

The Cuckoo's Boys

ROBERT REED

Robert Reed sold his first story in 1986, and quickly established himself as a frequent contributor to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Asimov's Science Fiction*, as well as selling many stories to *Science Fiction Age*, *Universe*, *New Destinies*, *Tomorrow*, *Synergy*, *Starlight*, and elsewhere.

Reed may be one of the most prolific of today's young writers, particularly at short fiction lengths, seriously rivaled for that position only by authors such as Stephen Baxter and Brian Stableford. And—like Baxter and Stableford—he manages to keep up a very high standard of quality while being prolific, something that is not at all easy to do. Almost every year throughout the mid- to late nineties, he has produced at least two or three stories that would be good enough to get him into a Best of the Year anthology under ordinary circumstances, and some years he has produced four or five of them, so that often the choice is not whether to use a Reed story, but rather which Reed story to use—a remarkable accomplishment.

Nor was the situation any different in 1998, with at least five first-rate Robert Reed stories from which to choose. I finally settled on the remarkable novella that follows, one as current as today's headlines and yet as surprising as tomorrow always must be, a thought-provoking study that reexamines the old question of nature vs. nurture, with some disquieting results.

Reed is almost as prolific as a novelist as he is as a short story writer, having produced eight novels to date, including *The Leeshore*, *The Hormone Jungle*, *Black Milk*, *The Remarkables*, *Down the Bright Way*, *Beyond the Veil of Stars*, *An Exaltation of Larks*, and, most recently, *Beneath the Gated Sky*. Just out is his long-overdue first collection, *The Dragons of Springplace*. His stories have appeared in our Ninth, Tenth, Eleventh, Twelfth, Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Annual Collections. He lives in Lincoln, Nebraska, where he's at work on a novel-length version of his 1997 novella, "Marrow."

1. Here's your first assignment:

Build a starship. And I want you to tell me all about it. Its name. How big it is. What it is made from. Tell me about its power plant and engines. How many are in the crew, and what are their names? They deserve names. Are they human, and if not, what? Draw them for me, and draw your ship, too. Do you have weapons on board? If so, what kinds? You might want to carry some little scout ships along for the ride. Anything else that you might think is useful, I'll let you take. Plus there's one piece of gear that I'm putting on board. It's a box. A box about this big. Inside is a wormhole. Open its lid, and the wormhole swallows your ship, transporting it to somewhere else. You'll travel through space and through time. Or maybe you'll leave our universe entirely.

There's no way to know what happens next.

It's all up to me.

My name's Houston Cross. Call me Mr. Cross, or Houston. I'm going to be your science mentor for the year.

* * *

John was one of the first PS's born. He is 13 years old, and since he hasn't been skipped ahead in school, he's an eighth-grader. A growth spurt and a steady lack of exercise have made him larger than many adults. His kinky black hair is short. His coffee-colored skin has a boy's smoothness, still free of whiskers and hair on the forearms. His brown eyes are active, engaged. He smiles with a nervous

eagerness, and sometimes, particularly when he's excited, he talks almost too quickly to be understood.

"Thanks for taking me," he blurts.

Then he adds, "Ms. Lindstrum says you've been doing this for a long time."

Ms. Lindstrum is the school's Gifted Facilitator.

"She says I'm lucky to have you."

Houston shrugs and halfway laughs. "I wouldn't know about that."

"How long have you been a mentor?" John asks, saying it in one breath, as if the sentence were a single word.

"Five years," Houston replies. "This is my sixth."

"Have you ever worked with us?"

"Eighth graders? Sure—"

"No. I mean us. Or do you teach normals, usually?"

Houston waits for a moment, then says, "I understood the first time." He shakes his head, telling the boy, "Please don't talk that way."

"Oh. Sorry!" John is instantly angry with himself. It shows in the eyes and how the big hands wrestle with one another. "You know what I mean. Normal gifted kids."

"Sure, John."

"I'm not better than anyone else," he blurts with a robust conviction. "I don't ever let myself think that way."

"Good."

"And I try to get along. With everyone."

"That's a good policy, John. Getting along."

The boy sighs, his face suddenly very young and tired. He looks around the empty classroom, then gazes out the long window. A wide green lawn ends at a quiet street, shade pooling beneath tall pin oaks.

"Can I start?" he asks.

"Excuse me?"

"With my starship. Can I, Mr. Cross?"

"Be my guest."

The Facilitator met with Houston yesterday. She warned him that John was an only child, and he lived with his divorced mother— a common circumstance among PS's. Perhaps that's why the boy suffered from feelings of guilt and loss and powerlessness. "But in the plus column," she added, "the mother is relatively well educated, and she seems to genuinely care about him. When she finds time."

John holds his stylus in his left hand, head bent forward, using an electronic workpad for the rest of their hour. He stops only to say that his hand is sore. When the bell rings— an obnoxious, metallic clanging—he looks up in panic, exclaiming, "But I'm not done yet!"

"Work at home tonight," Houston offers. "Or tomorrow. Here. We've got plenty of time, John."

The boy scrolls through page after page of sketches and hurried labels. Shaking his head in despair, he says, "This is all shit. I'm sorry about my language, Mr. Cross. But this is all just shit."

"We'll try again tomorrow."

But the boy isn't mollified. Folding his notebook, he says, "I get these ideas. All the time. But a lot of them...well, they're just stupid. You know? They're rancid! ..."

The mentor smiles in a thin way.

He says, "John," and pats the boy's left hand.

He says, "Believe me. Everyone chews on that shit sandwich."

* * *

Phillip Stevens was the only child of an African-American man and his German-American girlfriend. Phillip was labeled gifted before he was eight. He graduated from Princeton at 18, then dropped out of medical school two years later in order to form his own corporation. His first billion dollars were made before he was 26, most of it coming from the rapidly growing genetics industry. His later billions came from shrewd investments and several medi-technical advances in which he played a hands-on role. Following his 30th birthday, Phillip began pouring his wealth into a new research facility. To visitors and the press, he boasted that he would do nothing but cutting-edge research that would alleviate human misery. But close associates grew concerned with the real direction of their work, and to those malcontents, he said, "Here's six figures. Now quiet, or I'll have your nuts for lunch."

Too late, the CDC believed the warnings about the billionaire's plans.

Federal agents in bulky biosuits descended on Phillip's empire. But the criminal had already vanished, taking with him nearly 50 liters of growth media and an artificial microbe dubbed Phillip 23.

* * *

Mike was one of the last PS's born.

He has just skipped the sixth grade. No growth spurt has taken him, and judging by his wiry build, he's physically active. The face is narrower than John's, and two years younger, and something about it seems harder. He lives with parents of modest means. According to Ms. Lindstrum, the boy's genetics have little mutations. Which is normal among the last-born. "Maybe it's his genes," she warned Houston, "or maybe it's something else. Either way, Mike has a different attitude. You'll notice it right away."

"How'd you get this job?" the boy asks. Flat out.

"With bribes," Houston replies. Instantly.

"No," says Mike, never blinking. "I bet they gave you some special test."

Houston laughs, admitting, "They asked a lot of questions. But I don't know if I'd call it a test."

"When did this happen?"

"When I started working in the schools."

"How long have you been a teacher?"

"A mentor."

"Yeah. That." Mike has long hair— longer than any current fashion— and either through pharmaceutical tricks or the mutations, it's straighter and edging toward blond. The boy spends a lot of time pushing unruly locks out of his brown eyes. "You've been a mentor for a long time. Haven't you?"

"Several years now."

"But you didn't deal with us till now." He says it, then smiles with a slyness, happy to prove his special knowledge. "I've been asking about you."

"You have been."

"Shouldn't I have?"

Houston waits for a moment, then asks, "Did you talk to John about me?"

"God, no. Not that idiot."

Houston says nothing.

"No, there's some guys you used to teach. To mentor. Whatever." Mike names them— both boys are in high school now— then adds, "They thought you were pretty good. All things considered."

"All things considered, that's good news."

"They told me that you steered clear of us."

Houston doesn't respond.

"Why is that?"

"You weren't old enough." He speaks calmly, without doubts. "I like working with middle-schoolers. Not children."

The comment makes an impact. The boy almost smiles, then remembers his next question. "What did they ask?"

"When?"

"When you became a mentor. What kinds of questions did you get?"

"The interviewer wondered what I knew about gifted students. He asked what I would do in this situation, or that one. And he checked to see if I'd ever been arrested—"

"Have you been?"

"Five times," he says. Then he asks, "Do you believe that?"

"No," the boy snorts. Then, "What about this year? Did they make you do anything special before you

got us?"

"Some things," Houston admits. "I had to read various books and some very boring reports. And I went through special in-depth training for an entire afternoon. I needed to be sensitized to your circumstances and special needs."

"Oh, yeah? I've got special needs?"

"Everyone does, Mike."

"What else?"

"I signed a contract. I'm never supposed to talk to the press. Ever." Houston's voice sharpens, just for that instant. Then he smiles, adding, "All questions are handled through the Special Task Office at district headquarters."

Mike seems impressed with the answers or the precautions. Or perhaps both.

Houston prods him. "Work on your starship. Okay?"

Instead of a workpad, Mike has a fat spiral notebook and a pen leaking an unearthly green ink. With his left hand, he writes Day One on the first page. A moment's reflection leads to a little laugh, then a sly glimpse at his mentor. "Hey, Houston," he says. "Can I have an antimatter cannon?"

"I don't know. What is an 'antimatter cannon'?"

The boy rolls his brown eyes. "It's a cannon. It shoots balls of antimatter. They explode into pure energy when they hit anything."

"Okay. But how would a weapon like that work?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is your ship built from antimatter?" Houston asks. "And the crew, too?"

"That would be stupid," the boy assures him. "The first time we landed on another planet— boom."

"But how do you keep your shells from destroying you?" Houston asks the question, then leans closer. "How do you manipulate something that you can't touch?"

The boy thinks hard for a moment, then says, "Magnets."

"Okay."

"We make cannonballs out of anti-iron," he says, "and we keep them in a vacuum, held there by a really powerful magnetic field."

"Good enough," says Houston.

Mike shakes his head, admitting, "Those guys I know ... they warned me. You can really be un-fun when you want to be."

Houston says, "Good."

The boy folds himself over his notebook, working with the same fevered intensity that John showed. But he doesn't complain about a sore hand, and while the sketches are sloppier than those on a workpad, he

seems infinitely more pleased with the results.

After the bell rings, Houston admits, "I'm curious. What do you want to do with that fancy cannon?"

"Blow up planets," the boy says. Instantly. Then he looks up, wearing a devilish grin.

"Is that okay with you, Houston?"

"Sure," he says. "Why not?"

* * *

The synthetic protozoan, Phillip 23, was a mild but durable pathogen carried by spit and the air. Healthy males and children rarely showed symptoms. The old and impaired developed flu-like infections, and at least a thousand died during the epidemic. But fertile women were the preferred hosts. The bug would invade the monthly egg, consume the mother's nucleus and mitochondria, then replace both with huge amounts of nuclear material.

All races and all parts of the globe were struck by the disease.

Victims included nuns and teenage virgins and at least one lady on death row.

During the epidemic, some 3 percent of all conceptions on the planet were baby boys carrying Phillip Stevens' genetic code.

* * *

"Your third mentee," Ms. Lindstrum began to say. Then she hesitated, contemplating her next words.

They were sitting in the woman's tiny office.

"The boy's name is Troy Andrew Holdenmeister. And I should warn you. His parents are utterly devoted to him."

Houston said, "Okay."

The Facilitator was scrolling through reports and memos and test results of every complexion. With a mixture of professional distance and practiced scorn, she said, "The mother has dedicated her life to the boy. She has three other children, but it's Troy who gets most of her attentions."

"I see."

"She wants to meet with you. Tomorrow, if possible."

Houston said nothing.

