

THE MOTHER TRIP

By Frederik Pohl

Putting this collection together has made me realize that nearly every story in it was written, at least in part, in some corner of the world far from my desk and typewriter. That's not too surprising in some ways, because I have this habit of doing at least four pages worth of writing wherever I happen to be, every day, and I do a lot of traveling. It is often easier to work on a short story than a novel under such circumstances, if only because when you pack a couple of novel manuscripts into a suitcase you don't have much room left for clean socks. This one, however, was written right at home. It's true that part of its setting comes from a marvelous trip over the Cascade Mountains and much of its incident from a strange weekend I spent with an encounter group in New Jersey, having my sensitivities elevated and my inhibitions soaked away in the blood-temperature pool. It was an unsettling sort of experience, a dozen total strangers opening to each other, but one I am glad I did not miss. Among other things it brought me a couple of friendships I still treasure..., and, later on, filling up my daily pages in my office, this story.

It could have been just this way: That the get of Moolkri Mawkri could have landed in a faster-than-light spaceship resembling an artichoke on the outskirts of Jackson, Mississippi .

In this version Mawkri gathers her Get-cluster around her broodingly, while Moolkri assumes the shape of a man. The Get has studied all of the Earth's TV programs while they were in orbit, and they have picked an average person for Moolkri to be, not too tall, not too symmetrical, not too *dvezhnizt* (a term in their language which relates to the proportion between upper and middle circumferences). The Get is satisfied with Moolkri's appearance, but all the same it is pretty funny-looking. They laugh as he exits the spacecraft to explore.

Moolkri has well assimilated TV lore, and so he knows how to behave in a way appropriate to his body. He hooks his "thumbs in his "belt, crosses a deserted bridge, and strides swaggeringly down the light-saturated and totally uninhabited street.

It does not seem unusual to Moolkri that there should be no one gazing into the bright shop windows. He does not have a very good grasp of what is usual or unusual for human beings. It is late at night, and so a human being (or at least one from another city than Jackson) might find it strange that everything was so brightly lit. Contrariwise, a human might consider it odd that with every amenity turned on for shoppers, there was not a single strolling person to be seen. Moolkri does not realize this is strange. He is aware that sometimes streets are deserted and sometimes not; he is also aware that sometimes they are bright and sometimes dark.; he is simply not aware that deserted is not really compatible with well-lit, but then there is a lot he is not aware of about the Earth.

So Moolkri swings, gunman wide, his "chaps rustling against each other and his "bandanna bright against

his "neck. He slouches past the People's Cut Rate Pharmacy and Bette's New York Boutique and the Yazoo-Jackson Consolidated All-Faith Ashram, looking in the windows. He reads a typed notice about a lost Australian terrier. He inspects a naked black dummy with no hands, waiting for the window dresser to return in the morning and give her hands and ball gown. It is all interesting to him, and back in the spaceship Mawkri and her Get chatter excitedly among themselves, forgetting to be afraid as they receive his impressions.

It is not only his sense of vision that is active, it is also his sense of hearing, although that input does not produce much he considers worth noting. There are no voices, no footsteps. Overhead there is the sound of a motor, which he identifies easily enough as a helicopter. It is too far away for him to care much. He does not realize that it is quartering the city, alert for the sight of stray humans on the broad, bright street. He does not hear the radio message that the helicopter pilot transmits to the ground. Back in the spaceship the rest of the Get could have heard it, did in fact register the radio signal as an artifact originating nearby, but they did not associate the message with Moolkri.

