

"We'll be back to get you, Findokin, exactly one Earth year from now," said the warship captain just before the ship-to-planet transmitter beamed me down to the North American continent.

That was fifty-two years ago.

The World Council of Kaffar wanted to find out how the American poor were coping with the 1930s depression, so they sent me here to study them. Then, apparently, they forgot all about me. Either that, or they lost my genetic pattern and as a result have never been able to find me.

Well, I studied the poor. For a while, anyway. Not just because I'd been told to, but because I didn't have much of anything else to do. I'd been taught how to speak everyday English and had been inculcated with American customs and mores. Since most Kaffarians and most Americans look pretty much alike, there's never been a problem on that score. The same kind of organic particles that fell on Kaffar aeons and aeons ago fell on this planet too.

In the little town where I first took up residence I used to stand on one of the street corners with some of the guys who were unemployed and listen to them talk. The town was in Concord grape country and some of the guys worked part-time in a grape-processing plant. I got a part-time job there myself. There was also a canning factory and a furniture factory. The canning factory hummed during summer and fall, but the furniture factory had closed its doors some time ago, because most people couldn't afford to buy furniture any more.

On the street corner the guys would keep talking about when times would be good again and how then they'd be able to get good jobs. They would even stand there in the wintertime. In the summertime, though, we would sometimes sit in the village park. But the subject seldom changed.

One of the guys was named Jake Evans, and he and I got to be pretty good buddies. He was in his early thirties, but he looked older. Sometimes he made me think of a gaunt and leafless tree the wind had been trying its damndest to blow down without ever quite succeeding.

Jake's favorite pastime was hooting at politicians and other public dignitaries. He would often bum into Buffalo when a public figure gave a speech there and hoot and holler and ask embarrassing questions. I used to go with him sometimes, and after a while I began to hoot and holler and ask questions too. By that time I'd pretty much given up hope of ever being picked up and had resigned myself to the fact that the things that went on in America had as much to do with my welfare as they did with everybody else's.

After Roosevelt got in, things began to look better. The grape-processing plant raised its basic rate from twenty-five to thirty cents an hour. Some of the guys joined the CCC, reducing the group that gathered daily on the street corner to a skeleton crew. Eventually I managed to get a "full-time" job at the plant (my expense money was almost gone) and began working there four months a year instead of only one. It was now possible to draw unemployment insurance when you were laid off, and this worked out fine for me, although the insurance didn't begin to cover all the weeks I wasn't working. But this was no problem, because I always saved enough out of my wages to see me through.

Every so often word would get around that Ford was hiring. The company had built an assembly plant on the outskirts of Buffalo and the men working there made five dollars a day. Whenever word got around, we'd hightail it down there and wait at the gate. There would be a big crowd there, and all of us would stand and wait, even when it was biting cold. Sometimes a foreman would come out and grab one of the biggest guys and pull him inside. After a while it dawned on me that someday I might get grabbed, because I'm six feet tall. That was when I began to have second thoughts, and whenever a foreman would come out, I'd fade back into the crowd. Not long afterward I stopped going down there altogether. If they paid five dollars a day, it stood to reason they'd get five dollars worth of work out of you, and I didn't want a steady job that bad.

In fact, I didn't want a steady job at all.

That's one of the things being unemployed most of the time does to some people. It turns them into bums.

I was drafted early in 1942 and after a long spell in the states I was shipped to the South Pacific. But I was in the Quartermaster Corps and never saw a Jap till after the war when I wound up in Japan as part of the occupation force. I made sergeant before I was discharged, but I was still a bum.

Now, here in the eighties, we have a new depression. But it hasn't affected my way of life. Since the war, the only places I've ever worked have been canning factories, and even in hard times canning factories are always busy part of the year. When I'm not working, I hole up and draw unemployment insurance. But I have to keep moving around because Kaffarians have a much longer life span than Earth people, and I don't age. So what I do is stay in one place for about ten years; then, after I receive my last unemployment insurance check, I pack my suitcase and take off for a different part of the country, change my name, obtain a new social security number and get a job in another canning factory. Right now my name is Clark Cooper. I coined it by combining the first and last names of my favorite movie stars.

