

THE HOUSE LEFT EMPTY

by Robert Reed

While Robert Reed's short story "Eight Episodes" (*Asimov's*, June 2006) and novella "A Billion Eves" (*Asimov's*, October/November 2006) gave the author his seventh and eighth Hugo nominations, the latter tale also gave him his first Hugo Award. In his latest story for us, he investigates the significance of...

* * * *

The truck was long and white, with a name I didn't recognize stenciled on the side. But that doesn't mean much, what with new delivery services springing up every other day. It was the details I noticed, and I've always been good with details: No serious business would call itself something as drab as Rapid Distribution. The truck's body had been grown from a topnotch Ford-Chevy schematic, tires woven from pricey diamond-studded glass. But the machine acted heavier than I expected, as if somebody had thrown extra steel and aluminum into the recipe—just to help a pair of comatose industries. Instead of a joystick, the driver was holding onto a heavily padded old-fashioned steering wheel, and he was locked in place with three fat seat belts, a cumbersome buckle stuck over his poor groin. Standard federal issue, fancy and inefficient; and, not for the first time, I wondered why we still pretend to pay taxes to the remnants of our once-national government.

It was mid-morning. I was sitting in my living room, considering my options for the rest of the day. My roof tiles were clean, house batteries already charged, the extra juice feeding into the SG's communal bank. The factory inside my garage had its marching orders—facsimile milk and bananas, a new garden hose and a dozen pairs of socks—and it certainly didn't want my help with those chores. I could have been out in my yard, but last night's downpour had left the ground too soggy to work. I could attack one of the six or seven books I'd been wrestling with lately, or go on-line on some errand sure to lead to a hundred distractions. But with the early warm weather, what I was thinking about was a bike ride. I have four fresh-grown bikes, each designed for a different kind of wandering, but even a decision that simple requires some careful, lazy consideration.

Then the delivery truck drove past my house. I heard the *bang* when it hit the pothole up the street, and then the long white body swung into view. I immediately spotted the uniformed driver clinging to his steering wheel, trying to read the number that I'd painted beside my front door. He was young and definitely nervous. Which was only natural, since he obviously

didn't know our SG. But he saw something worthwhile, pulling up alongside the far curb and parking. The uniform was tan and unmemorable. A clipboard rested on his lap. With a finger leading the way, he reread the address that he was searching for. Then he glanced back up the street. His sliding door was pulled open, but the crash harness wouldn't let him get a good look. So he killed the engine and punched the buckle and climbed down, carrying the clipboard in one hand and noticing me as he strode past my window.

I considered waving, but decided otherwise.

The deliveryman disappeared for a couple of minutes. I wanted to watch him trying to do his job. But my instincts are usually wiser in these matters, and they told me to do nothing. Just sit and wait, guessing that he'd come looking for me eventually.

Which he did.

If anything, the poor guy was more nervous than before, and, deep inside, a little angry. He didn't want to be here. He was having real troubles with our streets and numbers. My guess then, and still, is that he was using a badly compromised database—not an unlikely explanation, what with the EMP blasts over Washington and New York, followed by the Grand Meltdown of the original Internet.

Of course he could have been hunting for me.

But that seemed unlikely, and maybe I didn't want to be found. Climbing back into his truck, he turned on the engine with his thumbprint and a keypad. I couldn't hear the AI's warning voice, but judging by the guy's body language, he didn't want to bother with any damned harness.

Real quick, he looked in through my window, into my house, straight at me sitting on my black facsimile-leather sofa.

Then he drove up to the next corner and turned and came back again, ending up parked two doors west of me.

This time, I got up off the sofa and watched.

His best guess was that the smallest house on my street was the one he wanted. Several minutes were invested in ringing the bell while knocking harder and harder at the old front door. Then after giving the window blinds a long study, he kneeled to look down into the window well, trying to decide

if someone was lurking in the cool, damp basement.

Nobody was.

With no other choice, he finally stood and walked my way, sucking at his teeth, one of his hands beating at the clipboard.

I went into the bedroom and waited.

When the bell rang, I waited some more. Just to make him wonder if he had seen me in the first place. Then I opened the door and said, "Yeah?" without unlatching the storm. "What's up?"

The guy was older than I'd first guessed. And up close, he looked like the sort who's usually sharp and together. Organization mattered to this man. He didn't approve of mix-ups. But he'd been in this delivery game long enough to recognize trouble when it had its jaws around him.

