The Reunion at the Mile-High

by Frederik Pohl

IN THOSE LONG AND LONG-AGO DAYS—IT'S BEEN HALF A century!—we were not only young, we were mostly poor. We were all pretty skinny, too, though you wouldn't think that to look at us now. I know this, because I have a picture of the twelve of us that was taken right around 1939. I dug it out to loan it to my publisher's public relations people just the other day, and I looked at it for a long time before I put it in the overnight mail. We didn't took like much, all grinning into the camera with our hairless, hopeful teenage faces. If you'd been given a couple of chances to guess, you might have thought we were a dozen Western Union boys on our day off (remember Western Union boys?), or maybe the senior debating club at some big-city all-boy high school. We weren't any of those things, though. What we actually were was a club of red-hot science fiction fans, and we called ourselves the Futurians.

That old photograph didn't lie. It just didn't tell the whole truth. The camera couldn't capture the things that kept us together, because they were all inside our heads. For one thing, we were pretty smart—we knew it ourselves, and we were *very* willing to tell you so. For another, we were all deeply addicted readers of science fiction—we called it stf in those days, but that's a whole other story. We thought stf was a lot of fun (all those jazzy rocket ships and zippy death rays, and big-chested Martians and squat, sinister monsters from Jupiter—oh, *wow!)* That wasn't all of it, though. We also thought stf was *important.* We were absolutely sure that it provided the best view anyone could have of T*H*E F*U*T*U*R *E—by which we meant the kind of technologically dazzling, socially Utopian, and generally wonderful world which the rather frayed and frightening one we were stuck with living in might someday become. And, most of all, we were what our old Futurian buddy, Damon Knight, calls toads. We weren't very athletic. We didn't get along all that well with our peers—and not even as well as that with girls. And so we spent a lot of time driven in upon our own resources, which, mostly, meant reading. We all read a *lot.*

We even more or less agreed that we were toads. At least, we knew that girls didn't seem anxious to fall bedazzled by any of our charms. I'm not sure why. It wasn't that we were hopelessly ugly—well, not all of us, anyway. Dave Kyle and Dirk Wylie and Dick Wilson were tall and actually pretty good-looking. Even the snapshot shows that. I think our problem was partly that we were scared of girls (they might laugh at us—some of them no doubt had), and partly a matter of our internal priorities. We were more into talking than tennis, and we put books ahead of jitterbugging.

That was half a century ago. In other words, *history.* My secretary, who is also my chief research assistant when I need a specific fact from the library, tells me that 62.8 percent of the people alive today weren't even born then, which undoubtedly means that that ancient year of 1939 seems as remote and strange to most people now as the Spanish-American War did to me.

I would like to point out, though, that 1939 didn't seem all that hot to us, either, even while we were living it. It wasn't a fun time. We were the generation caught between Hoover and Hitler. We had the breadlines of the Great Depression to remember in our recent past, and the Nazi armies looming worrisomely in our probable future. When we looked out at the real world we lived in we didn't much like what we saw.

So, instead, we looked inside the stf magazines we adored, and then we looked inside our own heads. We read a lot, and we tried to write. Because the other thing about us, you see, was that we were all pretty hardworking and ambitious. Since we weren't thrilled by our lives, we tried to change them. We had our meetings—we'd get together, once a month or so, in somebody's basement or somebody else's living room, and we'd talk about this and that; and then we'd go out for an ice-cream soda; and then we'd gradually splinter apart. Some of us would go home—especially the ones who had to get up in the morning, like Isaac Asimov. (He worked at his parents' candy store, and the commuters started coming in for their morning papers at five-thirty A.M.) Most of the rest of us would just wander, in twos and