Although I've confined my career to working in canning factories, I've always had the urge, ever since the 30s, to become a fruit tramp. That's what migrant workers used to be called. But I've always held back because it might be difficult to draw unemployment insurance. Someday, though, I may say goodbye to canning factories and take to the road.

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The new depression has given me sort of a comfortable feeling. The town I'm living in now isn't far from the one near which I was beamed down and where I began my working career. But you don't see any of the unemployed standing on street corners and the only people you see in the park are old men who've retired. But I don't associate with them, even though I belong to their age group; instead, I associate with young people.

Compared to the 1930s depression, this one is a breeze, but on some people it's been pretty rough. It's been particularly rough on young people who want to get a job, but in lots of cases they don't really need to work because their parents are relatively rich.

This is the case with the girl I'm at present keeping company with. In college she majored in chemistry, but as yet she hasn't been able to find employment. But she has a new Chevette which her father gave her for Christmas, all the spending money she needs, and more clothes in her wardrobe than she knows what to do with. I keep pointing these things out to her when she starts griping about not being able to find a job, but she always says, "Yes, but it's not the same. I want to be on my own." Then she lights into me. Why don't I try to better myself? she asks. Why don't I try to work my way through college? It's a shame for someone as intelligent as I am, she says, to work half a year in a canning factory and then loaf the other half. Then she upbraids me for rolling my own cigarettes. If I can't afford to smoke civilized cigarettes, she says, I should at least have enough dignity to quit.

I have, of course, during my fifty-two years on Earth, kept company with many girls. I much prefer the pre-World War II girls. They had an outward naïveté which I found reassuring. But this eighties girl, whose name is Jennifer, fascinates me nevertheless. Maybe a paradox is at work and she appeals to me because of her *lack* of outward naïveté. Or maybe, out of perversity, I like her because she's spoiled and self-centered. But I think the real answer lies in the fact that she's strikingly attractive in a dark-haired arrogant way, and so stunningly built she makes the girls I remember from my youth on Kaffar seem like beanpoles.

On Sundays Jennifer and I go for long drives in her Chevette and take in the sights and eat out. Sometimes we go swimming Sunday afternoons: The lake is only about a mile from town. She is deeply tanned from lying in the sun every weekday afternoon, and she makes me look like a corpse. But corpse or not, I still look good in a pair of swimming trunks. I'm built like a decathlon champion, I haven't an ounce of fat on me, and I don't look a day over 28.

Turned around, the figures show my true terrestrial age: 82.

Some Sundays we have dinner at her house. Her parents put up with me, but it's clear they don't like the idea of her going with a common canning-factory worker. Her father is an automobile dealer. Chevrolets. He has managed to stay afloat during the depression by charging people twenty-five dollars an hour for repair work, and he's smart enough to keep good mechanics on his payroll so the people'll come back.

One Sunday late in July when I am having dinner there, he offers me a job. He is a big, square-shouldered man who used to play fullback on his college football team. Jennifer inherited his sharp features, only in her case they don't look sharp. At least not *yet*. "How would you like to sell cars?" he asks over his slice of lemon pie.

"Nobody's buying cars," I tell him.

"Nobody *was* buying cars. But the economy has picked up, as you'd know if you ever read the papers, and people are beginning to buy them like mad. So I need another salesman."

I give the matter some thought. I know that Jennifer is looking at me and I suspect that her finger is in the pie.

"You'd have to get a new suit of course," her father says, "and make a few other minor changes."

"What's the matter with the suit I'm wearing?" It's a gray pinstripe which I got from the Salvation Army just two weeks ago.