Then the black-and-white slides silently around the corner. There is only one policeman in it. They are not expecting riots of mad killers, only the odd break-and-grab hoodlum or the hopeful would-be mugger. Moolkri hears the prowler car. First he hears the faint purr of the motor and whisper of tires, then, only in the last moment before it skids to a stop beside him, the quick bleat of its siren. He turns to look. The young cop leaps out. "Hands against the wall! Spread your feet! Hold it right there! He does not say it like that precisely, there is brushwood and bayou in his accent, but Moolkri is not attuned to regional distinctions of dialect. Moolkri submits. It is unfortunate, but it is all right. He has been ready to submit to human violence, in case it should develop, ever since he accepted the assignment to explore. Now it appears that he will not return to the Get, but he does not mind that. The Get will continue. He does not feel as though he were in danger. He only feels rage, and his rage races decisively, by means of his fourth and seventh senses, across the world and into the heavens.

In the spacecraft Mawkri mourns. The Get moves fearfully around her. She had wished to extend her motherhood to this planet, but it had rejected her. It was unfortunate since, among other things, it meant the end of sexual intercourse for her for the rest of her life, but she does not protest, only regrets.

Moolkri opens all the tactile inputs he has bothered to connect in order to perceive the policeman fully. He observes stimuli identified as pain, heat, body disorientation, and sex climax denied as the policeman's hand invades his body spaces. (There turns out to be nothing in the "pockets, nothing at all, Moolkn had never realized anything should be put there.)

Out of curiosity (he is overdeveloped in curiosity, that is why he is here), Moolkri increases his audio perception and, translating easily from the peckerwood English, hears the policeman radio in to see if there is a want on an unidentified white male pedestrian wearing a cowboy suit, about fifty, five feet seven, white beard, bald, blue eyes, no visible scars.

Listening in this way is only curiosity on Moolkri's part. It can no longer affect the outcome, since violence has already been done to him. He waits patiently, not very long. He hears headquarters report that there is no want on the described individual. The policeman tells Moolkri he can go. Moolkri adds to his file the datum that the violence has been withdrawn, but only out of neatness. The file is now complete. No more will be added.

The policeman cautions him against walking alone in the city at night, mentioning the risk of being robbed or harmed. He advises Moolkri to carry identification at all times. He gets back into his car, hesitates, then says, with half a smile and a cursory salute, "Y'all enjoy your stay in Jackson now, hear?"

But it is too late.

The automatic orbiting guardians have already reacted to Moolkri's broadcast danger of violence, as they were programmed to do. The spacecraft with Mawkri and the Get lifts and flees screaming into the sky. And the first planet busters begin to drop.

Fusion infernos blossom and burst. Cities slide into the already boiling sea. Mawkri's motherhood has punished the offense.

It is the end of the world of human beings, except as a blob of molten rock, and that is one way it could have been.

Or it could have been like this, that all of Moolkri Mawkri's Get remained in orbit, thundering down motherly orders to be obeyed:

Under pain of destruction!

Humans are commanded!

Alternative is the planet busters, and the end of your world!

In this version the Get prudently refrained from landing but after careful study of all radio and television transmissions elected to play a mother's arduous role from out in space. So they made a plan and ordered the world to carry it out. Six representatives of humankind were to present themselves, unarmed and tractable, in orbit: one each from China, the United States, Sweden, Rhodesia, Brazil, and the U.S.S.R.

The Get, here, too, had carefully studied all the EMF transmissions from Tokyo Tower and London's GPO and the American networks. The Get thought that most of them were very funny. Nevertheless they decoded them into aural and visual signals and analyzed them for meaning and implications.

Both Moolkri and Mawkri agreed that this complicatedly comic planet needed to be taken into the motherhood of Mawkri, and in this version they studied the means of manipulation nations and persons used upon each other. They were aware of the human custom of giving each other ultimatums: thus the commands from space. They were not as aware of certain other human habits. They were taken quite by surprise when, united in a common purpose at last, all six of the nations that had a nuclear missile capability conferred through their secret hot lines, set a time, and fired simultaneously upon the orbiting spaceship of Moolkri Mawkri and the Get.

Of the resulting swarm of missiles it happened to be a cold-launched American Minuteman III that destroyed the ship, the Get, Moolkri, and Mawkri herself, and ended the first contact between their people and ours.