threes. I'd start out by walking Dirk and Johnny Michel to their subway station. But generally, by the time we got to it, we'd be in the middle of some really interesting discussion (did the General Motors Futurama at the World's Fair have the right idea about the World of Tomorrow, all twelve-lane superhighways and forty-story apartments? Were John Campbell's Arcot, Wade & Morey stories as good as Doc Smith's *Skylark?)—so* then they'd walk me back to my station...or around the block...or anywhere. Always talking. Talking mattered to us. Writing mattered, too, almost as much. We did a lot of it, on our battered second-hand portable typewriters, each on his own but always with the intention of showing what we had written to the others. *Words* mattered, and we particularly intended to make *our* words matter. Somehow. We didn't really know how, exactly, but when you think of it, I guess we succeeded. If we were toads, as Damon says, then sometime or other some wandering fairy princess must have come along and kissed us, and turned us into something different...or we wouldn't have been getting together at the top of the Mile-High Building for our Fiftieth Reunion, with reporters allover the place and our older, considerably more impressive faces staring out at the world on the Six O'Clock News.

You can't fly nonstop from Maui to New York, even on the sleeper, because they don't let flying boats operate over the continent. So I had to change planes in Los Angeles. Naturally I missed my connection, so when we finally landed at Idlewild I was late already.

The porter cut a taxi out of the snarl for me—it'swonderful what a five-dollar bill can do at an airport. As I got into the cab I stretched my neck to look toward the New York City skyline, and I could see the Mile-High Building poking far above everything else, looking like a long, long hunting horn sitting on its bell...if you can imagine a hunting horn with gaps along its length, held together (as it seemed at that distance) by nothing bigger than a couple of pencils. They say they need those wind gaps in the tower, because a hurricane just might push the whole thing over if they didn't allow spaces for the air to get through. Maybe so. I'm willing to believe that the gaps make the building safer, but they certainly aren't reassuring to look at.

Still, the Mile-High has managed to stay up for—let's see—it must be six or seven years now, and it's certainly an imposing sight. You can see it from anywhere within forty or fifty miles of New York. More than that. It's so immense that, even across most of Queens and part of Brooklyn, when I looked at it I was distinctly looking *up.* Then, when I got out of the cab at its base, it was more than big, it was scary. I couldn't help flinching a little. Whenever I look straight up at a tall building I get the feeling it's about to fall on me, and there's nothing taller than the Mile-High.

A limousine had pulled up behind me. The man who got out looked at me twice, and I looked at him thrice, and then we spoke simultaneously. "Hello, Fred," he said, and I said:

"Doc, how are you? It's been a long time."

It had been—twenty years, anyway. We were obviously going to the same place, so Doc Lowndes waited for me while I paid off the taxi, even though it was gently drizzling on Sixth Avenue. When I turned away from the taxi driver, after a little argument about the tip, Doc was doing what I had been doing, staring up at the top of the Mile-High. "Do you know what it looks like?" he asked. "It looks like the space gun from *Things to Come.* Remember?"

I remembered. *Things to Come* had been our cult movie, back in the 1930s; most of us had seen it at least a dozen times. *(My* own record was thirty-two.) "Yeah, *space,* II I said, grinning. "Rocket ships. People going to other planets. We'd believe almost anything in those days, wouldn't we?"

He gave me a considering look. "I still believe," he told me as we headed for the express elevators to the top.

The Mile-High Building isn't really a *Things to Come* kind of edifice. It's more like something from that even more ancient science fiction film, *Just Imagine*—silly futuristic spoof packed with autogyros and Mars rockets and young couples getting their babies out of vending machines. I first saw *Just Imagine* when I was ten years old. The heroine was a meltingly lovely teenager, just imported from Ireland to Hollywood, and that movie is why all my life I have been in love with Maureen O'Sullivan.

The Mile-High Building doesn't have any of those things, least of all (worse luck!) the still lovely Maureen, but it is definitely a skyscraper that puts even those old movie-makers to shame. To get to the top you go a measured mile straight up. Because the elevators are glass-walled, you get to see that whole incredible five thousand plus feet dropping away as you zoom upward, nearly a hundred miles an hour at peak velocity.

