

Brian W.Aldiss

OUTSIDE

They never went out of the house. The man whose name was Harley used to get up first. Sometimes he would take a stroll through the building in his sleeping suit - the temperature remained always mild, day after day. Then he would rouse Calvin, the handsome, broad man who looked as if he could command a dozen talents and never actually used one. He made as much company as Harley needed.

Dapple, the girl with killing grey eyes and black hair, was a light sleeper. The sound of the two men talking would wake her. She would get up and go to rouse May; together they would go down and prepare a meal. While they were doing that, the other two members of the household, Jagger and Pief, would be rousing.

That was how every "day" began: not with the inkling of anything like dawn, but just when the six of them had slept themselves back into wakefulness. They never exerted themselves during the day, but somehow when they climbed back into their beds they slept soundly enough.

The only excitement of the day occurred when they first opened the store. The store was a small room between the kitchen and the blue room. In the far wall was set a wide shelf, and upon this shelf their existence depended. Here, all the supplies "arrived". They would lock the door of the bare room last thing, and when they returned in the morning their needs - food, linen, a new washing machine - would be awaiting them on the shelf. That was just an accepted feature of their existence: they never questioned it among themselves.

On this morning, Dapple and May were ready with the meal before the four men came down. Dapple even had to go to the foot of the wide stairs and call before Pief appeared; so that the opening of the store had to be postponed till after they had eaten, for although the opening had in no way become a ceremony, the women were nervous of going in alone. It was one of those things...

"I hope to get some tobacco," Harley said as he unlocked the door. "I'm nearly out of it."

They walked in and looked at the shelf. It was all but empty.

"No food," observed May, hands on her aproned waist. "We shall be on short rations today."

It was not the first time this had happened. Once - how long ago now? - they kept little track of time - no food had appeared for three days and the shelf had remained empty. They had accepted the shortage placidly.

"We shall eat you before we starve, May," Pief said, and they laughed

briefly to acknowledge the joke, although Pief had cracked it last time too. Pief was an unobtrusive little man: not the sort one would notice in a crowd. His small jokes were his most precious possession.

Two packets only lay on the ledge. One was Harley's tobacco, one was a pack of cards. Harley pocketed the one with a grunt and displayed the other, slipping the pack from its wrapping and fanning it towards the others.

"Anyone play?" he asked.

"Poker," Jagger said.

"Canasta."

"Gin rummy."

"We'll play later," Calvin said. "It'll pass the time in the evening.

"The cards would be a challenge to them; they would have to sit together to play, round a table, facing each other.

Nothing was in operation to separate them, but there seemed no strong force to keep them together, once the tiny business of opening the store was over. Jagger worked the vacuum cleanser down the hall, past the front door that did not open, and rode it up the stairs to clean the upper landings; not that the place was dirty, but cleaning was something you did anyway in the morning. The women sat with Pief desultorily discussing how to manage the rationing, but after that they lost contact with each other and drifted away on their own. Calvin and Harley had already strolled off in different directions.

The house was a rambling affair. It had few windows, and such as there were did not open, were unbreakable and admitted no light. Darkness lay everywhere; illumination from an invisible source followed one's entry into a room - but the black had to be entered before it faded. Every room was furnished, but with odd pieces that bore little relation to each other, as if there was no purpose for the room. Rooms equipped for purposeless beings have that air about them.

No plan was discernable on first or second floor or in the long empty attics. Only familiarity could reduce the maze-like quality of room and corridor. At least there was ample time for familiarity.

Harley spent a long while walking about, hands in pockets. At one point he met Dapple: she was drooping gracefully over a sketchbook, amateurishly copying a picture that hung on one of the walls - a picture of the room in which she sat. They exchanged a few words, then Harley moved on.

Something lurked in the edge of his mind like a spider in the corner of its web. He stepped into what they called the piano room and then he realized what was worrying him. Almost furtively, he glanced round as the darkness slipped away, and then he looked at the big piano. Some strange things had arrived on the shelf from time to time and had been distributed

over the house: one of them stood on the top of the piano now.

