

## REM THE REMEMBERER

by Frederik Pohl

I don't much like writing "special occasion stories for particular purposes. To be saddled with somebody else's theme or settings comports very poorly with the undisciplined and stochastic way I think I am best able to write; so it's hard work. If editors as a race had group awareness, they wouldn't ask me, either, because all too often I have dutifully done what some editor asked me to do, only to find about the time I finished the story that some higher-up had canceled the special issue or the magazine or project itself; "Kiss of Death Fred one editor called me, and she was at least in this respect right. This story is one such. It represents one of my very few involvements with the United Nations, specifically with UNICEF. I got a call from a man who said that UNICEF had decided to publish a book of what the children of the next generation would make of their world, in all the parts of the world the United Nations covered, and would I care to write one for the United States? I could not say no. With all its nasty and conspicuous faults, the United Nations has greatly bettered the world we live in; and of all the things it does, UNICEF is the most clearly, unequivocally good. So I wrote this story... and hardly had I finished it when the word came that high-level consultations had voted to torpedo the whole plan, and the book would never appear.

Sometimes when Rememberer awoke in the morning he was crying. Not for long. Just for a minute, out of a dream he didn't like. When his mother, Peg, heard him, she came into his small, cheerful room and stood in the doorway, smiling at him until she was sure he was altogether awake. She worried about him. He was ten years old, and she thought he was too old for that. She gave him his breakfast and sent him off to school on his bicycle. By then he was cheerful again.

In the afternoons he helped the grownups. When Peg was housecleaning, Rem mopped and brushed and helped prepare the food. When Burt, his father, was working at home on his analyses (Burt was something like a public accountant, in charge of the Southern New York Regional energy budgets), Rem checked his figures on a pocket calculator. On Tuesdays and Fridays he went out in catamarans with his Uncle Marc to help harvest mussels from the Long Island Sound Nurseries. The mussels grew on long, knotted manila lines that hung from floats. Each day hundreds of cords had to be pulled up, and stripped of the grown mussels, and reseeded with tiny mussel larvae, and put back in the water. It was hard work. Rem was too small to handle pulling up the ropes, but he could strip and reseed, and pick up the mussels that fell in the bottom of the boat so the men wouldn't crush them with their feet, and generally be useful. It was tiring. But it felt good to be tired after three hours in the catamaran, and the water was always warm, even when the air coming down off Connecticut was blustery and cold. In all but the worst weather Marc would wink and nod toward the side, and Rem would skin out of his outer clothes and dive overboard and swim down among the dangling cords, looking to see how the mussels were growing. Sometimes he took an air-pack and his uncle or one of the other men came with him, and together they would go clear down to the bottom to look for stray oysters or crabs or even lobsters that had escaped from the pens out around Block Island.

Then he would go home and meet his father, bicycling back from the Sands Point railroad station. If the weather was nice they'd dig in the garden or toss a ball around. Then they would have dinner—wherever they were having dinner that night; they rotated around from home to home most nights of the week so that each family had the job of cooking and cleaning up only two or three times a week. One of the grownups usually helped the children with their homework after dinner. Rem liked it when it was his father's turn, particularly when the homework assignment was about ecology. He was always popping up with questions. Don't hog the floor, son, his father would say. "Give the others a chance.

"It's always the same dumb questions, too, his cousin, Grace, complained. She was eight, still pretty much a brat." Why don't we get sick from eating sewage? What a dumb question!

His father laughed. "Well, it's not all that dumb. The thing is, we don't eat sewage. We just use it to grow things. All the New York City sewage goes into the settling ponds and then the algae tanks. Who knows what algae is ?

Rem knew the answer, of course, but he was polite enough to let one of the younger ones answer. Even Grace. "What they make bread out of, she said.

"That's one thing algae is used for, yes. But most of the algae is piped into Long Island Sound. The mussels live on it. So do the fish, but the mussels are the big crop. We grow three-quarters of the protein for the whole United States here, just on that algae. And, of course, on the waste heat from the power generators around Hell Gate. That warms up the Sound so the mussels grow all year round.

"And so do the potatoes, Grace crowed .

Rem's father said, "Yes, they do. That's a little different, though. They take the sludge from the algae tanks and spread it over the fields along the Island . Did you know they used to be covered with houses? Well, we got rid of the houses, and we began growing the best potatoes in the world there, again. But we use some of the warm water piped underground to keep the soil warm, and we get two crops a year.

Then Rem asked another question, always the same one or one like it: "But, he persisted, "aren't those bad things, sewage and sludge and all?

"People used to think so. Then we learned that some bad things are actually good things, in the wrong place.

"How did we learn?

His father looked at his watch. "That happened almost a hundred years ago. The people who lived then made some very good decisions.

Grace said indignantly, "They did *bad* things.

"In a way, but then they did better ones. We all know about the bad things. They drove around in cars that burned gasoline! They dumped sewage in the ocean, and ruined it for fifty years all up and down the coast. They used radioactive materials that poisoned places forever, just because they wanted more and more electric things and automatic things . But then they realized they were being too greedy. They learned-what did they learn?