"And there's something else you should know: Troy isn't quite like the other PS's. His scores are lower in the usual peak areas. Math and science, and so on."

"Mutations?" Houston asked.

She shrugged, as if to say, "We can hope." But she had to admit, "He's only five months younger than John. Mutations were rare then. And the differences ... well, it isn't likely that a few genes would change so much...."

Ms. Lindstrum looked like someone who had been married once or twice, and always too soon. She

was tall and a little heavy around the hips, and beneath a professional veneer was a puddle of doubts and fickle emotions. Houston recognized the symptoms. They showed in the lonely eyes and the way she always would watch his eyes. He sensed that if he wanted, he could gently take hold of one of her hands, say the usual nice words, and have her. Within the week, Ms. Lindstrum would be making breakfast for him, wearing nothing but her best apron, smiling in a giddy, lovesick way.

Houston didn't reach for her hand.

"Is Troy adopted?" he asked.

Ms. Lindstrum shook her head. "I know someone who knows the family. Mrs. Holdenmeister was most definitely pregnant."

A Newly Standardized IQ score lay in plain sight. Houston underlined the number with his thumb, remarking, "There could have been some simple prenatal problem."

"Maybe," she agreed.

But probably not, thought Houston.

Then quietly and a little sadly, Ms. Lindstrum admitted, "It's a respectably average IQ. Enough to make any parent happy ... if she didn't know any better...."

* * *

A 13-year-old boy sits hunched over a large, expensive workpad, focusing all of his attentions on his starship.

"He loves this kind of project," says his mother. She sits at the front of the classroom, and without a gram of subtlety, she stares at her son's mentor. "I'm relieved that you agreed to meet with me. Our last mentor didn't want to."

The woman is small and delicate as a carpet tack, with fierce little blue eyes that hint at a scorching temper.

Houston doesn't say what first comes to mind.

Instead, he tells her, "I want a good relationship with every parent."

"Do you have the other boys, too?" she wants to know.

He nods. "John and Mike. Yes."

"Try, if you can, to keep Mike away from my Troy." She says what she thinks, then thinks about how it sounds. To soften the moment, she adds, "John's very nice. We like him quite a bit. But the other one ... he scares us, frankly...."

Houston says nothing.

He refuses to look at the woman. Instead, he stares into the blackness of the on-line screen. It covers the back wall. The teacher who uses this classroom in the morning has turned it off, which is standard policy. He makes a mental note to ask for the screen to be left ready to work, in case they need help.

Perhaps sensing his mood, Mrs. Holdenmeister makes eye contact and tries a hard little smile. "If you need it, I can arrange for special software. And lab equipment. Anything of that sort."

"Not for now," he says. "Thank you."

"Because I'm perfectly willing—"

Houston interrupts, explaining, "What I usually do is give my students thought problems. They have to work out what's happening, and why, and what they can do about it."

"I see," she says, without conviction.

"And sometimes I'll make them face ethical dilemmas, too. What's right, what's wrong. And in the absence of either, what's best."

She opens her mouth, then hesitates.

After a long pause, she asks, "Would it be all right if I watch you at work again? With my husband. Name the day, and he'll take the afternoon off from work... if that wouldn't be too much trouble—"

"I don't believe so." He says it calmly, with a flat unaffected voice.

"Excuse me?"

"I wouldn't be comfortable," he explains. "An audience isn't going to help me with what I'm doing here."

She doesn't know what to say. Sitting motionless, Mrs. Holdenmeister breathes rapidly, trying to imagine a new, more productive avenue.

She decides on pity.

"You know," she whispers, "it's been very difficult just getting him into the mentoring program. That Facilitator has fought us all the way."

"Well," Houston replies, "I agree with you on this one."

That wins a smile, cold but bright. Then she abruptly turns her head, saying, "Darling," with a big, overdone voice. "Do you have something for us?"

"Mr. Cross?" says the boy. He's nearly as old as John, but smaller. Not just thinner, but he hasn't found his growth spurt yet. Whatever the reason, he's little larger than the 11-year-old Mike. Where the other boys have quick eyes, Troy's are simpler and slower. And while he has their voice, the words come out at their own studied pace.

"How is this, Mr. Cross?"

His mother snatches the workpad, then says, "Darling. It's wonderful!"

Houston waits.

"Isn't it just spectacular, Mr. Cross?" She hands the pad to him, then tells her son, "Great job! It's just wonderful!"

The boy and his software have drawn a starship with precise lines and in three dimensions. There are intricate details, and on the next pages, elaborate plans for the bridge and the engines. It's very thorough work, and that's all it is.

Quietly, without inflection, Houston says, "Troy." He asks, "Have you seen the movie Starfarer?"

"About a thousand times," the boy confesses.

"Because that's where this ship came from," Houston warns him. "You've done an exceptional job of copying it."

The brown eyes blink. Confused, suspicious.

But Mom hears an entirely different message.

"Good for you!" she sings out. "Good, good, good for you!"

* * *

2. Your starship emerges from the wormhole.

The first thing you see is a disk. The disk has stripes. Some dark, some candy-colored. Plus there are two blood-red swirls. And the disk itself is flattened on top and below, and it bulges out around its waist.

That's what you can see, and what else can you tell me?

* * *

"Is it Jupiter?" John asks.

"How do you know it's a planet?"

"Can I see stars?"

"Yes."

"The stripes are clouds. The swirls are hurricanes."

"All right. It's a planet," Houston conceded.

"Is it Jupiter?"

"Two red swirls," Houston repeats.

"Yeah, but that wormhole can take us through time. So it could be Jupiter. But millions of years ago."

"Good point. But it's not."

The boy nods compliantly, then grins. "Tau Ceti 5."

"Excuse me?"

"It's a planet. Haven't you heard about it?" Sensing an advantage, John explains, "They've found thousands of planets that look like Jupiter. The big telescopes spot new ones every day."

"They do," Houston agrees. "This isn't one of them."

"No?" The boy licks his lips, puzzled. "What about its sun?"

"Good question." The mentor pauses, considering his possibilities. "Two suns," he offers. "Close enough to touch each other."

"Can that happen?"

"Sometimes. But it's temporary. They'll lose momentum and fall together, then merge into one sun."

"Delicious!" he exclaims. Then, "What else can I see?"

"Moons. With your naked eyes, you count five of them."

"Big ones?"

"I don't know. How do we find out?"

John shrugs and says, "With sensors. I'll ask my sensors."

"What kinds of sensors?"

"Sensors." The boy believes in that word, and why can't Mr. Cross?

"But how do they work?" Houston asks. Then he warns him, "Not by magic, they don't. Every machine has its job and its inherent logic."

John grunts and says, "I don't know. They just work."

Houston shakes his head.

The boy compresses his mouth to a point, staring at his elaborate starship. It looks like a crystal chandelier with rockets stuck in its stem. "I don't get it," he finally confesses. "I thought we were going to explore the universe."

"So we'll start with good old universal principles," Houston tells him. "About light and energy and mass, for instance. Then later, if you really want, we can move on to those boring old moons."

* * *

The PS epidemic lasted 30 months. Occasionally the clones shared the womb with unrelated embryos. Sometimes they arrived as identical twins or triplets. But most were single babies, active and free of complications. In modern nations, a relatively simple test allowed expectant mothers to learn if their son was a clone. Many chose chemical or clinical abortions. And there was a deluge of orphaned babies that ended up with more forgiving or more desperate couples.

In certain backward nations, solutions wore harsher faces.

There were even places that pretended to escape the PS plague. Despite the global nature of this illness, despots and their xenophobic citizens denied ever seeing the clones, and they denied every rumor about organized infanticide. And even if babies were dying by the thousands, who could blame them?

A man and woman struggle to raise their own child. Why should they be forced to raise an abomination, too?

Which was what those babies were.

Abominations.

An opinion officially ridiculed by wealthy nations. Even while opinion polls found that a quarter to a third of their own people believed exactly that.

* * *

"The first thing I do is shoot it."

"Shoot the planet?"

"Are you going to let me?" Mike asks.

"Who am I? Part of your crew?" Houston lifts his hands, saying, "Wait. You haven't told me anything about the people on board."

"They aren't human."

"Okay."

"They're robots. Ten feet tall and built of smart metals."

Houston nods, then asks, "Do those robots have a leader?"

"Sure."

"What's his name?"

Mike dips his head, staring at his green-ink-and-paper starship. It's a bullet-shaped contraption bristling with every possible weapon.

"You'll want a good strong name," says Houston.

"Damned right!"

"How about Crocus?" he suggests.

"I like that! Crocus!" Mike nods and pushes at his hair, then asks, "Can Crocus fire his antimatter cannon?"

"Be my guest."

"All right. He lets loose a planet-busting round. Then, What happens?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it takes time for the round to reach its target."

Mike shakes his head, and with a disapproving tone says, "John warned me about this game of yours."

"You talked to John?"

"In the hallway. For just a second."

"I thought you didn't like him."

"I don't. He's a fat twisted goof." Then the boy shrugs, adding, "But he always talks to me. I can't stop him."

Houston watches the narrow face, the narrowed eyes. Then, "How fast is your cannon ball moving?"

"Fast."

"Make a guess."

"Half-light speed. How's that?"

"If it takes 20 seconds for the antimatter to reach the planet—"

"It's 10 light seconds away." The boy dismisses the entire game, saying, "This is easy. That big planet is ... let me think ..." He does some quick calculations on paper. "Twenty million miles away. No, wait! ... Two million miles. Right?"

"Something like that."

Mike nods, happily in control. "So then. How big's the explosion?"

"Good-sized."

"Damn right!"

Houston shakes his head, saying, "The shell's moving half the velocity of light, which means it has a terrific momentum. It burrows into the atmosphere and turns to plasma and light, and the explosion comes squirting back up through the vacuum left behind it. Like out of another cannon, sort of."

"And the planet explodes—!"

"Hardly," Houston warns. "It's not nearly the explosion you want."

"That's stupid," Mike tells him.

"No," says Houston. "It's not."

The boy stares at his starship, confusion and betrayal on his face. And then a sudden little smile comes to the eyes and mouth, and he exclaims, "I get it. That world's antimatter, too. Isn't it?"

"What if it is?"

"Jesus," he says, with mock panic. Then he slams his notebook shut and says,

"We've got to get the hell out of here!"

* * *

Worldwide, birth rates dropped for better than five years.

Couples delayed having children. Millions of women underwent hysterectomies, so great was their fear of conceiving a PS. The epidemic's climax was marked with incompetent news coverage sparking wild rumors. The most persistent rumor was that Phillip Stevens' genes were found inside every newborn, regardless of sex or race. And what made the rumor all the more pernicious was that it was true, in a sense: Humans were a young species. Eskimos and Pigmies shared vast amounts of genetic information. But that abstraction didn't translate well at work and home, and millions of healthy, non-PS offspring were aborted during the panic.

Even when a vaccine was available, people remained suspicious.

What if it didn't work as promised?

Or worse, what if this was just the first plague? What if a hundred mad bastards were putting together

their own bugs, and this mess was really just beginning?

* * *

"Maybe that planet has life," says Troy.

"Maybe so. How would you find out?"

The boy says, "I'll go there." Then he thinks to ask, "May I?"

"By all means."

Houston describes the two-million-mile voyage, and later, as the Hollywood-built starship slips into the atmosphere, Houston asks, "Who's in command?"

"The captain." Troy and his software have drawn a dozen people wearing trim blue uniforms. Everyone resembles a famous actor or actress. The captain is the tallest, oldest man, sporting a short dark beard.

"What's his name?"

"Storm. Captain Storm."

"Is he a human, or a robot?"

"Oh, he has to be human."

"Is he a good man?"

"Always." The boy looks at Houston with an imploring expression. "He wouldn't be the captain if he wasn't."

