

SPIDER ROBINSON IT'S A SUNNY DAY

"SIGN HERE."

Zack looked a bit dubiously at the bespectacled boy who sat surrounded by travelcases in the middle of his kitchen, then at the silent giant who had carried in the travel-cases, finally at the bald slender man who had spoken. The latter held out a clipboard and stylus in his pale hand. His voice was flat and emotionless, and he wore grey—Zack decided it suited him.

"Glad to, Mr. . . ."

"Jacob Abernathy," the grey man said, seeming to bite off the words.

He glanced around the room in apparent disapproval.

"Pleased to meet you, Jake. I'm . . ."

"I know who you are." Zack had stuck out his hand; Abernathy gazed at it without particular interest. Zack took the clipboard with it and made his chop, handed it back.

"You tell Raoul that I'll take good care of his . . ."

"His Excellency will be informed that you have accepted delivery," Abernathy clipped. Zack blinked. He adjusted his overalls on one broad shoulder and took his pipe from one of many pockets. Locating a pouch in another, he stoked up and emitted clouds of blue smoke, squinting at Abernathy. "You just do that, brother. Sorry you can't stay for lunch."

The sarcasm was lost on Abernathy. "Food is available on board the ship."

"What you call food, yeah. Good day to you." Abernathy nodded and left, followed by the huge manservant. Zack went to the window and watched them depart, puffing on his pipe. "Never seen a shirt so stuffed mass so little," he murmured, and shook his head, eyes twinkling.

He turned back to the boy who still sat silently amid his belongings in the rich, butter-yellow sunlight of early morning. The plunder nearly filled half the kitchen, pressure-tight suitcases designed to withstand sudden vacuum. Zack ran a calloused hand through his thick wiry red hair and grinned around his pipe at the youth.

"Sure a lot of swag, old son," he drawled. "You too proud to shake hands too?"

The boy shook his head, rose from his seat. "I'm Timeth Connery," he said, his thin voice as emotionless as Abernathy's. Zack shook his hand gravely.

"I am Zachary Mountain-Born, and this is the T.A., my home."

The boy's bland expression—or absence of any—changed slightly. "Mountain-Born?" he asked. "What kind of last name is that?"

"Why, mine," said Zack, somewhat startled.

"A surname is functional, an identifier," Timeth said, seeming to recite. "It is a family-referent and locator. Was your father also named Mountain-Born?"

"Why no. My father was Jody Sunray and my mother was Kerry Maplewood. We like to use surnames creatively here on New Home."

The boy digested this. Zack imagined lights blinking, chided his imagination sharply.

"What does 'T.A.' stand for?"

"'Total Anarchy,'" Zack said grinning. "This house was built by Daniel, one of the First Landed, later called Daniel of the Woods. He ceremonially destroyed his T-square before beginning this place: there isn't a right angle in the building." He realized his grin was unshared, felt foolish. "Don't you understand jokes?"

"I understand the theory and purpose of jokes," Timeth replied. "Was that one?"

Zack blinked, then suddenly burst out laughing. "Guess you couldn't be expected to appreciate a joke about anarchy at that, Tim. Not coming from a world like Velco. Well, never mind. You'll find things here to make you laugh. I hope."

Timeth regarded him intently, seeming to size Zack up—he had the feeling the lad could tell his shirt-size and annual income. "One of the standard purposes of the 'joke' is to make another feel at ease," Timeth stated. "Was that your wish?"

"It surely was," Zack assured him.

"Then tell me why I am here."

Zack started, then his brow clouded. "Well I'll be a . . . do you mean to tell me they didn't *explain* to you why you're here?" The boy shook his head. "Might have expected it—pure Velco," Zack exploded, and swore. "I thought better of Raoul." He saw Timeth looking at him, waiting. "I'm sorry, old son. Didn't mean to criticize your father; I knew him in college. But to truck you thirty parsecs and leave you in a stranger's kitchen with never a word of why . . ." He shook his head. "Let's sit down."

He led Timeth from the kitchen to his broad-beamed living room, just a bit of prideful expectancy in his manner. He had added some to Daniel's original structure, and the living room was his showpiece.

