

ROBERT REED

FIRST TUESDAY

It seems as if the 1992 elections just ended, and yet this magazine arrives in your mailbox at the beginning of primary season. So, with politics on our minds, we searched for some appropriate stories.

Political science fiction is often about the ramifications of social change. Rarely does the political sf story (these days) begin with a point of technological change. In "First Tuesday," Robert Reed uses a change in technology to examine the future of Presidential-Constituents relations.

AFTER A LOT OF PESTERING, More told Stefan, "Fine, you can pick the view." Only it wasn't an easy job, and Stefan enjoyed it even more than he'd hoped. Standing on the foam-rock patio, he spoke to the house computer, asking for the Grand Canyon, then Hawaii's coast, then Denali. He saw each from many vantage points, never satisfied and never sure why not. Then he tried Mount Rushmore, which was better. Except Yancy saw the six stone heads, and he stuck his head out long enough to say, "Change it. Now." No debate; no place for compromise. Stefan settled on the Grand Canyon, on a popular view from the North Rim, telling himself that 'it was lovely and appropriate, and he hoped their guest would approve, and how soon would he be here . . . ? In another couple seconds, Stefan realized. Jesus, now . . . !

A figure appeared on the little lawn. He was tall, wearing a fancy suit, that famous face smiling straight at Stefan. And the boy jumped into the house, shouting with glee:

"The President's here!"

His stepfather muttered something.

Mom whined, "Oh, but I'm not ready."

Stefan was ready. He ran across the patio, leaping where it ended. His habit was to roll down the worn grassy slope. But he was wearing good clothes, and this evening was full of civic responsibilities. Landing with both feet solidly under him, he tried very hard to look like the most perfect citizen possible.

The President appeared solid. Not real, but nearly so.

The face was a mixture of Latin and African genes. The dreadlocks were long enough to kiss his broad shoulders. Halfway through his second term, President Perez was the only president that Stefan could remember, and even though this was just a projection, an interactive holo generated by machines . . . it was still an honor to have him here, and Stefan felt special, and for more reasons than he could count, he was nervous. In good ways, and in bad ways too.

"Hello?" chirped the eleven-year-old boy. "Mr. President?"

The projection hadn't moved. The house computer was wrestling with its instructions, fashioning a personality within its finite capacity. There was a sound, a sudden "Sssss" generated by speakers hidden in the squidskin fence and sky. The projection opened its mouth; a friendly, reedy voice managed, "Ssstefan." Then the President moved, offering both hands while saying, "Hello, young man. I'm so very glad to meet you."

Of course he knew Stefan's name. The personality could read the boy's public files. Yet the simple trick impressed him, and in response he shouted, "I'm glad to meet you, Mr. President."

The brown hands had no substance, yet they couldn't have acted more real. Gripping Stefan's pale little hand, they matched every motion, the warmth carried by the bright eyes and his words. "This is an historic moment, Stefan. But then you already know that, I'm sure."

The first nationwide press conference, yes. Democracy and science joined in a perfect marriage. President Perez was invited here for a symbolic dinner, and he was everywhere else at the same time. It was a wondrous evening . . . magical . . . !

"A lovely yard," said the President. The eyes were blind, but the personality had access to the security cameras, building appropriate images as the face moved. With a faraway gaze, he announced, "I do like your choice of view."

"Thank you, Mr. President."

"Very nice indeed . . . !"

Holo projectors and squidskin fabrics created the illusion of blue skies and rugged geology. Although nothing was quite as bright as it would appear in the real outdoors, of course. And the squidskin rocks and the occasional bird had a vagueness, a dreamy imprecision, that was the mark of a less-than-good system. Sometimes, like now, the antinoise generators failed to hide unwanted sounds. Somewhere beyond the President, neighbors were applauding and cheering making it seem as if ghosts inhabited the ghostly canyon.

President Perez seemed oblivious to the imperfections. Gesturing at their garden, he said, "Oh, I see you're doing your part. How close are you to self-sufficiency?"

Not close at all, really.

"Beautiful eggplants," said the guest, not waiting for a response. "And a fish pond too!"

Without fish. A problem with the filter, but the boy said nothing, hoping nothing would be noticed.

The President was turning in a circle, hunting for something else to compliment.