"Sorry to bother you, sir."

"No problem."

"But can I ask ... do you know your neighbors...?"

"A few of them."

He glanced down at the clipboard's display, just to be sure before saying, "Penderlick?"

"No."

"Ivan Penderlick?"

"What's that first name?"

"Ivan?" he said hopefully.

"No." I shook my head. "Doesn't ring any bell."

This wasn't the news he was hoping for.

"But maybe I've seen him," I mentioned. "What's this Ivan guy look like?"

That could be a perfectly natural question. But the deliveryman had to shake his head, admitting, “They didn’t give me any photo.”

The Meltdown’s first targets were the federal servers.

That’s when I opened the storm door, proving that I trusted the man. “Okay. What address are you chasing?”

“Four-seven-four-four Mayapple Lane,” he read out loud. “Are you forty-seven fifty-four Mayapple?”

“That’s the old system.”

“I realize that, sir.”

“We pulled out of the city six years ago,” I reported. “New names for our streets, and new numbers.”

He flinched, as if his belly ached.

Then I had to ask, “You from around here?”

“Yes, sir.”

As liars go, he was awful.

I asked, “Which SG do you belong to?”

He offered a random name.

I nodded. “How’s life up there?”

“Fine.” Lying made him squirm. Looking at the clipboard, he asked, “Were you once 4754 Mayapple?”

“I was,” I said.

“The house two doors down—?”

“That ranch house?”

“Was it 4744?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so?”

“I’m pretty sure it wasn’t. Sorry.”

Minor-league mix-ups happened all too often. I could tell from the deliveryman’s stooped shoulders and the hard-chewed lower lip.

“Call out for help,” I suggested. “Our cell tower can get you anywhere in the world, if you’re patient.”

But he didn’t want that. Unless his hair caught fire, he wouldn’t involve his bosses.

“Mayapple was a short street,” I mentioned. “Go west, on the other side of the park, and you’d pick it up again. Of course that’s a different SG now. The street’s got a new name, I don’t remember what. But I’d bet anything there’s a house waiting, someplace that used to be 3744 Mayapple. Could that be your answer? Your first four is actually a three instead?”

An unlikely explanation, yet he had to nod and hope.

But then as he turned away, he thought to ask, “The name Penderlick doesn’t mean anything to you? Anything at all?”

“Sorry, no.”

Unlike that deliveryman, I am a superb liar.

* * * *

Our Self-Governing District is one of the best in the area. At least we like to think so. About five hundred homes stand on this side of the park, along with two bars and a public hall, an automated health clinic and a human dentist, plus a cell tower on talking terms to twenty others, and one big shop that can grow almost anything you can’t, and one tiny but very useful service station that not only has liquor to sell on the average day but can keep almost any machine functioning. One of the station mechanics lives one street over from me. We’re friends, maybe good friends. But that wasn’t the reason I half-ran to his front door.

His name is Jack, but everybody knows him as Gus.

“What do you think he was doing here?” Gus asked me.

“Bringing something special,” I allowed. “I mean, if you’re the Feds and you’re going to send out an entire truck, just for Ivan ... well, it’s going to be an important shipment, whatever it is.”

Gus was a tough old gentleman who liked his hair short and his tattoos prominently displayed. Nodding, he asked, “Have you seen our neighbor lately?”

Ivan was never my neighbor. I took over my present house a couple of years after he moved out of his.

“But has he been around lately?” Gus asked.

“Not since he cut his grass last year,” I allowed. “Early November, maybe.”

It was March now.

“A delivery, huh?”

“From Rapid Distribution.”

“Yeah, that’s going to be a government name.” Gus was grinning. “Didn’t I tell you? Ivan was important, back when.”

“You said so.”

“You do like I told you? Search out his name?”

When I was a kid, the Internet was simple and quick. But that was before the EMP blasts and the Meltdown. Databases aren’t just corrupted nowadays; AI parasites are still running wild, producing lies and their own security barriers. What I could be sure of was a string of unreadable papers and a few tiny news items—not much information maybe, but enough to make me accept the idea that my almost-neighbor had once been a heavyweight in the world of science.

Governmental science, to be precise.

“How’d Ivan look, last time you saw him?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“How was his weight?”

“He looked skinny,” I admitted.

“Cancer-skinny, or fit-skinny?”