A visitor's first impression was usually that a rainbow had been trapped in the room and battered itself to pieces trying to escape: while the great south window gave a clear view of the mountain sloping away to an azure bay, the east and west windows were stained glass mosaic, and the former of these now spangled the room with splashes of red and yellow and green and deep, rich blue. Zack watched Timeth for reaction, found none. He sighed, pointed to a chair and draped his own long, hard form on a rocker. He busied himself for awhile with his pipe, then fired up a fresh bowl and began.

"The way I get the story, Timeth—and you correct me if I'm wrong anywhere—Velco is in a hell of a pickle. Overpopulated, overindustrialized, overurbanized—just one big city, the way I hear it. They failed to learn the lessons of Old Terra, and so they got into a bind for efficient administration. Too much information to integrate. Computers weren't the answer, they don't correlate well enough. A computer can have the results of five different medical teams around a planet punched into it, and never see that, combined, those results mean a cure for Ashton's Disease—or whatever. So the Velcoi fastened on an ancient but untried notion from Old Terra, attributed to a man named Heinlein, made about the time that it stopped being possible for a normal man to absorb all known information in a single lifetime. They began tinkering with ova *in utero*, selecting for eidetic memory, and set about raising up a corps of encyclopedic synthesists: a group of men trained to absorb raw information at high input with perfect retention, and then reason from it. Sort of human computers; you're one of the first.

"They tell me you can read a page at a glance, Basic English or Fortran, and remember it a decade from now, letter-perfect in a cafe with the band playing. You know enough to converse intelligently with experts in a hundred specialized disciplines, and direct their work for maximum efficiency. They trained and sleep-taught and indoctrinated you in logical and non-logical analysis until you were eight, stuffed you with data until you were twelve, gave you four years to integrate it and then put you to work at sixteen. Only you didn't work.

"Not the way they hoped, anyhow. They fed you data on pressing social problems, not big stuff, just break-in exercises; and your solutions were unsatisfactory or barely so, not much better than the computers could do. So they sicced their psychiatrists on you, and their psychologists, and they turned you inside out and found nothing wrong. They tore you down and rebuilt you and you still don't make miracles. And so in desperation some would-be Freud stole another notion from Old Terra and recommended a vacation in the country—in this case a vacation on New Home, an agricultural colony world, with me." Zack paused, relit his pipe. "I knew your Dad—we were roommates in school on Trantor, and he told me a lot about the *YES* program—Young Encyclopedic Synthesists. He was mighty proud that his wife back home had been selected for genetic surgery. Wonder how he feels now." He stared at the distant bay below, then wrenched himself from his thoughts with a visible effort. "Anyway, that's the long and short of it, Tim. You're here for R and R—six months of it. How does that appeal to you?"

Behind his enormous spectacles (which could be returned to fisheye Fens for maximum optic input) Timeth regarded Zack gravely. "It is satisfactory."

"I said, 'Does it *appeal* to you?' Do you *like* the notion?"

For the first time Timeth hesitated. "Y . . . yes I do. The last few months have been . . . intensely

strenuous."

"And strenuously intense, if I know Velcoi shrinks," Zack snorted. "Well, that's all over for awhile, lad. Smile." He beamed himself, nodded at the south window. "It's a sunny day."

Timeth looked out at sun-drenched splendor, at stately maples which had crossed light-years as saplings and at native spruce whose skirts danced in the mountain breeze, and returned his gaze to Zack. "There is no more sun than on any other day. I fail to understand your pleasure simply because it's visible . . . oh, I see. As a farmer you are pleased that maximum growth-frequencies are available to your crops."

"Why, no," said Zack, startled. "I mean, that's all fine, but ... but . . ." He broke off, words failing him, and pointed at the window again. "*Look. It's a sunny day.*"

The boy looked, kept on looking.

"You ought to appreciate it: you haven't seen many, have you? I hear Velco is completely roofed over, to simplify atmosphere recycling. Must use artificial light, right?"

"Sunlight is relayed inside the city by a series of mirror-bank transfer-and-amplification complexes," Timeth said flatly. "Vitamin D is essential for health."