For some reason, the house wasn't wearing its usual coat of projected paints

and  
architectural flourishes. Their guest was too complicated, no doubt. Too many  
calculations, plus the computer had to show the Grand Canyon . . . and the  
real  
house lay exposed in all its drabness. Glass foams and cardboard looked gray  
and  
simple, and insubstantial, three walls inside the yard and the fourth wall  
pointed toward the outdoors, the brown stains on the sky showing where  
rainwater  
had damaged the squidskin.

To break the silence, Stefan blurted out a question. "Mr. President, where do  
you stand on the economy?"

That's how reporters asked questions.

But the great man didn't respond in the expected way. His smile changed,  
remaining a smile but encompassing some new, subtly different flavor of light.  
"I'll stand on the economy's head," he replied. "With my feet apart, ready for  
anything."

Was that a genuine answer?

Stefan wasn't sure.

Then the President knelt, putting his head below the boy's, saying with a  
happy,  
self-assured voice, "Thank you for the question. And remember, what happens  
tonight goes both ways. You can learn what I'm thinking, and in a different  
way  
I'll learn what's on your mind."

Stefan nodded, well aware of the principles.

"When I wake," said the handsome brown face, "I'll read that this many people  
asked about the economy, and how they asked it, and what they think we should  
be  
doing. All that in an abbreviated form, of course. A person in my position  
needs  
a lot of abbreviations, I'm afraid."

"Yes, sir." Stefan waited for a moment, then blurted, "I think you're doing a  
good job with the economy, sir. I really do."

"Well," said the guest, "I'm very, very glad to hear it. I am."

At that moment, the genuine President Perez was inside a government hospital,  
in  
a fetal position, suspended within a gelatin bath. Masses of bright new  
optical  
cable were attached to his brain and fingers, mouth and anus, linking him  
directly with the Net. Everything that he knew and believed was being blended  
with his physical self, all elements reduced to a series of numbers, then  
enlarged into a nationwide presence. Every household with an adequate  
projection  
system and memory was being visited, as were public buildings and parks,  
stadiums and VA facilities. If it was a success, press conferences would  
become  
a monthly event. Political opponents were upset, complaining that this was  
like

one enormous commercial for Perez; but this was the President's last term, and it was an experiment, and even Stefan understood that these tricks were becoming cheaper and more widespread every day.

In the future, perhaps by the next election, each political party would be able to send its candidates to the voters' homes.

What could be more fair? thought the boy.

Stefan's stepfather had just stepped from the drab house, carrying a plate full of raw pink burgers.

In an instant, the air seemed close and thick.

"Mr. Thatcher," said the projection, "thank you for inviting me. I hope you're having a pleasant evening . . . !"

"Hey, I hope you like meat," Yancy called out. "In this family, we're carnivores!"

Stefan felt a sudden and precise terror.

But the President didn't hesitate, gesturing at the buffalo-augmented soy patties. Saying, "I hope you saved one for me."

"Sure, Mr. President. Sure."

For as long as Stefan could remember, his stepfather had never missed a chance to say something ugly about President Perez. But Morn had made him promise to be on his best behavior. Not once, but on several occasions. "I don't want to be embarrassed," she had told him, using the same tone she'd use when trying to make Stefan behave. "I want him to enjoy himself, at least this once. Will you please just help me?"

Yancy Thatcher was even paler than his stepson. Blonde hair worn in a short, manly ponytail; a round face wearing a perpetually sour expression. He wasn't large, but he acted large. He spoke with a deep, booming voice, and he carried himself as if endowed with a dangerous strength. Like now. Coming down the slope, he was walking straight toward their guest. The President was offering both hands, in his trademark fashion. But no hand was offered to him, and the projection retreated, saying, "Excuse me," while deftly stepping out of the way.

"You're excused," Yancy replied, laughing in a low, unamused fashion. Never breaking stride.

Mom wasn't watching; that's why he was acting this way.

Things worsened when Yancy looked over his shoulder, announcing, "I didn't want you coming tonight, frankly. But the kid's supposed to do an assignment for school, and besides, I figured this was my chance to show you my mind. If you know what I mean. . . ."

President Perez nodded, dreadlocks bouncing. "Feedback is the idea. As I was just telling Stefan --"

"I'm an old-fashioned white man, Mr. President."

The boy looked at the drab house, willing Morn to appear.

But she didn't, and Yancy flung open the grill and let the biogas run too long before he made a spark, a soft blue explosion causing Stefan to back away. Nobody spoke. Every eye, seeing or blind, watched the patties hit the warming rack, sizzling quietly but with anger, Yancy mashing them flat with the grimy spatula that he'd gotten for Christmas last year.

