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*The Tweener*  
*Leigh Brackett*  
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A taxicab turned the corner and came slowly down the street.

"Here he is!" shrieked the children, tearing open the white gate. "Mother! Dad! He's here, Uncle Fred's here!"

Matt Winslow came out onto the porch, and in a minute Lucille came too, flushed from the purgatory of a kitchen on a July day. The cab stopped in front of the house. Josh and Barbie pounced on it like two small tigers, howling, and from up and down the street the neighbors' young came drifting, not making any noise, recognizing that this was the Winslows' moment and not intruding on it, but wanting to be close to it, to breathe and see and hear the magic.

"Look at them," said Matt half laughing. "You'd think Fred was Tarzan, Santa Claus, and Superman all rolled into one."

"Well," said Lucille proudly, "not many people have been where he has."

She went running down the path. Matt followed her. Inside, he was jealous. It was nothing personal, he liked Lucille's brother and respected him. It was only that Josh and Barbie had never had that look in their eyes for him. This was a secret jealousy, that Matt hid carefully, even from himself.

Fred got out of the cab, trim and soldierly in his uniform with the caduceus on the collar tabs, but forgetting all about dignity as he tried to hug the kids and kiss his sister and shake Matt's hand all at once. "I'll get your bags," said Matt, and the neighbors' children stared with enormous eyes and sent the name of Mars whispering back and forth between them.

"Be careful," Fred said. "That one there, with the handle on it—let me." He lifted it out, a smallish box made from pieces of packing case that still showed Army serial numbers. It had little round holes bored in its top and sides. Fred waved the children back. "Don't joggle it, it's a rare Martian vase I brought back for your mother, and I don't want it broken. Presents for you? Now what do you think of that—I clean forgot! Oh well, there wasn't much out there you'd have wanted, anyway."

"Not even a *rock*?" cried Josh, and Fred shook his head solemnly. "Not a pebble." Barbie was staring at the holes in the box. Matt picked up Fred's suitcase. "He hasn't changed," he thought. "Lost some weight, and got some new lines in his face, but with the kids he hasn't changed. He still acts like one himself." He, too, looked at the holes in the box, but with apprehension. "This is going to be good," he thought. "Something

special."

"God, it's hot," said Fred, screwing up his eyes as though the sunlight hurt them. "Ten months on Mars is no way to train up for an eastern summer. Barbie, don't hang on your old uncle, he's having trouble enough." He glanced at Matt and Lucille, grinning ruefully, and made a pantomime of giving at the knees. "I feel as though I'm wading in glue."

"Sit down on the porch," Lucille said. "There's a little breeze—"

"In a minute," Fred said. "But first, don't you want to see your present?" He set the box down, in a shady spot under the big maple at the corner of the house.

"Now Fred, what are you up to?" she demanded suspiciously. "Martian vases, indeed!"

"Well, it's not exactly a vase. It's more of a— *I'll* open it, Josh, you just stand back. This doesn't concern you."

"Oh, Uncle Fred!" wailed Barbie, dancing up and down like a doll on strings. "Open it up, *please* open it up."

Matt had put the suitcase inside the door. Now he came and joined the others under the tree.

Fred opened the lid of the box. Then he sat back on his heels, watching the children's faces, and Matt thought, "He's been waiting for this for nearly a year, dreaming it up...he should have married and had kids of his own."

Josh and Barbie let out one mingled cry, and then were still. For a moment.

"Is it really alive?"

"Can we touch it?"

"Will it bite?"

"Oh, Uncle Fred—oh, *look*—it does belong to us, doesn't it?"

Along the fence small boys and girls impaled their meager bellies on the pickets in an effort to see. Matt and Lucille peered down into the box. On a mat of red sand and dry lichens a thing was crouching, a neat furry thing about the size of a big rabbit and not unlike one in outline, except that its ears were cup-shaped, and except that its coat was mottled in the exact rust red and greenish gray of the native sand and lichens. It looked up at the unfamiliar faces with a sort of mild incuriosity, its eyes half shut against the glare, but otherwise it did not move.

"What on earth is it?" asked Lucille.

"Nothing," said Fred, "on Earth. On Mars, he's the dominant form of life—or was, until we came. In fact, he's the sole surviving mammal, and almost the sole surviving vertebrate. He doesn't have an official name yet. It'll be years before the zoologists can

decide on their classifications. But the boys out there call him tweener."

"What?" said Lucille.

"Tweener. Because he's sort of between things. You know – if anyone asked you what he was like, you'd say he was something between a rabbit and a groundhog, or maybe between a monkey and a squirrel. Go ahead, Barbie, pick him up."

"Now wait a minute," said Matt. He pushed Barbie back. "Wait just a minute. Fred, are you sure about this thing? Is he safe? I don't want the kids bitten, or catching anything."

"Beside him" said Fred, "a rabbit is dangerous. The tweeners have had no enemies for so long they've forgotten how to fight, and they haven't yet acquired any fear of man. I've pulled 'em out of their burrows with my bare hands."

He reached into the box and lifted the creature gently, clucking to it. "Anyway, this one has been a pet all his life. I picked him especially because of that. He's acclimated to warmer temperatures and approximately Earth-normal atmosphere, from living in a Base hut, and I thought he'd stand the shock of transplanting better." He held the tweener out. "Here, you take him, Matt. You and Lucille. Set your minds at rest."

Matt hesitated, and then received the tweener into his hands. It felt like – well, like an animal. Like any small animal you might pick up. Warm, very thick-furred, perhaps more slight in the bone and light in the muscle than he had expected. It had no tail. Its hind legs were not at all rabbit-like, and its forelegs were longer than he had thought. It placed a paw on his arm, a curious paw with three strong fingers and a thumb, and lifted its head, sniffing. The sunlight was brighter here, falling in a shaft between the branches, and the tweener's eyes were almost shut, giving it a look of sleepy imbecility. Matt stroked it awkwardly, once or twice, and it rubbed its head against his arm. Matt shivered. "That soft fur," he said. "It tickles, sort of. Want him, Lucille?"