"Fair enough." Houston nods, smiles. Then he scratches his little beard, saying, "Your ship flies into a cloud and pulls in a sample."

"Of what?"

"I don't know. At room temperature and pressure, it's liquid."

"Like water?"

"Exactly."

"Maybe there's life in it."

"How would you test that?" Houston asks.

The boy inhales, then holds his breath. Thinking.

"Any ideas?"

He exhales, confessing, "I know I'm not supposed to use sensors."

"Did John tell you?"

Troy shakes his head, then catches himself.

"Don't worry," Houston purrs. "You can talk to Mike. I don't care."

All the same, the boy seems ashamed.

Then Houston prods him, saying, "A microscope is a kind of sensor. And I'll let you use any sensor if you understand how it works."

"I do," says Troy. "I've got two microscopes at home."

"Okay. Use one of them now."

The hands assemble an imaginary slide, then the right eye squints into an imaginary eyepiece.

Watching, Houston quietly asks, "What is life?"

Then, in more concrete terms, he asks, "How do you recognize it?"

"Life is busy," the boy tells him, his voice pragmatic and pleased.

"When I make a slide at home, what I look for are things that are really, really busy."

* * *

3. You set down on a desolate world. A hard white plain stretches to the horizon. There's no trace of people or cities or even simple life forms. But perhaps something once lived here, and that's why you're putting on your archaeology hat.

I want you to dig into a piece of ground.

Like a scientist, you need to keep track of everything that you find. Everything. I want you to leave future generations with enough information to resurrect this dig site. Keep notes. Always. Make drawings and maps. And try to figure out what happened here.

There's a story waiting. If you can find it.

* * *

Houston has a small one-bedroom apartment that's a short drive from school. It's clean, but rarely tidy. He has lived here for a little more than five years. Prints of famous abstracts hang above the second-hand furniture. On a shelf fixed to one white wall are a pair of trophies. "Mentor of the Year," the plaques read. "Houston Cross." Both trophies show a pair of brass hands clasping— one hand large and grandfatherly, while the other is quite small and only half-formed.

He is working in the tiny kitchen.

Big old roasting pans are set in a row on the countertop. Inside each pan are pieces of shattered robots and random wires and the carefully dismantled bodies of several plastic toys. Houston bought three skeletal monsters, each with a human-like skull and six arms rooted into a long back. He has cut them apart and thrown out the occasional piece— fossils are almost never whole— and after setting everything into a careful heap, he pours a fresh polymer-plaster into the pans, trying not to spill, and when he does, immediately cleaning up the dribbles and drops.

"Breaking news," says the television. It's an old high-density, but Houston built its AI from a kit, then trained it to find what interests him.

He glances up and says, "Show me."

"— furthermore, the study shows that once a minimally enriched environment is achieved, the boys' intellectual development plateaus—"

The pictured face could be John's. It's older than most PS's, and pudgy.

"Save it," says Houston. "I'll watch it later."

"Okay," says the machine.

He sets the three pans inside the oven, the low heat helping the plaster cure. Then he heats up last night's leftovers in the microwave and, sitting in front of the television, prepares to watch the news story.

"Breaking news," says his television.

"Show me."

"— the controversial book is the fifth most popular title in the world today. The Cuckoo's Boys has sold more than 20 million copies, and that despite being banned in much of Europe and Brazil."

The author appears. Beneath him floats a name. Dr. Paul Kaan. An ex-associate of Phillip Stevens, Kaan has a gentle face and hard, uncompromising eyes. Talking to an unseen audience, he explains, "I wrote this book because it's vital that people understand. What the PS's represent is nothing short of a debasing of our species and a debacle for our immortal souls!"

Houston watches the three-minute report.

Afterward, the screen returns to a mountain vista accompanied by a quiet dose of Grieg. More minutes pass. The oven timer goes off. Finally, almost grudgingly, Houston rises and pulls the pans out of the oven. Then he sits again, watching his dinner grow cold, and the AI asks, "Should I run the synopsis?"

"Excuse me?"

"About the intellectual development of the PS clones. Are you still interested?"

"Not really. No."

* * *

The curved tip of the butterknife bites into the plaster, and the blade itself starts to bow as John presses, working to expose a length of yellow-brown plastic bone. He's been working quickly, almost frantically, for most of the hour, taking notes only when coaxed. After two months together, Houston feels sure that the boy should be enjoying himself. But something is wrong, distracting him. It isn't much of a guess when Houston asks, "What's going on at home?"

"Nothing," John blurts.

"Okay."

"Nothing," he says again. Then as if caught in the lie, he adds, "Well, yeah. I got in a fight last night."

"With your mom?"

"No. Her boyfriend." He shakes his head, then shoves hard with the knife, the entire bone popping out of its hole.

"Notes," Houston urges.

"I know. I know." Abbreviated, useless observations are jotted down. Then everything comes to a halt. John drops the knife and says, "My wrist hurts. Really bad." Then he stares out the window, dumbfounded rage in the eyes and the hard-set mouth.

After a long moment, Houston asks, "What happened last night, John?"

"I'm not him."

Houston waits.

"That boyfriend of hers ... he always calls me Phillip." The boy deepens his voice, saying, "Phillip, bring me this. Phillip, you're in my way. Phillip, get the hell lost."

"But you're not Phillip Stevens."

John looks at his feet now. Shaking his head.

"You're just the man's genetics."

"I told him that."

Houston says, "Good."

"PS was a different person than me. Right?"

"Absolutely."

"I mean, he was born in a different century, and in another place. Everything about his life was different than mine. Right?"

"Did you tell him that?"

"Yeah. But all he did ..." he just laughed at me. He said, "That's just what old Phillip would say, if he was here."

Houston says nothing.

"Fucker," says the boy. Viciously, with a pure scalding hatred.

Then with a low, stern voice, his mentor suggests, "You shouldn't, maybe. I know you don't like your mother's friend, but calling him that name—"

"No, Mr. Cross," John interrupts. "I'm talking about the other fucker."

* * *

For four years, law enforcement agencies followed every wrong lead, interviewed millions of earnest, mistaken individuals, and through means legal and otherwise, they pulled up the bank and tax records of more than a billion suspects.

But in the end, a routine traffic accident gave them Phillip Stevens.

An unidentified man driving a dilapidated pickup truck happened to rear-end a young mother. Bumpers locked. When two uniformed officers arrived, the man was staring at a PS child riding in the back seat.

Suddenly he panicked, pulling a weapon and discharging it into the air. Witnesses saw him fleeing into a nearby warehouse. There was a second muted shot. Eventually, a SWAT team broke into the warehouse and discovered a body lying in a tiny men's room, the scene filthy with blood and bone and bits of drying brain matter.

Subsequent tests proved that the corpse belonged to the missing billionaire. His face and skin color had been altered by surgical means, but his famous DNA was instantly recognized by five reputable labs, including his own.

The young mother was labeled a hero, then lost the label when she refused 10 million dollars for her role in ending the manhunt. Furthermore, she enraged many by admitting that she only wished she had known who the man was ... she wanted to thank Phillip for giving her her wonderful son! ...

* * *

Youth is a blessing.

When Mike takes the knife to the plaster, he believes. He is eleven, and this is fun, and he's enthralled. Intent, absolutely focused, each slice into the whiteness is full of possibilities.

Like John and every other young boy, PS or not, scientific ritual distracts him from his fun. Notes are taken, but only under duress. Working with ink on paper, Mike jots and sketches. Then he picks up the knife with both hands, making a game of picking his next quadrant, and after a calming breath, he cuts chisels a deep wedge of plaster.

Houston can't remember where he put which artifact, and so it's nearly a surprise to him when the boy uncovers a single golden eye gazing up at the alien sky.

Mike says, "Shit."

He giggles and says, "Neat," and goes to work with an old toothbrush, using bristles bent against Houston's teeth, sweeping away the clinging dust.

Half of the period is invested exhuming the skull. It's small and obviously plastic, yet something about it intrigues the boy. He can't stop smiling afterwards, moving to the next quadrant and working his way down to a severed hand clinging to a toy weapon. With a dissecting needle, he shoves at the trigger. A weak light and muted whine come from beneath the hardened plaster.

Houston waits.

The boy looks up, grinning.

"Wal-Mart?" he says matter-of-factly.

Disappointed, Houston shrugs and says, "Maybe."

But the boy's attitude shifts. With his next breath, he's back on that other world, and with a bleak authority, he says, "This is some ass-kicking monster. So something really tough must have killed it. That's what I think!"

* * *

After the bell rings, the hallway jams with students.

Houston's habit is to walk each boy to the door, then stand there and watch the kids pass by. The

sixth-graders are still very much children; while the eighth-graders, and particularly the girls, are metamorphosing into their adult selves. By the end of the year, Houston will catch himself watching the young women. When he first began mentoring, a certain kind of girl might offer glances and winsome smiles. But five-plus years is a long time, and his wilting hair and the graying beard makes him look older than their fathers. Houston has, in effect, vanished from their hormonal radar.

Mike's locker is straight across the hall.

Still grinning about the buried skull, he fingers his lock, and when it doesn't recognize him, he slams it hard against the gray steel, then tries again.

Troy steps up behind him, saying something.

The two boys talk for a moment. Differences in age and Mike's bleached hair make them look like siblings, not twins. And it helps that Troy carries himself with a slump-shouldered shyness, while his younger brother is the cockier, self-assured one.

Houston tries to read lips. And faces. And postures.

Then he notices other students. Like him, some stare. One boy points, which triggers a second to follow his lead. Then a tall girl giggles and shouts, "Which one's real? Which one's real?"

Mike calmly flips the girl off.

Troy just dips his head, trying to ignore the taunt.

Then as Houston starts to say something to the girl— acidic and cutting and cold— she turns and skips past him, still giggling, a bony elbow clipping his elbow as she passes, never noticing him.

* * *

In the end, Troy is the only boy to reassemble the entire skeleton. What's more, he uses resins and a bottomless patience to sculpt bones to replace what's missing. When the others have gone on new missions, he continues to happily piece together and repair. In the end, both a tiny toy robot and the skeleton man look like museum displays, mounted on a new plaster landscape that he and his mother built on a rainy Saturday.

Houston hangs a dozen concepts on those toys.

Entropy. Evolution. Anatomy.

"Those extra arms wouldn't work," he explains. "No shoulders, so there's no place to anchor the muscles. Is there?"

The boy shrugs. "I guess not."

"Why would a six-armed man evolve?"

With an enduring patience, he says, "I guess he must have needed them."

"The universe tends to slide from order into disorder. Have you ever heard that before, Troy?"

"When Mom cleans my room." When he laughs, he sounds most like John. Like Mike. Like many hundreds of thousands of boys. But the grim, abstract heart of this entropy business remains out of reach. He shrugs again, and with an easy-going stubbornness, he confesses, "I don't think about that stuff much."

Trying to cushion the bad news, he shrugs and smiles, admitting, "I'm not like them, Mr. Cross. Sorry."

* * *

The bookstore still accepts cash.

What's more, it's large enough to keep a ready inventory of bestsellers. No need to wait around three minutes while your purchase is printed and bound. Houston can pick up a fresh copy from under a sign that reads: "Controversial. #1 Seller!" Then he can take the copy up front and pay, asking for a sack, please.

The fear of discovery is wholly irrational.

And worse, it's laughable.

But Houston has mentored more than a dozen kids, and various parents know him, and countless teachers and administrators would recognize him on sight. Those are all exactly the kinds of people who might be browsing in a bookstore on a warm October night, which is why he takes precautions, and why he feels secretly nervous, stepping outside and strolling to his car with a forced nonchalance.

No parking slots are left at his apartment's lot. Houston's forced to leave his little car on the street. As he enters the building, he finds half a dozen neighbors and their friends on their way to a Halloween party. All are in costume, and drunk. The party must have a theme; everyone wears the same full mask, the adult Phillip Stevens reborn with rubber and fake hair.