All the kids chanted, "Use it over! Put it back!

"That's right. They learned not to waste things, and that decision made all the difference in the world. They decided not to be greedy. And now, he said, looking at his watch again, "it's time for everybody under the age of thirty-two to go to bed. He looked around the room with a surprised expression. "Why, that's all of you! Good night.

And Rem went back to his own room and to bed.

He didn't mind going to sleep. After all, he was pleasantly tired. He did mind the dreams. He remembered them clearly; and they were always the same, and always so real, not as though he were falling asleep but as though he were waking...

He woke up happy, with the vanishing clouds of a happy dream in his mind. Then the rattle and rasp of the air conditioner in his room chased the last of the dream away. By the time he got up and turned his little light on-he always needed one, even in the summer, because the skies were almost always dingy dark-he could remember the dream, but he couldn't feel it anymore.

His mother, Peg, worried about the way he always seemed to dream the same wishful dream, but when Rem realized that, he just stopped telling her about it. He did ask her if he could please leave the air conditioner off, at least in the winter, so that he could wake up more slowly and enjoy the dream more. "I wish you could, honey, she said, "but you know Dr. Dallinger said you had to have something filter the air, because of your asthma. I'm sorry about the noise. Maybe we can get you a new one- Although I don't know how, with the payments on the cars and the way heat's going up. And you wouldn't believe what I spent in the supermarket yesterday, just for three little bags of groceries. Then she laughed and hugged him and said, "A noisy air conditioner isn't so bad! What if you had to live in New York City ?

She was the one who drove him in to school every day. His father had to leave an hour earlier because of the traffic. School wasn't bad. Rem liked to learn, and he liked being with the other children. He even liked recess, at least in the winter, when the storm winds from Canada blew some of the sulfur -smelling smog away and the reek from the slow, iridescent waves of Long Island Sound was not so strong. He didn't mind the cold. He did mind being kept inside so much of the time, when the air index was "Unsatisfactory or "Dangerous to Health or even, which had happened two or three times the previous summer, "Condition Red! No burning! No driving! On days like that everybody was stuck wherever he happened to be. Everything stopped. Rem and his mother would take turns in the shower and then sit, playing cards, or talking, or just resting, waiting for the time to pass. If his father was lucky, he would be doing the same thing in his office in the city. If he wasn't, he might be caught in the long unmoving snarl of cars on the freeways, waiting for permission to start again. That was how Rem's uncle Marc had died, two years before, when he had another heart attack sitting at the wheel and got out of the car for help, and died there.

But then after a while the rain would come. It was worse than the dry heat at first, because the drops would come down as sticky black blobs that stained all the houses, dirtied the windows, and killed the grass, where there was any grass. But after a while there might be a real storm, with luck even a hurricane, and then for a few days Long Island might look queerly green and fresh for a while.

What Rem liked best was the one or two evenings a week when his father got home before his bedtime. They would talk about grown-up things.

Rem's father, Burt, was very proud of him. He told his wife, " Rem's really interested in things-important things; I think he's going to be somebody the world will be glad to have when he grows up. One of the "important things was why the Sound was dead and unhealthy. Another was why everybody drove their own cars instead of riding trains or buses, or even working near where they lived. His father tried to answer them as well as he could. "Well, son, he said, "people *like* having their own cars. You'll see, when you grow up and get your own license. When you get behind the wheel, you're on your own. You can shut out all the unpleasant things-

"What things, Dad?

Burt looked suddenly remorseful. "Oh, not things like *here*, Rem ! You and your mother-well, I wouldn't

change places with anybody in the world. But there are a lot of problems. Burt was a tax accountant for the New York State government. He shook his head. "We need so much, he said, "and it's hard to know where the money's going to come from. Let's see, what was the other question? Oh, about waste heat and sewage. Well, that's one of the problems, Rem. There's so much pollution, and it costs too much to get rid of it. I suppose that, of course, you could theoretically use the heat from the factories and power plants and so on to heat homes or even to warm up some sort of farms-they'd have to be greenhouses, actually-so you could grow more things. But the capital cost, Rem, would be immense. He hesitated, trying to find the words to explain economics to a ten-year-old. "We just don't have the money. Maybe if we'd started a long time ago- But we didn't. You can't drive cars without freeways to drive them on, do you see? I guess the government could have built piping systems and recirculation plants, but then where would the money have come from for the highways? We did the best we could. I think. We used up all the low-sulfur fuels first, and we kept on dumping sewage until it was too late to stop. And it got harder and harder to make the fertilizer to grow the food. I suppose, he said thoughtfully, "that if some people had made different decisions a century or so ago, the world would be quite a different place. Some ways, it would be pretty nice. But they didn't. And it's too late now. He smiled and squeezed Rem's shoulder. "Speaking of being late, it's about time for you to be off to bed.

So Rem would take his pills and drink his glass of soymilk and go off to sleep. He wasn't unhappy about that. He remembered the dream, and knew he would dream it again, and that was something to look forward to. It was so very pleasant, and so very real; he wasn't always sure which was the reality and which was the dream.