

Solitaire

by Kathleen Ann Goonan

Stumblebum was not his real name, but Norman had taken early to playing lots of solitaire and not paying much attention to his surroundings or anything else except cards. Early means seven years old and understandably this warped his thinking. When other kids were playing Cowboys and Indians, a popular pursuit in 1956, SB was making sure his playing surface was clean and dry so as not to gum up the cards, and took care to avoid windy places which meant that he was usually inside with the windows shut.

As for his name, SB's father could be cruel at times or at least rather short-tempered, and it was he who took to yelling "You idiotic card-sharp stumblebum, I told you to bring me that jar of screws from down in the basement ten minutes ago now where is it? I'll show you to waste your time with those stupid cards" loud enough for the neighbors to hear, in the summer, anyway. The other kids, by rights SB's natural playmates, heard this epithet wafting out the windows often enough and it struck them as just right. The Stumble, or SB, as it finally boiled down to, did have a penchant for clumsiness, and once had committed the atrocity of yelling, panicked, for some kid's dad to get him down out of a tree. His real name was Norman and he told them for awhile, then gave up.

SB's mother was not your normal fifties Lassie type mom, and though she did wear an apron when she cooked it was usually spattered with last week's dinner. She was sharp-faced with stringy blonde hair she kept in a pony tail at the nape of her neck, smoked all the time, and complained that SB (even she took to calling him that) had tied her down--right to his face--so often that after awhile it ceased to bother him. He wasn't sure why it was supposed to bother him, actually, but he was pretty certain that it was meant to.

Their house was a big white house. It sat on a corner lot, and had peeling paint and a dirt-packed yard where the grass grew in raggedy patches which his dad complained bitterly about having to mow with the metal push mower that went clip clip clip on Saturday mornings. SB had friends, sort of, for awhile, two neighbor boys. They were brothers, one his age the other a year younger, both with limpid brown eyes and freckles. But then a doctor did something wrong--so SB's mom told him--and the big brother died suddenly and the family moved away real fast. Jim, the dead one, had been all right. At least he'd play war, or fish. Boring, but at least you had cards in your hand.

SB kind of liked his new name, eventually, so that in school even the teachers called him that except Miss Gaymond, his second grade teacher. She called him Norman which always made everyone snicker until she made them write sentences on the board and then they stopped. As for the other things the kids did, SB did not mind baseball too much--not to play, of course, since he was taunted for his clumsy throws and never picked till last to be on a team. But he liked it when on Saturday afternoons his dad sat opening one can of Hamm's after another with an opener he kept next to him on the tv table, and watched the tiny men shift places like cards in a solitaire game on the small black and white Crosley which sat in a corner of the living room. SB absorbed the rules; he liked rules, and this was one of the main reasons he lacked interest in playing with the other kids--somebody was always changing the rules. He had no objection to sitting down and making up the rules to a game such as Indians could die twice but no more or that when you ran out of lovely sharp-sounding acrid-smelling caps which unreeled through your gun in a papery red tape you changed from a Cowboy to an Indian. But you just couldn't depend on the other kids to stick to those rules. The players on the gray diamond watching, waiting, while the crowd sat, then stood and roared, reminded him of cards. It could be anyone there on third but when they were there they took on special

characteristics depending on how the other parts of the game were going. There was chance like when he shuffled the cards and his uncle had taught him some pretty fancy shuffles, a bridge where he bent the cards in an arc which forced them to cascade together and so on, but once that was over it was up to his wits to see every opening, and up to his judgment to decide whether or not to move a card or wait for a better one and up to the sharpness of his memory to recall the position of a formerly turned up card.

You might have thought SB was lonely but he was not, particularly. He had a large blue Huffy bike which his dad had bought so big that he could barely reach the pedals even with the seat down as low as it would go. One nice thing he always remembered about the old man was that he told SB that training wheels were for sissies, even though everyone else in the neighborhood had them and SB had pleaded for them, thinking that it was impossible to learn to ride without them. SB learned to ride his bike in just a day, his dad said he'd damned well better because the method was that his dad would run along behind the bike holding it up by the rear fender. SB was forbidden to look back to see if he was being held onto, and when he did of course he crashed, which cured him of looking back. The first time he got to the end of the block he got confused and crashed anyway, scraping his arm pretty bad. He looked back and there was his dad standing way back at the other end of the block, and SB realized that he could ride his bike just fine. His dad was good in those ways, and seemed to come in for his share of the blame for tying mom down so SB felt a kind of kinship with him.