Then the President spoke, ignoring that last comment.

"It's a shame this technology won't let me help you," he declared, with a ring of honesty.

Yancy grimaced.

The patties grew louder, the flames turning yellow.

Obstinately ignoring the tensions, the President looked at his own hands. "A poverty of physicality," he declared, laughing to himself.

That was it. Something snapped, and Yancy barked, "Know what I like, Mr. President? About tonight, I mean."

"What do you like?"

"Thinking that the real you is buried in goo, a big fat glass rope stuck up your ass."

Stefan prayed for a systems failure, or better, a war. Anything that would stop events here. His fear of fears was that the President would awaken to learn that Yancy Thatcher of Fort Wayne, Indiana had insulted him. Because the boy couldn't imagine anyone else in the country having the stupid courage to say such an awful thing.

Yet their guest wasn't visibly angry. He actually laughed, quietly and calmly. And all he said was, "Thank you for your honesty, sir."

Yancy flipped burgers, then looked at Stefan. "Tell your more it'll be a few minutes. And take him with you."

It was such a strange, wondrous moment.

The boy looked at his President, at his smile, hearing the conjured voice saying "Yes. That's a fine idea." Built of light and thought, he seemed invulnerable to every slight, every unkind word.

Stefan had never envied anyone so much in his life.

Mom was a blizzard of activity, hands blurring as they tried to assemble a fancy salad from ingredients grown in the garden, then cleaned and cut into

delicate,  
artful shapes. She loved salads, planning each with an artist's sensibilities, which to Morn meant that she could never predict preparation times, always something to be done too fast at the end. When she saw Stefan inside, she whined, "I'm still not ready." When she saw President Perez fluttering for that instant when he passed from the outside to the kitchen projectors, she gave a little squeal and threw spinach in every direction. Then she spoke, not leaving enough time to think of proper words. "You've lost weight," she blurted. "Since the election, haven't you. . . . ?"

Embarrassed again, Stefan said, "The President of the United States," with a stem voice. In warning. Didn't Morn remember how to address him?

But the President seemed amused, if anything. "I've lost a couple kilos, yes. Job pressures. And the First Lady's anti-equatorial campaign, too."

The joke puzzled Stefan until he stopped thinking about it.

"A drink, Mr. President? I'm having a drop for myself. . . ."

"Wine, please. If that's not too much trouble."

Both adults giggled. Touching a control, More ordered an elegant glass to appear on the countertop, already filled with sparkling white wine, and their guest went through the motions of sipping it, his personality given every flavor along with an ethanol kick. "Lovely," he declared. "Thanks."

"And how is the First Lady?"

It was a trivial question, Stefan within his rights to groan.

Mom glared at him, in warning. "Go find Candace, why don't you?" Then she turned back to their guest, again inquiring about his dear wife.

"Quite well, thank you. But tired of Washington."

Mom's drink was large and colorful, projected swirls of red and green never mixing together. "I wish she could have come. I adore her. And oh, I love what she's done with your house."

The President glanced at his surroundings. "And I'm sure she'd approve of your tastes, Mrs. Thatcher."

"Helen."

"Helen, then."

The kitchen walls and ceiling were covered with an indoor squidskin, and they built the illusion of a tall room . . . except that voices and any sharp sound echoed off the genuine ceiling, flat and close, unadorned by the arching oak beams that only appeared to be high overhead.

Mom absorbed the compliment and the sound of her own name, then noticed Stefan still standing nearby. "Where's Candace? Will you please go find your sister,

darling?"

Candace's room was in the basement. It seemed like a long run to a boy who would rather be elsewhere, and worse, her door was locked. Stefan shook the knob, feeling the throb of music that seeped past the noise barriers. "He's here! Come on!" Kicking the door down low, he managed to punch a new hole that joined half a dozen earlier kickholes. "Aren't you coming up to meet him -- ?"

"Open," his sister shouted.

The knob turned itself. Candace was standing before a mirrored portion of squidskin, examining her reflection. Every other surface showed a fantastic woodland, lush red trees interspersed with a thousand Candaces who danced with unicorns, played saxophones, and rode bareback on leaping black tigers. The images were designed to jar nerves and exhaust eyes. But what Stefan noticed was the way his sister was dressed, her outfit too small and tight, her boobs twice their normal size. She was ready for a date, and he warned her, "They won't let you go. It's only Tuesday."

