

*Roger never said that it happened this way.
Then again, who's saying that it didn't?*

THE STORY ROGER NEVER TOLD

JACK WILLIAMSON

HE WAS LATE, RUSHING TO WORK ON THAT GRAY NOVEMBER morning in 1962, when a car coasted to the curb beside him. A man slid out of it, lifting an imperative hand to stop him. The driver got out and darted around the car. A woman, she held his eye. Slenderly perfect in figure and style, she was made up like a matinee queen, every blond curl precisely in place. The man caught her arm and spoke to him in a language that sounded like Russian or per-haps Greek.

“Are you lost?” he asked. “Can I help?”

The woman spoke, her inflections just as puzzling. He stepped back, staring. The man was too film-star hand-some. They both looked far too hep and chic for the traffic noise and diesel reek of this busy Cleveland street. He dodged back when the woman pounced at him, reaching with both hands to clap him on the sides of his head.

“Hey—”

In a moment she had glided away. Catching a startled breath, he found that she had left a cloud of some rich perfume and two hard little objects clinging to his temples. They vibrated briefly and felt slightly warm. She spoke to him again, her voice now musically clear.

“You are Security Agent 850-28-3294?”

He retreated again, blinking in startled bewilderment at them and their car, a 1958 Ford sedan. It looked too new, the sky-blue paint too bright, the whole shape not quite right, though it had a 1962 license plate.

They stood intently waiting.

“I do have a job with Social Security,” he told them. “And that is my Social Security number. But I’m no agent—”

“A clever attempt at cover.” The woman glanced down the street and made a face of shocked disgust. “And a very strange place to hide. You almost escaped us.”

He backed farther away. Though he saw no weapons, they both looked alert and superbly fit, poised and ready for anything. Her green eyes narrowed, she watched him like a crouching cat. Hostile or not, they made no sense here in downtown Cleveland.

“What’s this all about?” He blinked at them and the sky-blue Ford. “Who are you?”

She made a sound he didn’t understand.

“Security,” the man said. “We are here from Security Command.”

“What’s that?”

“If you’ve forgotten—” Impatiently, she sniffed something, perhaps a name or a title, that he didn’t get. “We’re here to get you back to your duty.”

“You’ve got me wondering.” He turned to the man, who seemed less demanding. “Do you have some identification?”

The woman tilted her ivory wrist to display a little object that flickered for a moment with rainbow color.

“Do you want our individual designations?”

Blankly, he nodded.

“They don’t translate.” The man shrugged as if in apology. “Not into any local dialect. You may call me Paul.” He smiled ambivalently at the woman. “Lilith, perhaps, from the local folklore? Call her Lil.”

“What, exactly, are you after?”

“If you have forgotten who you are,” the woman was severely ironic and no longer charming, “your record here has been abysmal since the day you were placed. You’ve failed to file reports and ignored your recall. We are here from the command to pick you up.”

“You must have made some mistake—”

“We don’t make mistakes.” Her voice had the cold snap of breaking ice. “We’re here to stop your own.”

“If you want to see my record—” He appealed to the man. “Just come down to the office with me. I’m still the new man there, but you won’t find anything—”

“You’ll come with us.” Sharply, she cut him off. “At once.”

“Wait a minute.” He edged back, prepared to run. “Let’s call a cop to straighten this out.”

“Get him in the car,” she told the man. “I’m sick of this hideous hellhole.”

“I’ve got to get on to the office.” He backed farther. “Let me call a lawyer—”

“Your native ways are no concern of ours, and you won’t be returning to any office here.” The woman grew stern. “Not after your miserable fiasco.”

“However,” the man was more patient, “we are re-quired to record any statement you may wish to make.”

Looking up and down the street, he found no police car, no taxi, no visible escape.

“Let’s get on with it,” the man urged him. “We have your earlier duty record, apparently satisfactory and com-plete up until your assignment here. What we need is an account of what you have been doing since.”

“In particular—” The woman paused, holding out her wrist as if that flickering dial might conceal a microphone. “Have you compromised the service? Have you revealed yourself?”

“What could I reveal?” He dug for his wallet. “I’m an American citizen. Here’s my driver’s license. Roger J. Zelazny, born right here in Cleveland, May 13, 1937.”

“Born?” Her perfect eyebrows lifted. “What does that mean?”

“Remember we’re out on a frontier rim world,” the man told her. “Among primitive exotics. Natural procre-ation is evidently still allowed.”

She made a face and shrank away.

“Thank you.” With a noncommittal nod, the man glanced at the license and gave it back. “Will you continue?”

“Just what do you want to know?”

“Your own account of what you have been doing.”

“Briefly,” the woman said. “I’ve got to get out.”

“Mostly, I’ve just been in school.” He spoke slowly, watching the street for a chance to break away. “At Noble School and high school out in Euclid. Then Western Reserve for the B.A. in English. I finished my M.A. at Columbia earlier this year. I write a little poetry—”

“A bard?” The man turned to the woman. “A native bard!”

The woman shrugged with impatient disdain.