But mostly SB studied his solitaire game. He learned many new and esoteric games from various sources including a book from the library, where his teacher took them all once a week in second grade. At that time he thought "The Cat In The Hat" was what fiction was all about, and was amazed that other people could stand reading such junk. It bored him silly. His aunt Ethyl brought him a whole slew of books like that one day, and it frightened him so to see the awful stack of them he pried open the screen of his bedroom window and shoved them out, one after another. As luck would have it his mom and Ethyl were sitting on the porch smoking and saw the books fly past and he got a spanking and his cards taken away from him. He didn't mind, though, because hidden in his closet he had four Bee decks he'd bought from Al's corner grocery by trading in pop bottles. He slit open a new pack and laid out a rather successful game of eight-up, pleased to win because though eight-up was an easier game than the one he usually played, he usually lost because he didn't know what to expect.

One day, about midday on a summer's morning, when most of the kids were building a tree fort, SB's mom threw him out of the house, so he jumped on his Huffy and sped away.

He rode down the smooth mica-sparkled sidewalk for two blocks, swerving onto the street down driveways to avoid curbs, and cut a sharp left a few blocks past the ballfield. His street had houses on one side, and across from his house was the ballfield, with damp concrete steps leading down to it through the woods, and then past the ballfield, facing the houses for a mile or so, were just woods and fields, mysterious and free.

This was a dirt road where he was forbidden to go by his mother, but the only reason he was out on his bike, a deck of Bee cards bouncing around in the basket in front of the handlebars, was that his mom had yelled at him and told him to go outside and get some fresh air. Besides, she had messed up a particularly promising game and acted more than a little nuts. Somehow this sequence of events combined in his mind to mean that no matter what he did it would be all right just as long as he stayed outside.

He had been down this road a little ways once and turned back, because the sky had been gray and the wind had been chill and the branches black and this had all scared him somewhat. The other boys said that the Bogeyman of Mill Creek lived down there.

But on the other hand he had once walked right up the cracked and slanted walk of the old lady that everyone called a witch, through her many twining cats, while she called, "Come on up here, little boy, I know your mother," through the screen door in her old voice which did in fact sound haunted and witchlike. He was positive Ricky and Denny had watched like chickens from behind the fence, and she gave him milk and cookies and he had not died. His mother had not called her a witch, he recalled, as he savored the plain vanilla cookies, but an old crackpot. And a sweetie.

So though he had turned back from the prospect of the bogeyman once, he had braved Mystery and found it delightful. The memory kept him bouncing farther down the road than he had ever been before, standing up on his pedals when approaching particularly big ruts. Mill Creek came in and joined the side of the road, wide and green with big overhanging white scaly sycamores. Lots of blue flowers were scattered through the verge of woods along the creek, and to his left was a cornfield with corn taller than he was. Even if he didn't find the bogeyman--he realized that he had begun to actively look for him--he liked it here. He decided to come back often. Maybe he'd find a good place to swim. He found himself liking his mother more for kicking him out.

He backpedaled fast, braking, when he came upon a clearing.

The cornfield angled sharp left, and the creek bent in a gentler curve along one side of it, so that the deep blue sky was freed of trees and wide. SB caught his breath.

In the middle of the clearing was an unpainted gray shack. This was shocking to SB, as he had never suspected that so much as a toolshed would be back here. He was sure his dad would call it a shack. On the ramshackle porch was an empty rocking chair. The wind caught it. The chair rocked while the corn and the sycamore leaves rustled and then hushed. SB did not like this.

SB was so sure that the bogeyman was in that chair, only invisible, that his throat got narrow and he gasped for breath. He yanked his bike around and just about died when blocking the road was a man, and the first thing SB noticed was a tall misshapen gray hat which he found menacing. The man wore overalls and over them an old brown suit jacket and no shirt.

"What're--you--doing here?" The man asked, his speech oddly slow as if he didn't use it much. Beneath gray hair his face was unaccountably odd. Paralyzed, SB watched as the man came over and picked the deck of cards out of his basket. He saw that what made the man's face look so strange and so like a bogeyman's was that he had no eyebrows. The man looked at SB and then at the cards.

He did not say anything else. Instead, he held onto the cards and crashed off into the cornfield.

SB was astonished, but did not chase after the man. The man was a lot bigger and stronger than him and it occurred to SB that if the man wanted to he could seriously damage him. So he pumped hard down the bumpy road, not breathing easy until he got back to the street. He looked both ways. It all looked normal. What was behind him, he felt, was something not normal.