Doc swayed a little as we accelerated. "Pretty fast," he said. "*Real* fast," I agreed, and began telling him all about the building. It's hollow inside, like an ice-cream cone, and I knew quite a lot about it because when I was still living in New York City, before I could afford the place on Maui, I used to know a man named Mike Terranova. Mike was a visualizer working for an architect's office—at another point in his career he did the drawings for the science fiction comic strip I wrote for a while, but that's another story, too. Mike really was better at doing machines and buildings than at drawing people, which is probably why our strip only ran one year, but he made up for it in enthusiasm. He was a big fan of the Mile-High. "Look at the wind gaps in it," he told me once, as we walked down Central Park West and saw the big thing looming even thirty blocks away. "That's to let the wind through, to reduce the force so it shouldn't sway. Of course, they've also got the mass dampers on the two hundredth and three hundredth and four hundredth floors, so it doesn't sway much anyway."

"It's just another skyscraper, Mike," I told him, amused at his enthusiasm.

"It's a different *kind* of skyscraper! They figured out the best offices are the ones with an outside view, so they just didn't build any offices inside! It's all hollow—except for the bracing struts and cables, and for the three main floor—through sections, where you change elevators and they have all the shops and things. "

"It's brilliant," I said; and actually it was. And I was explaining all this to Doc, and all the time I was talking we were flashing past those vast central atria that are nearly a hundred stories high each, with their balconies, and flowers growing down from the railings, and lianas crisscrossing the central spaces; and Doc was looking at me with that patient expression New Yorkers reserve for out-of-towners.

But all he said was, "I know."

Then I was glad enough for the break when we walked across the hundredth-story level, between the soda fountains and the clothing shops, to the next bank of elevators, and then the next. Then you get out at the top, five thousand and change feet above the corner of Fifty-second Street and Sixth Avenue, and you have to take an escalator up another flight to the club itself.

I don't like standing still, so I took the escalator steps two at a time. Doc followed gamely. He was puffing a little as we reached the door the doorman was already holding open for us.

"Put on a little weight, I see," I told him. "Too much riding in limousines, I'd say. There must be big bucks in the poetry racket these days."

I guess my tone must have sounded needling, because he gave me a sidelong look. But he also gave me a straightforward reply, which was more than I deserved. "I just don't like taxi drivers," he said. "Believe me, I'm not getting rich from my royalties. Publishing poetry doesn't pay enough to keep a pig in slop. What pays my bills is readings. I do get a lot of college dates. "

I was rebuked. See, we Futurians had been pretty sharp-tongued kids, big on put-down jokes and getting laughs at each other's expense; just the thought of coming to the reunion seemed to get me back in that mood. I wasn't used to seeing Bob in his present gentler incarnation.

Then the white-haired woman took our coats, and even gentle Bob got a kind of smirk on his face as I handed over my trenchcoat. I knew what he was looking at, because I was wearing my usual at-home outfit: canary-yellow slacks, beach-boy shirt, and thongs. "I didn't have a chance to change," I said defensively.

"I was just thinking how nice it is for you folks that live in Hawaii," he told me seriously, and led the way into the big reception room where the party had already started.

There had certainly been changes. It wasn't like the old days. Maybe it was because they were talking about making Bob poet laureate for the United States. Or maybe it was just the difference

between twenty and seventy. We didn't have to explain how special we were now, because the whole world was full of people willing to explain that to us.

There were at least a hundred people in the room, hanging around the waiters with the champagne bottles and studying the old pictures on the wall. It was easy to see which were the real Futurians: they were the ones with the bald spots or the white beards. The others were publicity people and media people. There were many more of them than of us, and their average age was right under thirty.