Candace gave her little brother a cutting worldly look. "Go lose yourself."

Stefan began to retreat, gladly.

"Wait. What do you think of these shoes?"

"They're fine."

She kicked them off, without a word, then opened the door behind the mirror, mining her closet for a better pair.

Stefan shot upstairs.

Their honored guest and Mom remained in the kitchen. She was freshening her drink, and talking.

"I mean I really don't care," she told him. "I know I deserve the promotion, that's what matters." She gave her son a quick, troubled glance. "But Yankee says I should quit if they don't give it to me --"

"Yankee ?"

"Yancy, I mean. I'm sorry, it's my husband's nickname."

The President was sitting on a projected stool, watching Mom sip her swirling drink once, then again.

"What do you think I should do? Quit, or stay."

"Wait and see," was the President's advice. "Perhaps you'll get what you deserve."

Mom offered a thin, dissatisfied smile.

Stefan thought of his comppad and his list of important questions. Where was

it?

He wheeled and ran to his room, finding the pad on his unmade bed, its patient voice repeating the same math problem over and over again. Changing functions, he returned to the kitchen. There'd been enough noise about decorating and Mom's job, he felt. "Mr. President? Are we doing enough about the space program?"

"Never," was the reply. "I wish we could do more."

Was the comppad recording? Stefan fiddled with the controls, feeling a sudden dull worry.

"In my tenure," the voice continued, "I've been able to double our Martian budget. Spaceborn industries have increased twelve percent. We're building two new observatories on the moon. And we just found life on Triton --"

"Titan," the boy corrected, by reflex.

"Don't talk to him that way!" Mom glowered, thoroughly outraged.

"Oh, but the fellow's right, Helen. I misspoke."

The amiable laugh washed over Stefan, leaving him warm and confident. This wasn't just an assignment for school, it was a mission, and he quickly scrolled to the next question. "What about the oceans, Mr. President?"

A momentary pause, then their guest asked, "What do you mean.?"

Stefan wasn't sure.

"There are many issues," said the President. "Mineral rights. Power production. Fishing and farming. And the floating cities --"

"The cities."

"Fine. What do you think, Stefan? Do they belong to us, or are they free political entities?"

Stefan wasn't sure. He glanced at his pad, thinking of the islands, manmade and covered with trim, modem communities. They grew their own food in the ocean, moved where they wanted, and seemed like wonderful places to live. "They should be free."

"Why?"

Who was interviewing whom?

The President seemed to enjoy this reversal in roles. "If taxes pay for their construction -- your tax money, and mine -- then by what right can they leave the United States?" A pleasant little laugh, then he added, "Imagine if the First Lady and I tried to claim the White House as an independent nation. Would that be right?"

Stefan was at a loss for words.



Then Mom sat up straight, giving a sudden low moan.

Yancy was coming across the patio. Stefan saw him, and an instant later, Morn jumped to her feet, telling her son and guest, "No more politics. It's dinnertime."

Yancy entered the kitchen, approaching the projection from behind.

The President couldn't react in time. Flesh-and-bone merged with him; a distorted brown face lay over Yancy's face, which was funny.

"Why are you laughing?" snapped Yancy.

"No reason," the boy lied.

His stepfather's temper was close to the surface now. He dropped the plate of cooked burgers on the countertop, took an enormous breath, then said, "Show your guest to the dining room. Now."

Taking his comppad, Stefan obeyed.

The President flickered twice, changing projectors. His voice flickered too, telling the boy the story of some unnamed Senator who threw a tantrum whenever rational discourse failed him. "Which is to say," he added, "I have quite a lot of practice dealing with difficult souls." And with that he gave a little wink and grin, trying to bolster the boy's ragged mood.

Stefan barely heard him; he was thinking of floating cities.

It occurred to him that he'd answered, "Yes, they should be free," for no other reason than that was his stepfather's opinion, voiced many times. The cities were uncrowded. Some allowed only the best kinds of people. And Stefan had spoken without thinking, Yancy's ideas worming their way inside him. Embarrassed and confused, he wondered what he believed that was really his own. And did it ever truly matter?

Even if Stefan could think what he wanted, how important could his opinions ever be?

The table was set for five, one place setting built from light. The President took his seat, and Stefan was across from him, scrolling through the comppad in search of new questions. Most of these came from his social studies teacher -- a small, handsome Nigerian woman who didn't know Yancy. Why do we keep our open border policy? He didn't dare ask it. Instead he coughed, then inquired, "How are your cats, Mr. President?"