"It's too conservative. What you need, though, isn't necessarily a new suit, but a flashy blazer and maybe a pair of maroon slacks. You've got to be modern. People expect car salesmen to be. And your hair. You'd have to let it grow longer and get it styled."

I lay down my fork. "I won't do that."

Jennifer tugs on my arm. She's been after me about my hair for months. I can't see why. I part it neatly on the side and get it cut every three weeks. "My hair stays the way it is."

"Damn it, Jen, I can't take on a salesman who looks as though he just stepped out of a 1930s movie!"

"Well what difference does it make how he looks if he can sell cars?"

"Maybe he *can't* sell cars."

"Well at least let him try!"

Her father looks at me with resignation in his eyes. "What do you say, Clark?"

I can see he hopes I'll say no. And no is what I want to say. I know that if I quit the canning factory, I probably won't be able to get my job back. Worse yet, I haven't got enough time in this year to draw unemployment insurance, and if I should quit, I wouldn't be able to draw it anyway. But the really bad point is that if I take the job I'll have to work *twelve months a year!*

The moment is a critical one. If I say no, I may lose Jennifer; if I say yes, I'll be saying goodbye to a way of life that fits me like an old shoe. The presence of Jennifer beside me is the deciding factor. I just can't bring myself to let her down. "All right. I'll give it a whirl."

The next morning I tell my boss at the canning factory that I've found another job and that afternoon Jennifer helps me pick out a blazer and slacks. They set me back a bundle and make me look like a Christmas tree. Then she says, "Now we'll get you some new shoes."

"Shoes? I don't need shoes. I just got the ones I have on a month ago."

"They look like you've been hoeing corn in them."

The new shoes set me back \$49.95. If I'd bought the ones she wanted me to, I'd have been set back over seventy bucks.

"Well," she says the next morning when she picks me up at my rooming house to drive me to work, "you'll never make the ads in *Playboy*, but you do look pretty sharp at that."

When I see the list prices of the cars in her father's showroom and remember that there's a seven percent sales tax, I'm sure he must have been kidding when he said people are buying them like mad. Then he explains that most people don't lay down that much money, that usually they don't lay down any money at all but use their old car as a down payment and pay off the balance in monthly instalments over

a period of four years. The magic word is GMAC.

He gives me a little book which shows the list prices of used cars, tells Jonesy, his other salesman, to break me in, and retires to his office. Jonesy, a pleasant young man who looks even more like a Christmas tree than I do, tells me all he thinks I should know, not only about selling cars but about selling people the need to buy them, and after he gets through talking, I stand there primed, waiting for my first customer. Except for the hour I take for lunch, I stand there all day without a single potential car-buyer showing his face.

But the next day is different, and to my amazement I sell a Caprice.

I don't even have to pressure the customer. He just walks in and tells me he wants to buy the brown four-door that's parked in the showroom.

Afterward, when I figure out my commission, I find that I've earned as much in one day as I would have earned in a whole week at the canning factory!

That night, when Jennifer and I go out to dinner, she is effervescent with plans for our future. First of all, she says, I must buy a car of my own, and then we will go looking for a nice lot on which to build our new house. The weird part of it is, I go along with the whole deal, even though I am 82 and she is only 23!

But the age difference doesn't really count, because I only look a little older than she does, and she won't age any faster than I will. Kaffarians are long-lived, but they don't live forever, and I am well past the midpoint of my life.

We shall grow old together, Jennifer and I.

She begins teaching me how to drive, and not long afterward I buy a Caprice. It's a demonstrator and Jennifer's father gives me a good price on it and waives the down payment. Meanwhile I sell two more cars—a Celebrity and a Monte Carlo. I stop going to the barber and switch from Bull Durham to tailor-made cigarettes.

