

R E L A Y

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

STEVENS REWOUND THE TAPE, pretending to concentrate on the hum of the machine. “What is it I’m supposed to be hearing?” he asked. “Voices?”

Across the desk from him, Blair was pale and sweaty. “It’s Weston, the other man I was ... traveling with.”

“Into the future,” Stevens said, not bothering to make it a question, no longer believing that Blair would deny it.

“I know what you’re thinking. With the tape that way and all. I don’t know what happened to it. But if you concentrate, you can still hear it. You can hear him saying my name.”

Blair’s mother sat next to him, her face stiff as papier-mache. How old she looks all of a sudden, Stevens thought. Just since last week.

“Here,” Blair said. “Let me play it again.”

He leaned over the desk and pushed PLAY. As the weird humming and crackling began again, Stevens let his attention wander to the open window of his office. In the long twilight he could see miles of Kansas prairie rolling away from him, the glint of Fall River in the distance, beyond that the vivid pinks and purples of sunset. A warm breeze puffed at the white lace curtains and the smell of cut grass sent his mind back twenty years, to the day he’d first met Blair’s mother.

She’d brought the boy in with chicken pox. Stevens had been drawn to her immediately: strong, thin, handsome, with an educated accent from the Eastern seaboard. He’d hoped at first she was widowed or divorced. She hadn’t been, of course, so they’d become friends instead, and Stevens had no real regrets.

Though it broke his heart to see her now. She had so much grief locked up inside her, and no way for him to help her with it. Whatever was wrong with her boy would take a psychiatrist to figure out, maybe a team of them.

Stevens shut off the tape in mid-yowl.

“Look,” Blair said. “You told me you’d heard of the Project.”

“Heard of it, yes. I heard there was some kind of space station they were using for time research, or some such nonsense.”

“A relay station. In geosynchronous orbit. With matter transporters and a Schwartzchild simulator that can produce nearly infinite acceleration. That’s why they had to put it up there in space.”

Stevens spread his hands out on the desk. “You’ve obviously read up on it. I’m not going to debate this with you. I don’t even know what half those words mean. The simple fact is that they closed the project down five years ago. And you were never part of it.”

Stevens pushed the EJECT button and handed Blair the cassette. “Until two days ago you were in California, in graduate school. Your mother has letters to prove it. Then you suddenly showed up on the train from Wichita, babbling a

lot of nonsense about government projects and time machines. There's nothing else I can say."

Blair nodded, looking resigned. "I knew there wasn't any point in coming to you. But Mom insisted."

"Go on home. Get some sleep. If you still feel ... disoriented tomorrow, maybe I can prescribe something."

"Yeah, right," Blair said, getting heavily to his feet.

Stevens wondered if he would ever get used to the sight of the adults he remembered as children. "I'll go wait in the car, Mom."

When the office door closed, Stevens said, "I'm sorry. I just don't think there's anything I can do."

Tears started in her eyes, then refused to fall. "I know. I just ... couldn't keep it to myself any longer." She stood and reached one hand across the desk to him.

Stevens took the hand and held it, but she wouldn't meet his eyes.

BLAIR LAY IN THE DARKNESS of his parents' house and lived through it all again. He and Weston, suiting up in the relay station. Stepping into the transport chamber, the energy field making his hair crackle and his stomach chum. The feeling of falling, a small impact against the bottoms of his feet. Then his first sight of the future.

They stood on an endless plain of concrete, rough textured, unpainted, broken only by a network of hairline cracks. The sky was clouded over and a relentless wind sent sand and grit pinging against their helmets.

"Blair?" Weston said. "Do you feel something ... ?"

Blair turned to look at him. Through the distorted glass of the face plate he saw Weston's mouth tighten in pain. Blair was reaching for him when Weston began to scream.

Weston's suit seemed to shrivel and contract. In an instant he was gone.

Then Blair felt it himself, his entire body flexing and distorting like a reflection in a piece of foil. Something popped in the cooling system of his suit and he was suddenly flooded with freezing air. His stomach heaved. He took one step forward, groping blindly, and then the whole world shot away from him, in all directions. He blacked out.