It was a model, heavy and about two feet high, squat, almost round, with a sharp nose and four buttressed vanes. Harley knew what it was. It was a ground-to-space ship, a model of the burly ferries that lumbered up to the spaceship proper.

That had caused them more unsettlement than when the piano itself had appeared in the store. Keeping his eyes on the model, Harley seated himself at the piano stool and sat tensely, trying to draw something from the rear of his mind ... something connected with spaceships.

Whatever it was, it was unpleasant, and it dodged backwards whenever he thought he had laid a mental finger on it. So it always eluded him. If only he could discuss it with someone, it might be teased out of its hiding place. Unpleasant: menacing, yet with a promise entangled in the menace.

If he could get at it, meet it boldly face to face, he could do ... something definite. And until he faced it, he could not even say what the something definite was he wanted to do.

A footfall behind him. Without turning, Harley deftly pushed up the piano lid and ran a finger along the keys. Only then did he look back carelessly over his shoulder. Calvin stood there, hands in pockets, looking solid and comfortable.

"Saw the light in here," he said easily. "I thought I'd drop in as I was passing."

"I was thinking I would play the piano awhile," Harley answered with a smile. The thing was not discussable, even with a near acquaintance like Calvin because ... because of the nature of the thing ... because one had to behave like a normal, unworried human being. That at least was sound and clear and gave him comfort: behave like a normal human being.

Reassured, he pulled a gentle tumble of music from the keyboard. He played well. They all played well, Dapple, May, Pief ... as soon as they had assembled the piano, they had all played well. Was that - natural? Harley shot a glance at Calvin. The stocky man leaned against the instrument, back to that disconcerting model, not a care in the world. Nothing showed on his face but an expression of bland amiability. They were all amiable, never quarrelling together.

The six of them gathered for a scanty lunch, their talk was trite and cheerful, and the afternoon followed on the same pattern as the morning, as all the other mornings: secure, comfortable, aimless. Only to Harley did the pattern seem slightly out of focus; he now had a clue to the problem. It was small enough, but in the dead calm of their days it was large enough.

May had dropped the clue. When she helped herself to jelly, Jagger laughingly accused her of taking more than her fair share. Dapple, who

always defended May, said: "She's taken less than you, Jagger."

"No," May corrected, "I think I have more than anyone else. I took it for an interior motive."

It was the kind of pun anyone made at times. But Harley carried it away to consider. He paced round one of the silent rooms. Interior, ulterior motives... Did the others here feel the disquiet he felt? Had they a reason for concealing that disquiet? And another question:

Where was "here"?

He shut that one down sharply.

Deal with one thing at a time. Grope your way gently to the abyss. Categorize your knowledge.

One: Earth was getting slightly the worst of a cold war with Nitivity.

Two: the Nititians possessed the alarming ability of being able to assume the identical appearance of their enemies.

Three: by this means they could permeate human society.

Four: Earth was unable to view the Nititian civilization from inside.

Inside ... a wave of claustrophobia swept over Harley as he realized that these cardinal facts he knew bore no relation to this little world inside. They came, by what means he did not know, from outside, the vast abstraction that one of them had ever seen. He had a mental picture of a starry void in which men and monsters swam or battled, and then swiftly erased it. Such ideas did not conform with the quiet behaviour of his companions; if they never spoke about outside, did they think about it?

Uneasily, Harley moved about the room; the parquet floor echoed the indecision of his footsteps. He had walked into the billiards room. Now he prodded the balls across the green cloth with one finger, preyed on by conflicting intentions. The white spheres touched and rolled apart. That was how the two halves of his mind worked. Irreconcilables: he should stay here and conform; he should - not stay here (remembering no time when he was not here, Harley could frame the second idea no more clearly than that). Another point of pain was that "here" and "not here" seemed to be not two halves of a homogeneous whole, but two dissonances.

The ivory slid wearily into a pocket. He decided. He would not sleep in his room tonight.

They came from the various parts of the house to share a bedtime drink. By tacit consent the cards had been postponed until some other time: there was, after all, so much other time.