Both of them seemed happy with the new topic. "Fine, thank you." Another wink and grin. "The jaguars are fat, and the cheetah is going to have triplets."

Miniature breeds. Declawed and conditioned to be pets.

They spoke for a couple minutes about preserving rare species, Stefan mentioning

his hope to someday work in that field. Then More burst into the room with her completed salad, and Yancy followed with some bean concoction, making a second trip for the burgers. Somewhere en route he shouted, "Candace!" and she appeared an instant later, making her entrance with a giggle and a bounce.

If anything, her boobs were even bigger. And the room's holo projectors changed her skin, making it coffee-colored.

Mom saw the clothes and her color, then gave a shocked little groan. But she didn't dare say anything with the President here. Yancy entered the little room, paused and grimaced . . . then almost smiled, glancing at their guest with the oddest expression.

Why wasn't he saying anything?

The President glanced at Candace, for half a second. Then he looked straight ahead, eyes locked on Stefan. Big, worried eyes. And his projection reigned a slow sigh.

With her brown boobs spilling out, Candace sat beside President Perez.

Mom glared at her, then at Yancy. But Yancy just shook his head, as if warning her to say nothing.

Seven burgers were on the plate. The real ones were juicy; the one built from light resembled a hard lump of charcoal.

Stefan realized that he was growing accustomed to being ashamed.

Candace took nothing but a small helping of salad, giggling and looking at their guest with the same goofy flirtatious face that she used on her infinite boyfriends. "Hey, are you having a good time?"

"Mr. President," Stefan added.

His sister glared at him, snapping, "I know that."

"I'm having a fine time." The apparition never quite looked at her, using his spoon to build a mound of phantom beans on the phantom plate. "You have a lovely home."

Mom said, "Thank you."

Candace giggled, like an idiot.

But she wasn't stupid, her brother wanted to say. To shout.

Yancy was preparing two burgers, slipping them into their pouches of bread and adding pickles, mustard and sugar corn. Then after a first oversized bite, he grinned, telling the house computer to give them scenery. "Mount Rushmore," he demanded. "The original."

Squidskin recreated the four-headed landmark. Presidents Barker and Yarbarro were notably absent.

The current President was staring at his plate. For the first time, he acted remote. Detached. A bite of his charred burger revealed its raw red interior, blood flowing as if from an open wound. After a long pause, he looked at Stefan again, and with a certain hopefulness asked, "What's your next question, please?"

Candace squealed, "Let me ask it!"

She shot to her feet, reaching over the table, her boobs fighting for the privilege of bursting out of her shirt. Before Stefan could react, she'd stolen his compad, reading the first question aloud.

"Why do we keep our open border policy?"

The pause was enormous, silence coming from every direction at once. More stared at Yancy, pleading with her eyes. Everyone else studied the President, wondering how he would respond. Except he didn't. It was Yancy who spoke first, in a voice almost mild. Almost.

"I don't think it matters," he replied. "I think if we want to do some good, we've got to turn the flow back the other direction. If you know what I mean."

"I think we do," said President Perez.

"Fifty years of inviting strangers into our house. Fifty idiotic years of making room, making jobs, making allowances . . . and always making due with less and less. That's what the great Barker gave us. Her and her damned open border bullshit!"

Stefan felt sick. Chilled.

Mom began, "Now Yancy --"

"My grandfather owned an acreage, Mr. President. He ate meat three times a day, lived in a big house, and worked hard until he was told to go half-time, some know-nothing refugee given the other half of his job, and his paycheck . . . !"

"Employment readjustments." Their guest nodded, shrugged. "That's a euphemism, I know. There were problems. Injustices. But think of the times, Mr. Thatcher. Our government was under enormous pressures, yet we managed to carry things off --"

"Some know-nothing refugee!" Yancy repeated, his face red as uncooked meat. "And your party took his home, his land, needing the room for a stack of apartment buildings."

Stefan tried not to listen. He was building a careful daydream where he had a different family, and he was sitting with the President, everyone working to make his visit productive, and fun.

Yancy pointed at the old Rushmore. "A great nation built it --"

"An individual built it," the President interrupted. "Then his grateful nation embraced it."

"A free nation!"

"And underpopulated, speaking relatively."

