

# Time-Sharing Angel

*James Tiptree*

It's not true there are no angels; the young woman named Jolyone Schram spoke to one, with results that have astounded us all.

Whether what Jolyone talked to was actually an angel in the classic sense, we'll never know, of course; unless it returns, which seems unlikely. Certainly it was a space-borne Something of great power, a principle of the outer void, perhaps, a wandering sentience—possibly even, as some might claim, an interstellar commuter out of his usual way. Whatever it may have been, it heard Jolyone, and this is the manner of that event.

On the night it happened Jolyone was trying not to cry, while her teeth played music.

She was at her nightly job of news clipper and general gofer on the fifth floor of WPNQ's new building. Far up above her head towered WPNQ's new transmitter, which had just been erected on what had been the last wooded ridge behind L.A. The new transmitter was powered up to cut through everything near it on the L.A. bands. It was so strong that while Jolyone stapled Telex flimsies, the big filling in her right molar clearly brought in Stevie Smith.

*"I was much farther out than you thought, and not waving but drowning,"* sang her tooth. Jolyone's eyes blinked tears and her chin trembled, but it wasn't the song doing it.

The fact is that right there in Hal Hodge's office Jolyone was passionately mourning the death of Earth, which she had just foreseen.

She was nineteen years old.

The day before she had taken off to drive up the coast and over to the piney-woods valley where she'd spent a lot of happy time as a kid. Her semiroommate had just split, semiamiablely, and she needed some peace. She felt she'd been away from earth and woods too long.

It was dark before she got close, but she couldn't help noticing that there seemed to be a lot more houses than on her last trip. Finally the misty trees closed around her headlights, and the road was its bad old self. By midnight she drove over the ridge and pulled onto the verge. The mist was so thick she decided to nap till dawn and see the sunrise. All around was the peaceful smell of woods. A hoot owl called and was answered. As Jolyone drifted off to sleep, she could just hear the little brook purling through a cave she used to hide out in when she was little. She smiled, remembering.

Jolyone never saw the sun rise there.

In the first pale light she was jolted awake by the starting roar of a big diesel not a hundred yards away. It was joined by another, and another, and another—and before she was sure she wasn't in a nightmare, from the other side the high wicked yowl of chain saws burst out.

Hands on her ears, Jolyone peered out at the thinning mist. Treetops were waving and crashing. She saw a line of giant earth movers advancing past her straight across the valley. A horrifying great misty mountain of trees, rocks, earth, everything was spewing out of the monsters' blades. Behind them stretched raw gravel.

Aghast, Jolyone whirled in her seat, trying to disbelieve the devastation. From nowhere a back-hoe bucket rose up beside her, so close that she could see a small dusty body still struggling in the rocks. A kit fox, her eyes noted numbly.

With a wordless moan she threw the VW in gear and shot back over the ridge. As she went she saw she had spent the night under a huge signboard painted with a man's grinning face: A THOUSAND MORE HAPPY HOMES BY HAPPY HARRY JOEL.

"Oh no, *oh no*," Jolyone wept to herself as she drove shakenly down toward the coast. The darkness had fooled her coming in, she saw. There weren't just a few more houses among the trees. From horizon to horizon the foothills were covered by houses, houses, houses everywhere, with only a thin line of dried trees by the old road. Her valley had been the last patch of woods left.

"How could they, it was so, so—" she whispered incoherently, trying to find a word for all lost defenseless beauty, for all that she had loved deeply

without really knowing it, and believed would always endure.

When she finally got onto the freeway approaches, the hurt was calmer. It was a fine sunny day. As she sailed up the ramp into the southbound lanes, she noticed something else she had missed the night before. The sea up north had a funny black-looking scum edge on it. An oil slick?

"It's the biggest one yet," the girl at the Burgerchef rest stop told her, nodding proprietarily. "They say it killed all those seal otters or whatever—hey, don't you want your Supercheese?"

Jolyone drove on back to her job, trying to lose herself in the long thrumming hypnosis of the freeway traffic. The sun shone whitely on her from the thickening veils of the sky; trucks, cars, vans roared beside her, ahead, behind. The grief that had shaken her calmed to the rhythm of driving on and on. But, somewhere underneath, her mind kept chewing on it.