Right in the middle was Dr. Isaac Asimov, sparring good-naturedly with Cyril Kornbluth. They were the center of the biggest knot, because they were the really famous ones. General Kyle was there—in uniform, though he was long retired by now—telling a young woman with a camera how he got those ribbons at the battle of Pusan. Jack Robinson was standing in the background, listening to him—no cameras pointed at Jack, because the reporters didn't have much interest in schoolteachers, even when that one had been one of Harvard's most distinguished professors emeritus. I saw Jack Gillespie, with a gorgeous blonde six inches taller than he was on his arm—she was the star of one of his plays—and Hannes Bok, looking older and more content than he used to, drinking Coca-Cola and munching on one of the open-faced sandwiches. There wasn't any doubt they were pretty well known by any normal standards. Jack had already won a Pulitzer, and Hannes's early black-and-whites were going for three thousand dollars apiece in the galleries on Fifty-seventh Street. But there's a difference between say-didn't-I-see-you-once-on-TV and *famous.* The media people knew which ones to point their cameras at. Cyril didn't have one Pulitzer, he had three of them, and the word was he'd have had the Nobel Prize if only he'd had the sense to be born a Bolivian or a Greek. And as to Isaac, of course—well, Isaac was *Isaac.* Adviser to Presidents, confidant of the mighty, celebrated steady guest of the Jack Paar show and star of a hundred television commercials. He wasn't just *kind* of famous. He was the one of us who couldn't cross a city street without being recognized, because he was known by features to more people than any senator, governor, or cardinal of the Church. He even did television commercials. I'd seen him in Hawaii, touting the Pan American Clipper flights to Australia...and he didn't even *fly.*

They'd blown up that old photograph twelve feet long, and Damon Knight was staring mournfully up at it when Doc and I came over to shake hands. "We were such kids," he said. True enough. We'd ranged from sixteen—that was Cyril—to Don Wollheim, the old man of the bunch: why, then he had been at least twenty-three or twenty-four.

So much has been written about the Futurians these days that sometimes I'm not sure myself what's true, and what's just press-agent puffery. The newspaper stories make us sound very special. Well, we certainly thought we were, but I doubt that many of our relatives shared our opinion. Isaac worked in his parents' candy store, Johnny Michel helped his father silk-screen signs for Woolworth's Five and Ten, Dirk Wylie pumped gas at a filling station in Queens, Dick Wilson shoved trolleys of women's dresses around the garment district on Seventh Avenue. Most of the rest of us didn't have real jobs at all. Remember, it was the tail end of the Great Depression. I know that for myself I considered I was lucky, now and then, to get work as a restaurant busboy or messenger for an insurance company.

A young woman came over to us. She was reading from a guest list, and when she looked at me she wonderfully got my name right. "I'm from *Saturday Evening Post Video,* " she explained. "You were one of the original Futurians, weren't you?"

"We all were. Well, Doc and I were. Damon came along later."

"And so you knew Dr. Asimov and Mr. Kornbluth from the very beginning?"

I sighed; I knew from experience just how the interview was going to go. It was not for my own minor-league fame that the woman wanted to talk to me, it was for a reminiscence about the superstars. So I told her three or four of the dozen stories I kept on tap for such purposes. I told her how Isaac lived at one end of Prospect Park, in Brooklyn, and I lived at the other. How the Futurians would have a meeting, any kind of a meeting, and then hate to break it up, and so we'd just walk around the empty streets all night long, talking, sometimes singing—Jack and I, before he finished his first play; Doc and I, reciting poetry, singing all the numbers out of our bottomless repertory of the popular songs of the day;

Cyril and I, trying to trick each other with our show-off game of "Impossible Questions."

"'Impossible Questions,' " she repeated.

"That was a sort of a quiz game we played," I explained. "We invented it. It was a *hard* one. The questions were intended to be about things most people wouldn't know. Like, what's the rhyme scheme of a chant royal? Or what's the color of air?"

"You mean blue, like the sky?"