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Back in the hills we find a beautiful piece of property which affords a superb view of the lake. Jennifer talks her father into buying it for us, and a contractor, who is a good friend of his, tells us he will tear down the old farmhouse and the ramshackle barn which stand there now and build us a beautiful three-bedroom Cape Cod for \$109,500. I am appalled, and when I find out how much it will cost to pipe in gas, install a septic tank and dig a new well, I try to back out. Then Jennifer tells me that her dowry will more than cover the down payment and assures me that with both of us working, paying off the twenty-year mortgage will be a breeze. I tell the contractor to go ahead.

On a Sunday late in August her grandparents on her mother's side drive out from Rochester to meet me. Jennifer has told me all about them. Her grandfather is a retired Kodak worker and he and her grandmother spend every fall, winter, and spring in Florida playing golf and eating out at expensive restaurants, and during the summer they do the same thing up here.

He gives a little start when we are introduced and it's all I can do to keep from giving one too, because I know him. In the full-fed but sagging face I discern the shining countenance of one of my old World War II buddies. Barney Waite. We used to get drunk together in the Philippines on Paniqui whiskey. One time Barney got so drunk he blanked out for two days and couldn't remember a thing that had happened. He almost went blind. And here he stands before me, looking like his own grandfather!

"Do you know," he says, after we shake hands, "for a minute I thought I knew you. Used to be a guy looked just like you in a Quartermaster outfit in the Philippines during the war."

"It could hardly have been me," I tell him, "seeing that I'm only twenty-eight years old."

"Oh, I know it couldn't've been you. Not just because you're young, but because you're a car salesman. This guy I knew—you know what he wanted to be? He wanted to be a fruit tramp. Come on, let's go out in the kitchen and have a beer."

Since meeting him I've had sort of a funny feeling about Jennifer and me. It would have been bad enough if I'd been buddies with her father, to say nothing of her grandfather. What would she think if she knew that Barney and I used to get drunk together during World War II?

I go to get my hair styled. "It's not quite long enough," the beautician says, "but I'll fix it up as nice as I can. After it grows a few more inches, I'll have you looking like that handsome newscaster on Channel 3."

The first week in October the village holds a Festival of Grapes to celebrate the grape harvest. This is a yearly event and has become as important as a county fair.

On Friday night there is a grape-stomping contest in the park and Jennifer and I go to watch it. So does just about everybody else in town.

It's a warm night for October. A platform has been built in the park and upon it are three halved wine barrels half-full of grapes. The contestants are local celebrities who have been divided into groups of three. The object of the contest is to see which member of each group can stomp out the most juice in five minutes.

The first three contestants are the mayor, the contractor who's building our Cape Cod, and one of the local lawyers. They climb up on the platform and stand behind the halved barrels. They've rolled up their pantlegs and are wearing old shoes, except for the mayor, who's wearing a pair of cowboy boots. He is short but big-boned, and weighs at least two hundred pounds. The contractor is tall and lanky and is wearing a cowboy hat, and the lawyer has hairy legs and looks like a member of the Mafia who came to town to make book.

Wheeeeeeeep! goes the whistle, and into the barrels they jump and begin to stomp.

Uproarious laughter from the crowd.

Cameras are recording the event for posterity. One of them belongs to a photographer from the local newspaper. MAYOR, CONTRACTOR, LAWYER FROLIC IN GRAPES AT FESTIVAL. Grape juice flies up from the barrels, splattering the contestants' legs, and the mayor's boots go *splosh! splosh! splosh!*

Association whisks me back through time, and I find myself working in the grape-processing plant again. I am filling press blankets with a juicy mixture of pulp and skins and stems, folding the blankets one on top of the other till they will be piled high enough to be put under one of the presses. The mixture comes down from one of the kettles on the floor above and when it gushes out of the hose it splatters me and my helper, turning our faces and arms purple. My helper has three kids, and brings tomato sandwiches in his lunch because he can't afford to buy cold cuts. We are making thirty cents an hour.