He came to on the floor of the relay station, his skin covered with chill bumps inside the suit, his teeth rat, ding and his arms instinctively wrapped around his legs for warmth that wouldn't come.

He crawled to the control console and read the instruments. Power but no air, no heat. He was trapped in the malfunctioning suit.

A red light blinked next to the cassette recorder. Blair reached out with a shaking hand and played the tape through his suit radio.

"Blair ... I've waited here two hours and I can't see waiting any longer. I don't know what's happened, but the transporter seems to be working. I'm going to try it.

"Blair ... this is not the station we left from. Something's gone wrong. In this world, the station has been shut down for years. If you end up here, use the transporter. I'll try to find you somehow."

Blair had the tape in his hand as he staggered down the hall to the transporter. The room was empty. He could feel the blast of escaping air when he opened the hatch. Once inside, the room began to repressurize automatically. He got out of the freezing suit as soon as there was air to breathe.

His clothes weren't in the locker where he'd left them. Instead there was a suit of coveralls with someone else's name on the chest. He got into them and checked the transport controls. Everything seemed to be functioning. The destination coordinates were set for N A S A in Houston.

He started to power up the machine with a hand that still shook—he wondered if he would ever be warm again—and then hesitated. If Weston was right, and this world wasn't the same one they'd left, he could transport himself into the middle of a concrete wall.

His mind suddenly flashed on Neodesha, the flat empty land where he'd grown up. It hadn't changed in hundreds of years, and he remembered the latitude and longitude from his school days. He reset the coordinates, and as he pushed the T R A N S M I T button he was thinking of home.

His mind skipped over the rest: the lurch of the transporter, falling into the field outside of town, catching a ride on the Wichita train. He concentrated on the earthly, visible reality in front of him, the cool breeze coming in the window, the sound of crickets and wind.

It's all right, he thought. I'm back. I'm safe. It's 1990 and this is Kansas, and I'm back again.

He found his old red and gray flannel bathrobe in the closet and put it on, hugging it against himself for warmth. He didn't want to go back to sleep, didn't want to let the fragile illusion of reality slip away.

He walked barefoot into the living room, stepping around the loose board that had creaked all his life. He sat on the blue floral sofa with his legs tucked under him, wanting a cup of coffee but unwilling to risk waking his father, who still got up at six every morning for his job at the lumber yard. He remembered the awkward silence when he'd tried to talk to his father about the project, the haunted look in his mother's eyes.

He picked up the newspaper from the coffee table and glanced at it by the moonlight coming in through the front window. The small town trivia of retirements and flower shows was comforting, had him on the verge of sleep.

Then he noticed the date at the top of the page.

April 23. 1997.

He clutched his stomach to keep from screaming.

Through the window he could see the spindly heads of the rye grass in the uncut lawn, the asphalt street, the lightning-split oak in the neighbor's yard. He'd grown up with that sight, but now it was terrifyingly alien.

When the voice spoke his name, he nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Blair..."

He turned to see Weston in the doorway.

"Had to warn you," Weston said. He was dressed in jeans and a sport shirt, reaching out with one hand. "It's not holding ... I wound up back on the

station again ... couldn't tell if it was the same one or not ... used the transporter again but something's wrong..."

Weston reached for the wall and his hand passed through the paneling. "I don't know how much longer I've got. Listen, Blair, you have to..."

Clear streaks of lightning shot through Weston's image. His voice turned to static. In a second he was gone. Blair was left with the memory of his face, distorted in unbearable pain.

Blair ran to the spot where Weston had stood. Nothing remained, no smell of ozone, no stains on the wooden floor, nothing to show it had been anything but a dream.

THE MORNING CAME UP sunny, with a slight chill that had burned off by the time the coffee was done.

She hadn't wanted to wake her son yet, but he'd always been a light sleeper. He couldn't possibly have slept through the noise she'd already made. She put sugar in a cup of coffee and took it to his room.

She stopped outside his door. A wave of feeling, of loss, came over her for no reason. She had to swallow, hard, and brush her hair back to regain control. Then she knocked softly with one knuckle and eased the door open.

It was as if she'd known he would be gone.

She sat on the rumpled bed, touching the cool sheets, and let silent tears run down her face.

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