I couldn’t remember.

Gus used to be friendly with the old Ph.D. “Of course you mentioned that Ivan lives with his daughter now.”

“The daughter, is it?”

Gus knew me well enough to laugh. “You didn’t tell him, did you?”

“It slipped my mind.”

He threw me a suspicious stare. “And is there some compelling reason why you came racing over here two minutes before I’m supposed to go to work?”

“That deliveryman will come back again,” I promised.

“If the daughter isn’t in their files, sure. Somebody’s going to make a couple more stabs to deliver the package. Whatever it is.”

“I didn’t tell him that the house was empty. What if he shows and finds an old guy sitting on the porch of that house, enjoying the spring sun?”

“I’m supposed to be Ivan?”

“Sure.”

“What if it’s valuable, this delivery is?”

“Well then,” I said. “I guess that depends on how valuable valuable is. If you know what I mean.”

* * * *

I’m not old, but I’m old enough to remember when the world felt enormous, and everybody was busy buying crap and selling crap, using their profits to move fast across the globe. In those times, life was fat and

sweet and perfectly reasonable. Why shouldn't seven billion souls fight for their slice of the endless wealth? But still, not everybody agreed with the plan. Environmentalists had valid points; apocalyptic religions had a strong urge toward mayhem. Some governments tried cracking down on all kinds of enemies, real and otherwise, and that spawned some tough-minded groups that wanted to remake the world along any of a hundred different lines.

Our past leaders made some spectacularly lousy decisions, and those decisions led to some brutal years. But it wasn't all just chaos and famine and economic collapse. Good things happened while I was a young man. Like the cheap black tiles that every roof wears today, supplying enough electricity to keep people lit-up and comfortable. Like the engineered bugs that swim inside everybody's biotank, cleaning our water better than any of the defunct sewage systems ever could. And the nanological factories that an average guy can assemble inside his garage, using them to grow and harvest most of the possessions that he could possibly need, including respectable food and fashionable clothes, carbon-hulled bicycles and computers that haven't required improvement for the last ten years.

The old nation-states are mangled. But without any burning need, nobody seems eager to resurrect what used to be.

The old communications and spy satellites have been lost, destroyed by the space debris and radioactive residues stuck in orbit. There are days when I think that it would make sense to reconstitute that old network, but there just aren't enough hands or money, at least for the time being.

A few physical commodities still demand physical transportation: fancy products protected by the best patents or their own innate complexities; one-of-a-kind items with deep sentimental attachments; and certain rare raw materials. But I don't usually hunger for vials of iridium or a kidney grown in some distant vat. My needs are more than being met by my patch of dirt and my black rooftop.

That old world was gigantic, but mine is small: five hundred houses and a slice of parkland, plus the old, mostly empty roads that cut through our little nation, and the pipes and gas mains eroding away under our feet. As an SG, we take care of ourselves. We have laws, and we have conventions and routes that feuding parties can use, if they can't answer their troubles privately. We have a good school for the few kids getting born these days. We even have a system for helping people suffering through a stretch of lousy luck. Which is why nobody remembers the last time

anybody in our little nation had to go hungry or feel cold.

But that doesn't mean we can quit worrying about bad times.

While we sat on Ivan's front steps, I gave Gus one-half of a freshly cultured facsimile-orange, and as we sucked on the sweet juice, we discussed the latest news from places that seemed as distant as the far side of the moon.

Ivan's house was the oldest and least impressive on the block—a shabby ranch-style home wearing asphalt roof tiles and aluminum siding. What interested me about his property was the lot itself, double-sized and most of it hidden from the street. The backyard was long and sunny, and I'd walked its green grass enough times to feel sure that the ground was rich, uncontaminated by any careless excavations over the past century. My ground is the opposite: fill-earth clay packed down by machines and chronic abuse. And even though our facsimile foods are nutritious and halfway tasty, everybody enjoys the real tomatoes and squash and raspberries that we grow every summer.

I mentioned the long yard to Gus, and not for the first time.

"It would be nice," he agreed, stuffing the orange rind into the pocket where he always kept his compostables. "We could build a community garden, maybe. It'd help people keep busy and happy."

People were already happy. This would just add to our reasons.

"I hear a truck," he said, tipping his head now.

A low, powerful rumble was approaching. We were a couple of blocks from the main arterial, but without traffic, sounds carried.