There is, however, a warmer and more loving version.

In this version Moolkri spoke up:

"I do not think we can trust ourselves to these creatures, he said. "Neither do I think we should reveal ourselves to them, either for communication or to impose our helpful will on them. Let's cool it while we figure things.

There was some resistance to this, particularly from a forensicist and a KP pusher in the Get. That was right and proper. It was their function to do that. The forensicist was charged with debating all devil's-advocate positions that no one really cared to espouse, and she was very good at it. The KP pusher (who was not really called that, but none of their words are much like ours) was detailed to making things happen. He *always* urged action, so that nothing desirable would fail to be done simply because no one bothered to make it occur. Nevertheless, in this version Moolkri prevailed upon the rest of the Get to lie low in orbit, and so they did while drones and far-watchers made a saturation study of one small area of the planet. It was near Arcata, California.

Moolkri became aware, in this version, as he had never otherwise been made aware during his sheltered life in the Get cluster, that the universe was a diversity of things. Oh, they had seen other races. They had been journeying for many subjective years, while the Get spawned and grew and matured; they were near the end of their journey now, near the time when the Get would have to return to their home to disperse and mate. But these bipeds were unusual. Some of them were hairy, some were bald. Skeletally they were quite the same (bar the occasional malfunction or amputee), but in size and in weight they differed. Their fragrances, the drones reported, came in a wide variety of osmic frequencies, most of them not very nice.

It was in behavior, however, that the bipeds exhibited the most amazing diversity. It was not only that one biped differed from another. The same biped might behave in differing ways at differing times! They found and labeled one who was clearly a KP pusher; an hour later she was an empathizer!

Semantic analysis of their communications to each other was equally confusing. Some of the bipeds were aggressively mission-oriented within themselves:

"I'm a *woman*, not a *doll*. (Throwing a wastepaper basket at the male lying in the bed.) "I've got twenty-two years of *rage* inside me because of this mother trip you lay on me! (Slamming a door.)

Moolkri played that tape five times to make sure he had understood it, marveling, for only a few minutes before it had seemed this pair were preparing to procreate.

Some of the bipeds were role playing; that is, their mission was assigned from context:

"Now, gentlemen, please! (Big expression of the lips and corners of the eyes called "smile.) "*You* know that under the American system my client is entitled to the presumption of innocence. (Eyes turned directly into a television camera.) "You gentlemen can try this case in your newspapers all you like-and I'm not saying you shouldn't; you have a right to freedom of expression; and I approve that right !-but the State of California Will decide my client's guilt or innocence, not you. (Decisive up and down movement of the chin and head.)

None of the Get understood any of this, and they stirred and muttered in their cluster. The forensicist proposed immediate annihilation of the planet. No one agreed, but still- But still, how could such persons live?

Among Moolkri Mawkri's people, person could not be separated from mission. They were the same thing. What a person was was what he did. It was the foreseen need for mission operators that determined how a person was nurtured; it was the nature of their aptitudes that decided which was chosen for what purpose. There was no such thing as a split personality in the Get. There was no one who was unhappy with his life. Moolkri could not play a role. He was always typecast. He could never attempt to change his image. He *was* his image.

The Get of Moolkri Mawkri came from a planet of the star Procyon, blue-white and burning. It was a deadly dangerous star, and it was only the dense, damp clouds in their atmosphere that kept the radiation from cremating every one of them at birth. Humans, of course, were physically repulsive to them. Humans did not have armored claws or vibrissae. Humans had only twelve senses, not nineteen, and two of the senses they did have ("pain and "heat) seemed ridiculously unimportant to the Get. The Get clustered together, interlocking mouthhooks touching spiracles, and murmured to each other reassuringly and lovingly. (They didn't know it was lovingly; they had no way to relate to each other that was anything but loving.) They shuddered in apprehension at the physical qualities of humans. Humans seemed so *deformed*.