I grinned at her. "You just lost a round. Air doesn't have any color at all. It just *looks* blue, because of what they call Rayleigh scattering. But that's all right; these were *impossible* questions, and if anyone ever got the right answer to anyone of them he won and the game was over."

"So you and Dr. Asimov used to play this game—"

"No, no. *Cyril* and I played it. The only way Isaac came into it was sometimes we'd go over to see him. Early in the morning, when we'd been up all night; we'd start off across the park around sunrise, and we'd stop to climb a few trees—and Cyril would give the mating call of the plover-tailed teal, but we never had a teal respond to it—and along about the time Isaac's parents' candy store opened for business we'd drop in and his mother would give us each a free malted milk."

"A free malted milk," the woman repeated, beaming. It was just the kind of human-interest thing she'd been looking for. She tarried for one more question. " Did you know Dr. Asimov when he wrote his famous letter to President Franklin Roosevelt, that started the Pasadena Project?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but Doc Lowndes got in there ahead of me. "Oh, damn it, woman," he exploded. "*Isaac* didn't write that letter. Alexis Carrel did. Isaac came in much later."

The woman looked at her notes, then back at us. Her look wasn't surprised. Mostly it was—what's the word I want? Yes: pitying. She looked at us as though she were sorry for us. "Oh, I don't think so," she said, politely enough. "I have it all here."

"You have it wrong," Doc told her, and began to try to set her straight.

I wouldn't have bothered, though the facts were simple enough. Albert Einstein had written to the President claiming that Hitler's people were on the verge of inventing what he called "an atomic bomb," and he wanted FDR to start a project so the U.S.A. could build one first. Dr. Alexis Carrel heard about it. He was a biochemist and he didn't want to see America wasting its time on some atomic-power will-o'-the-wisp. So he persuaded his friend Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh to take a quite different letter to President Roosevelt.

It wasn't that easy for Lindbergh, because there was a political problem. Lindbergh was certainly a famous man. He was the celebrated Lone Eagle, the man who had flown the Atlantic in nineteen twenty-something all by himself, first man ever to do it. But a decade and a bit later things had changed for Lindbergh. He had unfortunately got a reputation for being soft on the Nazis, and besides he was deeply involved in some right-wing Republican organizations—the America First Committee, the Liberty League, things like that—which had as their principal objective in life leaving Hitler alone and kicking that satanic Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt out of the White House.

All the same, Lindbergh had a lot of powerful friends. It took two months of pulling hard on a lot of strings to arrange it, but he finally got an appointment for five minutes of the President's time on a slow Thursday morning in Warm Springs, Georgia. And the President actually read Carrel's letter.

Roosevelt wasn't a scientist and didn't even have any scientists near him—scientists weren't a big deal, back in the thirties. So FDR didn't really know the difference between a fissioning atomic nucleus and a disease organism, except that he could see that it was cheaper to culture germs in Petri dishes than to build billion-dollar factories to make this funny-sounding, what-do-you-call-it, nuclear explosive stuff, plutonium. And FDR was a little sensitive about starting any new big-spending projects for a while. So Einstein was out, and Carrel was in.

By the time Isaac got drafted and assigned to the secret research facility it was called the Pasadena Project; but by the time Doc got to that point the *Saturday Evening Post* woman was beginning to fidget. "That's very interesting, Mr. Lowndes?" she said, glancing at her notes. "But I think my editors

would want me to get this sort of thing from Dr. Asimov himself. Excuse me," she finished, already turning away, with the stars of hero worship beginning to shine in her eyes.

Doc looked at me ruefully. "Reporters," he said.

I nodded. Then I couldn't resist the temptation any longer. "Let's listen to what he does tell her," I suggested, and we trailed after her.