A thousand new homes, on top of all those other thousands... Jolyone had once heard her generation described as "the baby boom's baby boom." She'd always intended, in a vague way, to have kids. But now all the bits and pieces of her standard education began to add up. The "ecology"—it wasn't something distant, somewhere else with strip mines. It was the awful devastation of her lovely valley, the broken little body in the back-hoe bucket. And that oil slick... she herself was driving a car right now. Probably she would have used some of the oil that spilled. It was being brought for people like her. For thousands, millions of people just like her.

To get away from the idea she tuned the radio to catch the end of Hal Hodge's news break. Nothing but a filler about some mountains in Nepal that had slid down because the people had used up all the trees for firewood. Then she switched to WPNQ's Pop Hour, and she thankfully let thought go with the dreamy beat *Twenty-nine colors of blue...*

The miles passed.

Finally she was turning into the station parking lot. Mimi Lavery was subbing for Hal on the evening news; Jolyone listened critically, hoping Mimi would pitch her voice low. Mimi ended with another filler, something about how the population was going up again and was expected to double in thirty years, and cut to a taped ad for

condominiums in the Rockies.

And right then, all in the second between parking the Volks and pulling out her car keys, it happened.

Jolyone Schram *knew*.

It came to her as a vision of a billion-headed monstrous wave, a huge spreading flood of multiplying people, people unending, forming in their billions a great devouring mindless incubus that spread around the green ball of Earth—blotting out everything, eating everything, using everything, expanding and destroying without limit on a finite surface. Hordes of individually innocent people made frightful by their numbers bulged out into and under the oceans, tunneled underground, flowed over the mountains, surging and covering everything everywhere. Billions of heads gaped, grinned at her, billions of hands reached and grasped blindly as the torrent of bodies flooded over the world.

*That* was what was happening, slower or faster, all around her. And it would continue, faster and faster, to the oncoming end.

Jolyone gasped, falling back into the car seat. She was a gentle girl, unsuited to apocalyptic visions. But she had also an innocent fact-mindedness; she actually believed in numbers. All in that terrible instant she saw what the numbers meant. *Doubling in thirty years*—and then doubling again and again, quicker each time. It was happening. Not somewhere else in some remote lifetime, but right here and now. She was seeing it begin. With all the singleness of her nineteen-year-old mind she suddenly, totally believed.

And all in that same second it came to her how much she would suffer and how helpless she was. How could she live in that tumult of people, without room or peace, with no refuge to escape to? But she couldn't stop it, no one could—she saw that, too. People just wouldn't stop having kids, she knew that in her blood. Pointing a gun at a President wouldn't save the redwoods; all those organizations to save a river or a mountain wouldn't delay matters much. Because nothing could stop those *numbers*. In the cold time-light of her vision she saw the flurries of protest, speeches, little movements, hopes and local successes and good intentions—all swept away by the relentless multitudes, like the line of buckling trees she had seen go down in the valley. Numbers talk. Nothing can stop it, really, she thought. Everything I love will go.

She sat trembling, too shaken to cry. After a while things eased a little. Since there seemed to be nothing else to do, she picked up the fallen car keys and went on in to her job.

In the studio no one noticed her. It was an off night. A couple of engineers were still trying to fix that oscillation in the booster circuits; they had a panel torn down.

Jolyone went leadenly about her work, sorting the Telex pile, putting back the used tapes, answering phones in the empty offices, doing zombielike whatever she was asked. Her teeth whispered the late sports roundup. The vision that had hit her didn't go away. It surrounded her head like a ghostly projection, making the real world outside as thin as a momentary dream. Every now and then her eyes leaked uncontrollably when she thought of something dear to her that wouldn't be around much longer. High-rise developers were already buying up the scraggly old garden block she and her friends lived in. That was just one first soft nudging edge of the terrible future she had foreseen. With all the clarity of her nineteen years Jolyone was saying good-bye to something deep and vital, to hope itself maybe.

At 10:30 Hal Hodge's usual batch of almost-celebrities came in for Tonight Talk. One of them was a science-fiction writer, a short, jumpy older man, neurotically worried that his car would be towed away. Jolyone got him some Kleenex for his cold, gave them all coffee, and put them into Hal's hands during the station break.

As she shut the door, one of the equipment men called her over to the torn out board.

"Hold this a sec." He handed her a big complicated jack trailing cables. "Don't let it touch anything, that's right. Look, when I say 'break,' you push that circuit breaker up here with your other hand. Got it?"

