

Birthday Party

Keith Laumer

“Imagine it,” Jim Tate said. “Our boy, Roger, fifty years old today.”

“It doesn’t seem possible,” Millie Tate said. “All those years gone by, and they’ve let us see so little of him—our own son. It’s not fair, James.”

“It had to be that way, Millie. For a special person like Roger there had to be special education, special everything. He’s a very lucky boy, our Roger.”

“What about us, James? We’ve been left out. We’ve missed so much.”

“It’s a wonderful thing, Millie. Us—out of all the millions—to’ve been picked to be the first to have an immortal son.”

“Not immortal,” Mrs. Tate said quickly. “Roger is a perfectly normal boy. Just longer-lived, is all.”

“Certainly, certainly,” Tate soothed.

“But sometimes I miss—so many things.”

“Oh, well, yes, Roger had to give up certain ordinary things—but think what he gets in return, Millie: his life span expanded to fifty times normal. Fifty . . . times . . . normal.”

“Like his first day at school,” Mrs. Tate said. “I wanted to see him all dressed in his little suit, his hair combed—ready to begin his life.”

“Roger has his life ahead. Think of it: centuries and centuries of life.”

“And playing ball, and making snowmen, and being in the school play. I would have liked making his costume, and then sitting in the audience with the other parents . . .”

“Remember how excited we were when we heard?” Tate said. “I was so proud I nearly burst. Remember the newspaper stories?”

“Starting to college,” Millie said. “Graduating. Making his mark. A mother wants to see those things.” A tear ran down her withered cheek.

“I wonder,” Tate said, “what the world will be like five thousand years from now?”

"It makes me dizzy," Mrs. Tate said, "just thinking of it."

"Scientific progress," Tate said, "will have to slow down, at least as far as its effects on individuals. For a couple of centuries we've been exploding into one new scientific development after another. But progress can't keep going faster and faster; it's running out of gas."

"We wouldn't understand it," Mrs. Tate said. "We'd be lost there."

"Between 1900 and 1935, say," Tate went on, "the progress was all at the personal level. Consider the automobile: in 1900, a buggy with a one-cylinder hit-or-miss noisemaker up front. But a 1936 Cord, say, was as fast and as comfortable as any 1990 model. Not as efficient—ten miles to a gallon of raw gasoline—but as far as the driver was concerned, all the progress had been made. Since then, it's been tin-bending."

"The clothes, the buildings—even the way people think," Mrs. Tate said. "It will all be strange. Stranger than ancient Egypt."

"Airplanes," Tate said. "Telephones, movies, the phonograph, refrigerators, they had 'em all in the Thirties. Even the familiar brands: Grape-Nuts, Coca Cola, Kelloggs—why if you were to be magically set down on a street in the New York of 1935, you might not even notice the difference for half an hour. The same stores, the same traffic, the same clothing, more or less. I mean, no togas or G-strings."

"And to think . . ." Mrs. Tate clutched the handkerchief in her thin, old hand. "Our boy will be there."

Tate shook his head, not in negation but wonderingly.

"When is he coming?" Millie said. "I want to see him, James."

"Soon," Tate said.

"They said at one o'clock. What time is it now, James?"

Tate looked at his watch. "Five till." He patted Millie's hand. "Don't you worry, he'll be along."

"James—what will the women be like in the year 3000? Will he find a good wife? Will he be happy?"

"Certainly, Millie, you can count on it. Why, he'll have all the best of everything."

"Grandchildren," Millie said. "I wanted grandchildren. And—" She broke off, looking along the gravel path of the garden where she and her husband sat in the comfortable chairs that had been set out for them. A young woman in crisp whites came into view, pushing a wicker-topped carriage. She smiled, wheeling the buggy up beside Millie. Millie made a small sound and looked down at the blue-eyed, round-cheeked infant who gazed up at her. With hands that trembled, Millie picked up her child. A

neatly uniformed waitress had appeared with a cart on which was a small, round, pale-blue-iced cake with 50 lighted candles in a ring.

Roger smiled at Millie and blew a bubble.

“Ma-ma,” he said clearly.

“James,” Millie said. “Do you think . . . do you think he’ll remember us?”

Tate opened his mouth, then paused.

“Sure, Millie,” he said. “Sure he will.”