Zack's jaw dropped; he lost his pipe. *They literally pipe daylight in to 'em*, he thought. *Holy smoke, what a dungeon.*

He gave up, took refuge in manners-toward-a-houseguest. The T.A. held five bedrooms, four of which he customarily sealed off in winter to conserve heat. Although Autumn already lay on this quadrant of New Home, he had left all five open, and invited Timeth to take his pick. All were furnished and clean but not especially orderly: Zack had felt that a newcomer would feel most welcome in a room that felt lived-in. The boy selected the smallest and most functional room, hardly more than a square box with a mattress on the floor and a small table. It had no window. Zack shrugged and carried in the travel-cases, stacking them for maximum access. Timeth opened one of the seals with an economical movement of his small thin hand, and began removing toilet articles. "What are my duties?" he asked stiffly.

Well, if I'm supposed to find out what's wrong with his working habits . . . "None at all," Zack said cheerfully. "Do what suits you—or nothing. Any help you feel like giving will be appreciated, but you owe me none. Your father paid your rent for you, twenty years ago—by teaching astrogationar mechanics to an ignorant farmer of a roommate."

Timeth stared. "I cannot solve a problem without parameters," he stated.

"Just keep your eyes open, old son. You'll catch on," Zack assured him heartily. He hoped that he sounded more confident than he felt.

* * *

The next few days passed slowly, grey weather hiding the sun, and Zack's puzzlement increased daily. Timeth indeed found things to do, and did them with maximum efficiency, but his performance was consistently lackluster.

Sent to fetch water from the stream while Zack repaired a water-pump which had slipped its leathers, he reappeared from the forest staggering, under the weight of two buckets fuller than Zack would have filled them, struggling valiantly uphill. He was frustrated by his inability to deliver perfectly full buckets, and shed tears approximately equal in volume to the amount spilled.

Partly soothed by Zack's assurance that he had fetched a-plenty, he set about cutting up onions for the midday stew—and produced precise cubes of onion as uniform as his small hands could make them.

When Zack mentioned, casually, that they could use some firewood, he was shortly startled by the stuttering roar of his ancient chainsaw—a device of which he was certain Timeth had only empirical knowledge. He had expected the lad would use the pulp saw which hung in the woodshed. Leaving his cooking and wandering outside to investigate, he found Timeth in a silent rage, annoyed not by the enormous demand the snarling, bucking chainsaw put on his young arms, but by the refusal of the irregular logs to lie down neatly and be sawed. *Probably never met with a piece of unplaned wood in his life*, Zack thought, and tried to explain that the logs' tendency to leap from the sawhorse and savage

one's knees was an interesting challenge rather than a defect in their structure, but he had little success—Timeth's early training had led him to define "challenge" as "a problem they don't expect me to be able to solve." The boy went grimly back to work, generating a mountain of firewood as neat as a postcard-picture but no joy. Zack shook his head, sighed for the dozenth time and went back inside.

The uneasiness persisted as the grey, rainy days of the season continued to unfold, and Zack lay awake nights trying to put his finger on the problem. The boy played chess like an automation, winning consistently and emotionlessly, continued to perform household tasks adequately but with an undercurrent of feeling that might have been sullenness had it not been so mild. He never roamed the mountain, though a forest environment was certainly new to him, and seemed uncomfortable when he could not find a task to accomplish, a problem to solve. Even his constant displays of encyclopedic knowledge, which saved Zack man-hours on several occasions, contained no tinge of pride, but only a weary boredom. Damn it, the boy simply had no juice. Could it be simply homesickness?

One damp morning Timeth coughed after breakfast, and asked diffidently if he could have his bed off the floor. "I keep hearing the floor hum," he said. Under questioning he explained that floors on Velco invariably hummed with power, the electronic systems which were the city-world's lifeblood pulsing beneath floorboards. By association he heard them here on New Home, and a psychosomatic annoyance is as real as any other. Zack assented readily, and they studied the three bedframes the T.A. held.