"Out of our way!" one man shouts.

"Genetic superiority coming through!" says another.

A woman says, "Stop that," and slaps a hand off her ass. Then she slides up against Houston, beery breath telling him, "You look different. You look awfully cute!"

"He's not," says the first man.

"He's inferior," says the second man.

Then they're past him. And Houston stands on the bottom stair for a long while, doing nothing but breathing, holding tight to the rail with his free hand.

* * *

4. You pop out the wormhole and find yourself inside a clear thick gel. This universe is a thick transparent goo that goes on forever.

Fire your engines, and you can move.

But barely, and your hull creaks and groans, and the instant you stop your engines, your ship comes to an abrupt halt.

Now a monster swims out of the gelatin. It dwarfs the largest whale, and it's covered with tree-sized hairs that beat like oars, carrying it straight at you.

What do you do?

No, that weapon won't work here.

And that one won't kill it.

Just pisses it off, in fact.

So what now?

You can run, but the monster is faster. It's ready to eat you and your ship. Whole. And you've got four seconds to think this through and tell me: Where are you?

Now three seconds.

And two.

And one.

* * *

"Mr. Cross," John blurts. "There's something new here!"

Houston fights the temptation to look for himself. Instead, he sits back and watches the boy twist at the knobs, his jaw dropping an instant before he leaps back. Dramatic, overdone. "God, it's huge!"

"Draw it," Houston coaches.

"Okay, I'll try!"

The boys and mentor have set up an aquarium at the back of the classroom— five gallons of tapwater with its chlorine removed, then sweetened with straw and oxygenated with a simple airstone. Over the past five days, using Troy's donated microscope, they've watched the microbial community explode and evolve, bacteria followed by hungry parameciums— the "monsters" of the gel universe— and now the parameciums are serving as fodder for an even larger, more wondrous monster.

"It's got wheels," John reports.

"Where?"

"On this end." John commands the circles in his drawing to spin, giving his creation a liveliness. "They go around and around, then stop. And then they go again."

"How big is it?"

"Huge," the boy declares. Then he peers into the eyepiece with his right eye— none of the boys can resist pinching his left closed— and suddenly, with a quieter, more honest astonishment, he says, "Jesus, it ate one!"

"One what?"

"One of the parameciums. I saw it!"

Houston picks up the workpad, trying to remember when he first saw a rotifer swimming across a glass slide.

"You should look at it, Mr. Cross. Look!"

Anticipation makes the mouth dry. He bends over the microscope, the fine adjustment knob spinning easily between finger and thumb. As promised, the rotifer seems vast. And as if answering his wish, he

watches while one of the football-shaped protozoa is caught in that intricate mouth, spinning hairs pulling the transparent carcass inside a transparent body.

Water eating water.

When you got down to it, that's what it's all about.

* * *

The woman teaches science at a different school. Their relationship is three years old, and it is convenient, and it has mostly run its course. They see each other infrequently. But as it happens, she's at Houston's apartment on that weekend evening when the television interrupts them, saying, "Breaking news."

"Not now," he tells it.

But the machine obeys its rigorous instructions. "Important, breaking news."

"Maybe the President's been shot," says the woman. Then she sits up and says, "Anyway, I probably need to get home." She pulls a heavy sweater over her head, speaking through the frizzy red wool. "I want to see this news first."

"Show us," says Houston.

"— the gunman apparently turned the weapon on himself, committing suicide. At least 14 students died, while nine more are hospitalized, six in critical condition—"

"Where is this?" Houston asks.

"Australian Independent—"

"From the beginning. Now."

Schools always look like schools. Houston stares at a glass and brick building as the narrator reports, "Today, an unidentified male walked into the Riverview School for the Gifted, shouted inflammatory phrases, then produced a pair of handguns, killing more than a dozen boys in their early teens—"

"Shit," says the woman.

Houston is silent.

"All of the deceased, and all but two of the injured, are clones of Phillip Stevens. At this point, it's assumed that the murderer was singling them out..."

On screen, grim-faced paramedics are carrying dark sacks. Some of the sacks seem heavy, while others are less so.

The woman sits next to Houston, exhaling hard.

She says, "Shit," quietly. Then with a different voice, "Have you seen my rings?"

"On the kitchen counter." She always leaves her diamond and wedding band on the counter.

But she doesn't move. Instead, she places a damp hand on Houston's bare knee, telling him, "This sounds horrible. But I'm surprised that it's taken this long for this sort of tragedy to happen. You know?"

He doesn't speak.

His lover gives him a few seconds, then asks, "What are you thinking?"

He stares at those rubber sacks set in a ragged row, and he thinks that it's odd. As they are now, robbed of their faces and souls, those boys have never looked more alike.

* * *

"We'll have new security measures naturally." Ms. Lindstrum whispers, trying to keep her words private. It's a week after the Riverview Massacre, but there have already been three more attacks In France. In White Russia. And two PS's dead in Boston. "Cameras in the hallway," she promises. "At least one armed guard stationed in the front office. And all of us who work directly with the boys ... we'll naturally have to go through an extensive security check ..."

"I've already been scrutinized," says Houston. "Six years ago."

"It's a formality," she assures.

He doesn't mention the obvious: Any determined person can kill these boys anywhere in time and space. No reasonable amount of security will protect them. And unreasonable security will just make their lives more constricted, and their murders more noteworthy.

Houston doesn't say one word, watching Troy working at the back of the room.

"You did speak with them?" Ms. Lindstrum inquires. "About what happened in Australia, I mean."

"That next day," he says.

"How were they?"

"John was shaken. 'Killing someone is always awful,' he told me." Houston closes his eyes, the voices and faces coming back to him. "Troy acted sad, and sorry. But I don't think he appreciates what happened. It's on the other end of the world, and I think his mother shields him from the news. So none of it's quite real."

"And Mike?"

"Pissed, more than anything."

"That's sounds like him," she chimes in.

But it wasn't a simple anger. The boy had made fists and drummed on the top of his desk, growling, "It won't happen to me."

"It won't, but why not?" Houston had asked.

"I'm not the same as the others. I look different." He nodded explaining with an amoral practicality, "If some asshole comes to school firing, he's going to shoot John first. Then Troy. And finally me. Except I'll have run away by then!"

Houston neglects to mention any of that conversation.

Misreading his grim expression, Ms. Lindstrum says, "I wouldn't worry. This is a good community, in its heart. Nothing tragic's going to happen here."

He just looks at her.

She starts to ask, "What are you thinking?"

But just then Troy spins in his chair, calling out, "Mr. Cross? I found a baby snail. Want to see?"

"Do I ever!" he blurts. "Do I ever!"

* * *

"It is an honor, Mr. Cross. Houston. May I call you Houston? And thanks for taking the trouble. I know this has to be an imposition."

"It isn't," Houston lies.

The school district's headquarters are set inside a sprawling single-story building designed on some now-defunct principle of efficiency and/or emotional warmth. The central area is one vast room. Working areas are divided by partial walls and overly green plastic foliage. The ventilation system produces a constant roar, not unlike the Brownian drumming of atoms against a starship's hull. Over that roar, the man in charge of security says, "I mean it. It's an honor to cross paths, sir. We have so much trouble finding good mentors, and keeping them. Which makes you something of a legend around here."

Houston gives a little nod. "What can I do for you?"

"Very little." The man looks and sounds like a retired police officer. A military cop, perhaps. Dragging a thick hand across the hairless scalp, he says, "You used to be ... what's the term? ... A professional student. At two universities. Is that right?"

"Yes."

He glances at his monitor. "Your resumé lists several impressive degrees."

"I have a trust fund," says Houston. "A little one. It gives me enough security for that kind of lifestyle."

"Good for you," says the cop. Without inflection.

Houston waits.

"Then you moved here and took up mentoring ... six years ago. Correct?"

"Correct."

Again the hand is dragged across the scalp. "Now I couldn't help but notice. You didn't work with PS's until this year."

"I guess I didn't. No."

The cop sits motionless, clear eyes regarding Houston without suspicion.

"The boys were too young," Houston offers. "As a rule, I work with middle-schoolers."

"That's what I thought." He nudges the monitor just enough to let both of them skim over a life's history.

Houston read dates, places.

He says nothing.

"Of course there were two boys ... older ones who skipped grades ... and they were kicking around your current school before the others...."

"True enough." Then with a flat, matter-of-fact voice, Houston points out, "I had other students then. Two girls and a boy. And I felt a certain loyalty to them."

"Good for you."

Silence.

The monitor is eased aside, glare hiding whatever it shows now. The clear eyes grow a little less so, and with a pained voice, the cop says, "I'm awfully sorry. I'm required to ask these questions, sir."

"Go on," says Houston.

"Are you a member of the Defenders of the Womb?"

"No."

"Do you know anyone who you suspect could be a member?"

"No."

"How about the Birth-Righters?"

"God, no."

"Like I said, I have to ask." He pauses, considering his next words. Or not. Perhaps this is a game that he's played too many times, and he has to remind himself what comes next. "Mr. Cross," he says. "I mean Houston. Have you read any of the anti-PS literature or watched the associated digitals?"

Houston sets his jaw, and waits.

"I'm sure you know what I mean, sir. There's some awful things being published. That crazy in Australia had stacks of the stuff...."

"The Cuckoo's Boys," says Houston.

"Excuse me?"

"That book was in the crazy's stacks. As I recall."

"Perhaps. But honestly, it isn't on my list of dangerous works."

"Isn't it?" Houston leans forward, asking his interrogator, "Why not?"

"It isn't in the same category as those other works," he claims, "since it never advocates murder."

"No, it doesn't," Houston agrees.

"The boys are the blameless product of an evil man."

"Says Paul Kaan."

"Who used to work for Phillip Stevens. As I recall, they were colleagues and friends." The eyes lift and grow distant. "The moral thing to do is to give the PS's useful lives. But to protect our species, they have

to be sterilized, too."

The ventilation's rumbling fades away.

"It sounds like you know the book," says Houston.

But the man won't be caught so easily. "I'm just repeating what I've seen on television, sir. That's all."

"But what if?" asks Houston. "What if Congress decides to pass laws and perform a simple clinical procedure on every boy? ..."

"Well what, Mr. Cross?"

"What's your feeling about that?"

"My only concern, sir, is that there is no violence inside our schools."

Houston nods, sitting back again.

The cop glances down, then asks, "Do you own a firearm, sir?"

"No."

"Do you possess bomb-making materials?"

"Yes."

The eyes lift and grow large.

An angry laugh, then Houston explains, "I've got a well-stocked kitchen, and there's a filling station at the end of the block. So in theory, yes, I can make a substantial bomb. Anytime I want."

"That's not the best answer. Sir."

"Then no, I don't have bomb-making materials."

"Good. Thank you." The eyes dip again, and quietly, speaking as much to himself as Houston, he says, "This is what you do all day, isn't it, sir? These little mind games? ..."

* * *

5. You emerge from the wormhole, what you see is blackness. Perfect, endless blackness.

But as your eyes adapt, you begin to make out a faint curtain of light in front of you. And behind you. And above. And below.

Now, what do you do? ...

* * *

Mike starts to say, "Sensors," before catching his mistake.

He grimaces instead, then tells Houston, "I'll use my thermometer. I put it in the airlock. What does it read?"

"About two degrees."

"Kelvin?"

"Yes."

The boy stares at his starship's newest incarnation. It's still armored and bristling with weapons, but now bubble-like portholes line its sides, and the robotic crew has shrunk to human proportions.

"All right," says Mike. "I use my barometer. What does it say?"

"Nothing."

"It doesn't work?"

"No. It's reading nothing. Zero."

"Pure vacuum." He nods, muttering, "I'm out in space somewhere." Houston waits.