“A native informant!” The man’s voice quickened. “Or native enough, if he’s been here since we set up the station.”

She said something he didn’t catch and gestured at the Ford.

“Please forgive us, Mr. Zelazny.” The man was suddenly affable. “Lil is my superior. The service is her career. My own main interest is cultural anthropology. The service affords me a splendid opportunity for field work while I’m fulfilling a civil duty. Whatever your excuses, your extended experience here can make you a very useful informant.” His voice turned harder. “You will find yourself far more comfortable if you don’t resist.”

The woman reached for him with red-nailed talons.

“Help!” Yelling, he gestured wildly at a passing taxi. “Help me! They’re—”

Her steely fingers gripped his arm. He felt a sharp vibration in the objects she had stuck to his temple. His yell was cut off. Suddenly limp, he let them drag him into the Ford. The man got in the backseat beside him. The doors closed with oddly solid thumps. He heard a puzzling hiss of air. The woman drove them, silently and fast.

Feeling numbed and groggy, he tried to see where they were going. The familiar buildings gave way to suburbs, farms, finally woods. Then the woods were gone. He craned to the window and saw the earth falling away below.

“Where—”

His voice only a croak, but the man answered helpfully:

“The first stop is your proper post at the signal station out on the satellite. The second is Galactic Security High Command.”

He gulped and tried to wet his mouth.

“Really—” His throat ached, but he found a papery voice. “Can’t you just pretend I’m really who I say I am?”

“Why not?” The man shrugged. “If you want to work as my informant, I’ll play whatever game you choose.”

“Anything!” he gasped. “Please.”

“The unmanned signal station was set up here when we began observing artificial fires. The first nuclear explosions triggered a more urgent alert. Agent 850-28-3294 was assigned to watch duty here. Though the blasts had been increasing in frequency and power, he never filed a report. He ignored official inquiries and even his final notice of recall.”

The man’s grin turned sardonic.

“That’s what you have to explain, if you persist in your denial.”

Stunned by that, too sick to think what it might mean, he sank weakly back in the seat. The man said nothing more to him. When the woman spoke, their exchange was not translated. The sky outside darkened to purple and black. Stars blazed out. He watched in dull wonderment and finally went to sleep.

When he woke, feeling almost himself again, they were falling out of that black sky, down to the gray blaze of the sunlit Moon. The craters swelled and multiplied till the man pointed to one with a bright metal rim.

“The signal station,” he said. “Underground.”

The woman was pecking at a keyboard where the steering wheel had been. They hovered near it till a tower of darkness stood suddenly above it, a beam of blackness that shone toward the stars.

“The transit tube,” the man said.

The woman steered them into it, and out again above another landscape, so barren and crater-pitted that he thought for a moment that they were still on the Moon. The sun that lit it, however, was huge and dimly red, turning the craters into scarlet pools.

“Security Command.” The man pointed. “And your own destination. The oxygen-breathers’ complex at the se-curity academy.”

Turning, he saw an enormous mirror dome rising out of barren desolation. Inside it, he found himself in a line of oxygen-breathing bipeds shuffling down endless gray-walled corridors, following arrows of flashing light. Some looked almost humanoid, but none resembled him or his captors. Most were grotesquely different, many of them apparently new recruits, a few veterans back for retraining.

They all wore translators, but the slouching thing ahead had a scent that sickened him and the shell-cased thing behind merely stared through multiple eyes when he turned and tried to talk. He did make out scraps of talk from others, but their native worlds had been so diverse that they seemed to find little in common and less to say.

The corridors branched and branched again until he sat alone in a narrow booth. A rapid metal voice rattled out of the wall, instructing him to press his open hands to the plate in front of him and look into the lens. It asked ques-tions he seldom understood.

“Number 850-28-3294,” it droned at last, “you are found grossly unqualified for any security service. Your earlier field assignment was a gross and inexplicable error. You will proceed to the exit and await final disposition.”

“Final? What does that mean?”

The wall did not explain. The maze of corridors led him on to a little room where the man he might call Paul sat waiting behind a bare glass desk.

“You’re out of the service?” With a sympathetic smile, he rose to offer

his hand. "That tends to support the story you told us, though it does leave you in a devil of a spot. A bonanza, however, for me. At least I can get you off your feet."

He gestured at a chair. Zelazny collapsed into it gratefully.

"Want a drink? A rum cola? My favorite drink on your planet."

With only a stale doughnut and instant coffee for the breakfast he hardly remembered, Zelazny felt readier for nearly anything else, but he accepted the glass and waited silently.

"My informant!" Paul waved his glass expansively. "I did the research I could during the weeks it took to run you down, but I never really got to know a native. For my graduate project, I'm planning an animated exhibit of the culture of Earth, displayed through the story of your own life."

He sipped cautiously at the rum and cola, wishing it had been steak and eggs, while he tried to answer interminable questions about his life, his family, his friends, his experience in the Ohio National Guard, his travels, his studies in school, his political interests, his poetry awards, his plans for the future.