Of course, even the Get sometimes fell short of physical perfection. Moolkri himself had a birth defect that damaged his second instar. Their wisest evaluator lacked a limb, and so he would never be a breeder. (Therefore, he would never want to.) But all of the Get had the power to change their shape when they wanted to. Humans did not seem to have that power. They were condemned to inhabit forever the bodies they were born to, except for such rude mechanical devices as they used to replace teeth or assist sight or the daubs of paint and odor-producing substances that some humans employed to enhance their natural appearance. This seemed a terrible punishment to the Get.

But they tried not to judge. They had seen other races and, compared to them, none seemed particularly attractive, and most were awful.

East of Arcata the road leaps rivers, looping through the foothills. There stands a long, low clapboard building with some of the windows replaced with plywood. It is more than a hundred years old. It wears its history in every scar. All day the logging trucks thunder down past it out of the Klamath Mountains , continuing their long-term systematic eradication of the redwood forests. Three of them have gone out of control and plunged through one corner of the building or another in the past thirty years.

No one wants to live in this house; it is like living next to the number one pin in a bowling alley. The porch stops short at the northwest corner. An eight-hundred-horsepower diesel tractor carried that piece of it away in 1968. The nine-foot log it was towing minced the driver's head; you can still see stains on the clapboard. The sign in front of the house now says:

KlamathValleyCenter

for Development of

Human Potential

One of Moolkri's drones had buzzed all around it for more than seven days, cataloguing the human creatures as well as the other fauna of the area (dragonflies, moths, rabbits, twenty-three kinds of birds, forty reptiles and amphibia, microorganisms past counting). There were sixteen of the humans, and they were playing a game.

The Get understood games. They enjoyed play. They even understood consciousness-raising games; those were the only games they ever played, except for athletic ones like vibrissa trilling and obstacle scuttling. They discovered the name of the human game was "Primal Weekend, which meant nothing to them, but watching the game itself was a grand spectator sport. The cluster squirmed itself into such position that all several score of them could see clearly into one monitor or another. They studied the pictures the drone was transmitting with, for the first time since they had approached this messy little G-type star, a certain empathy and joy.

Some of the aspects of the game were peculiarly ludicrous to them. Not threatening. Just funny, and they laughed and laughed, in their way. (They did not know that some of the aspects would have been ludicrous to most humans, too. . . not necessarily the same aspects.) For instance, there was a game in which fifteen of the players locked arms and braced hips in a tight ring, while the sixteenth, sobbing and fighting, struggled to get into the group. How funny they thought the notion that any group might try to keep a member out! Another game involved a forty-one-year-old male player who rinsed out a pair of his underdrawers in a bucket while all the others squatted in a circle around him, calling out words of encouragement and love. (He had soiled himself in a passion of weeping and writhing a few minutes before.) The symbolism of this game was perfectly apparent to the Get, and they responded not with laughter but with understanding and joy.

But other games troubled the Get immensely.

The weekenders played the game called Psychodrama a lot. In one of the episodes two humans squatted facing each other, again in the circle of the ring. "I'm your wife, said one cheerfully. "I castrate you. Her voice grew more threatening. "You're not a real man! She spat the words. "If you were half a man you'd beat me black and blue!

"I want to, I want to, sobbed the male player. "I can't, I can't.

"Then I'm going to leave you, shrilled the female one, and, "You mustn't, you mustn't, wept the male.

The Get revolved uneasily, changing grips and communicating fearfully. They could not take their eyes off the monitors. They felt ill and damaged, in ways they had never felt before. They listened with sick fascination to the translations of the audio track: "Kill her, Ben! shouted the players in the ring. "Walk out on her! Kick her ass off! Hey, Ben, slap her with the plastic bat!

Walk out on her?

The Get shivered. They could find no empathy whatever in the situation. Even their empathizers merely shook in fear. A mated couple planning to *split*? How could that *be*?