I return to the present and look at the three clowns up on the platform. The mayor only gets four thousand a year, but this is cigarette money, for he is a plumber and charges eighteen dollars just to look at your toilet. The contractor is up in the six-figure bracket, and the lawyer charges fifty dollars just for a consultation.

Something goes *click!* in my mind, and I holler, "If you guys keep stomping so hard, your feet'll swell up and won't fit into your Florsheims!" Laughter from the crowd. "Shhhh!" Jennifer says.

"Hey, you with the hairy legs!" I shout. "If you stomped grapes like that in Italy, they'd deport you!"

"Clark!" Jennifer says.

I get off a good one. "Lookit the mayor! He's stomping out the vintage where the grapes of graft are stored!"

A well of silence has begun to grow around me and a cop is working his way toward me through the crowd. "Clark, if you don't stop it, I'll never speak to you again!" Jennifer says.

I am wound up now. "If anybody wants to build a house, stay away from that guy in the cowboy hat. He'll fleece you for all you've got!"

The cop has reached my side. He grabs my arm and starts marching me out of the crowd. Jennifer follows. I'm tempted to level the cop, but decide I hadn't better.

At the edge of the crowd Jennifer's father materializes from somewhere. He talks the cop into letting

me go, then he faces me. He is furious. "Those three people are good friends of mine," he says. "If you don't apologize to them for what you said, you're fired!" He turns and walks away.

When I drive Jennifer home, she doesn't say a single solitary word.

On Saturdays the showroom is open only half a day. I put my time in the next morning, but no one comes in to look at the new cars. Jennifer's father asks me if I returned to the park last night and apologized to the "three fine, outstanding citizens" I insulted. I shake my head. "I'll give you till Monday night," he says. "If you haven't apologized to them by then, don't bother to come to work Tuesday morning."

I don't go near Jennifer over the weekend and she doesn't come near my rooming house. I spend much of the time in deep thought. I know I've got a good deal. It's the best deal I've ever had since I arrived on Earth and I know I'll never get a better one. What harm will it do if I apologize to the three men I insulted? I won't be any the poorer for it, and my future will be secure.

Then I get to thinking about Jake Evans. *He* wouldn't have apologized. He never apologized to anyone. One time when he harassed a state senator, the senator said he wouldn't prefer charges if Jake would say he was sorry. Jake laughed in his face.

But Jake never needed to apologize to anyone because he never had anything to lose. For a long time it was that way with me too. But not any more. I've got the whole world on a string, and the Findokin who didn't care whether school kept or not is now a respectable middle-class citizen.

On Monday morning when these two guys come sauntering into the showroom, I know at once that they're from Kaffar. Sure, they're wearing corduroy slacks and plaid shirts and their hair is styled, and they *look* like Americans. But a Kaffarian can spot another Kaffarian a mile away.

I walk over to where they're looking at a brand new Impala. I pat the hood. "Beautiful job, isn't it," I say.

Both of them look at me then. They'd been pretending they hadn't seen me. The taller one has a long nose and the shorter one has a squarish face. The former has a genetic detector, disguised as a pen, in his shirt pocket. "We've come to take you home, Findokin," he says. "I'm Smidden. My partner here is Oggsvoten."

He handles everyday English even better than I could when I first arrived, although there's no need for him to speak it, since Jonesy's in the used-car lot and Jennifer's father hasn't shown up yet.

"Well it was nice of you to come for me," I say, "but you're fifty-one years late."

"That's not our fault," Oggsvoten says. "The ship that was supposed to come back for you got sent out on another mission and in the meantime somebody misfiled your dossier and the Council forgot all about you."

"Fortunately," Smidden says, "one of the file clerks found it when he was looking for somebody else's."

"I must have quite a bit of back pay coming."

"You'll have to take that up with the Council."

"Well it's not the back pay that concerns me so much. It's the fact that if I go back with you, I'll be way behind the times. It'll take me the rest of my life to catch up."

"You should be thankful you weren't forgotten about altogether," Oggsvoten says.