"Doesn't look like any of these will fit through the door of that closet you picked to live in, Timi. I guess you'll have to build you a bed." Zack expected the boy to ask for help, as he was sure carpentry was not a skill Timeth could have acquired on a steel-and-plastic world, but the boy only nodded and started measuring the mattress. Zack busied himself with the dishes, observing unobtrusively out of the corner of his eye. Having obtained the dimensions, Timeth put on a coat and went out into the morning mists, to the lumber pile out back. He returned with a pair of tongue-and-groove boards, repeated the process until he had stacked a dozen of them in his room, then fetched two long two-by-fours and four four-by-fours. Zack interrupted his labors to provide hammer, nails and handsaw, then returned to the kitchen. As always, the boy worked in silence, save for the pounding and sawing the job required. Zack let him be, spent the afternoon cleaning his survey-laser.

At noon Timeth emerged, his spectacles coated with a fine spray of sawdust. Zack left off caning a chair, one of his favorite forms of relaxation, and went to inspect the new bedframe, easing past the mattress that partially filled the doorway. He blinked at what he saw, said nothing at first.

"I'm not certain the legs are really perpendicular," Timeth said uneasily. "I didn't have a level or a T-square."

"How do you tell if your wife is true?" Zack quoted. "'Check her out with a plumb-bob.' Never mind, old son. Another of my bum jokes. About the bed: it's . . . it's very functional."

The boy looked pleased.

". . . but I can't say that I like it."

Timeth was briefly crestfallen, then his features smoothed into their usual blank. "Why not?"

Zack started to answer, then stopped. He turned and walked into the living room, the boy following, and sat down with a frown. Timeth waited.

After a time Zack spoke. "Timeth, I'm beginning to understand why you had trouble on Velco. Hell, it sticks out all over—it's so obvious I couldn't grasp it."

"You must tell me," the boy said, and Zack was startled by the intensity in his voice.

"Why *must* I tell you, Timi?" he asked softly.

"Because I have shamed my father," Timi said shortly, turning red. For him, it was an emotional outburst.

Zack swore, with feeling. "You poor kid. They couldn't get the results they wanted out of you, so they applied pressure on your motivation circuits, figuring you were stubborn. And so they made you ashamed—and that's one of the stubbornest places there is. Perpetuated their own problem. Serves them right—but it doesn't serve *you* at all.

"Listen, lad. You've been programmed for maximum efficiency. But as much as your father and that. Abernathy creature would like to believe otherwise, people aren't built to be satisfied with merely efficient

solutions to their problems. Suited, maybe, but not satisfied. People are irrational, Timeth, in a way you've never been allowed to be. They want to enjoy life."

Timeth displayed no comprehension.

"Take that bed you just built. You went to the lumber-pile and picked up the first bunch of boards that fit your parameters, the right size, the right length. And you stopped looking. You figured out the most economical use of wood and nails and designed your bed-frame. And stopped thinking. You fit the tongue-and-grooves together, spanned them with two-by-fours to distribute the load, and added legs. And stopped building. It'll hold your weight and it's the size of the mattress, but it's as spartan as a K-ration, as cheerless as a utility pole. It's functional, but that's all it is."

The boy looked close to tears. Zack suspected that he was having his equivalent of hysterics, but pushed on anyway. "I know what your problem is, Timeth, and it's the problem with your whole world: the reason why they needed you to pull their chestnuts out of the fire in the first place and the reason why you can't do it, all in one.

"Look: a certain number of chores must be done in order to live—call it life support. Because your world is so confounded crowded the nature of those chores become complex and subtle—from hydraulic engineering to solar power conversion to piping in the bloody daylight. All I need is food and firewood, so I'm not as pressured. But when life-support chores become too complex to allow for the kind of cheerful inefficiency with which I run this farm, people don't enjoy doing them, or living with the end-results.

"Look at my kitchen-stove sometime. It's a wood-burner, as old as underwear and as big as a landing-field. It keeps me busy wrestling that chainsaw, and it's not an especially efficient heat-source. I make a pretty good living from this farm—I could afford gas. Hell, I could afford a solar stove. But I *like* that old heap of iron. It was my mother's; it has stains on it that she made fixing my school lunches. It keeps the room cheery and warm of a winter's night. I don't *have* to cut wood for it—so I don't begrudge the energy it consumes.

