

## Cold War by Bruce McAllister

*Bruce McAllister published his first story in 1963 and he made his first appearance in our pages in the April 1968 issue. He is the author of two novels, Humanity Prime and Dream Baby. During the 1990s, we didn't hear much from him, but in recent years he has been very productive, with stories appearing in Asimov's, Sci Fiction, not to mention "Hero: The Movie" and "The Boy in Zaquitos" in recent issues of ours. He says he's working on a YA novel, The Dragons of Como. His new one is a disquieting tale of what might have been (and what may yet still be).*

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During those decades we never really knew who was watching.

--Admiral William "Billy" Brandicoff, 1918-2000

One night when I was ten, too grown-up to sit between my mother and father in the front seat anymore, my dad put us in the car at our house on San Diego Bay and began to drive through the night into the northern part of the county and its vast scrub-brush emptiness.

My father was executive officer of the Navy laboratory high up on the peninsula, where civilian scientists with top-secret clearances did their experiments day and night, though he'd never taken us there. It was classified and he couldn't. But tonight, even if he wasn't wearing his uniform, he was taking us somewhere, somewhere that felt secret.

He didn't say a thing as we drove. He didn't say, "I've got a surprise for you two," or "This is going to be a long drive, but I think it'll be worth it." He just drove while my mother told him about what the other wives were doing for the Christmas dinner at the yacht club and how well I was doing in science and social studies, and, well, yes, a little less well in math.

I don't remember whether we passed through a military gate. If we did, it was a simple one, barely there, where a Marine guard in a booth, seeing the sticker on our car, saluted crisply, clicked his heels, as they all did, and said, "Good evening, Sir." It wasn't heavy security or I'd remember that. It was just an endless training base somewhere in the northern part of the county where, in the moonlight, my father drove and drove and my mother and I tried to stay awake.

At one point we passed--I remember this--some barracks where moths and other bugs beat themselves silly against the rafter lights, and a soldier, just one, lit a cigarette, paying no attention to the insects or us. But after those barracks the endless chaparral just became more endless. I fell asleep, and I know my mother did too because she stopped talking--something that was, as my uncles used to say with affection, "a very rare thing."

When the road turned bumpy, I woke up, sat up, and we were on a dirt road. In the distance ahead was a single yellowish light, the kind you always see on country roads, wondering who lives there and what they're doing and whether they would ask you in if your car broke down. In that light there were people, I always told myself; people different from me, but still people, and wasn't it an amazing thing, there in the darkness, miles from anywhere, a light that told the universe there were human beings there?

When my father slowed at last, the light became a shack--the kind you'd imagine cowboys or sheep-herders would live in, except for a bunch of antennas on its roof--and we stopped. My father still said nothing. My mother was awake now, too, and we got out.

At the door of the shack a man in civilian clothes--a red cowboy shirt and jeans (I remember that, too)--held the screen door for us as we went in, and he said, "Good to see you, Captain. Good to see you, too, Ma'am," while my parents said the same, I'm sure.

There was a table in the corner, under three bare light bulbs, and on the table was a machine of some kind--a machine with needles, the kind you'd use to measure the waves of your brain--and I remember looking from my dad to the man in jeans, waiting for someone to say what the machine was, though no one did.

I don't know how I got close enough to see what the needles were doing, but I did. Maybe my dad pushed me closer. Maybe the man in jeans waved for me to step in. That's the kind of thing memory often leaves out, though supposedly it's all still deep inside us, should we ever need it. I don't need it yet, I guess. All I really need to remember, to remember that night, is that I stood close enough to see the needles scratching rhythmically with their black ink while somewhere my mother and father watched too.

We watched and waited, and no one said a thing. And then the needles jumped suddenly, scratching furiously, and the man, who was somehow sitting at the table beside me now, looked around at my father and said, "This is it."

"Sputnik," my father said, and I jumped at his voice. It was the first word he'd spoken all night--at least that's how it felt--and he was looking at both of us, my mom and me, as he said it. "It's overhead," he was saying. "Right now--isn't that right?"

The man in jeans nodded, his eyes on the ink.

"The Russians are watching us," my dad said.

I remember thinking: *This is what matters*. Not that the Russians were watching; and not that they could do this, my father and the civilian scientists he oversaw at the lab high on the Point--listening to it with needles and ink; but that it was over us at that very moment, that it was up there somewhere in the night beyond the ceiling, a light no brighter than many stars, but moving across the sky and as much of a miracle.

My mother started to say something--to ask a question maybe--but didn't, as if she were seeing it too: *what really mattered*.

"Every night?" my father asked.

"Yes, Captain," the man said. "Remarkable, isn't it."

"Yes. Doesn't seem possible."

"No, Sir, it doesn't."

We stared at the needles, listened to them quiet down, and seemed to be waiting. For what? I wondered. The satellite would not come around again for a long time, would it?

Then the furious scratching started up again, much louder this time, and I knew this sound was what we'd been waiting for. My father leaned in, as if the sudden shadow of ink on the long, endless paper that folded and folded again on the floor as it left the machine, would tell him what was above us now, even as the man in jeans made room for him, moving his chair, my father saying, "It's bigger tonight."

"No. It's just sending out more, Sir."

"More what?"

"Light--a kind of light...."

"One we can't see."

"Right."

My father nodded once--I remember that--and was silent again, and we all watched the paper turn black from the sudden bursts, as if a long finger, maybe God's, were reaching down from the night sky to touch the table before us.

"Do you see it?" my father asked me.

"Yes, Dad."

"Do *you*?" he asked my mother, who nodded, saying, "It's louder."

"Yes, it is," he said.

My dad nodded again, and I could tell it was time to go. He and the man shook hands. "Great work, Gary," my dad said. The man complimented my mother on something she was wearing--they'd met before, I realized--and we walked to the screen door. I didn't want to leave. I could have stayed in the shack with the machine all night, waiting and watching.

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I remember this, too: looking through the rear windshield of our Chevrolet, watching the yellow light of the shack getting smaller behind us in the dark, and for a moment the little light seeming to brighten, seeming to rush at us like a voice, a presence as big as space itself, hoping to tell us something, but then it was quiet again, only the twinkling nursery-rhyme stars above us in the night as my mother said, "That was fascinating, Jimmie." Then, as if time and space were caught in a stutter and we were caught in it, she repeated it: "That was fascinating, Jimmie." "That was fascinating, Jimmie," she said a third time, and I could hear in her voice that she wanted to break free, but couldn't.

After a while--an hour maybe, maybe more--when I was still watching the road behind us and still shaking, though the voice and the light were gone--my father said quietly, "I--I wanted you both to see it."

"Yes," my mother answered, and I said something too, our voices unsteady. Maybe it was to thank him. I don't know exactly what we said, but I'm sure we thanked him.

"Will they ever know what it is?" my mother asked, just once.

My father didn't answer. He was breathing hard--I remember this now--I remember thinking how strange it was--and he wasn't blinking. He was driving but not blinking. When he did speak, when he could speak, his voice was hoarse--I remember this, too--and it was to say, "I don't think so. It comes when it wants and it goes when it wants, Dorothy. It's big and it's got its own kind of light."

But he wasn't thinking of its light, I knew. None of us were. We were thinking of the *ink*, there on the endless sheet of paper, the only thing we could really be sure of, the only thing we'd later claim we remembered, though somewhere inside us we would hear the voice and remember *everything*, and it would make us shake.