I stood. "Good luck, Gus."

"Ivan," he corrected.

"Ivan. Yeah."

My ground was too wet to work, but that's what I was pretending to do when the white truck drove past. I had a shovel in my hand, eyes staring at a lump of clayish mud. If the driver looked at me, I didn't see it.

This time, the deliveryman knew exactly where he was going.

I didn't look up until I heard the two men talking. At a distance, words didn't carry. But I could tell one of them was nervous and the other was confident. One of them was a long way from home, while the other looked as if he belonged nowhere else in the world but lounging on that front porch.

The driver must have asked for identification, leading Gus to give some story about not having any. Who needs a driver's license in a world where people rarely travel? The deliveryman probably heard that excuse every day, but there were rules: he couldn't just give what he had to anybody, could he?

Then I made out the loud, certain words, "Well, I am Ivan Penderlick. Just ask anybody."

I stood there, waiting to be asked. My plan was to say, "Oh, this is Ivan What's-His-Name? I don't talk to the guy much, you see. I just knew him as The Professor."

But the deliveryman didn't want to bother with witnesses. He probably had a sense for when locals didn't approve of the old government. Which was another hazard in his daily duties, I would think.

All he wanted was a little reassurance.

Gus nodded, pretending to understand. Then he opened the front door that we had jimmed just ten minutes ago. Reaching inside, he pulled out a photograph of himself and his own daughter, and instantly he began spinning a convincing story that might or might not match any sketchy biography that the driver was carrying with him.

"Good enough," was the verdict.

The driver vanished inside his truck, then returned with a dark wooden box just big enough and just heavy enough to require both arms to carry it.

At first, Gus refused to accept the delivery.

I watched him demanding identification before he signed for anything. How else would he know this was on the up and up? His complaining won a hard stare, but then several documents were shown, and with no small amount of relief, the two men parted, each thrilled by the prospect of never seeing the other again.

Burning booze, the truck left for its next delivery somewhere in the wilderness that used to be the United States.

Gus set the box on the front steps, using a screwdriver to pry up a few big staples.

I walked toward him. Part of me expected an explosion, though I can't tell you why. Mostly I was hoping for something with value, something that could offer an ambitious man some leverage. But there was no way I would have expected the hunk of machinery Gus found wrapped inside a sleeve of aerogel, or the simple note stuck under the lid:

"Ivan:

"In a better world, this would be where it belongs."

I stared at the device, not sure what to think.

"Know what you're seeing?" my friend asked.

"No," I admitted. "What?"

"A starship," the older man remarked. Then he sat on the stairs, drooping as if weak. "Who would have believed it? Huh?"

* * * *

What we had in our hands was a model, I told myself. A mock-up. Something slapped together in an old-style machine shop, using materials that might look and feel genuine but was built for no other purpose than to convince visiting senators and the captains of industry that such wonders were possible if only they would throw so-many billions toward this glorious, astonishing future.

"It isn't real," I said.

Gus made soft, doubting sounds.

"Somebody found it on a shelf somewhere." I was piecing together a believable story. "Somebody who remembers Ivan and thought the old man would appreciate the gift."

"Except," said Gus.

“Except what?”

He handed the starship to me and closed the empty box, and after running a mechanic’s thick hand along one edge, he mentioned, “This isn’t just a run-of-the-mill packing crate.”

It was a walnut box. A nice box, sure.

Then he turned it ninety degrees, revealing a small brass plaque that identified the contents as being Number 18 in an initial culture of 63.

“That’s exactly how many starships they made,” he told me.

The number was familiar. But I had to ask, “Why sixty-three?”

“Our twenty-one closest star systems were targeted,” he explained. “The railgun was supposed to launch three of these wonders at each of them.”

The ball in my hands was black and slick, a little bigger than a basketball and heavier than seemed natural. When I was a kid, I’d gone bowling once or twice. This ball was heavier than those. There were a lot of tiny holes and a couple of large pits, and I thought I could see where fins and limbs might pop out or unfold. Of course the starship was a model. Anything else was too incredible. But just the idea that it might be real made me hold it carefully, but away from my body, away from my groin.

“It won’t be radioactive,” Gus said. “They never bothered fueling things. I’m practically sure of it.”

“If you say so.” I handed it back to him.

But he didn’t hug the ball either, I noticed.

“So,” I said. “Do you know where the daughter lives?”