"But more important than that, Timeth, the chores that I do have immediate personal results, of a tangible sort. I spend an hour cutting up vegetables into interesting shapes instead of neat cubes, and somehow my soup tastes better to me, and it looks different every time. I spend a few weeks over at Yang Wildflower's house learning to blow glass, and my living room wears a coat of many colors that changes as the day goes by, and changes with the seasons, too. I make the upstairs dormer I put on this house much wider than I *need* it—but I can sit in the window-sill with my feet up, come sundown, and watch the sun set over the bay that my father used to fish.

"*You* spend a week of hard mental labor and produce a more efficient traffic-routing system for use halfway around the planet, or a step-up in distribution of goods you'll never see. Meanwhile your own life-support comes from cans and boxes and grilles in the ceiling, from supermarkets and factories, rather than from the earth and sky. You don't *feel* the effect you have on your world, and so it is meaningless to you. No wonder your solutions don't satisfy your constituents.

"Go look at my bed; you've seen it already. Big four-poster with a canopy overhead made from a genuine Carson's World tapestry and a tape-viewer built in. Stereo speakers in a headboard of gnurled oak that's got a gold sunburst painted in the middle. That bed doesn't just hold me off the floor—it gives me pleasure. Sometimes it's hard to get out of it in the morning. Sometimes I don't.

"Dammit, son, there's some driftwood that you didn't get to, out there on the lumber pile, that'd make the prettiest bedframe you ever saw, with more interesting contours than any straight line ever milled. There's one big slab that bay worked over for near a century, with that smooth, timeless texture that only driftwood has, that'd make a headboard as majestic as this mountain we're sitting on. And as asymmetrical—so you never noticed it. Instead of a pleasing place to spend a third of your every day, you produced a piece of floor with legs on it. Instead of an interesting soup you produced a homogenous pot of cubes. Instead of a lived-in room you've produced a collection of right angles that's as efficient and as lifeless as a laboratory maze.

"Function, function, function! Timeth, human beings aren't built to live functionally. Durn near everything in this house, from kettle to cupboard, is decorated some way or other, and so the house is full

of *me*. If I'm an unimaginative man, then they're unimaginative decorations, but they satisfy me and they say who I am. Your room says only what Velco is.

"Confound it, boy! Didn't anyone ever teach you how to *enjoy* yourself?"

Timeth burst out crying, the great, racking sobs of a very small child or a grown man. Zack suddenly cursed himself for a fool. Rising, he held out his arms blindly, and the boy as blindly rushed into them. "You poor slob," he murmured, stroking Timeth's hair, "They trained you how to work like a ballerina—and they never taught you how to play." His face darkened. "I guess you can't play . . . if you live on Velco."

The boy's sobs intensified.

But finally his crying became less explosive, began to subside. His trembling ceased. He lifted his face, and the stained glass window turned his tears to tiny diamonds, rubies and amethysts. "Zack," he pleaded, "will you teach me how to enjoy myself?"

Zack was startled to discover that his own vision was blurred; Timeth's face became a small, oval kaleidoscope.

"I'll try, son," he said, his voice hoarse. "I'll try."

* * *

The winter was long, but unseasonably mild. Nonetheless Zack got very little accomplished around the house—but it was a very full time all the same. There were hayrides and fishing trips and husking bees. Happy smiling neighbors too seldom seen. There were square-dances where Timeth danced until his legs refused to support him and he giggled, gasping, on his knees at how the mathematical relationships of the dance melted away before the sheer joy of it. There were beer brewing parties and barn-raisin celebrations at which he learned for the first time the joy of cooperation of shared labor. There was a holiday feast where he glowed at the compliments bestowed on a cake he had fashioned in the shape of the, T.A., with frosted windows, icing sills and trim, and a fine-grain chocolate roof for all the world like tar-paper. And there were endless nature walks and countless camping trips and a hundred color-splashed sunsets; there were windy days on the shore racking for driftwood and sweet winter nights singing New Home songs and Velcoi ballads by the fireside until eyelids stung with the weight of happy fatigue; there was snow to be shoveled and trees to be felled, a boat to be built and sap to be collected and boiled down into thick, gold syrup.