Pursing his heavy pink lips, Yancy declared, "We should have let you people starve. That's what I think." He took a huge breath, held it, then added, "You weren't our responsibility, and we should have shut our borders. Nothing in. Not you. Not a rat. Not so much as a goddamn fly . . . that's my opinion . . . !"

President Perez stared at his own clean plate. Eyes narrowed. The contemplative face showed a tiny grin, then he looked up at Yancy, eyes carved from cold black stone.

With a razored voice, he said, "First of all, sir, I'm a third-generation U.S. citizen. And second of all, I believe that you're an extraordinarily frightened man." A pause, a quiet sigh. "To speak that way, your entire life must be torn with uncertainty. And probably some deep, deep sense of failure, I would guess."

Stefan sat motionless, in shock.

"As for your opinions on national policy, Mr. Thatcher . . . well, let me just say this. These are the reasons why I believe you're full of shit."

The rebuke was steady, determined, and very nearly irresistible.

President Perez spoke calmly about war and famine, a desperate United Nations, and the obligations of wealthy people. He named treaties, reciting key passages word-for-word. Then he attacked the very idea of closing the borders, listing the physical difficulties and the economic costs. "Of course it might have worked. We could have survived. An enclave of privilege and waste, and eventually there would have been plagues and a lot of quiet hunger on the outside. We'd be left with our big strong fences, and beyond them . . . a dead world, spent and useless to us, and to the dead." A brief pause, then he spoke with a delicate sorrowful voice, asking, "Are you really the kind of man who could live lightly with himself, knowing that billions perished . . . in part because you deserved a larger dining room . . . ?"

Yancy had never looked so tired. Of those at the table, he seemed to be the one composed of light and illusion.

The President smiled at everyone, then focused on Stefan. "Let's move on, I think. What's your next question?"

The boy tried to read his comppad, but his brain wouldn't work.

"Perhaps you can ask me, 'What do you think about this hallmark evening?'"

"What do you think?" Stefan muttered.

"It should revolutionize our government, which isn't any surprise. Our government was born from a string of revolutions." He waited for the boy's eyes, then continued. "I love this nation. If you want me angry, say otherwise. But the truth is that we are diverse and too often divided. My hope is that tonight's revolution will strengthen us. Judging by these events, I'd guess that it will make us at least more honest."

Yancy gave a low sound. Not an angry sound, not anything.

"Perhaps I should leave." The President rose to his feet. "I know we've got another half hour scheduled --"

"No, please stay!" Mom blurted.

"Don't go," begged Candace, reaching for his dreadlocks.

Mom turned on her. At last. "Young lady, I want you out of those clothes --!"

"Why?"

"-- and drain those breasts. You're not fooling anyone here!"

Candace did her ritual pout, complete with the mournful groan and the teary run to the basement.

Mom apologized to their guest, more than once. Then she told Yancy, "You can help Stefan clear the table, please. I will show our President the rest of my house."

Stefan worked fast. Scraps went into the recycle system; dishes were loaded in the sonic washer. Through the kitchen window, he saw the Grand Canyon passing into night, its blurry, imperfect edges more appropriate in the ruddy half-light. And it occurred to him that he was happy with this view, even if it wasn't real. Happier than he'd feel on any ordinary plot of real ground, surely.

His stepfather did no work. He just stood in the middle of the room, his face impossible to read.

Stefan left him to set the controls. Morn and the President were in the front room, looking outside. Or at least their eyes were pointed at the lone window. With a soft, vaguely conspiring tone, the President said, "It's not my place to give advice. Friends can. Counselors and ministers should. But not someone like me, I'm sorry."

"I know," his mother whispered. "It's just . . . I don't know . . . I just wish he would do something awful. To me, of course. Just to make the choice simple."

What choice? And who was she talking about?

"But really, he only sounds heartless." She tried to touch their guest, then thought better of it. "In five years, Yankee hasn't lifted his hand once in anger. Not to the kids, or me. And you're right, I think. About him being scared, I mean. . . . "

Stefan listened to every word.

"When you come next month," More inquired, "will you remember what's happened here ?"

President Perez shook his head. His face was in profile, like on a coin. "No, I won't. Your computer has to erase my personality, by law. And you really don't have room enough to hold me. Sorry."

"I guess not," Mom allowed.

They looked outside, watching an airtaxi riding its cable past the window. The building across the street mirrored theirs, houses stacked on houses, each one small and efficient, and lightweight, each house possessing its own yard and the same solitary window facing the maelstrom that was a city of barely five million.