Among Moolkri and Mawkri's people, you see, such a thing is impossible. It is not statute or custom. It is natural law. When a seed planter like Moolkri intromits an egg ripener like Mawkri, the fertilization takes the form of a sort of allergic reaction. The Get that result are, in a sense, only hives.

Intromission plays more than a merely reproductive function with them, as screwing does with us. But the biology of it is ironclad. At first sexual encounter each partner builds up specific antigens. They cannot produce offspring without them. They can never have sexual intercourse with any other. The antigens produced from any other mating, or from intercourse with an unmated person, would kill them immediately in great, bloated, pustulant pain.

There is therefore no question of sexual morality among the Get or their planet-gotten. It is a boy-meets-girl world, a Cinderella planet on which when the prince discovers that She Is The One, they do indeed live happily together ever after, or else they do not live happily (or at all). They do not have the option of promiscuity. They have only one source of sexual pleasure. One partner for life.

And of course they only produce a Get once-subsequent intromissions are sterile, though a lot of fun-but as there are up to five hundred individuals in each get (more than half dying in the first half hour), the race goes on and grows.

So the Get were shocked and terrified, and some of them even made physically ill, by this inexplicable vice their specimens displayed. Their medical members were kept furiously busy, scuttling around the cluster to tend the damaged ones, when they were not too damaged to function themselves.

Moolkri and Mawkri's people are no better than human beings. Their first reaction was total revulsion and a wish to destroy, like the stamp of a four-year-old foot on a spider. Their collective claws were trembling near the clasps for the planet busters, when one of the smallest of the Get, and usually one of the quietest, piped up, sobbing:

"But they can't help it.

Through a warped window both sides look strange to each other. Humans looked strange to Moolkri Mawkri's Get. Now consider how strange the Get look to us:

"They can't help it is a concept none of them had ever heard before.

They chattered wonderingly for a while, and as they talked, the claws withdrew from the buster clasps. *They cant help it.* It was so strange a thought that it seemed to excuse almost any perversion, even promiscuity. And then an observer, restlessly examining the environment, cried, "Look what they're doing! And they all quieted and stared at the monitors, still faithfully conveying what was happening at the Klamath Valley Center for the Development of Human Potential, and there they found an empathy they had not expected.

One corner of the building was an add-on shed of tar- paper and sheet metal, extending over a concrete pool.

A century and more before, some hungry and hopeful men had channeled a creek into a sluice in order to pick flakes of gold out of the water. They hadn't found much, but they had kept trying, relays of them for a couple of decades, and each one had deepened and widened the channel and the pool.

Now the gold was all gone, geologists having tracked the stream to its source and ripped out the auriferous rock that had given its flakes to the stream, but the pool was still there. The Center had cemented its bottom and covered its top and put in a heater. Now it was kept at hot blood temper- ature (the Get liked that, it reminded them of home), and in it all sixteen of the humans (their coverings gone, only their hides still enclosing them) were knotted and seething together in the amniotic waters (the Get liked that too, it reminded them of their own cluster). The name of the game the people played in the water was float. Naked and touching, they formed a chain. "Pass er down, cried the ones at the lower end, and at the top two humans picked up a third and slid her passively, relaxedly, half floating and half supported, touched and soothed and caressed, from hand to hand through the warm pool.

The Get chattered among themselves. It was almost like a Get cluster, the touching and the support. It was almost inviting enough to join; and perhaps it was not the fault of the humans that they did not have mouthhooks or spiracles so that they could join together properly.

"They can't be all bad, mused the little Get-sibling aloud. And he spoke for all of them.

"I think, said Moolkri, reaching over to glance at Mawkri for concurrence, "that we should study these people more. I do not know what to do, he added.

"We cannot stay very long, warned a rememberer. They all knew it was true. They had been a long time traveling. The Get was ripening, it was time to return home and seek partners.