They talked about the slight nothings that comprised their day, the model of one of the rooms that Calvin was building and May furnishing, the faulty light in the upper corridor which came on too slowly. They were subdued. It was time once more to sleep, and in that sleep who knew what dreams might come? But they WOULD sleep. Harley knew - wondering if the others also knew - that with the darkness which descended as they climbed

into bed would come an undeniable command to sleep.

He stood tensely just inside his bedroom door, intensely aware of the unorthodoxy of his behaviour. His head hammered painfully and he pressed a cold hand against his temple. He heard the others go one by one to their separate rooms. Pief called good night to him; Harley replied. Silence fell.

Now!

As he stepped nervously into the passage, the light came on. Yes, it was slow - reluctant. His heart pumped. He was committed. He did not know what he was going to do or what was going to happen, but he was committed. The compulsion to sleep had been avoided. Now he had to hide, and wait.

It is not easy to hide when a light signal follows wherever you go. But by entering a recess which led to a disused room, opening the door slightly and crouching in the doorway, Harley found the faulty landing light dimmed off and left him in the dark.

He was neither happy nor comfortable. His brain seethed in a conflict he hardly understood. He was alarmed to think he had broken the rules and frightened of the creaking darkness about him. But the suspense did not last for long.

The corridor light came back on. Jagger was leaving his bedroom, taking no precaution to be silent. The door swung loudly shut behind him. Harley caught a glimpse of his face before he turned and made for the stairs: he looked noncommittal but serene - like a man going off duty. He went downstairs in bouncy, jaunty fashion.

Jagger should have been in bed asleep. A law of nature had been defied.

Unhesitatingly, Harley followed. He had been prepared for something and something had happened, but his flesh crawled with fright. The light-headed notion came to him that he might disintegrate with fear. All the same, he kept doggedly down the stairs, feet noiseless on the heavy carpet.

Jagger had rounded a corner. He was whistling quietly as he went. Harley heard him unlock a door. That would be the store - no other doors were locked. The whistling faded.

The store was open. No sound came from within. Cautiously, Harley peered inside. The far wall had swung open about a central pivot, revealing a passage beyond. For minutes Harley could not move, staring fixedly at this breach.

Finally, and with a sense of suffocation, he entered the store. Jagger had gone through there. Harley also went through. Somewhere he did not know, somewhere whose existence he had not guessed Somewhere that wasn't the house.... The passage was short and had two doors, one at the end rather like a cage door (Harley did not recognize a lift when he saw

one), one in the side, narrow and with a window.

The window was transparent. Harley looked through it and then fell back choking. Dizziness swept in and shook him by the throat.

Stars shone outside.

With an effort, he mastered himself and made his way back upstairs, lurching against the banisters. They had all been living under a ghastly misapprehension....

He barged into Calvin's room and the light lit. A faint, sweet smell was in the air, and Calvin lay on his broad back, fast asleep.

"Calvin! Wake up!" Harley shouted.

The sleeper never moved. Harley was suddenly aware of his own loneliness and the eerie feel of the great house about him. Bending over the bed, he shook Calvin violently by the shoulders and slapped his face.

Calvin groaned and opened one eye.

"Wake up, man," Harley said. "Something terrible's going on here."

The other propped himself on one elbow, communicated fear rousing him thoroughly.

"Jagger's LEFT THE HOUSE," Harley told him. "There's a way outside. We're - we've got to find out what we are." His voice rose to an hysterical pitch. He was shaking Calvin again. "We must find out what's wrong here. Either we are victims of some ghastly experiment - or we're all monsters!"

And as he spoke, before his staring eyes, beneath his clutching hands, Calvin began to wrinkle up and fold and blur, his eyes running together and his great torso contracting. Something else - something lively and alive - was forming in his place.

Harley only stopped yelling when, having plunged downstairs, the sight of the stars through the small window steadied him. He had to get out, wherever "out" was.

He pulled the small door open and stood in fresh night air.

Harley's eye was not accustomed to judging distances. It took him some while to realize the nature of his surroundings, to realize that mountains stood distantly against the starlit sky, and that he himself stood on a platform twelve feet above the ground. Some distance away, lights gleamed, throwing bright rectangles onto an expanse of tarmac.