Several Presidents were visible.

They waved at each other, laughing with a gentle, comfortable humor.

Then their President turned, spotting the boy at the other end of the little room, and he smiled at Stefan with all of his original charm and warmth, nothing else seeming to matter.

Mom turned and shouted, "Are you spying on us?"

"I wasn't," he lied. "No, ma'am."

The President said, "I think he just came looking for us." Then he added, "Dessert. I feel like a little dessert, if I might be so bold."

Mom wasn't sure what to say, if anything.

"Perhaps something that looks delicious, please. In the kitchen. I very much liked your kitchen."

They gathered again, a truce called.

Candace was dressed as if ready for school, looking younger and flatter, and embarrassed. Yancy had reacquired a portion of his old certainty, but not enough to offer any opinions. Morn seemed wary, particularly of Stefan. What had he heard while eavesdropping? Then the President asked for more questions, looking straight at Yancy, nothing angry or malicious in his dark face.

Crossing his arms, Yancy said nothing.

But Stefan thought of a question. "What about the future?" It wasn't from his comppad's list; it was an inspiration. "Mr. President? How will the world change?"

"Ah! You want a prediction!"

Stefan made sure that the comppad was recording.

President Perez took a playful stab at the layered sundae, then spoke casually, with an easy authority.

"What I'm going to tell you is a secret," he said. "But not a big one, as secrets go."

Everyone was listening. Even Yancy leaned closer.

"Since the century began, every President has had an advisory council, a team of gifted thinkers. They know the sciences. They see trends. They're experts in new technologies, history and human nature. We pay them substantial fees to build intelligent, coherent visions of tomorrow. And do you know what? In eighty years, without exception, none of their futures have come true." He shook his head, laughing quietly. "Predicted inventions usually appear, but never on schedule. And the more important changes come without warning, ruining every one of their assessments." A pause, then he added, "My presence here, for instance. Not one expert predicted today. I know because I checked the records myself. No one ever thought that a President could sit in half a billion kitchens at once, eating luscious desserts that will never put a gram on his waist."

Yancy growled, asking "Then why do you pay the bastards?"

"Habit?" The President shrugged his shoulders. "Or maybe because nothing they predict comes true, and I find that instructive. All these possible futures, and I don't need to worry about any of them."

A long puzzled silence.

"Anyway," said the President, "my point is this: Now that we've got this technology, every prediction seems to include it. In fact, my experts are claiming that in fifty years, give or take, all of us will spend our days floating in warm goo, wired into the swollen Net. Minimal food. No need for houses or transportation. Maximum efficiency for a world suddenly much less crowded." He gazed at Stefan, asking "Now does that sound like an appealing future?"

The boy shook his head. "No, sir."

"It sounds awful," Mom barked.

Candace said, "Ugh."

Then Yancy said, "It'll never happen. No."

"Exactly," said their guest. "It's almost guaranteed not to come true, if the pattern holds." He took a last little bite of his sundae, then rose. "You asked

for a prediction, son. Well, here it is. Your life will be an unending surprise.

If you're lucky, the surprises will be sweet and come daily, and that's the best any of us can hope for. I think."

The silence was relaxed. Contemplative.

Then the President gestured at the projected clock high above their stove.

"Time to leave, I'm afraid. Walk me out.?"

He was speaking to Stefan.

Hopping off his stool, the boy hugged himself and nodded. "Sure, Mr. President.

Sure."

The Grand Canyon was dark, the desert sky clear and dry. But the genuine air was humid, more like Indiana than Arizona. There were always little clues to tell you where you were. Stefan knew that even the best systems fell short of being real.

In a low, hopeful voice, he said, "You'll come back in a month. Won't you, sir?"

"Undoubtedly." Another smile. "And thank you very much. You were a wonderful host."

What else? "I hope you had a good time, sir." A pause, then he said, "It was perfect. Perfect." Stefan nodded, trying to match that smile.

Then the image gave a faint, "Good-bye," and vanished. He suddenly just wasn't there.

Stefan stared at the horizon for a long moment, then turned and saw that the house was whole again. Their computer had enough power to add color and all the fancy touches. Under the desert sky, it looked tall and noble, and he could see the people sitting inside, talking now. Just talking. Nobody too angry or too sad, or anything. And it occurred to Stefan, as he walked up toward them, that people were just like the house, small inside all their clothes and words and big thoughts.

People were never what they appeared to be, and it had always been that way. And always would be.