"Okay. I shoot my antimatter cannon. What happens?"

"Eventually, the shell strikes the curtain of light, and its surface gets bright for as long as it's passing through. But the curtain's very thin, and most of the shell's mass continues on its merry way."

"I get it. There's not much stuff there, is there?" He nods again, then says, "Okay. I follow it."

"Okay."

"And I reach the curtain?"

"Eventually."

"Can I get through?"

"Eventually."

"What's 'eventually' mean?"

"A few million years, give or take."

"But my throttle's all the way open!" The boy leans back, licking his lips. "In a vacuum, I'd be going nearly light speed!"

Houston says, "Agreed."

"Okay. I stop inside the curtain. What happens?"

"It swirls around you. Like a slow, slow fog."

"I take a sample."

"How?"

Frustration builds, then collapses into resignation. "Okay. I put a jelly jar in the airlock, then open the outer door, and some of the fog drifts into the jar. All right?"

"Fine."

"I screw down the lid and bring the sample to the lab."

Houston says nothing.

"And I put everything in my best microscope. What do I see?"

"Lights. Tiny, bright-colored points of light."

The boy licks his lips, eyes narrowed, one hand absently sweeping the hair out of his baffled eyes.

"Most of the lights are dim and red," Houston adds. "Others are yellow. And the brightest few are blue."

"What about—?"

Houston shouts, "Wow!"

The boy halfway jumps. "What happened?"

"A big flash of light!"

"Outside somewhere?"

"No. From the jar."

"How big?" He shakes his head, asking, "Is there damage?"

"You're blind now."

"Okay. I pop in new eyes. Now what do I see?"

"One of those tiny blue lights has vanished. That's the only change."

Mike rises to his feet. Trying to concentrate, he steps up to the window, staring at the falling snow as one hand, then the other, plays with his shaggy hair.

Several minutes later, he screams, "Jesus!"

He smiles and says to the snow, "You made me huge. Didn't you?"

* * *

6. Jungle. And a Blue, Blue Sea.

Swimming in the warm water are fish not too different from our fish, and creatures that resemble porpoises, and something with a round body and paddles and a tiny head stuck on the end of a long, long neck—

* * *

"A plesiosaur," John blurts.

"Exactly." A pause, then Houston adds, "Up in the sky, as close as the Moon now, is a comet. In a few hours, it's going to hit exactly where you are now. It's going to vaporize the water and the limestone below, then set fire to North America, and the world."

John winces. Then in a self-conscious way, giggles.

"What do you want to do, John?"

"I want to watch the plesiosaur. I've always liked them."

Houston knows that. Last night, his AI found a new documentary on Danish TV, and for the next 30 minutes, he plays the subtitled digital on the classroom screen. Then comes lunch. The new semester has a break in the middle of the period. The mentor is expected to fend for himself. And naturally, he doesn't get paid for time not spent teaching.

When John returns, Houston outlines the situation again.

But this time he closes by saying, "In a very few hours, your plesiosaur, and almost everything else on Earth, is going to be dead."

John winces. No giggles.

"Fly up to the comet," Houston suggests, "If you want."

"I guess."

"The coma is beautiful. And the tail extends for millions of miles." He shows him photographs of last year's big comet. "Inside the coma you find a black ball of tar and buried snows. It's barely 10 miles across. If you want, you can stop it now."

"I can?"

"You've got weapons," Houston points out. "What would you use if you wanted to move a mountain-sized snowball?"

"My engines. They'd melt anything."

"Do you want to use them?"

"I don't get it, Mr. Cross. What are you asking?"

"Why would you stop the comet? And why wouldn't you?"

"Well," says the boy. Then he licks the tentative hairs over his upper lip, and breathes deeply, and says, "If dinosaurs go on living, then maybe mammals wouldn't get their chance. Which would be bad for us. For human beings."

Houston leans forward, saying, "You're going to let the comet hit. Aren't you?"

The boy doesn't answer, eyes tracking from side to side.

"Would you like to see the comet's impact?" Houston offers. "I found a real good Japanese simulation. It's accurate and it's spectacular, too."

John shakes his head.

"No, thank you," he says. "But Mike would like it, I bet."

"He loved it," Houston confides.

The boy makes fists and drums softly on his desk.

"What about the comet, John? Are you going to leave it alone?"

"No," the boy squeaks.

Houston tries to hide his surprise. Then after a few deep breaths, he asks, "Why?" with a quiet voice. "If it means there'll never be humans—"

"Good," says the boy.

Once. Softly. But with a hardwon conviction.

* * *

7. You've decided to become a cat farmer.

No, seriously. I mean it.

You can make a lot of money selling cat skins. And since you're left with carcasses after you skin them, you start feeding that meat to the new kittens. Who grow up into your next harvest of cats. Which you feed to the next litters of kittens. And so on. And so on. Cats all the way ...

Now, what's wrong with that plan?

* * *

Troy says, "Nothing," without hesitation. He thinks this is gross and clever.

"But," Houston warns, "you're losing energy at every stage. A cat burns calories to keep itself warm, and it's got a short gut that doesn't digest everything that it eats. That's why your dog chews on your cat's turds. They're full of energy."

"Ugh." Giggles.

The others understood the problem almost immediately. "Try it this way," says Houston. "How much meat would you have to eat every day? In order to eat enough, I mean."

"Ten pounds," the boy guesses.

"Forty quarter-pound hamburgers. Really?"

"Maybe not." Troy shakes his head, licks his lips. "How about two pounds?"

"Fine." Houston nods. "On the first day of school, you'll go to the cafeteria and eat your daily ration. Two pounds of grilled seventh-grader."

"You mean like Mike?"

"Exactly."

"Neat!"

"And you'll do that for a full year. Two pounds worth of seventh-graders every day. Which is more than seven hundred pounds in all."

"Mike's not that big. Not yet."

Both of them laugh. Hard. Then Houston says, "Remember. A body is bone and gruesome crap that you'd never eat. Maybe half of the carcass won't get on your plate. So how many seventh-graders are

you going to need?"

Troy hammers out a reasonable estimate. "Ten."

"How many eighth-graders are in your class?"

"I don't know. Three hundred?"

"So we need three thousand seventh-graders. And you can't just lock them in a room and pull one out whenever you're hungry. They need their food, too."

"Sixth-graders!"

"How many?"

"I don't know ... God, thirty thousand! ..."

"Right." Houston leans forward, and smiles. "But remember, Troy. Teachers can be awfully hungry people, too."

The boy's face grows a little pale.

"Three hundred eighth-graders feed how many teachers?"

"Thirty." He sickens, but just for a moment. Then the eyes quicken, and for that instant, in his face and eyes, Troy is indistinguishable from the other PS's.

"There's three principals. Right?"

"I guess there would be. Yes." Houston sits back in his chair, then asks, "Who's left standing? At the end of the year, I mean."

Troy sees it instantly.

"Only the principals. Right?"

"Right."

Then he's laughing too hard to breathe, and he gasps, and he admits to Houston, "I'm not going to tell Mom about this lesson. No, I'm not!"

* * *

8. You give birth to a child who isn't yours. Genetically speaking.

Phillip Stevens hijacks your reproductive system and forces you into having his clone, just as he did with millions of blameless women. Yet you feel blamed. And of course you're bitter. It's only reasonable to play the role of the victim here.

It's only human to want revenge.

But it's also human to be better than that. To forgive, or at least to forget. To accept and hold and cherish this gift ...

... a better son, frankly, than anything you would have spawned on your own ...

* * *

Saturday morning, and Houston shops for next week's groceries.

He spots the boy at the end of a long aisle, and for a half-instant, he isn't sure. It could be another PS, or even just a boy who happens to resemble them. But something about the don't-give-an-inch stance and the habitual pushing of hair out of the eyes tells him that it's Mike. Which means that the tiny woman next to him, lowering a blood-colored roast into the cart, must be his mother.

Two aisles later, paths cross.

The boy calls him, "Houston." Then he does a thumb-pointing gesture, telling Mom, "This is the guy."

She's holding a box of tampons. Without blinking, she throws them into the cart, then offers a tiny hand. "The famous Mr. Cross. Finally. Believe it or not, I've been meaning to get in touch."

"It's a pleasure," he replies.

"Groceries?" she inquires, gesturing at his cart.

"They are," he admits.

"What do you think of these prices?"

"They're high," Houston volunteers.

"Ridiculous," she grouses. Then just as the conversation seems doomed to canned chatter, Mom tells him, "You know, my boy hates you."

"Pardon?"

"You drive him nuts. Goofy nuts. I mean, he knows that he's smarter than his brother and sister. And his parents, of course, are perfect idiots—"

"Shut up," Mike growls. "You old lady."

Mom has a good laugh, then continues. "Anyway, Mr. Cross. Thank you. You've been getting under his skin. Which is the best thing for him, I think."

Mike says, "Jesus," and stomps in a circle.

His mother takes a step toward Houston, smiling up at him, and with a conspirator's urgent voice, says, "Humble him. Please."

"I try," Houston confesses.

"Fucking Jesus!" Mike moans, squirming in every sense.

Mom turns and glares at her son, her mouth ready to reprimand. Or encourage. Houston can't guess which. But instead of speaking, she looks back at Houston and gives him an odd little smile.

Again, he says, "It's been a pleasure."

Then he takes his cart and his expensive groceries and moves on.

* * *

The field trip is the result of a lot of pleading and a slippery set of excuses. At first, John says, "You've got to eat lunch. Eat it at my house. It's just a short walk from school." But when Houston firmly refuses, the boy adds, "I've got books you'd like to see. Old ones. About science and stuff."

"What books?"

Their titles escape him. But they're about dinosaurs and flying saucers, and John adds, "I can't bring them here. They're practically antiques, and something might happen!"

Last week, there was a fight at school. Houston didn't see it, but Ms. Lindstrum reported that John was showing his starship to one of his few friends, and another boy stole his workpad. John couldn't stop himself from throwing the first punch. His only punch, it seems. He still sports an ugly maroon bruise beside his left eye.

"Mr. Cross," he pleads. "Please come over?"

The boy is sick with loneliness. But Houston has to tell him, "We need a better reason. If we're going to get permission, we'll need something special that ties directly to our work here."

The next day, John bursts into the room. "Okay. How's this? We've got a huge stump in our back yard. Hundreds of tree rings showing. Maybe we could do some sort of study, counting back in time and looking at the weather. That kind of stuff."

"Good enough," Houston tells him.

But the Facilitator has doubts. "It's not up to me anymore," Ms. Lindstrum explains. "If it involves PS's, we'll need permission from the superintendent's office."

Houston nods, then says, "The boy really wants this."

"Can you blame him?"

Houston didn't know that he was.

She promises to make the request. And for the next full week, John's first question every day is, "When are we going?"

"Never," seems like a possible answer.

But suddenly the faceless powers grant their blessing. Appropriate disclaimers are filled out. A parental signature is produced. And like explorers bound for some great adventure, the two of them pack up their equipment and make the four-block trek to an anonymous split level on a quiet side street.

All the way there, John is giddy with excitement.

Effusive to a sickening pitch.

Five years old, at the most.

He tells silly jokes about farts and singing frogs. He boasts that he'll be a great scientist before he's 30. With an overdone clumsiness, he trips on a crack in the sidewalk and drops in a slow-motion tumble into his own front yard. Then he suddenly grows quiet and thoughtful, saying, "By the way. Mom's boyfriend is gone. Moved out gone, I mean."

The trap is revealed.

Entering the front door, John cries out, "We're here!"

Mom can't look any less prepared for company. Bare feet. Jeans worn white against the chunky ass. A sweatshirt of some unearthly green. Physically, she bears no resemblance to her son. Chinese and European. Pretty in a fucked-over way. Sleepy, teary eyes regard this onslaught with a genuine horror. "Oh," she finally exclaims. "That's today, isn't it?"