Gus didn’t seem to hear me.

“Even if this is a model,” I mentioned, “Ivan’s going to be thrilled to get it.”

Which could earn me some goodwill points in the process.

“I know,” said Gus.

“Where the daughter lives?”

“That too. But I just figured how to see if this is real or not.” He was holding the mystery with both hands, and after showing me a little smile—the kind of grin a wicked boy uses with his best buddy—Gus gave a grunt and flung our treasure straight ahead. I wasn’t ready. Stunned, I watched it climb in a high arc before dropping to the sidewalk, delivering a terrific blow that I heard and felt, leaving the gray concrete chipped and the starship rolling with a certain majesty over the curb and out into the street.

I ran our treasure down, ready to be angry.

But except for a little dust to wipe away, the starship hadn’t noticed any of the abuse.

“Is that enough proof ?” I asked doubtfully.

“Unless you’ve got a sophisticated materials lab tucked in your basement somewhere.”

“I’ll check.”

He laughed.

Then he said, “The daughter lives in the old Highpark area. I got the original address written down somewhere.”

And I had a stack of maps pulled out of old phonebooks. Give us enough time, and we’d probably be able to find the right front door.

I made noise about getting one of the bikes and my big trailer.

Gus set the starship back into its aerogel sleeve and then into the box. Then he closed the lid and shook his head, remarking to me, “With a supremely important occasion like this, I believe we should drive.”

* * * *

Our SG has some community cars and small trucks, while a few households have their own little putt-putts. Even if you don’t drive much, it’s halfway easy to keep your vehicle working, what with a factory in every garage and experts like Gus to putter in the gaps. My friend had a certain

client in mind, and while I found my best map of the old city and packed a lunch for each of us, he wandered around the corner to ask one very big favor. By the time I stepped outside again, he was waiting at the end of the drive, sitting behind the joystick of a 2021 Ferrari. That was Mr. Bleacon's baby, manufactured in his own garage by nanologicals steered along by some semi-official schematics, fed nothing but pot metals and stolen pipes and a lot of plastic trash left over from the last century.

"If we're going to ride with a starship," Gus pointed out, "we should have a halfway appropriate vehicle."

We weren't going to get twenty miles to the gallon of alcohol, but just the power of that machine made this into a wondrous adventure.

With our prize stowed in the tiny trunk, I asked, "So what if Number 18 is genuine?"

Gus pushed the joystick forward, and in an instant, we were sprinting out into the wide, empty street.

"You hear me?" I asked.

"Most of the time."

I waited.

"I was expecting that question," he admitted.

"Glad to be predictable."

The first big intersection was marked with Stop signs. But even at a distance, it was easy to see that nobody was coming. Gus accelerated and blew through, but then as soon as we rolled out of our SG, he throttled back to what was probably a quick-but-legal speed.

"So what if—?" I started asking again.

"You think we should beg for more? More than just ground for our crops?"

"Maybe. If you think about how much money went to making sixty-three of these machines."

"Don't forget the railgun," Gus mentioned. "Before the project ended,

they had most of the pieces in orbit, along with enough solar panels to light up half of the United States.”

You don't hear those two words much anymore.

United States.

“Do you know how this probe would have worked?” he asked me.

I was watching houses slipping past, and then all at once there was nothing but empty businesses. A strip mall. A couple of abandoned service stations. And then another strip mall, this one with a couple of stores that might have been occupied. A hair cutting place, and some kind of pet store. Two little traces of commerce tucked into the new world order. I didn't often come this way when I biked. There were prettier, easier routes. But I could see where some people would pay for a good barber. As for pets: cats were running free everywhere, but not many dogs or hamsters. Or parakeets either. So until we can grow critters like them in our garages and basements, shops like that would survive.

“The railgun would have fired our probe like a cannon ball,” I answered.

“Which is one reason why it has to be tough,” Gus explained. “That shell is almost unbreakable, and the guts too. Because of the crushing gee-forces.”

I had known Gus for years, but he was revealing interests that I had never suspected.

“How long would it have taken?” I asked, testing him.

“To reach the target star? A few centuries.”

What a crazy, crazy project. That's what I thought. But I was careful not to be too honest.

“Three probes to each star system, each one talking to each other two, and occasionally shouting back to us.” He scratched his chin, adding, “They would have saved most of their energy for those few days when they'd fly past their targets.”