It wasn't easy to get near Isaac. Apart from the reporters, there were all the public relations staffs of our various publishers and institutes—Don Wollheim 's own publishing company, Cyril's publishers, Bob Lowndes's, *The New York Times*, because Damon was the editor of their *Book Review*. Even my own publisher had chipped in, as well as the galleries that sold Hannes Bok's paintings and Johnny Michel's weird silk screens of tomato cans and movie stars' faces. But it was the U.S. Information Agency that produced most of the muscle, because Isaac was their boy. What was surrounding Isaac was a *mob*. The reporter was a tough lady, though. An elbow here, a side-slither there, and she was in the front row with her hand up. "Dr. Asimov? Weren't you the one who wrote the letter to President Roosevelt that started the Pasadena Project?"

"Good lord, no!" Isaac said, "No, it was a famous biochemist of the time, Dr. Alexis Carrel. He was responding to a letter Albert Einstein had written, and—What is it?"

The man from the *Daily News* had his hand up. "Could you spell that, please, Dr. Asimov?"

"E-I-N-S-T-E-I-N. He was a physicist, very well known at the time. Anyway, the President accepted Dr. Carrel's proposal and they started the Pasadena Project. I happened to be drafted into it, as a very young biochemist, just out of school."

"But you got to be pretty important," the woman said loyally. Isaac shrugged. Someone from another videopaper asked him to say more about his experiences, and Isaac, giving us all a humorously apologetic look, did as requested.

"Well," he said, "I don't want to dwell on the weapons systems. Everybody knows that it was our typhus bomb that made the Japanese surrender, of course. But it was the peacetime uses that I think are really important. Look around at my old friends here." He swept a generous arm around the dais, including us all. "If it hadn't been for the Pasadena Project some of us wouldn't be here now—do you have any *idea* how much medicine advanced as a result of what we learned? Antibiotics in 1944, antivirals in 1948, the cancer cure in 1950, the cholesterol antagonist in 1953?"

A California woman got in: "Are you sure the President made the right decision? There are some people who still think that atomic power is a real possibility."

"Ah, you're talking about old Eddy Teller." Isaac grinned. "He's all right. It's just that he's hipped on this one subject. It's really too bad. He could have done important work, I think, if he'd gone in for real science in 1940, instead of fooling around with all that nuclear stuff."

There wasn't any question that Isaac was the superstar, with Cyril getting at least serious second-banana attention, but it wasn't all the superstars. Quite. Each one of the rest of us got a couple of minutes before the cameras, saying how much each of us had influenced each other and how happy we all were to be seeing each other again. I was pretty sure that most of us would wind up as faces on the cutting-room floor, but what we said, funnily enough, was all pretty true.

And then it was over. People began to leave.

I saw Isaac coming out of the men's room as I was looking for the woman with my coat. He paused at the window, gazing out at the darkling sky. A big TWA eight-engined plane was coming in, nonstop, probably from someplace like Havana. It was heading toward Idlewild, hardly higher than we were, as I tapped him on the shoulder.

"I didn't know celebrities went to the toilet," I told him.

He looked at me tolerantly. "Matter of fact, I was just calling Janet," he said. "Anyway, how are things going with you, Fred? You've been publishing a lot of books. How many, exactly?"

I gave him an honest answer. "I don't exactly know. I used to keep a list. I'd write the name and date and publisher for each new book on the wall of my office—but then my wife painted over the wall

and I lost my list."

"Approximately how many?"

"Over a hundred, anyway. Depends what you count. The novels, the short-story collections, the nonfiction books"

"Over a hundred," he said. "And some of them have been dramatized, and book-clubbed, and translated into foreign languages?" He pursed his lips and thought for a moment. "I guess you're happy about the way your life has gone?"

"Well, sure," I said. "Why wouldn't I be?" And then I gave him another look, because there was something about his tone that startled me. "What are you saying, Eye? Aren't *you?"*

"Of course I am!" he said quickly. "Only—well, to tell you the truth, there's just one thing. Every once in a while I find myself thinking that if things had gone a different way, I might've been a pretty successful writer."