The boy drops his workpad on the floor. "Mom!"

But the woman recovers. "Just a minute! Be right there!" She gallops out of sight, and from the back of the house screams, "Food's in the fridge, hun!"

"She forgets things," says John, shaking from anger.

"Don't worry about it," Houston tells him. His voice is angry, too. But the inflection goes unnoticed.

Lunch is egg-salad sandwiches with off-brand pop to wash them down.

Mom returns during an Oreo dessert. Her clothes have improved— newer jeans and aerobics shoes— and she's washed her face and combed her hair. But obviously, she'd rather be anywhere else. With anyone else. A condition that gives the adults common ground.

"I'm glad to meet you," she tells Houston.

"And I'm glad to meet you," he echoes.

They chat. It's polite, rigorously simple chatter. How long has Houston been a mentor? How long have they lived here? What about this warm weather? How was the sandwich, and does anyone want any more cookies?

Adults know how to be polite.

They can converse for hours, revealing nothing about their true selves.

Yet John is visibly thrilled by their prattle. He grins more and more. Mom finally asks, "Aren't you supposed to be doing a project?" And he tells her, "There's still time," without glancing at the clock.

Eventually, the kitchen grows silent.

Houston turns to the boy and says, "Maybe we should get busy. You think?"

"Oh, sure. Why not?"

They have only a few minutes to invest in the promised tree stump. Which is ample, since it's too old and weathered to teach much more than the fact that wood rots. Standing over that brown mass of fungus and carpenter ants, John looks at him expectantly and says, "Well?"

Houston imagines a dozen responses, and John's black disappointment. So he says simply, "Interesting," without defining what it is that interests him.

John hears what he wants, and for the next week, pesters Houston shamelessly.

He says, "I'm worried about my mother. She's too lonely."

He says, "You know, there's a new restaurant up on Acer. I'd take Mom, but I don't have the money."

In a pleading tone, he confesses, "You're my best friend in the world, Mr. Cross. I mean that!"

Then, the pestering stops.

And Houston discovers that he misses the boy's clumsy match making. He misses it but doesn't say so, knowing better than to trust his own weakness. Then one day the boy arrives with a purple bruise matching the last one, and Houston asks, "Did you fight that same jerk? I hope not."

"I didn't," John mutters.

Then he looks past Houston, a cold glare matching the accusing voice. "The boyfriend's back. Again."

* * *

"I know this seems impolite. I got your address from one of last year's parents—"

"Come in, Mrs. Holdenmeister."

"You've probably got plans for tonight."

"Not really." He offers her the sofa, then sits opposite her. Looking at those hard blue eyes, he secretly thinks, "You're one scary bitch."

"What can I do for you?" he inquires.

"About Troy," she mutters. Pale hands turn to fists. "About that grade—"

"The B+?"

"You're his mentor. You know how much he adores science."

"Absolutely."

"I just don't think ... after he earned A's last semester ..."

"We had a big project this quarter. He had to do his own research and write a paper about what he learned—"

"Didn't he?"

"No, actually." He says it flat out, then sits back and asks, "Did you come here by yourself, Mrs. Holdenmeister?"

She starts to ask, "Why?" Then she shakes her head, admitting, "My husband's in the car. Waiting." With an indiscriminate rage, she admits, "He doesn't think that I should be going to this much trouble—"

"He's right."

She hesitates. Then after measuring him with those deadly eyes she says, "I saw Troy's paper. I saw it, and it was very good."

"Because you helped him write it."

She flusters easily, nothing about it genuine. "I don't think that's true! ..."

"I asked him. And your son has a wicked streak of honesty."

She hesitates again, not sure what to say.

"It's a quarterly grade," he reminds her, "and it's a B+. Which is very respectable, Mrs. Holdenmeister."

"Even still," she snaps, "it's on his permanent record."

"Fuck his record. Ma'am."

She swallows. Goes limp.

"We both know, he's not like the others. He doesn't function as well in science. And he won't be anyone's valedictorian." Houston says it, then takes a long deep breath. Then, "Which aren't crimes. And in some ways, those are probably blessings."

"I ... I don't know what to say here...."

"Let him do his own work. I'll give him a nice little A at the end of the year, and it won't mean shit in ten years. Or two, for that matter."

Fists pull close to her belly. "You've got an ugly, awful attitude, Mr. Cross."

"Guilty as charged."

She mistakes his indifference for weakness. "I plan to complain. To the superintendent himself. A person like you shouldn't be working with impressionable young minds."

That's when Houston's rage takes hold of him.

Suddenly his mouth takes charge, asking, "What exactly did you do to your son? To make him this way, I mean."

She goes pale, except for the blazing eyes.

"Watching you ..." he sputters. "Seeing all this damned guilt masquerading as love ... I have to wonder if maybe, once you saw that PS baby ... maybe you put a pillow over him and gave him a few good shoves before you got too scared to finish the job! ..."

"Shut up!" she screams.

And rises.

Then with a tight, furious voice, she whispers, "I had a drinking problem. While I was pregnant. You son-of-a-bitch."

He says nothing.

Feels nothing, he believes.

For an instant, she shivers hard enough to lose her balance. Then she puts her hand against the wall, and says, again, "You're a horrible man."

"Tell me what I don't know."

She tries to murder him with her eyes.

It nearly works, it seems. But Houston makes himself stand, facing her, telling her simply, "You'd better

go, Mrs. Holdenmeister. Now."

* * *

9. I want you to invent a world, a universe, for the other boys.

I'll send them there. In their starships, they'll explore and decipher the mysteries that you leave for them. And maybe they'll escape in the end, and maybe they won't. Which means, in other words, if you want to make a dangerous place, you can do that.

You've got my blessing.

Just as they have the same blessing, and that's all the fair warning I'm going to give you ... okay? ...

* * *

"Is it John's world, or Troy's?"

"Does that matter?"

"No," says Mike. Then, "Yes." He licks his lips, drums his fists, then tells Houston, "I bet it's Troy's."

"Why?"

"Because it's neat. You know. Not sloppy."

A map of the world covers the long screen. It has two blue seas and a brilliant dash of icecap, and its single continent is yellow except where it's brown. It is not sloppy because it's authentic. The image comes with NASA's compliments, and what Mike sees has been fitted together from a thousand fuzzy, partial images gathered by orbiting telescopes. The physical and chemical data are equally authentic. But what waits on the world's surface belongs entirely to John.

"I'm not going to tell you who did this," Houston warns. "Just like I won't tell the others which world is yours."

"You'd better not," he growls.

"What are you going to do first, Mike? You've got a mission here."

"I'll fire my cannon. Ten times."

Houston says nothing.

"Well, can I?"

The mentor says, "If you want," and shakes his head sadly.

"Okay. I do it, and what happens?"

"The explosions melt the icecap, boil the oceans, then cause the crust to turn to magma."

"Neat!"

Houston says nothing.

"Is there anything left alive down there?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

The boy describes his flight into the hell. Crocus, the top robot, collects samples of atmosphere and liquid rock. Mentor and student agree that nothing lives there. Even if there had been a thriving biosphere, it was vaporized, leaving not so much as a fossil tooth to mark its glorious past and promise.

"Congratulations," says Houston, the word tipped in acid.

But Mike just shrugs and says, "That was easy." Then he's laughing, admitting, "I don't know why I was so worried."

* * *

Half an hour later, the bell rings.

Houston accompanies Mike to the door. The hallway is already jammed with scurrying bodies and sharp, overly loud voices. The boy, still proud of his carnage, grins and wades out into the current. A bigger, older boy drives an elbow into him. But it's barely felt. Mike reaches his locker and touches the lock, then slams it hard against the steel. And then John appears beside him, touching him on the arm, obviously asking him, "Which world did you get? Which world? Which world? Which?"

Houston can see their faces, can halfway read their lips.

He watches as Mike glances up at this older, fatter boy, and showing the most malicious grin, the boy says, "Two oceans. And some kind of yellow land."

John can't resist. He confesses, "That's mine!"

Mike says something like, "Was it?"

Then John asks a "What'd you think, what'd you do" sort of question.

And Mike tells him. With both hands, he creates the universal symbol of an explosion, and loud enough to be heard, he says, "Boom!"

There's no time to intercede.

Before Houston can force his way through the bystanders and into the fight, John has already slammed Mike's head into the lockers. At least three times. Maybe four. And Mike counters with a fist into the belly, leaving his attacker on his knees, gasping and pale and crying for every reason imaginable.

* * *

"It's just us for the next few days," Houston explains.

But Troy already knows the news. There's nothing bigger in a school than a bloody brawl. Unless of course it's when two PS's are doing the brawling.

Troy shakes his head, asking, "Why did they fight?"

Houston starts to offer the simple explanation, then hesitates. It occurs to him that he barely knows either boy, much less their real motivations, and thinking that he understands them is dangerous, and stupid, and very much a waste.

So instead, he admits, "I really don't know why they fought, or why they seem to hate each other so

much."

"I know," the boy tells him.

Anticipation makes Houston lean forward. "Why, Troy?"

"They've got to," he assures.

"But why?"

With an endearing patience, the boy shakes his head, warning him, "You can't know it, Mr. Cross."

"You might want to. But you just don't belong."

* * *

10. Again, your starship is tiny. Microscopic. Suspended within that vast ocean, living water swimming through the dead.

But this time the monster isn't some marauding paramecium. This time what you see has a blunt head and a long ropy tail, and it isn't feeding. Instead it's moving with a singleness of purpose, passing you and your ship without the smallest regard.

In anger, or maybe out of simple curiosity, you fire your weapons at it.

The monster wriggles and dies.

And just like that, Phillip Stevens is never born. And you, all of you, instantly and forever cease to exist.

I'm not going to ask why.

It's easy enough to see the reason.

And I won't dwell on the paradoxes inherent in this mess.

No, what I want to ask is the hardest question of all: Is this world better off without Phillip and the PS's? Or is it worse off?

That's the only question worth asking.

And you can't give me any answer. Sixty years from now, maybe. But not today. Not here. You're smart but not that smart. And even in 60 years, I doubt if you'll look me in the eye— all the thousands and thousands of you— and to the man, you will say in one indivisible voice, "The world is better off," or, "It's worse."

The best questions are always that way....

* * *

The Sun is plunging behind the Moon.

At its height, the eclipse will reach 80+ percent coverage. Which is a long way from a total eclipse, yes. But since it is a warm, cloudless day, and it's noon, the effect is dramatic. There comes a growing chill to the air. A sense of misplaced twilight. Houston twists his head and says, "Listen." But hundreds of students are scattered across the school's lawn, enjoying the cosmic event, and it's hard to hear anything but their endless roar. "Listen to the birds," he tells them.

Both boys nod in the same way, John saying, "I hear them. They're singing."

Troy points and cries out, "Look!"

Swallows have appeared, streaking back and forth.

Then a younger voice says, "Look under the trees."

Mike stands behind them. Smiling, but not. Horizontal cuts mark where his face struck the vent on his locker. And he seems taller than before. Houston noticed it yesterday— Mike's first day back from his suspension— but it's more obvious now. A growth spurt took him during his week-long suspension, adding a goodly fraction of an inch to his gangly frame.

"The way the light is," he says. Pointing.

John sits up. "Yeah, look! What's going on, Mr. Cross?"

Crescent-shaped splashes of light dapple a sidewalk and the shady grass. Houston stands, hands on hips. "I don't know," he lies. "What do you think? Guesses?"

"It's the eclipse," Troy volunteers.

"Duh," says Mike.

Houston reprimands him with a look. Then as he starts to ask his next question, he notices a group of kids staring at them. Talking among themselves. Eighth-graders. Every last one of them female.

Houston's boys are oblivious to the stares.

