

THE GREAT GOODBYE

Robert Charles Wilson

Here's a sly and ingenious little glimpse of what the new millennium ahead may have in store for humanity, one of a weekly series of such speculations about the future commis-sioned by the science magazine *Nature*. ..

Robert Charles Wilson made his first sale in 1974, to *Analog*, but little more was heard from him until the late eighties, when he began to publish a string of ingenious and well-crafted novels and stories that have since established him among the top ranks of the writers who came to promi-nence in the last two decades of the twentieth century. His first novel, *A Hidden Place*, appeared in 1986. He won the Philip K. Dick Award for his 1.995 novel *Mysterium*, and the Aurora Award for his story "The Perseids". His other books include the novels *Memory Wire*, *Gypsies*, *The Divide*, *The Harvest*, *A Bridge of Years*, *Bios and Darwinia*. His most recent book is a new novel, *The Chronoliths*. He lives in Toronto, Canada.

* * * *

THE HARDEST PART OF THE Great Goodbye, for me, was knowing I wouldn't see my grandfather again. We had developed that rare thing, a friendship that crossed the line of the post-evolutionary divide, and I loved him very much.

Humanity had become, by that autumn of 2350, two very distinct human species—if I can use that antiquated term. Oh, the Stock Humans remain a "species" in the classical evolutionary sense: New People, of course, have forgone all that. Post-evolutionary, post-biological, budded or engineered, New People are gloriously free from all the old human restraints. What unites us all is our common source, the Divine Complexity that shaped primordial quark plasma into stars, planets, planaria, people. Grandfather taught me that.

I had always known that we would, one day, be separated. But we first spoke of it, tentatively and reluctantly, when Grandfather went with me to the Museum of Devices in Brussels, a day trip. I was young and easily impressed by the full-scale working model of a "steam train" in the Machine Gallery—an amazingly baroque contrivance of ancient metalwork and gas-pressure technology. Staring at it, I thought (because Grandfather had taught me some of his "religion"): Complexity made this. This is made of Stardust, by Stardust.

We walked from the Machine Gallery to the Gallery of the Planets, drawing more than a few stares from the Stock People (children, especially) around us. It was uncommon to see a New Person fully embodied and in public. The Great Goodbye

had been going on for more than a century; New People were already scarce on Earth, and a New Person walking with a Stock Person was an even more unusual sight—risque, even shocking. We bore the attention gamely. Grandfather held his head high and ignored the muttered insults.

The Gallery of the Planets recorded humanity's expansion into the Solar System, and I hope the irony was obvious to everyone who sniffed at our presence there: Stock People could not have colonized any of these forbidding places (consider Ganymede in its primeval state!) without the partnership of the New. In a way, Grandfather said, this was the most appropriate place we could have come. It was a monument to the long collaboration that was rapidly reaching its end.

The stars, at last, are within our grasp. The grasp, anyhow, of the New People. Was this, I asked Grandfather, why he and I had to be so different from one another?

"Some people," he said, "some families, just happen to prefer the old ways. Soon enough Earth will belong to the Stocks once again, though I'm not sure this is entirely a good thing." And he looked at me sadly. "We've learned a lot from each other. We could have learned more."

"I wish we could be together for centuries and centuries," I said.

I saw him for the last time (some years ago now) at the Shipworks, where the picturesque ruins of Detroit rise from the Michigan Waters, and the star-travelling Polises are assembled and wait like bright green baubles to lift, at last and forever, into the sky. Grandfather had arranged this final meeting—in the flesh, so to speak.

We had delayed it as long as possible. New People are patient: in a way, that's the point. Stock Humans have always dreamed of the stars, but the stars remain beyond their reach. A Stock Human lifetime is simply too short; one or two hundred years won't take you far enough. Relativistic constraints demand that travellers between the stars must be at home between the stars. Only New People have the continuity, the patience, the flexibility to endure and prosper in the Galaxy's immense voids.

I greeted Grandfather on the high embarkation platform where the wind was brisk and cool. He lifted me up in his arms and admired me with his bright blue eyes. We talked about trivial things, for the simple pleasure of talking. Then he said, "This isn't easy, this saying goodbye. It makes me think of mortality—that old enemy."

"It's all right," I said.

"Perhaps you could still change your mind?"

I shook my head, no. A New Person can transform himself into a Stock Person and vice versa, but the social taboos are strong, the obstacles (family dissension, legal entanglements) almost insurmountable, as Grandfather knew too well. And in any case that wasn't my choice. I was content as I was. Or so I chose to believe.

"Well, then," he said, empty, for once, of words. He looked away. The Polis would be rising soon, beginning its aeons-long navigation of our near stellar neighbours. Discovering, no doubt, great wonders.

"Goodbye, boy," he said.

I said, "Goodbye, Grandfather."

Then he rose to his full height on his many translucent legs, winked one dish-sized glacial blue eye, and walked with a slow machinely dignity to the vessel that would carry him away. And I watched, desolate, alone on the platform with the wind in my hair, as his ship rose into the arc of the high clean noonday sky.

* * * *