Jolyone nodded; she was having trouble with her eyes again.

The engineer dived down and wriggled in under the panel. Jolyone stood holding the thing. Her teeth were even louder here; she heard Hal Hodge's sincerely interested voice. "What are people like us going to be doing a hundred years from now, Bill?"

"Standing on each other's throats," the science-fiction writer said in

her tooth, and sneezed.

The whole horrible vision came back onto Jolyone, and with it something worse she hadn't seen before. "Oh, no, no, no," she whispered, feeling a big tear start down her cheek. She couldn't wipe it.

What she had seen were the expressions on that oncoming mountain of people. Their faces snarled, mouths gnashing in hatred, leering in triumph, wailing in desperate loss; eyes narrowed in cold calculation; hands clutched knives or guns and fought as the tide rolled over them. Here a few combined for a moment in furious victory, only to go under as new faces overrode them. From under every foot rose the weak cries of the trampled and dying. Nowhere in all that panorama of strife was kindness, nowhere was anything she thought of as human— only the war of all against all raging on the despoiled earth.

When we've destroyed everything we'll be animals, she thought. A great sob rose in her throat compounded of doomed beauty and the hideous revelation that what she had taken for the reality of people was a fragile dream about to perish. "No," she choked.

"Hit it!" barked the engineer from under the board.

Blind and shaking, Jolyone reached across the open board. Tears ran unheeded down her jaw and splashed complex electrolytes where no such things should be. In anguish, Jolyone whispered a prayer to the empty air. "Make it stop, *please*."

There was a sudden total silence that crackled.

"*Piontwxq?*" said her filling sharply in the stillness. "*Eh! Stop what?*"

"Make us stop," Jolyone repeated crazily, unaware that her cry was howling out on unknown frequencies, unaware of anything except her pain. "Make us stop making more people before we kill everything! Oh, *please* don't let it happen, don't let all the beautiful world be killed!"

"*Wait*," said the tiny voice in her jawbone. Jolyone's eyes suddenly got as big as Hal Hodge's mouth. "*Oh, very well*," the voice went on. "*You can stop crying now*."

It sounded far away and preoccupied, and it wasn't speaking English,

although Jolyone never knew that.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Who—wha—?"

"Holy crap!" The engineer exploded out from under the panel and started grabbing things. Hal Hodge shot from the booth and collided with the sound man, both of them yelling. In the uproar Jolyone saw the science-fiction writer scuttle out clutching his car keys and shaking his head.

Then she was being chewed out for letting the hyper-mixed touch the goobilizer, and it was all entirely too much.

Meanwhile, twenty-two thousand miles out in space, the Something—being, djinn, essence, or what have you —completed a tiny swift adjustment to the last of our synchronized satellites. Then he or she or it zipped into a parabolic pass down through earth's atmosphere. As it hurtled down, it opened something that wasn't a briefcase. The orbit noded over the Andes and something very small dropped into a crevasse.

Next instant, our visitor was out again and receding into the depths of space with the thing that wasn't a briefcase tucked under its—well, whatever it was under. Could you have translated the expression on what might have been its face, you would have been reminded of the look worn by a passing grown-up who has stopped to retrieve a kid's lost ball.

And that's the last we've known of it to this day.

But as the next morning's light spread round the world, we all know what was revealed.

In every home, every apartment or igloo or cave or grass hut from Fiji to New York to Archangel, the scene was the same. One baby and only one awoke—the youngest. All the other children lay unstirring; on mats, in beds or hammocks or cribs or fur piles, all but the youngest lay apparently asleep.

A moment later started the billion-throated scream that followed the sunrise round the world. Mothers discovered the sleeping children's flesh was cool, their chests were silent. No breath moved their lips. Girls and boys from two to twenty, all siblings of whatever age, lay moveless and cold. Even the grown ones not at home were found lying lifeless.

Death, it seemed, had reaped the earth of all but the last-borns.

But among the frantic parents were a few persistent ones who held mirrors to the still lips and listened longer at the cooling breasts. And finally it was known: the children were not dead. Slower than glaciers, breath moved in them. Slower than the ooze of rock, their blood flowed still and the infinitely languorous hearts squeezed and relaxed. They were not dead but sleeping—or rather, as their temperatures fell and fell, it was understood that this was a sleep like hibernation, but deeper than any ever known.