Mike drops to the ground. He sits as far as possible from John while still being part of their group. "It's got something to do with how the light bends," he volunteers. "It's like you can see the Sun in those little crescent things."

Troy says, "I bet so."

Then John says, "This would have been a full eclipse back in dinosaur times."

"Why?" asks Troy.

"The Moon was closer," Mike tells him.

"It covered more of the Sun back then," John adds.

Troy turns. "Is that right, Mr. Cross?"

He starts to nod, then notices one of the girls approaching them. The hesitation in her walk and the other girls' giggles implies this is a dare. Instead of speaking, Houston holds his breath, and all the boys grow silent, too. She's a tall, willowy creature with full breasts and a model's face. And in a voice that comes wrapped in a nervous, electric energy, she says, "Hi, you guys."

Then she turns, and sprints back to her friends.

"What the fuck was that?" Mike growls. "What the fuck?"

But Houston laughs out loud, saying, "That." Saying, "Is a woman enamored." Saying, "I know the look. And you just better get used to it, boys."

* * *

"At least I can see him now," she says. "Can you?"

"Barely," says the short man.

"I've never gotten a writer's autograph. Have you?"

"I'm not much of a reader."

"Neither am I," she confesses. Then she turns to Houston, asking him, "Have you ever read anything better than this?"

He glances at the woman. Then he looks up the long line, saying, "Yes."

She doesn't seem to notice. Holding her copy of *The Cuckoo's Boys* in both hands, she tells everyone in earshot, "It had to be said. What Dr. Kaan says here."

Houston manages to keep silent.

This is a Saturday afternoon. He drove two hundred miles to stand here. The author sits in the center of a long table, flanked by thousands of copies of his phenomenal bestseller. "The New Edition," reads the overhead banner. "New Chapters! Fresh, Innovative Proposals!!"

The short man asks, "Do you know what's in the new chapters?"

"I'm dying to find out," she confesses.

Houston waits. Then after a while, he says, "Tailored viruses."

"Excuse me?" says the woman.

"Kaan thinks we should create a virus that would target Phillip Stevens' genetics. It would destroy the clones' somatic cells. In other words, their sperm."

She says, "Good."

The line slips forward.

Houston finds himself breathing harder, fighting the urge to speak. A pretty young woman says, "Please, open your book. One copy, only. To the page you want signed. And please, don't ask for any personalized inscriptions."

The author wears a three-piece suit. He looks fit and hardy, and smug.

Houston avoids looking at the man's eyes.

The line moves.

With both hands, the woman in front of Houston opens her book.

The short man bends and mutters something to the author, getting nothing but a signature for his trouble.

The woman takes his place, gushing, "I'm so glad to meet you. Sir!"

Kaan smiles and signs his name, then looks past her.

Houston's legs are like concrete. Suddenly, he is aware of his pounding heart and a mouth suddenly gone dry. But he steps forward, and quietly says, "You know, I have a PS son," as he hands his opened book forward. "And I took your good advice."

The author's face rises, eyes huge and round.

"I cut off his nuts. Want to see 'em?" Houston asks, reaching into a pocket.

"Help!" the author squeals.

A pair of burly men appear, grabbing Houston and dragging him outside with the rough efficiency of professionals. Then after a quick body search, they place him in his car, and one man suggests. "You should go home, sir. Now."

"All right," Houston agrees.

They leave him, but then linger at the bookstore's front door.

Houston twists the rearview mirror, looking at his own face. Tanned and narrow, and in the brown eyes, tired. He thinks hard about everything until nothing else can be accomplished. Which takes about 30 seconds. And that's when he starts the engine and pulls out into traffic, feeling very light and free, and in the strangest ways, happy.

* * *

11. You get an end-of-the-school-year field trip out of me.

I always always take away students down to our little community's renowned natural history museum. Most have already been there. According to one boy, maybe five hundred times already. But never with me. Never benefitting from my particular slant on mammoths and trilobites and the rest of those failures that they've got on display down there.

Don't bring lunch money. We'll be eating at Wendy's or the Subway Barn, and I'm the one buying.

Don't bring your workpads or notebooks. You won't need them.

But if you would, please ... remember to wear good shoes. Shoes you can walk in. And if it's at all cold outside, please, for god's sake, wear a damned coat! ...

* * *

"It's been refused," says Ms. Lindstrum.

"Excuse me?"

"Your proposed field trip. I know the boys were looking forward to it. But what with the latest tragedy, people want to be cautious."

Which tragedy? Houston wonders. In Memphis, five PS's were found dead in a basement, each body savagely mutilated. In Nairobi, a mob killed three more. Or was it the UN's failure to condemn Singapore's new concentration camp that's masquerading as a special school.

"I'm sorry," she offers.

Over the school year, her office has shrunk. Paper files and stacks of forms have gathered, choking the

available space into a stale few breaths and two uncomfortable people.

Again, she says, "I am sorry."

"It's all right." His eyes find hers. What worries him most is the way that she blinks now. Blinks and looks past him. "Is it because of that fight? Because John and Mike did fine during the eclipse, and since," he says. Then he tells her, "There won't be any incidents. I can absolutely guarantee it."

She sighs, then says, "No PS-only field trips are being authorized."

"So let me take along one or two of my old students. To beat that rule."

"No," she replies. Too urgently and with a wince cutting into the half-pretty face. Or maybe he's just being paranoid.

Houston offers a shrug of the shoulders. "Are you sure there's nothing we can do?"

"I'm certain," Ms. Lindstrum tells him. "But the four of you could throw a little party for those three periods. Safe in your classroom. In fact, I'll arrange for food and pop to be brought from the cafeteria."

"I guess that would work," Houston tells her. Then he puts on his best smile, saying, "Why don't we? A little celebratory party. Fine."

* * *

Maybe it is simple paranoia.

But a back-of-the-neck feeling has Houston peering over his shoulder. Every public place seems crowded with suspicious strangers, and his little apartment seems full of dark, secretive corners. He finds himself peeking through curtains, watching the empty parking lot below. Three times he runs diagnostic programs on his phone, searching for taps that refuse to be found. And when he finally manages to convince himself that nothing is wrong, except in his imagination, his old widescreen abruptly stops finding news about the PS's. Instead, it delivers highlights from a teaching conference in Nova Scotia. Which is a signal.

Prearranged, yet surprising.

Long ago, Houston taught the AI that if its security was breached, dump all of the old files and start chasing down a different flavor of news.

He doesn't fix the protocols now.

Instead, he pretends to watch the conferences that are being piped to him, and he runs new diagnostics on the apartment and every appliance.

That night before the school party, someone knocks.

His lover wears nice clothes and a smile, and she says, "Hello," too quickly. She says, "I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time."

She has always, always called before visiting. But not tonight.

Houston says, "No, it's a fine time. Come on in."

She says, "For a little bit. I'm expected back home."

He hasn't seen her for a month. But he doesn't mention it. He sits opposite her and says absolutely nothing, trying to read the pretty face and nervous body, and when she can't tolerate any more silence, she blurts, "Are you all right, Houston?"

"Perfect," he says.

She swallows, as if in pain.

"How about you?" he inquires.

"They know about us." She says it, then gathers herself before admitting, "They came to me. And asked about you."

"Who asked?"

She crosses her arms, then says, "They threatened to tell my husband."

Houston calls the woman's name, then asks, "Was it that bald security man? From district headquarters?"

"One of them was."

"Who else was there?"

She shakes her head. "He didn't give me a name."

"It's nothing," says Houston. And to an astonishing degree, he believes it. "I've had some trouble with one of the parents. I'm certain that she's filed a formal complaint. That's the culprit here."

His lover nods hopefully, staring at the floor.

He tells her, "Everyone's scared that something bad is going to happen here."

"I am," she allows.

"What did they ask?"

"About you," she mutters.

"What did you say?"

"That I know almost nothing about Houston Cross." Eyes lift, fixing squarely on him. "Which is true. All of a sudden, hearing myself say the words, I realized that you're practically a stranger to me."

He says nothing.

At this very late date, what can he say? ...

* * *

Mentors are required to check in at the front office. Houston arrives a few minutes earlier than normal signing his name at the bottom of a long page and glancing sideways into Ms. Lindstrum's office, catching a glimpse of her grim face as her door swings shut, closed by someone whom he cannot see.

The school's uniformed guard sits nearby, pretending to ignore him.

Which is absolutely ordinary, Houston reminds himself.

The bell rings. Children pour into the hallway, a brink-of-summer fever infecting all of them. Houston beats the boys to the classroom, then waits in front of the door. For an instant, he fears that they're home sick, or Lindstrum has bottled them up. But no, John walks up grinning, Troy at his side. Then Mike is fighting through the bodies making for his locker ... and Houston tells the others, "Stay with me," and he intercepts Mike, putting a hand on the bony shoulder, saying to all of them, "Change of plans."

This spring, the school installed a security camera at one end of the hallway.

In the opposite direction, the hallway ends with lockers and a fire door. With the boys following after him, Houston hits the bar, causing the alarm to sound—a grating roar that causes a thousand giddy youngsters to run in circles and laugh wildly.

"Hey!" says Mike. "You did that!"

"No," says Houston. "It's a planned fire drill. Trust me."

Then John asks, "Where are we going? On our field trip?"

"Exactly."

"I don't have any permission slip," Troy complains.

Houston turns and says, "I took care of all that. Hurry. Please."

They climb down a short set of metal stairs, then cut across the school yard. Behind them, mayhem rules. Screaming bodies burst from every door, harried teachers trying to regain some semblance of control. In the distance, sirens sound. As they reach the street, a pair of fire trucks rush past, charging toward the nonexistent blaze. Various cars are parked along the curb. Trying to smile, Houston says, "Guess which one's mine."

John says, "That one," and points at a gaudy red sports car.

Houston has to ask, "Why?"

"It's a neat car," says the boy. "And you're a neat guy!"

Now he laughs. Despite everything, he suddenly feels giddy as the kids, and nearly happy. With keys in hand, he says, "Sorry. It's the next one."

A little thing. Drab, and brown. Utterly nondescript.

But as the boys climb inside, Mike notices, "It smells new in here."

"It's a rental," Houston admits. His old heap is parked out in front of the school, as usual. He stashed this one last night. "I thought we needed something special today."

"Are we still going to the museum?" Troy asks.

He and John share the backseat.

Houston says, "No, actually. I came up with a different destination."

Mike watches him. Suspicious now.

The boys in back punch each other, and giggle, and John says, "Maybe we could eat first. Mr. Cross?"

"Not yet," Houston tells them.

He drives carefully. Not too fast, or slow. Up to the main arterial, then he heads straight out of town, knowing that Mike will be the first to notice.

"Where?" asks the boy. Not angrily, but ready to be angry, if necessary.

"There's a few acres of native prairie. Not big, but interesting." Houston looks into every mirror, watching the cars behind them.

After a minute, Mike says, "I don't know about this."

"That's right," says Houston. "Be suspicious. Of everything."

The smallest boy shrugs his shoulders and looks straight ahead now.

Houston glances over his shoulder, telling John, "There's a package under you. In brown paper. Can you get that out for me, please?"

"This it?"

"Yeah. Can you open it up, please?"

The boy never hesitates. He tears away the paper, finding a pair of what look like hypodermic needles wrapped in sterile plastic. "What are these for, Mr. Cross?"

"Tear one of them open. Would you?"

"Just one?"

"Please."

It takes a few moments. The plastic is tough and designed not to be split by accident. While John works, Houston turns to Mike and says, "Be suspicious," again. "When I was your age, I was always suspicious. Suspicion is a real skill, and a blessing. If you use it right."

The boy nods, wearing a perplexed expression.

"Here it is, sir," says John, handing the hypodermic to him.

"Thank you."

"What is it?" asks Troy. "It looks medical."