He thought about it all week. But he did not seriously consider going back. In fact he never would have gone back except that one day a week later he was riding his bike down the road looking for discarded pop bottles as he was down to his last deck of cards when a boy ran out of the dirt road, which was tucked into the street edge like no other egress in the neighborhood, and stood there wordlessly watching SB come closer and then SB noticed that he had that deck of cards in his hand.

"Show me," he said, when SB stopped, determined to get his cards back.

"Show you what?" SB asked.

"What you do with these," the boy said, and SB saw that he had no eyebrows either.

SB could see down the road where washes of summer sunlight brightened the rutted dirt road and glimpses of Mill Creek through the trees. Past the jumble of brushy woods the cornfields began on the left, strange in a way they had not seemed just a minute ago, as if something about the world had changed.

The kid's eyes looked flat; they were brown and plain-looking, and the fact that he had no eyebrows made him look very weird. SB kind of liked that.

SB knew that he should go back home, back to the safe plain streets (even though a witch lived on one of them) but he also knew that he wouldn't. He thought it would be nice to have somebody to play with for a change; this boy was interested in cards and no other kid he knew was. He could teach him to play solitaire, of course, but then maybe he could play Hearts, and his uncle had taught him to play poker but the trouble was he didn't come often enough and then he usually drank lots of beer and SB's mom ended up throwing him out. His dad was always too busy to play.

"What's your name?" SB asked.

He didn't say anything so then SB asked, "Well, how old are you? Eight?" He looked the same age; that would be neat.

He stared at SB for a minute then said, softly, "Yes."

"Where's your dad?"

The kid stared at him again and SB thought, they're the same. This is the dad. He just made himself little.

That's crazy, SB thought immediately, you really are nuts like everybody says.

"Around," said the boy, and shrugged. "Come on. He won't bother us."

SB thought yeah, then forgot about the dad. He was kind of surprised at how beautiful it was here in the woods. He hadn't ever paid much attention to things like the rustle of wind through the old gnarled trees and through the cornfield and even he could almost swear as he looked into the weird eyes of this kid the rush of wind through his own hair. The forest was so green at the bend of the road where the cornfield changed from being a cornfield to some sort of infinite thing like the infinite number of games in a deck of cards. He couldn't really put his finger on it but it was just that there was row after row of the very same plant with the very same young ears of corn, must be a million of them, filling themselves with the light of the sun, eating dirt . . .

The kid blinked and SB took a shuddering breath.

"We have to go inside," SB said, with fear and excitement in his stomach, because he realized that he'd have to walk across that rocking-chair porch into a place that might not have a back door.

But when they got to the shack SB saw that it did have a back door, and a bedroom door too, which was ajar. The kid went around and pulled the kitchen window almost closed (if you could call a room with only a deep porcelain sink a kitchen) after SB laid the cards out on a table with a green marbled pattern on it and they blew off the table in a gust of wind and both of them laughed. After that SB felt better. He yanked down another window; paint from the crooked sash flaked off on his hands and he had to put all his weight on the stubborn frame. Then he crossed the wavy, bare floor of wide weathered planks that looked like they'd been there forever and closed the last window as best he could.

A ragged couch sagged on one side of the room. He saw an iron bed through the bedroom door, and next to it used-looking comic books were scattered all over the floor. It looked like a great place to live. Kind of like a fort of your own. He felt jealous.

"There," he said. Then he wondered how to teach someone else to do anything--play this game, anything. He shrugged.

"I guess the best thing to do is just do it," he said.

He thought that seven across would be the easiest game to teach. So he dealt a row of seven cards across the top of the table, standing next to it and the kid was standing at his left elbow just staring at the cards. SB couldn't believe how important this made him feel. This was something most people made fun of him for doing all the time.

"First one on the . . . left . . . (he still had a hard time telling right from left) faces up. The rest are down."

The kid nodded, his face so pale that SB thought he never got out. He smelled. Not bad, but sweet, kind of like an apple pie.

"Next row," SB said, "you leave the first one like it is and put the second one face up. Then all the rest are down."

The boy nodded again.

"And the next row," he said, "you skip the two already face up and turn the third one up. The rest are face down."

Another grave nod.

"Well," said SB, feeling exactly like a teacher, "what do you think comes next?"

He was joking. But he relinquished the cards when the kid held out his hand, and watched him lay out the rest of the cards, correctly. He was left with a handful, and looked at SB questioningly.