"Back when I had a future," he interrupted bitterly. "I'm starving. Can I have something to eat?"

"Certainly. We've only begun."

Paul left him alone in the room for an anxious hour and came back with a sandwich of imitation bread with slices of imitation ham and imitation cheese, dressed with imitation margarine and imitation mustard. The imitations were less than perfect, but he ate it while Paul resumed the interrogation. When he demanded a rest, Paul showed him into an Earth-type bathroom that adjoined the room, and took him later to a high galley where he could look far across the red-lit waste landscape to another dome rising into the dead-black sky like a huge silver moon.

"The marine complex," Paul said. "For water-breathers."

Walking with him there, Paul continued the interrogation till he begged for a break. Back in the little room, a cot had replaced the desk, and dishes on a table beside it were filled with imitation salad and imitation mutton stew.

The room became a prison. He was sometimes left alone there, battered with never-ending questions from a machine behind the wall. His watch still ran, but Earth time meant nothing here. Paul came unpredictably to wake him for a walk or another meal, always demanding more about his planet and its peoples. He was dreaming that he was back on Earth, shuffling papers for Social Security, when Paul shook him awake.

“Come see yourself!”

Paul ushered him into a vast hall at the top of the dome.

“Your replicate!” He gestured proudly. “A splendid likeness, don’t you think, created to play the central role in my animated diorama of your culture. The grand climax of my studies! The entire faculty seems enormously impressed, and I expect it to make my career.”

Any likeness was hard to see. The replicate looked too dark and too tall. Strangely garbed, with beads strung around its neck and huge rings in its ears, a long spear lifted, it stood guard at the entrance to an enclosure woven of thorny brush. Beyond it a half-naked woman, clad and jeweled just as strangely, grinned from the doorway of a mud-plastered hut.

He stared at Paul.

“What is that meant to be?”

“Don’t you like it?” Paul looked hurt. “I have designed it to portray you as the symbolic prototype of your culture.”

He shook his head.

“Your own life story! I present you as a Masai warrior. The Masai, as you know, are magnificent runners. As the narrative unfolds, your extraordinary abilities are recognized by an American professor who has been searching Kenya for fossil relics of your evolutionary origins. He takes you back to America and obtains an athletic scholarship for you at his university. You win great races. You excel in scholarship. You lecture to share the history and folkways of your people. You win influential friends. You become rich and famous, and finally return to a happy reunion with the woman you had loved when you were children.

“Please say you like it.”

“It’s interesting.” He nodded reluctantly. “But that’s not me. It has

nothing to do with me.”

“Just open your eyes! You must recognize the star role I have given you in the basic myth shared by nearly all your tribes? The mythic hero leaves his home, faces great dangers and crippling handicaps, endures severe ordeals, learns profound truths and discovers new strengths, defeats powerful enemies, creates the genius of his people, and returns at last to enjoy his due rewards. The diorama re-veals you as the spirit of your world! Dramatized, of course, but you must recognize that fiction can convey more truth than bare fact can. Don’t you see?”

Paul waited impatiently for him to nod again.

“I knew you would! You would share my elation if you could stay to see the whole diorama in motion. Unfortunately, however, you are leaving. My superior, whom you remember as Lil, has admitted her terrible blunder. She mistook you for an actual agent, a man she thought had been assigned to the warning station on your satellite. He was given another duty post instead, from which he has just come home.”

“You mean—”

“A matter of transposed digits in the designation of Agent 850-28-3294. His number should have been 3249. As a result, your satellite station has never been manned at all. Lil’s career is in grave jeopardy unless she is able to correct the error at once.”

“Correct?”

“It can be done.”

“How?”

“Simply enough.” Paul grinned at his anxiety. “Technology exists for very severely limited navigation into the past. So long as we create no paradoxical interruptions in established sequences of cause and effect, we can return you to the space-time coordinates where we found you. Lil has arranged for us to leave immediately.”

Waiting for them in the sky-blue Ford, she nodded at him with no apology, and took them up at once, diving back into the transit tube and emerging over the Moon. He napped again during the flight back to Earth, but he was wide awake before she pulled them to the curb on his Cleveland street.

Nearly an hour late to work that morning, he never tried to explain the delay, but as time went on he found that his philosophy of life and art had changed. Poetry had been his first great love. He returned with a new language: his far-ranging and often mythic fiction.

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AFTERWORD

I met Roger at SunCon in 1977. He later moved to New Mexico and became a loyal friend, but New Mexican roads are long and I knew him best from teaching his work. That changed in a remarkable way. “A Rose for Ecclesiastes” and other early stories are finely crafted works of art, brilliantly imagined, full of poetry and literary allusion. The later novels, such as the Amber series, have the same daring originality, the same poetic imagination, but they flow almost in the easy-seeming manner of a chanting epic bard.

“The Story Roger Never Told” story was suggested by that shift, which revealed a second side of Roger’s genius. In these latter days, nobody makes a living writing great short stories. Novels are generally more profitable. The shift may have been commercially impelled, but this story presents an alternative explanation.