There was a steel ladder at the edge of the platform. Biting his lip, Harley approached it and climbed clumsily down. He was shaking violently with cold and fear. When his feet touched solid ground, he began to run. Once he looked back: the house perched on its platform like a frog hunched on top of a rat trap.

He stopped abruptly then, in almost dark. Abhorrence jerked up inside him like retching. The high, crackling stars and the pale serration of the mountains began to spin, and he clenched his fists to hold on to

consciousness. That house, whatever it was, was the embodiment of all the coldness in his mind. Harley said to himself: "Whatever has been done to me, I've been cheated. Someone has robbed me of something so thoroughly I don't even know what it is. It's been a cheat, a cheat...." And he choked on the idea of those years that had been pilfered from him. No thought: thought scorched the synapses and ran like acid through the brain. Action only! His leg muscles jerked into movement again.

Buildings loomed about him. He simply ran for the nearest light and burst into the nearest door. Then he pulled up sharp, panting and blinking the harsh illumination out of his pupils.

The walls of the room were covered with graphs and charts. In the centre of the room was a wide desk with vision-screen and loudspeaker on it. It was a business-like room with overloaded ashtrays and a state of ordered untidiness. A thin man sat alertly at the desk; he had a thin mouth.

Four other men stood in the room, all were armed, none seemed surprised to see him. The man at the desk wore a neat suit; the others were in uniform.

Harley leant on the door-jamb and sobbed. He could find no words to say.

"It has taken you four years to get out of there," the thin man said. He had a thin voice.

"Come and look at this," he said, indicating the screen before him. With an effort, Harley complied; his legs worked like rickety crutches.

On the screen, clear and real, was Calvin's bedroom. The outer wall gaped, and through it two uniformed men were dragging a strange creature, a wiry, mechanical-looking being that had once been called Calvin.

"Calvin was a Nititian," Harley observed dully. He was conscious of a sort of stupid surprise at his own observation.

The thin man nodded approvingly.

"Enemy infiltrations constituted quite a threat," he said. "Nowhere on Earth was safe from them: they can kill a man, dispose of him and turn into exact replicas of him. Makes things difficult.... We lost a lot of state secrets that way. But Nititian ships have to land here to disembark the Non-Men and to pick them up again after their work is done. That is the weak link in their chain.

"We intercepted one such ship-load and bagged them singly after they had assumed humanoid form. We subjected them to artificial amnesia and put small groups of them into different environments for study. This is the Army Institute for Investigation of Non-Men, by the way. We've learnt a lot ... quite enough to combat the menace.... Your group, of course, was one such."

Harley asked in a gritty voice: "Why did you put me in with them?"

The thin man rattled a ruler between his teeth before answering.

"Each group has to have a human observer in their very midst, despite all the scanning devices that watch from outside. You see, a Nititian uses a deal of energy maintaining a human form; once in that shape, he is kept in it by self-hypnosis which only breaks down in times of stress, the amount of stress bearable varying from one individual to another. A human on the spot can sense such stresses.... It's a tiring job for him; we get doubles always to work day on, day off -"

"But I've always been there -"

"Of your group," the thin man cut in, "the human was Jagger, or two men alternating as Jagger. You caught one of them going off duty."

"That doesn't make sense," Harley shouted. "You're trying to say that I -"

He choked on the words. They were no longer pronounceable. He felt his outer form flowing away like sand as from the other side of the desk revolver barrels were levelled at him.

"Your stress level is remarkably high," continued the thin man, turning his gaze away from the spectacle. "But where you fail is where you all fail. Like Earth's insects which imitate vegetables, your cleverness cripples you. You can only be carbon copies. Because Jagger did nothing in the house, all the rest of you instinctively followed suit. You didn't get bored - you didn't even try to make passes at Dapple - as personable a Non-man as I ever saw. Even the model spaceship jerked no appreciable reaction out of you."

Brushing his suit down, he rose before the skeletal being which now cowered in a corner.

"The inhumanity inside will always give you away," he said evenly. "However human you are outside."