"Right," said SB, sure that none of the other kids he knew could have figured that out. He liked this guy. "Now watch. There's an ace. An ace is like a one in this game. It goes up top. And what you want to do is put all the hearts,

and spades, and diamonds, and clubs--see those little pictures--in order up at the top. If you can put them all up there you win. Now we get to turn over the card that was under that ace. See how all the cards are red or black? It's black on red and red on black except when you pile them up on the aces. You want to move the cards around so you can turn up the cards that are underneath. If you have this red eight, see, you can move this black seven. That's a black jack. It can go on this red queen. That's all you can do now. So in this game you deal out three cards--one, two, three. Can't do nothin. Deal again. One, two, three. There. A black two."

SB paused. How could he tell him about all the things that could possibly happen, about how to think about them and decide what to do?

"You could put that black two on this red three. That's the easy move. The obvious move." SB swaggered a bit as he imitated his uncle's way of talking. "But you got the ace of hearts up there and if you turn up the two of hearts anytime soon you could move that three up top which would be good because then you could see what's underneath. If you put the two of spades on the three you could block that up because the only other places you could move it is another red three, and here's only one left in the deck, and I don't know where it is, or onto the ace of spades and I'm not sure where it is right now. So if you skip this move you might come up with a better one a few deals down the road."

He studied the layout while SB watched.

"So what you gonna do?" SB asked, after a minute.

"What . . . would . . .you . . . do?" he asked, his voice once more slow and strange, like the way the boy talked who SB's mother said he had to be nice to because he wasn't as lucky as SB.

"Skip it," SB said. "Wait."

They were rewarded a few deals later.

The afternoon passed in what SB always remembered later as a deep sweet smell. He didn't know if it came from his new companion, from the cornfield, from the flowers in the woods, or even shouting from the sky, but there was such a beautiful, timeless perfection to it all that SB didn't realize how much time had passed till the ramshackle house was growing dim. He looked around and realized with a slight shock that there were no electric lights that he could see.

"Hey!" he said. "It's getting late. My mom will be mad. She rings this bell at dinnertime and if I don't come . . . well, gotta go."

He started to scrape up the cards. He couldn't believe he'd stood at this table since just after lunch. The kid touched his arm. "Leave . . . them," he pleaded.

SB paused. Then he shrugged. The kid had really learned fast. "Well," he said, "I will, for about ten pop bottles, because I'm down to my last deck. Maybe I'll come back tomorrow afternoon, all right? You can look for the pop bottles before then." He looked blank but nodded after SB looked at him for a minute.

"What's your name anyway?" asked SB, as he rushed out onto the porch.

He didn't hear the answer, he was in such a hurry. "See ya tomorrow," he yelled as he pedaled furiously down the darkening road, half scared that he'd

see the kid's hulking dad on the way. He missed dinner and got a blistering scolding from his mom, and no food because she was mad and slamming things around, but later his dad brought a bowl of soggy Frosted Flakes up to his room, which he thought was better than pot roast anyway.

SB couldn't wait to see the kid the next day. He woke up like a flash, one minute asleep and the next bounding out of bed. He ate more Frosted Flakes for breakfast, because he was starving, but left his bowl and spoon on the table with a few flakes too soggy to eat floating in the milk which would make mom mad, if she was up she'd complain that he'd wasted milk and make him drink it, then pedaled off as fast as he could. He'd shoved his last pack of cards in his pocket, the crinkly cellophane unopened. Who knows, the kid, whatever his name was, might of lost a card overnight. There were jokers, of course, but he was afraid of introducing the concept of a joker so soon. It was like saying an orange was an apple, which he knew was wrong, but they were both fruit, which made Miss Gaymond mad if he said anything like that. But it was true. If you added one and one it was like you were always assuming that they were the same one and one, which was not a bad idea, really . . . it made everything more neat than it really was, like cards and baseball.

He bounced off the sidewalk onto the dirt road, standing on the pedals to absorb the shock as he rounded the first bend. He backpedaled hard, suddenly, and braked in a cloud of dust, afraid that he might meet Big Dad on his way to work or something.

The air was clear and still cool and damp settled on his arms because the sun had just risen.

He couldn't remember ever having gone out in the woods this early before. The huge green trees all around him, the rustle of the cornfield in the dawn breeze, the ripple of the creek in slight sunlight, flashed through him as if they were all one thing and then there the kid was, walking toward him on the road.

He caught his breath. Then he yelled, "What's your name? I didn't hear it yesterday." He forgot about the pop bottles.