And still they could not leave yet, they had to learn more. The drones were busy, busy, and the far-watchers turned their electronic sensors onto the world of human society (Washington, Moscow, Peking) and human science (Arecibo, Tyuratam-baikonur, and the Moon) and human relations (bedroom, bathroom, bus). Many things happened while they watched. A war broke out. It was in a part of the planet that none of the Get would really have thought worth fighting over, except that it held some large reserves of liquid hydrocarbon. ("But so easy to carry it somewhere else, marveled a commenter.) Nevertheless tens of thousands of humans died. Millions were hurt, or frightened, or impaired in some way. This part of the event amused the Get. It was so *silly*. ("But I wonder if *they* think it's funny, queried the little one, laughing.) Drought and famine struck large patches of three continents. The Get observed this mass death with curiosity, but their emotions were not involved. After all, they were used to half their siblings dying before the rest of any get were old enough to preen themselves.

And then they turned off the far-watchers and recalled the drones, and they clustered and thought before they spoke.

"Human beings, said the Get member in charge of summarizing, "are clearly self-destructive. It is what their psychology' calls a "death wish." Unchecked, they will wipe themselves out.

"Talk sense, begged the little sibling. (Moolkri gave him a playful, partly disciplinary bite.) "No, I mean it, the little one went on. "They *act* as if they're going to destroy themselves. But, you know? They never have.

Ajudger responded: "That is true. A theorizer added, "What is causality for us may not be for them.

This concept caused consternation among the Get, but it seemed to fit the facts. "What then shall we do? asked Moolkri. "We don't have very much time. Mawkri has stopped accepting intromission. She is near the time of her death, and I cannot be far.

"We'll miss you, said several of the Get together, sorrowful not for their parents but for themselves. "Let us then decide.

A proposer stated: "We have several choices. We can exterminate them. Instant contractile movements from all, signifying no. "We can help them to be more like us- but how? I have no proposal for this. Quivering movements from the cluster, signifying inability to respond, a request to go on. "Or, he said, "we can leave them alone.

"Stale, stale, murmured the Get. But the judger piped up:

"I think not. Let us hear more.

"We can go away without any further intervention at all, went on the proposer. "We can leave one of our drones in orbit, programmed for Home. Then if one of their craft should someday find it, and if they wish, they can come to us. If not-not.

Mawkri cried feebly: "But a mother must care for all!

"Mawkri, said the proposer, trembling, "your care has given us life. But the humans are not like us. They must make their mistakes if they will. It is how they learn.

And the judger confirmed wonderingly, "It is how they learn. We can do nothing to help. We can only

wish them well..., and wait.

And so the ship shaped like an artichoke turned on its axis, swallowed all its satellites but one, and retreated toward the constellation Canis Minor. And not an eye, not an interferometer, not a Schmidt ever saw it go.

There is still another version, in which Moolkri Mawkri's Get never reach Earth at all. In fact, they never leave their home planet. None of their people do. All the proliferating gets stay locked and squirming in their dense, damp viny nests until they ripen and seek partners. Technology? Yes, they build technology. They learn the workings of their own cellular biology and the devising of medicines. They learn to keep alive that half of every get which would otherwise die. They learn to tame the tangle vines, and finally to live without them, for there is then not enough space on their world for any kind of life at all, except their own. They learn to tunnel the planet's crust for living space and to harness the scattered heat of Procyon to drive engines to make new nests. They devise a sort of plastic-made from their excrement, their bodies once they have died, and the simple elements of the rocks-and they create new living spaces from it. They never reach out into space. They never taste the stars. They never got to Earth. They live forever (or until this version runs out of program) locked into their one small world; and nothing that happens anywhere else has anything to do with them. They do not kill, or spare, or help, or trust. And they do not receive any of those things from others.

But what is the use of a life that never reaches out to touch another? Never to hurt or help? Never to feel or even to see? No, it is not a very interesting version. We never play that one anymore.