“Fly past? You mean they weren't going into orbit or anything?”

“Too much momentum. No engines to slow them down.” Gus paused for a moment, and then asked, “Do I turn here?”

“Left. I think.”

The Ferrari changed its momentum without complaint.

I had to say, “It seems a huge waste.”

“What?”

“Throwing half a trillion dollars or whatever it was at the stars, and getting nothing out of it but a quick look-see.”

With a hard voice, he said, “You’re young.”

I don’t feel that young anymore. But I asked, “So what?”

“You don’t remember how things were.” Gus shrugged and gave a big sigh before adding, “The probe couldn’t go into orbit. But do you know what’s inside that black ball?”

I said, “No.”

I looked down at the map and said, “Right. Turn here, right.”

We were cruising up a fresh street. Some of the houses were abandoned. No, most of them were. Now I remembered another reason why I never came this way on my bike. Political troubles in a couple of SGs had gotten out of hand. In the end, the Emergency Council dispatched police to mash down the troubles, teaching all the parties to act nice.

“What’s inside the black ball?” I asked, prompting him.

“The original nanochines,” he told me.

Which I halfway remembered, maybe.

“Tiny bits of diamond dust filled with devices and knowledge.” He came to another intersection. “Straight?”

“Looks like.” I had the old address circled on the yellowed map.

“Anyway,” said Gus, “those bits of dust would have been squirted

free long before the star was reached. They had tiny, tiny parachutes that would have opened. Light sails, really. The sunlight would have killed their velocity down to where they would start to drift. Each probe carried a few thousand of those amazing little devices. And if one or two landed on a useful asteroid, they would have come awake and started eating sunlight for energy, feed on rock and divide themselves a million million times. And eventually we would have a large loud automated base permanently on station, screaming back at us.”

“In a few centuries’ time,” I said.

He nodded. “As good as our shops are? As much crap as we can make from nothing but trash and orange peels? The marvels sleeping in that pregnant machine make our tools look like stone knives and flintlock pistols.”

Which is when I pointed out, “So maybe this starship thing is worth a whole lot.”

Gus slowed the car and then looked over at me.

“I’m just mentioning the obvious,” I said.

And for the first and only time, Gus told me, “I like you, Josh. I do. But that doesn’t mean I have illusions when it comes to your nature. Or infinite patience with your scheming, either. Understood?”

I gave a nod.

Then he shoved the joystick forward, pressing me hard into the rich fake leather of the seat.

* * * *

It was easy to see why Old Ivan abandoned his little house to live with his daughter.

Every building standing just outside her large SG had been torn down, and people with resources and a lot to lose had built themselves a wall with the rubble—a tall thick castle-worthy wall made from the scavenged bricks and stone, concrete blocks and two-by-fours. I’d heard stories about Highpark, but until that moment, I hadn’t bothered coming up this way. At least twenty signs warned off the curious and uninvited. There was only one entranceway that we could find, and it was guarded by military-grade robots

and a tall titanium gate. We parked outside and approaching on foot, me walking a half-step behind Gus. Weapons at the ready, the robots studied our faces while searching their databases for any useful clues to our identities and natures. I decided to let my friend do the talking. Quietly, gently, Gus explained that an important package had been delivered to the wrong address, and if possible, would they please inform Ivan Penderlick that his old neighbors had come to pay their respects?

A call was made on our behalf.

After what seemed like an hour, the gate unlocked with a sharp *thunk*, and we were told to leave our vehicle where it was. Only our bodies and the package would be allowed inside the compound.

There are SGs, and there are SGs.

No doubt this was the best one I'd ever seen. Every house was big and well-maintained, sitting in the middle of huge lawns that were covered with greenhouses and extra solar panels, towering windmills and enough cell phone antennas to keep every resident connected to the world at the same time.

The house that we wanted was wearing a richer and blacker and much more efficient brand of solar paneling.

The greenhouses were top-of-the-line, too.

Of course I could always build my own greenhouses. But without the power for climate control, the plants would freeze during the cold winter nights, and come summer, when the sun was its best, everything inside the transparent structures would flash-fry.

Stopping on the front walk, I stared at red tomatoes begging to be picked.

Carrying the walnut box, Gus reached the front door before me, and he said, "Ma'am," before turning back to me, saying, "Come on, Josh. We're expected."