"Jeff," said the kid, after a few seconds, and then said, "Come . . . on," and turned and started to run down the path in front of SB. "Come on," he yelled, a little farther down the road where it started to curve, and he grinned and SB decided that Jeff was all right, he was great, he was fun, more fun than anyone he'd ever met before. And he jumped on his bike and followed, jolting, feeling great joy for the first time in his life which he only realized years later, when watching the night sky.

Jeff had a hard time giving up a game. He must have played solitaire all night, because he seemed able to see many moves ahead. But he took it for granted that there was only one outcome. The first time, he was right.

"No," Jeff said, a few plays into the first hand. "Won't work." He shoved all the cards together angrily, and SB saw that tears had gathered in his strange round eyes.

"Hey man," SB said, which he had picked up from one of his dad's favorite shows, *Dobie Gillis*, "it's all right. We just deal another hand, all right?" He knew how Jeff felt. The frustration of it. "There's another game, see?" He didn't yet know how to put into words the things he'd long come to terms with. Each game was death or life, light or dark; but then there was another one after it and that was the fun of it. It wasn't failure. It was . . .

opportunity. With each deal he learned something new about the cards, about what could happen, about what to expect. It wasn't each single game that mattered. Sometimes the game turned into a cul-de-sac quickly. He could see it a long way off, or maybe there wasn't even a first move. But usually if he was canny, if he spotted every opportunity to make a move and could decide whether or not to make that move, the game opened up like the long valley he'd seen one night when his dad was watching *The World At War*, his favorite show, puffing away on Chesterfields, tense on the edge of his seat as on the screen puffs of smoke issued from black and white mountain valleys like the puffs from his dad's mouth. SB had never seen a valley before, even though the weatherman insisted that they lived in the Ohio Valley. It seemed flat as a pancake to him and colored his ideas of mountains and valleys until he saw real valleys.

He tried to tell Jeff. "I saw a movie one night about a horse . . ." he dealt a few more cards . . . "it wasn't just any horse, it was a smart horse, and he loved his master, and even though it was war and the horse might be killed he went back and found his master . . ." he stopped, wondering how indeed the horse had picked up his master so that the man, wounded, lay across the saddle, but decided it didn't matter . . . "and he saved him from dying. Well, see, any one of these cards coming up could save you, you just don't know . . ." but Jeff frowned, his eyes stormy, and swept the cards up. "No," he said, "No," and dealt again, oddly ferocious, and bent over the table, tossing cards down so fast that they began flying off the table. SB watched for a moment, amazed, then gently pried the dirty cards from Jeff's hand, picked the cards off the floor, reshuffled, and calmly dealt. He straightened them out where Jeff had bent them. "There's always another game," he said.

SB left well before dark that day, because he was hungry, but after that he came back just about every day. His mom seemed pleased, and more gentle, and didn't ask where he was all day. He knew she wouldn't be real happy if she knew he wasn't climbing trees or playing *Cowboys and Indians*, but teaching someone else to play solitaire.

After the first week SB started wondering about Jeff's mom, but figured that maybe she had decided not to be tied down. Then he wondered why he never saw Jeff's dad, but decided that it was just as well.

But one day even he got tired of cards. "Look," he said, "Let's go out and do something. The big kids are playing baseball in the field across from my house. Want to go?"

To his surprise, Jeff nodded. But when they went outside, instead of going up the road, Jeff took off past the south edge of the cornfield, where SB had never been before. SB hesitated, then followed. Jeff could run real fast. SB could hardly keep up. But after ten minutes Jeff stumbled to a stop, SB on his heels, and crouched on the edge of the woods as SB looked over his shoulder, surprised.

They had come by another route to the ball field, and were well back from the third baseline, hidden by leaves.

Across the field he saw bleachers which he knew needed paint and were full of splinters. Spread out across them were the usual assortment of boys like himself who came on dull afternoons to watch the big kids play and hope the team would be short and one of them would be asked to fill in. There were only about five or six of them, hanging between bleachers by knees and back. SB recognized most of them.

Not far from him and Jeff a big kid was inching away from second base. SB felt

weird, like he was spying on his own life, like he was watching himself over there on the bleachers. "Out," hissed Jeff, and SB was startled when the pitcher suddenly turned and burned a fast ball to the second baseman who caught it with a loud thump in his lovely big glove and tagged the big kid out.

SB looked over at Jeff, wanting to say how did you know but said nothing when he saw the rapt look on the eyebrowless face, the breathless, panting look of him. He looked steadily back at SB, at first helplessly. Then his eyes changed to fierce. "Home run" he whispered, defiance in his voice, and it was.