"Suppose I don't want to go back?"

Smidden says, "You know you got to whether you want to or not."

"Why should you want to stay here anyway?" Oggsvoten asks. "This is a shit planet."

"Maybe I like it here."

"Well maybe you do and maybe you don't, it don't make no difference," Smidden says. "So let's go. We were beamed down two miles outside of town. The ship's in geosynchronous orbit and the focus of the transmitter can't be changed, so grab one of those cars out there."

I lead the way to my Caprice. The two Kaffarians climb into the back seat and I get behind the wheel. They tell me which way to go. Once we're outside of town, they direct me to the hill that the

transmitter is focused on. I park the Caprice at the side of the highway and accompany them up the slope. Smidden pulls a tiny transceiver out of his pants pocket, contacts the ship and says we're ready to come on board.

While we're waiting for the beam I light a cigarette. Casually I point to the genetic detector in Smidden's shirt pocket. "You must have a bigger, more powerful one on the ship. You could never have located me from space with one that small."

Smidden pats the detector. "You sure *are* behind the times, Findokin. The way they make these things now, you don't need a big one, and this little baby's the only one we've got. We picked up your pattern with it the minute we emerged from the warp."

The transmitter beams us up to the ship. Warships used to be big, but this one isn't. The transmission room and the control room are one. "Let's go," Smidden says to the pilot in Kaffarian, and the pilot, who was manning the transmitter, seats himself in the cockpit.

Smidden turns to me. "Come on, Findokin, we'll take you to your cabin."

He leads the way aft. Oggsvoten follows close behind me. My cigarette has gone out. I drop it to the deck. Apparently the pilot is the only other member of the crew.

The warp gyro begins to hum beneath the deck. In a few minutes the gyrations will reach mass-transfer velocity.

My cabin turns out to be the brig. Smidden swings the lock-door open. Quickly I turn and level Oggsvoten with a short right which Jake Evans taught me how to throw; then I spin around, grab the detector out of Smidden's pocket and shove him into the brig. I slam the door shut and secure it.

I drop the detector to the deck and stamp on it.

A ship-to-planet transmitter has to be operated by someone outside the field-zone, so I can't beam myself back to Earth. But all warships carry at least one life raft in the event of an emergency. Or at least they used to. I step over Oggsvoten's prostrate body and start searching for the boat bay.

The hum of the gyro turns into a high-pitched whine. I have about one minute left.

The bay should be on the starboard side. There are only three lock-doors. I begin opening them. I am lucky: I find the bay on the second try. There is only one raft. I slam the lock-door shut, secure it, climb on board the raft and close the nacelle. The hull lock-door opens as I nose the craft toward it, and a moment later I am in space.

A second later the warship winks out of sight.

I land the raft in a gully. I don't believe anyone saw it come down. I am nowhere near the town where I live, but I know which way to go to reach it. I find a highway and begin hitchhiking in the opposite direction.

Evening finds me deep in apple country. I have enough money on me to buy my supper and a night's lodging in a motel. I am wide awake by dawn. I slip into my slacks and shirt and shoes, leave my blazer hanging in the closet, and step outside. I can smell the wine-sweet smell of apples. I strike off across the fields and presently I come to an orchard where men are already at work. I find the foreman. "Sure you can work—why not?" He gives me a ladder and a basket and I climb up among the branches of one of the trees. The leaves are still wet with morning dew. Drops of dew fall upon my face as I climb higher into the branches. It is as though a dryad is kissing me on the cheek. The last of dawn's pinkness fades from the sky and the sky becomes a benign blue. I eat the first apple I pick for breakfast. It is a McIntosh. Its wine-sweetness fills my mouth and courses through my body, and I feel one with the Earth. I breathe deeply of the fresh morning air. I know they will never go to the expense of sending another ship for me. When cold weather comes I'll go south and pick oranges. The first thing I'll do when I get my first pay is go to a barber and get a real haircut.