The daughter was Gus's age, give or take.

But she didn't look like the tattoo kind of gal.

The woman said, "My father's sleeping now. Could I get you

gentlemen something to drink?"

Gus said, "Water."

I said the same, adding, "Thank you, ma'am."

She came back with a pitcher filled with ice water and three tall glasses, and once everybody was sitting politely, she asked if she could see what was inside the mysterious box.

Gus handled the unveiling.

I watched the lady's face. All it took was a glance, and she knew what she was seeing. Her dark eyes grew big and the mouth opened for a long moment, empty of words but obviously impressed.

Then Gus said, "We'd like your father to have this. Naturally."

She didn't seem to hear him. With a slow nod, she asked, "Exactly how did you come by this object?"

I jumped in, telling the story quickly, passing over details that might make us out to be in the wrong.

At the end of the story, she sighed.

Then she heard a sound that neither of us had noticed. Suddenly she stood up and said, "Dad's awake now. Just a minute, please."

We were left alone for a couple of minutes. But I had the strong feeling that various eyes, electronic and otherwise, were keeping watch over us.

When the daughter returned, a skeletal figure was walking at her side, guided along by one of her hands and a smooth slow voice that kept telling him, "This way, Dad. This way, this way."

Winter had transformed Old Ivan.

He was a shell. He was wasted and vacant and simple, sitting where he was told to sit and looking down into the box only when his daughter commanded him to do that. For a long moment, he stared at the amazing machine that he once helped build. Then he looked up, and with a voice surprisingly strong and passionate, he said, "I'm hungry. I want to eat."

“Sure, Dad. I’ll get you something right now.”

But she didn’t do anything. She just sat for another couple of moments, staring at the precious object that he hadn’t recognized.

One last time, I looked at the starship, and then Gus took me by the elbow and took us toward the front door.

“Anyway,” he said to the daughter, “it’s his. It’s yours.”

“Maybe he’ll remember it later,” she said coolly, without real hope.

Then I said, “We were hoping, ma’am. Hoping that we could earn something for our trouble today.”

Gus gave me a cutting look.

But our hostess seemed pleased. Her suspicions about us had been vindicated. With a suspicious smile, she asked, “What would you like?”

“It’s about that empty house,” I admitted.

“Yes?”

“And the lot it sits on,” I added. “As it is, all of that is going to waste.”

She looked at Gus now. “I’m surprised,” she admitted. “You people could have taken it over, and who would have stopped you?”

“Except it’s not ours,” Gus allowed.

How many times had I dreamed of doing just that? But our SG has its rules, and there’s no more getting around them.

“I should warn you,” she mentioned. “I promised my dad that as long as he’s alive, that house remains his. But when he is gone, I will send word to you, and after that you and your people will be free to do whatever you want with the building and its land. Is that fair?”

“More than fair,” Gus agreed.

“But how about today?” I asked.

Suddenly both of them were throwing daggers with their eyes. But I just laughed it off, suggesting, "What about a sack of fresh tomatoes? Would that be too much trouble, ma'am?"

* * * *

For maybe half the drive home, Gus said nothing.

I thought he was angry with me. I couldn't take it seriously, but I was thinking of charming words when he broke the silence. Out of nowhere, Gus said, "This is what makes me sad," and it had nothing to do with me.

"Think of everything we've got in our lives," he said. "The water that we clean for ourselves. The food we grow in our garages. The easy power, and the machinery, plus all the independence that comes with the SG life. These aren't tiny blessings, Josh. A century ago, no one was able to stand apart from the rest of the world so completely, so thoroughly."

"I guess not," I allowed.

"But there's this big, big house, you see. And it's just sitting empty."

"Ivan's place isn't big," I reminded him.

But then Gus pointed at the sky, shaking his head sadly as he began to speak again. "With even the most basic tools, you and I and the rest of our SG could equip our own starship. Not a little ball thrown out of a cannon. No, I'm talking about an asteroid or comet with us safe in the middle, starting a ten thousand year voyage to whichever sun we want our descendants to see first."

"I guess that would work," I allowed.

"The biggest house of all is the universe, and it's going to waste," Gus said.

Then he pushed the joystick forward, pushing the big engine up to where it finally began to come awake.

"Sometimes I wish that we'd taken a different turn," he called out.

"Who doesn't think that?" I asked, watching our speed pick up, the world around us starting to blur.