They walked back, and on the way, SB saw something strange in the woods, through the sunset.

He pushed his way through the brush, while Jeff pulled at him. "Come on," he kept saying, but SB shrugged him off.

SB saw, bent in the woods, crumpled metal. It was not like a car. It had a shape he had never really seen before. Light shone from it but it was just sunset, he told himself, standing in the small clearing which looked blackened as if by fire.

"Let's go," said Jeff, pulling at him, but when SB looked over at him his eyes were changed, so deep and sad, like when his mom said she was tied down, like when his dad said I'm a slave to the goddamned GE plant before piercing another beer.

SB stood for a moment looking at Jeff, at his queer face, so like his father's which SB remembered perfectly. Jeff looked at him helplessly, his eyes filled with tears which overflowed. "Like cards," he said then, over and over and over, and ran to hug the metal. "Can't win."

SB left him there, running through the woods for his Huffy.

But he was back the next day, and they didn't talk about it. They just played cards.

SB didn't tell his parents about Jeff but his dad followed him one day without him knowing it. He burst in on them playing cards, just stomped up the rickety stairs and said "What the hell! I might have known!"

SB was surprised when Jeff was added to his class at school when it opened a few weeks later. His mother told him that the social worker had found Jeff a home with the witch woman. She had the perfectly normal name of Mrs. Johnson, and that was now the last name Jeff answered to at roll call. He was surprised again when Jeff did so well at school that they pushed him forward into another grade the next week. They had different recesses, so SB hardly had a chance to talk with Jeff, or see how he liked it, or tell him that he was sorry, and then his mom and dad moved to a new house in a place SB hated. His mom told SB that they'd been talking about it for months, ever since his dad was promoted, but SB didn't even know about the promotion, whatever that was, much less talk about moving. The new neighborhood had no creek and it had no woods and it had no ballfield, no alley, no Jeff, just endless houses so identical that at first he had to count streets to find his way home, and no trees at all. It had another bunch of kids who were even more dull than the first bunch he had known, so that all SB did was read and play solitaire and after that his mom gave up on making him play outside. Even she understood that it was dull when none of the streets held mystery, he thought, then

realized much later that she had given up on mystery a lot earlier than he ever could have, and was not quite sure why. He only knew that it was not his father's fault, as she always claimed.

He never told anyone that he didn't think that Jeff was the kid's real name. One day at the beginning he had found an old shredded comic book fluttering on the road by the creek. He stopped and tossed it in his basket. When he was reading it after dinner the first balloon he read started "Jeff," and Jeff kind of glowed at him for a minute, and then he realized that it was colored, like with a yellow crayon. He remembered that, later.

And he never told anyone either that he thought that little Jeff was the same person as the large man he thought of as Jeff's father, made small so that he could have somebody to play with. Somebody to learn from. Someone to hold to, in the infinite reaches of space, on this small sphere, the smallness of which SB became increasingly aware the more he knew, which, eventually, was quite a bit.

SB grew up to win a scholarship first at OU and then at Cal Tech, in math. But it was about ten years later when he came across a paper that excited him greatly.

The author was a physicist who worked for a private French company that made a business of launching things into space.

He was describing, mathematically, a solitaire game. With growing excitement, SB thought ahead as if each new set of inferences was a new card dealt, understanding the absolute crystal rigor of the man's thoughts, the yearning perfection of the barely possible outcome. The author was linking the possibility of other intelligent beings existing, somewhere, with the possibility of developing, on Earth, the means of going there. Too many variables, really. SB--now Norm---knew the author's name before he read it.

He was also not surprised when he read later that one of the launches of the French company had left the solar system, headed, they thought, for Tau Ceti. It took a lot more digging to discover what few people knew, that it had been manned.

Godspeed, thought SB, the night he found that out, beneath brilliant stars, breathing chill air in his backyard, his kids asleep upstairs, his wife's reading light illuminating their bedroom, as he stared into space and thought ahead to possible outcomes.

He had not felt this way since he was a kid, since the day he had seen the twisted metal shape in the woods by Mill Creek, since the day he had heard the whispered pain in his new companion's voice. The day surfaced suddenly, forgotten, or pushed aside, for all these years.

"Like cards," he heard again. "Can't win," and saw his friend's eyes overflow with tears.

He opened his mouth and did not know what to say. He was reminded of how Jeff had known the plays of that ball game. But there was no one around to hear him.

Nevertheless he spoke, as if stars pulled it from him with the power of some previously unknown velocity.

"Win," he whispered.