And they could not be waked or revived. Doctors, shamans, mothers en masse attacked the sleepers with heat or cold or shock, with any or every stimulus that could possibly or impossibly break the spell. Nothing worked. Days passed, but not a heartbeat quickened, no breath came a millisecond faster.

All over the world, fathers gazed upon the rows of their comatose offspring and went looking for drink. Distracted mothers alternated between caring for their waking youngest and futilely trying to awaken the rest.

Only those homes with a single child were unaffected. But in many such, another child was on the way. And it was soon found that whenever the mother gave birth, as the newborn cry squalled out, the eyelids of the older baby fell upon its cheeks. By the time the new baby had started to nurse, the former only child was cooling into hibernation. It seemed that in every home only one child, the youngest, could wake to cry and feed and play in normalcy. All around it, in every hut, hospital, sampan or split-level, the older siblings lay in cold trance.

Desperation mounted with the days; all other issues faded to insignificance. Were the Earth and the hearts of its people to be filled with the living dead?

And then the first sleeper woke.

It was, at any rate, the first one known, and it happened on Day Fourteen in the well-filled trailer of the McEvoy's in Pawnet, West Virginia. As the sun rose, a young voice that had been silent for a fortnight spoke.

"Maw! Maw, I'm hongry."



Mrs. McEvoy rushed into the front room where her sleeping brood was laid out on every surface. Denny, her next-to-youngest, was starting to scream in fright because he had touched his cold brother Earl. She clutched him and felt of him while he wriggled; he seemed perfectly all right.

"Earlene!" called her sister. "I can't wake the baby. I think she's coolin' off."

And sure enough, little Debbie McEvoy was sliding into the chill of hibernation and could not be roused.

The waking of a child was world news; the media led a mass descent upon little Dennis. It was soon established that he was his normal self with no memory of his missing fortnight.

Among the crowd was a lanky, quizzical man named Springer. Like Jolyone, he believed in numbers. He ascertained that there were eighteen living McEvoy children, and his face became more puzzled than ever.

"You, ah, don't happen to have any more children, do you, Mrs. McEvoy?"

Earlene McEvoy's face clamped shut.

But her neighbors were not so reticent, and Springer soon discovered that there had been a period, or periods, of extra-McEvoy activity in Earlene's life. The results thereof were now living, or rather, sleeping, with various distant relatives. He was also impressed by the robust health Mrs. McEvoy had imparted to all her young.

"Twenty-six," he mused. "Twenty-six alive from one mother. Remarkable. And there's twenty-six fortnights in a year, give or take a few hours."

To Mrs. McEvoy he said only, "I'd keep my eye on Dennis about a week from Saturday."

"Why?"

"It's only a hunch, Mrs. McEvoy. He just might go back to sleep then."

"Don't talk like that, mister."

But, sure enough, on Saturday week young Dennis was cooling back to hibernation while his next-oldest sister woke up.

By then it wasn't a surprise, because living families of less than twenty-six are common and enough other children were waking up to make the arithmetic plain. Saturday week was Day Twenty-eight; on that morning, the next-youngest child of every family of thirteen was waking up while the youngest slid into stasis.

It was clear what had happened, at least in its first incredible outlines.

No one had been killed.

No one had been hurt, except by overzealous efforts to wake them.

No one had been prevented from having as many children as her heart, mores, ignorance, or vulnerability dictated. (It was noted with varying emotions that the Affliction seemed to count only mothers as parents.) What had happened was time-sharing. Every child, it appeared, would have its turn at being awake, and this was shortly found to be true. The problem was that the length of time it stayed awake depended on how many siblings it had. All the children of each mother shared out the year, each getting more or less depending on their number; the twenty-six offspring of Earlene got only a fortnight apiece while each child of a pair waked for six months. Only children were unaffected. Thus each mother had always one waking child— and one only.

But were the children of large families to be robbed of most of their lives? Was even the child of a two-child family to lose half its life asleep? The answer slowly came back: No. It required time to be sure, of course. But right from the start people had their suspicions, because even the smallest hibernating infants did not seem to grow. Hair and nails did not lengthen, even small cuts did not heal. Older children awoke with their last meals undigested and their last waking preoccupations on their *lips*. In sleeping women, pregnancies did not advance. Scientists watched, measured, argued, and finally the startling fact was understood: those who hibernated did not perceptibly age. Only waking hours counted as life.