And one chill night there was a chimney fire and Timeth heard it first and they sprang from their beds to become twin whirlwinds of wordlessly coordinated energy, and there was chopping of limbers and tearing down of boards and Timeth at the pump, with new-grown muscle efficiently pumping, keeping the full buckets coming, and Zack, disheveled and red in the glow of firebox and embers, his great shoulders rippling as he swung the great double-headed axe that Timeth had remembered to snatch up as they raced past the shop; and then there was a policing for embers in which time slowed down some, and then at last Zack and Timeth, panting on their knees, locking eyes for the first time, dissolving into laughter at the same instant, great echoing whoops of laughter that seemed to blow the smoke and the stink from the room; and Zack, reaching out to shake Timeth's hand and saying the first words spoken since Timeth's cry had woken him: "Pleasure to work with you, partner." And the boy's face was something that Jacob Abernathy would not have recognized ...

And one slightly warmer night, Timeth returned from three days alone in the woods, healthy and fit and profoundly *alive*, and he asked Zachary Mountain-Born a question, and Zack made the answer which he had prepared.

And one pleasant Spring evening, two weeks later, Zack was sitting alone on a bluff overlooking the garden, watching the stars, when a darkness occulted one of them. The star reappeared and its neighbor vanished, and he smiled a soft smile and went in to bed, sleeping soundly for the first time in a month, waking before dawn for the first time in years.

* * *

The knock came as the coffee was perking, and Zack carefully slid the pot to a cooler place on the stove before he answered the door. Abernathy walked in without greeting, followed by the large manservant, and the three of them stood for a moment, regarding each other. For Zack it was almost a moment of *deja vu*—the same kitchen, the same people, the same stack of travelcases awash with the light of dawning.

But Abernathy methodically assessed the room, identified the missing element, and frowned. "Where is the boy?"

"The boy is dead," Zack said truthfully. "He will not be returning with you."

Abernathy's planed features had never held emotion, and were not about to start at this late date, but he looked as if he wished his eyebrows would let him frown.

"There was an avalanche last week," Zack explained. "A rockslide to the east. I watched him fall. I could not recover his body. Tell Raoul I . . ." he broke off, strong emotion on his own face.

Abernathy stood stock-still for a long moment, nodded and said, "I see. Was his death your fault?"

"No," Zack said slowly, "it was his own doing."

Abernathy read truth in his sturdy face, and nodded again. Without another word he spun on his heel like a drill instructor and left. The servant followed with the forlorn travelcases.

Zack watched from the window until the landing craft rose into view from the tall neopines at the base of the mountain and arced off over the bay toward the orbiting mothership he had seen in the sky last night. Then he put down his empty coffee cup and went to the smallest room in his house. As he opened its door he noted with approval that the sunburst painted on its door was dry now.

A new-carved, diamond-shaped window let in the morning sun; it splashed across a great majestic bed, seasoned maple timbers and a mighty slab of driftwood for a headboard, held together by careful, macrame-like lashings of thick blue cord, a great canopy arching overhead with a hand-stitched representation of this sector of the galaxy on its undersurface. It was nowise perfect or neat, but its craftsman had obviously enjoyed himself.

Zack coughed. "All clear, old son."

From beneath the magnificent bed came—not a boy—but a young man, the beginning of an eager grin below a proud, new mustache.

"They're really gone, Zack?"

"They're really gone, Timeth. They won't be coming back."

"I . . . I guess I'll miss my parents some." The grin faltered.

"I guess you will," Zack agreed, wondering for the thousandth time whether he had chosen rightly.

Timeth shrugged, and his grin returned full strength. "Even feeling bad is better than not feeling," he said positively, and to his own surprise Zack laughed. They embraced for a moment, as comrades-in-arms and then Timeth pulled away- smiling. "Let's go outside, Zack," he said. "There's a shed to be built."

"Whoa, lad. What about breakfast?"

"The hell with breakfast," Timeth said, and raced to the window. Flinging it open, he breathed in a great chestful of spruce and earth and distant sea.

"Look!" he cried, pointing. "It's a sunny day!"