not with *her*. Maybe she wants to make amends. We did

have a pretty decent relationship in the nonphysical sense, until that one stupid evening. Jesus, what if she really *does* want to make amends, all the way? She scares me. I guess I'm a little bit of a coward. Or a lot of a coward. I don't understand any of this, man. I think I'm getting into something very heavy.

* * * *

I juggle three tennis balls and keep them all in the air at once, with my hands in my pockets. I see a woman trying to park her car in a space that's too small, and as I pass by I give her a sneaky little assist by pushing against the car behind her space; it moves backward a foot and a half, and she has room to park. Friday afternoon, in my gym class, I get into a basketball game and on five separate occasions when Mike Kisiak goes driving in for one of his sure-thing lay-ups I kick the ball away from the hoop. He can't figure out why he's off form

and it really kills him. There seem to be no limits to what I can do. I'm awed at it myself. I gain skill from day to day. I might just be an authentic superman.

* * * *

Cindy and Harry, Harry and Cindy, warm and cozy, sitting on her living-room couch. Christ, I think I'm being seduced! How can this be happening? To me? Christ. Christ. Christ. Cindy and Harry. Harry and Cindy. Where are we heading tonight?

In the movie house Cindy snuggles close. Midway through the bring flick I take the hint. A big bold move: slipping my arm around her shoulders. She wriggles so that my hand slides down through her armpit and comes to rest grasping her right breast. My cheeks blaze. I do as if to pull back, as if I've touched a hot stove, but she clamps her arm over my forearm. Trapped. I explore her yielding flesh. No padding there, just authentic

Cindy. She's so eager and easy that it terrifies me. Afterward we go for sodas. In the shop she turns on the body language something frightening—gleaming eyes, suggestive smiles, little steamy twistings of her shoulders. I feel like telling her not to be so obvious about it. It's like living one of my own wet dreams.

Back to her place, now. It starts to rain. We stand outside, in the very spot where I stood when I polted her the last time. I can write the script effortlessly. "Why don't you come inside for a while, Harry?" "I'd love to." "Here, dry your feet on the doormat. Would you like some hot chocolate?" "Whatever you're having, Cindy." "No, whatever you'd like to have." "Hot chocolate would be fine, then." Her parents aren't home. Her older brother is fornicating in Scarsdale. The rain hammers at the windows. The house is big, expensive-looking, thick carpets, fancy draperies. Cindy in the kitchen, pattering at the stove.

Harry in the living room, fidgeting at the bookshelves. Then Cindy and Harry, Harry and Cindy, warm and cozy, together on the couch. Hot chocolate: two sips apiece. Her lips near mine. Silently begging me. Come on, dope, bend forward. Be a *mensh*. We kiss. We've kissed before, but this time it's with tongues. Christ. Christ. I don't believe this. Suave old Casanova Blaufeld swinging into action like a well-oiled seducing machine. Her perfume in my nostrils, my tongue in her mouth, my hand on her sweater, and then, unexpectedly, my hand is *under* her sweater, and then, astonishingly, my other hand is on her knee, and up under her skirt, and her thigh is satiny and cool, and I sit there having this weird two-dimensional feeling that I'm not an autonomous human being but just somebody on the screen in a movie rated X, aware that thousands of people out there in the audience are watching me with held breath, and I don't dare let

them down. I continue, not letting myself pause to examine what's happening, not thinking at all, turning off my mind completely, just going forward step by step. I know that if I ever halt and back off to ask myself if this is real, it'll all blow up in my face. She's helping me. She knows much more about this than I do. Murmuring softly. Encouraging me. My fingers scrabbling at our undergarments. "Don't rush it," she whispers. "We've got all the time in the world." My body pressing urgently against hers. Somehow now I'm not puzzled by the mechanics of the thing. So this is how it happens. What a miracle of evolution that we're designed to fit together this way! "Be gentle," she says, the way girls always say in the novels, and I want to be gentle, but how can I be gentle when I'm riding a runaway chariot? I push, not with my mind but with my body, and suddenly I feel this wondrous velvety softness enfolding me, and

I begin to move fast, unable to hold back, and she moves too and we clasp each other and I'm swept helter-skelter along into a whirlpool. Down and down and down. "Harry!" she gasps and I explode uncontrollably and I know it's over. Hardly begun, and it's over. Is that it? That's it. That's all there is to it, the moving, the clasping, the gasping, the explosion. It felt good, but not *that* good, not as good as in my feverish virginal hallucinations I hoped it would be, and a backwash of letdown rips through me at the realization that it isn't transcendental after all, it isn't a mystic thing, it's just a body thing that starts and continues and ends. Abruptly I want to pull away and be alone to think. But I know I mustn't, I have to be tender and grateful now, I hold her in my arms, I whisper soft things to her, I tell her how good it was, she tells me how good it was. We're both lying, but so what? It *was* good. In retrospect it's starting to seem fantastic,

overwhelming, all the things I wanted it to be. The *idea* of what we've done blows my mind. If only it hadn't been over so fast. No matter. Next time will be better. We've crossed a frontier; we're in unfamiliar territory now.

Much later she says, "I'd like to know how you make things move without touching them."

I shrug. "Why do you want to know?"

"It fascinates me. *You* fascinate me. I thought for a long time you were just another fellow, you know, kind of clumsy, kind of immature. But then this gift of yours. It's ESP, isn't it, Harry? I've read a lot about it. I know. The moment you knocked me down, I knew what it must have been. Wasn't it?"

Why be coy with her?

"Yes," I say, proud in my new manhood. "As a matter of fact, it's a classic poltergeist manifestation. When I gave you that

shove, it was the first I knew I had the power. But I've been developing it. You wouldn't believe some of the things I've been able to do lately." My voice is deep; my manner is assured. I have graduated into my own fantasy self tonight.

"Show me," she says. "Poltergeist something, Harry!"

"Anything. You name it."

"That chair."

"Of course." I survey the chair. I reach for the power. It does not come. The chair stays where it is. What about the saucer, then? No. The spoon? No. "Cindy, I don't understand it, but—it doesn't seem to be working right now ..."

"You must be tired."

"Yes. That's it. Tired. A good night's sleep and I'll have it again. I'll phone you in the morning and give you a real demonstration." Hastily buttoning my shirt. Looking for my

shoes. Her parents will walk in any minute. Her brother. "Listen, a wonderful evening, unforgettable, tremendous—"

"Stay a little longer."

"I really can't."

Out into the rain.

* * * *

Home. Stunned. I push ... and the shoe sits there. I look up at the light fixture. Nothing. The bulb will not turn. The power is gone. What will become of me now? Commander Blaufeld, space hero! No. No. Nothing. I will drop back into the ordinary rut of mankind. I will be ... *a husband*. I will be ... *an employee*. And push no more. And push no more. Can I even lift my shirt and flip it to the floor? No. No. Gone. Every shred, gone. I pull the covers over my head. I put my hands to my deflowered maleness. That alone responds. There alone am I still potent.

Like all the rest. Just one of the common herd, now. Let's face it: I'll push no more. I'm ordinary again. Fighting off tears, I coil tight against myself in the darkness, and, sweating, moaning a little, working hard, I descend numbly into the quicksand, into the first moments of the long colorless years ahead.

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