This meant—this meant—with a worldwide gasp it was realized that the sleepers' lives would be long. Even the children of a pair would take twice

as long as normal to grow up and then, presumably, would go on to live twice the usual span. And as for those from larger families—

For two days the McEvoy's were in the news again when it was realized that Earlene's brood might live, if all survived, for fifteen hundred years—each doing so two weeks at a time. Then a woman in Afghanistan was delivered of her thirtieth living child. People drew in their breaths, contemplating a baby who could live, in twelve-day installments, for three thousand years.

The world was upside down.

It's hard to remember how it went, the chaos in all our heads as the tired old problems were overwhelmed by new ones. Different problems everywhere, of course. In the hungry nations millions of young mouths closed peacefully, while a million tasks went undone because the child workers were sleeping. A dozen nasty little wars subsided across their hibernating armies. In the industrialized world the loss of millions of young consumers ushered in the great Sleepers' Depression that's with us still. The reality of zero pop growth came crunching down on us all.

And beyond the economic immediacies rose the great human questions. Who will care for the sleeping multitudes when their parents age and die? How do you educate kids in monthly or six-monthly increments? What will we do with teenagers who are going to be teenagers for centuries ahead? Sibling rivalry has taken on new and fearful dimensions as children realize that they sleep because their brothers and sisters wake; mercifully many can understand that their hibernation also means long life. Everything has subtly changed in myriad ways. Even fiction and soap operas have taken on a whole new content: can a girl who wakes only in summer find happiness with a boy who wakes through summers and autumns, too?

All over the world, groups of the young people who waken at the same time are forming, to be replaced when the next group wakes. Perhaps alternative cultures will develop on the same terrain. Or perhaps the visible futility of having additional children will do what no other arguments could. The number of people who believe that this is temporary gets less every year. It seems the "angel" has wrought well, having the superior technology you'd expect of angels.

Meanwhile a strange sense of quiet pervades our life. The decibels seem

to have fallen and the grass could be coming back. In every family, only one child at a time coos or squalls or begs for the car keys or mugs old ladies or competes for jobs or medical school. Only one young body in each home consumes food or firewood or gasoline or orthodontistry or plastic toys. And each child as it wakes gets the full attention of its adults.

A peaceful trip, while it lasts. Happy Harry Joel's thousand new homes went into receivership half-built, though of course nothing could be done about the kit foxes.

As for Jolyone Schram, who had started it all, she has had several good job offers, being an awake-all-the-time only child. She spends a lot of time just breathing and listening to the growing green. The terrible vision faded away. But she never told anybody what happened. Except one night in Point Lobos Park; when she saw I was harmless, she told me.

We were sitting by a dusty eucalyptus clump, looking out to where the rocks drown in the shimmering moonlit Pacific.

"The thing is," she said, frowning, "I was thinking. Take sixteen people, say. That's eight couples."

I saw she still believed in numbers.

"So they have children. But only one apiece is awake at a time. So that's like it's really just one child. And then say the eight children marry, that's four couples. And they have one waking child each, that's four. And they grow up and marry, that's two couples. So it comes down to really two children. I mean, it's half each time... of course that takes a long time."

"A long time," I agreed.

"But when the two children grow up and marry, they have one child. I mean, it *counts* as one child. And that's all."

"Looks that way."

She pushed back her hair, frowning harder in the moonlight. "Of course there's billions of people, not just sixteen, so it's a *really* long way off. And maybe something's wrong with my idea, I mean, they'll all wake up eventually. But... I wonder if the—the person I spoke to, I wonder if they thought of that?"

"No telling, is there?"

The sea sighed and glittered peacefully, making long shining curves around the rocks. There was no sign of any oil. There wasn't much litter on the grass, and the highway behind us was unusually empty.

Jolyone sat staring out with her chin on her knees. "Maybe whoever it was will come back and change things in time. Or maybe I should tell people and try to call it somehow."

"Would you know how?"

"No."

"There's a lot of time for somebody else to worry about all that," I offered.

We sat in silence for a while. Then she sighed and stretched out on the grass; a strange, private, gentle girl.

"Funny... I feel like I'd almost got run over. It feels good to—to *be*. Maybe the thing is, I should just go on and enjoy it."

"Why not?"

And that's exactly what she went on and did.