"It is," Houston admits, removing the plastic cap with his teeth. "People made these things by the millions years ago. If you were poor and gave birth to a mixed race boy, you could test his blood. Like this." He doesn't let himself flinch, punching his own shoulder with the exposed needle. Then he shakes the device for a moment, and shows everyone the dull red glow. "Now unwrap another one. Yeah. And hand it to me."

John obeys.

In the same smooth motion, Houston jabs Mike in the shoulder. "Sorry," he offers, shaking the second device. Then he puts them together, and with a voice that can't help but break, he says, "Both showing red. See? And what do you think that means?"

* * *

12. I used to be Phillip Stevens.

He says the words, then sucks in a breath and holds it.

Not one boy makes the tiniest sound.

Finally, laughing uneasily, Houston asks, "What do you think about that? John? Troy? Mike?"

"I don't believe you," Mike growls.

"No?"

"That's a stupid shit thing to say." The boy's anger is raw and easy, bolstered by the beginnings of panic. He takes a gasping breath. Then another. Then he strikes his own thighs with both fists, telling Houston, "He died. The asshole offed himself. Everyone knows that."

Again, silence.

Houston glances at the mirror. The boys in back wear identical expressions. Lost, and desperately sad. Troy sees him watching then looks back over his shoulder, probably hoping to find help coming to rescue them.

But there isn't another car in sight.

"You two," says Houston. "What do you think?"

"It was Dr. Stevens' body," John offers. "That's what the police said."

"The police," Houston points out, "found a body with Phillip's physical features as well as his DNA. But a body isn't the man. And if anyone could have arranged for a bunch of dead meat and organs infused with his own DNA, wasn't it Phillip Stevens?"

"A full-grown clone?" says Mike.

"With a massive head wound. And what the press didn't report— except as wild rumor— were those occasional disparities between the corpse on the table and the fugitive's medical records."

"Like what?" Mike mutters.

"Like scars and stuff?" John asks.

"No, every scar matched. Exactly." Houston nods and pushed on the accelerator, telling them, "But those things would be easy enough to fake. The body was grown in a prototype womb-chamber. The brain was removed early, and intentionally. No pain, no thoughts. Phillip did that work himself. He broke the clone's big left toe, then let it heal. He gave the skin the right patterns of mole and old nicks and such. He even aged the flesh with doses of radiation. And he kept the soulless clone relatively fit through electrisometrics and other rehab tricks."

The only sound is the hum of tires on pavement.

Finally, Mike asks, "So what was wrong with that body?"

"Not enough callus: Not on its fingertips or the bottoms of its feet." Houston nods knowingly, looking

across the blurring countryside, then straight ahead. "And even though the brain tissue was scrambled, the FBI found problems. Even with dehydration there wasn't enough brain present. And what they had in jars didn't have the dendritic interconnections as you'd expect in mature genius mind."

Again, Troy looks back the way they had come.

Houston turns right on a graveled road, and over the sudden rattling of loose rock, he tells them, "It's not far now."

Even Mike looks sad.

"The original Houston Cross was a loner. No family, and few prospects." Houston says it, then adds, "For a few dollars and a new face, that Houston acquired a new life. And he doesn't even suspect who it is that bought his old one."

John starts to sob loudly enough to be heard.

Mike turns and glares at him. "God, stop it. You baby!"

Over the crest of the hill is a small green sign announcing Natural Area. The tiny parking lot is empty. Which is typical for a weekday, Houston knows.

He pulls in and stops, turning off the engine and pocketing the key.

"All right," he says. "Out."

The boys remain in their seats.

Houston opens his door and stands in the sunshine. "Out," he tells them.

From the back, Troy squeaks, "Are you going to kill us? Mr. Cross?"

The words take him completely by surprise.

He shivers for a moment, then makes himself stop. And he looks in at all of them. And he tells them, "You can't begin to know how much that hurts."

* * *

13. Why did Phillip Stevens create you?

Any ideas?

Forget my little announcement. My name is Houston Cross, and I want you to explain to me why your father did what he did? Because I know you must have lain awake nights wondering just that....

* * *

The four of them walk in single file through the big bluestem prairie, following a narrow path up a hill, both hill and path vanishing in the same step.

Houston stops for a moment, watching the horizon and the rolling windswept land, farm fields on all sides and this little patch of grass and wildflowers tucked into a spare 40 acres. The nearest intelligence is a soaring redtailed hawk. Other than the bird, no one notices them but them.

Again, he walks.

And he asks the boys, "Why did PS do it?"

"He was selfish," says John. Blurts John.

"Who told you that?" Houston responds. Then he makes himself laugh, adding, "That's right. Everyone says that he was horribly, wickedly selfish. Don't they?"

From behind, Troy asks, "Were you?"

"In a sense. Of course. Who isn't?"

At the base of the hill is a little stand of trees. Ash trees, mostly. With an enormous and stately cottonwood anchoring one end.

"But maybe there's a different answer. A harder, truer one."

"Like what?" asks Mike.

"All of you are Phillip's gift to the world." Houston slows his gait, making sure that everyone can hear. "The man had certain talents that can prosper in any time, and he decided to share those talents with his species. To enrich your generation with his genes, and when you have your own children, then enrich every generation to come."

Mike snorts, in disgust.

"What's the matter?" Houston asks. "Don't you approve?"

The boy just shakes his head, glowering at the ground.

For the last time, Troy looks over his shoulder. Then Houston places a hand on his shoulder, warning him, "Nobody knows where we are. For a little while, nobody's going to interrupt us. So don't worry. Okay?"

The eyes are wide and sorrowful, but Troy says nothing.

Then they move beneath the trees, out of the wind, their voices carrying and the mood instantly more intimate. More familiar.

Houston says, "There's a third possibility."

"What?" squeaks John.

"That Phillip Stevens remembered his childhood too well. He remembered his loneliness and how very separate he felt from the other kids. A bastard, interracial child without any father ... and maybe all of his plotting and his selfish evil was simply to make certain that the next time around ... that he wouldn't grow up so alone...."

Now Houston cries.

Sobbing, practically.

Mike is unimpressed. He starts to turn away, announcing, "I don't want to do this shit any more. I'm going back to the car."

"Please don't," Houston pleads. "I want to show you something first. Something important."

Curiosity is the richest, sweetest drug.

One after another, the boys nod in identical fashions and follow, their mentor leading them under the giant cottonwood. Head-high on the trunk is a distinctive X-shaped scar, the thick bark chopped open with a heavy blade. With his back to the scar, Houston starts to count his steps from the trunk. At a dozen, he stops. Kneels. And while tugging at the shade-starved grasses, he tells them, "Always remember. Being smart only means that you make bigger, louder mistakes."

The boys stand as close together as they have ever been.

Watching him.

"With the PS bug," explains Houston, "I assumed that only a few thousand women inside a very limited region would catch it. That's all. A minimal plague and nobody would die...and when it was otherwise, believe me, there wasn't anyone more surprised than me."

For an instant, Houston wonders if maybe this is the wrong place. Or perhaps he's really Houston Cross, and he is simply delusional. A pure crazy man. But then one tuft of grass gives on the first tug, then lets itself be uprooted with a hard yank. Beneath it is a pipe with a false bottom. He reaches elbow-deep and touches the bottom, the Swiss-made lock recognizing his fingertips.

"I was shocked by the disease's scope," he confesses. "And horrified. And very sorry."

The packets of money are pushed up by a gentle gas-powered piston. Hundred dollar bills create a little wall in the grass, and every boy has to step closer and gawk, Mike saying, "God, that's a lot!"

"A few hundred thousand. That's all."

Troy says, "Shit," under his breath.

The others laugh, for just a moment.

"And this is twenty million dollars," Houston adds, showing them an e-card that couldn't be more nondescript. "Untraceable, in theory. Although I haven't used it in years."

"What else is there? ..." one of them asks.

He isn't sure who. Bending low, reaching into the damp hole, he tells them, "This. This is what I wanted to show you."

Exactly the size of the piston beneath it, the disc is silvery and outdated by the latest technologies. But it's still readable, and probably will be for a few more years.

John asks, "What's that?"

"When I realized the scope of my plague," says Houston, "I made a nearly full list of the PS's. Birth dates and addresses and important government IDs. Everything that you would need to make contact with them. In this country, and everywhere else."

"But that's all old now," Mike points out.

"A lot of these boys have already died. You're right." He looks at them, one after another. Then he lets them watch as he shoves the cash back into its hiding place, leaving it unlocked, and fits the hat of sod and grass back into the pipe. "Others have moved. But if you're going to get in touch with them, you'll need to start somewhere."

None of the boys can manage a word, watching him.

Houston flips the disc toward John, then says, "If you need, come get this cash. But only as you need it."

Mike bends and picks up the disc, then asks, "What are we supposed to do? Mr. Whoever-You-Are? ..."

"Dr. Stevens," Troy tells him.

"Organize your brothers. The sooner, the better." Houston stands and pockets the e-cash, then in the gravest voice he can summon, he tells them, "Things are going to get very bad, and probably before you're ready. But I know you. And I don't mean that you're just new incarnations of me. I know you as John and Mike and Troy. Together, you and the other boys are going to survive this mess that I selfishly made for you...."

Then, he gasps for air.

John asks, "What about you? Can't you stay and help us?"

Mike says, "I don't want him here."

Houston agrees. "I think they already suspect that I'm not Houston Cross. If they find out everything, then things will just be worse for you. Which is why you can't tell a soul about me. Ever."

Only John nods with conviction.

"But I plan to help you," he adds. "Later, when I've settled down again, I'll feed you advice, somehow. And if you need it, more money ..."

For a long moment, no one speaks.

Then finally, with a quiet sorry voice, Houston says, "Five minutes. Give me that much time. Then walk back to the main road and wait until someone comes looking for you."

He turns, taking his first tentative step toward the car.

"What'll you do now?" asks Mike.

Houston isn't sure. Maybe he should slip into another autographing ... this time with a copy of *The Cuckoo's Boys*, its pages laced with botulin toxins ...

"What you should do," Mike says, "is shoot yourself. For real this time!"

"Don't say that," John warns him.

"Why not?" the smallest boy replies. "He's just a big fuck-up."

Again, the grown man starts to cry.

Troy says, "I had fun this year, Dr. Stevens. I did!"

"Don't say awful things about our father!" John shouts.

"He's not my father, and I'll say what I goddamn want to!" Mike replies.

"Don't!"

"Oh, fuck you!"

With both hands and a hard deep grunt, John shoves Mike in the chest. The smaller boy stumbles and falls backward into the grass. Then for a moment, he does nothing. He just lays there, his face full of blood and a wild, careless anger. Then with his own grunt, he leaps up and runs, dropping his head as he slams into that big soft body, and both boys are throwing fists and cursing, then kicking each other, ribs bruised and lips bloodied before someone throws his body between them, screaming, "Now stop! Please, please, just grow up!"

For a slippery instant, Mike wishes that it's Houston. Phillip. Whoever that prick is. Just so he can give him a few good smacks now.

But no, it's just Troy. Poor stupid Troy is sobbing, and in his own way, he's furious. Then for some bizarre, twisted reason, Mike finds himself actually sorry that it wasn't the man who stops them. Wiping the gore out of his eyes, the boy looks across the prairie and sees no one. No one. Just the tall grass waving and the empty hillside, and the shit ran away again, and there's nobody else in the world but the three of them.

That's when it starts to sink home.

For all of them.

At long last.

* * *

14. There's no one like you in the world.

People like to say otherwise, but they don't understand. Only people like ourselves understand. Each of us is more different than we are the same, and if you think about it, that's our best hope.

Our only hope, maybe.

For now, that's all we can tell you. But watch your mail, and watch for signs. Someday, sooner than you think, we'll talk again. We'll make our plans then.

For anything and everything, we'll have to be ready.

Sincerely,

THE CUCKOO'S BOYS