She looked sternly at Fred. "No germs?"

"No germs."

"All right." She took the tweener the way she would have taken a cat, holding him up under the forelegs and looking him over while he dangled, limp and patient. Finally she smiled. "He's cute. I think I'm going to like him." She set him carefully on his feet in the green grass. "All right, you kids. And be careful you don't hurt him."

Once more Josh and Barbie were speechless, if not silent. They lay on the ground and touched and patted and peered and took turns holding, and the ragged fringe of small bodies on the fence dripped and flowed inward until the yard was full of children and the stranger from Mars was hidden out of sight.

"Kids," said Fred, and laughed. "It's nice to see them again. And normal people."

"What do you mean, normal?"

Fred said wryly. "I had to be doctor *and* psychiatrist. I've had xenophobes crawling

all over me for ten long months."

"Xeno – what?" asked Lucille.

"A two-dollar word for men who fear the unknown. When chaps got to worrying too much about what was over the horizon, they were dumped on me. But the heck with that. Take me somewhere cool and drown me in beer."

It was a long hot afternoon, and a long hot evening, and they belonged mostly to Fred. To the children he seemed ten feet high and shining with the hero-light. To the neighbors who dropped in to say hello, he was a man who had actually visited a place they still did not quite believe in.

The children, the whole gaggle of them, hunkered in a circle around the chairs that had been dragged to the coolest spot in the yard.

"Is it like in the books, Uncle Fred? Is it?"

Fred groaned, and pointed to the tweener in Barbie's arms. "Get him to tell you. He knows better than I do."

"Of course he does," said Barbie; "John Carter knows everything. But –"

"Who?" asked Fred.

"John Carter. John Carter of Mars."

Fred laughed. "Good. That's a good name. You get it, don't you, Matt? Remember all those wonderful Edgar Rice Burroughs stories about the Warlord of Mars, and the Swordsman of Mars, and the Gods of Mars?"

"Sure," said Matt, rather sourly. "The kids read 'em all the time. John Carter is the hero, the kind with a capital H." He turned to the children. "But John Carter was an Earthman, who went to Mars."

"Well," said Josh, scornfully impatient of adult illogic, "*he's* a Martian who came to Earth. It's the same thing. Isn't it, Uncle Fred?"

"You might say that, like the other John Carter, he's a citizen of two worlds."

"Yes," said Barbie. "But anyway, we can't understand his language yet, so you'll have to tell us about Mars."

"Oh, all right," said Fred, and he told them about Mars, about the dark canals and the ruined cities, about the ancient towers standing white and lonely under the twin moons, about beautiful princesses and wicked kings and mighty swordsmen. And after they had gone away again to play with John Carter, Matt shook his head and said, "You ought to be ashamed, filling their heads up with that stuff."

Fred grinned. "Time enough for reality when they grow up."

It got later, and the night closed in. Neighbors came and went. The extra children

disappeared. It grew quiet, and finally there was no one left but the Winslows and Fred. Matt went inside to the kitchen for more beer.

From somewhere in the remote darkness beyond the open windows, Barbie screamed.

The can he was opening fell out of Matt's hand, making a geyser of foam where it hit the floor. "If that little—" he said, and did not stop to finish the sentence. He ran out the kitchen door.

Fred and Lucille had jumped up. Barbie's shrieks were coming from the foot of the lot, where the garage was, and now Matt could hear Josh yelling. He ran across the lawn and onto the drive. Lucille was behind him, calling, "Barbie! Josh! What is it?"

In the dim reflection of light from the house, Matt could make out the small figure of Josh bent over and tugging frantically at the handle of the overhead door, which was closed tight. "Help!" he panted. "It's stuck, or something."

Matt brushed him aside. Beyond the door, in the dark garage, Barbie was still screaming. Matt took hold of the handle and heaved.

It was jammed, but not so badly that his greater strength could not force it up. It slid, clicking and grumbling, into place, and Matt rushed into the opening.

Barbie was standing just inside, her mouth stretched over another scream, her cheeks running streams of tears. John Carter was beside her. He was standing on his hind legs, almost erect, and the fingers of one fore-paw were gripped tightly around Barbie's thumb. His eyes were wide open. In the kindly night there was no hot glare to bother them, and they looked out, green-gold and very, very bright. Something rose up into Matt's throat and closed it. He reached out, and Barbie shook off John Carter's grip and flung herself into Matt's arms.

"Oh, Daddy, it was so dark and Josh couldn't get the door open—"

Josh came in and picked up John Carter. "Aw, girls," he said, quite scornful now that the emergency was over. "Just because she gets stuck in the garage for a few. minutes, she has to have hysterics."

"What in the world were you doing?" Lucille demanded weakly, feeling Barbie all over.

"Just playing," said Josh, sulking. "How should I know the old door wouldn't work?"

"She's okay," Fred said. "Just scared."

Lucille groaned deeply. "And they wonder why mothers turn gray at an early age. All right, you two, off to bed. Scoot!"

Josh started toward the house with Barbie, still clutching John Carter.

"Oh, no," said Matt. "You're not taking that thing to bed with you." He caught John Carter by the loose skin of his shoulders and pulled him out of the boy's arms. Josh spun

around, all ready to make trouble about it, and Fred said smoothly, "I'll take him."

He did, holding him more gently than Matt. "Your father's right, Josh. No pets in the bedroom. And anyway, John Carter wouldn't be comfortable there. He likes a nice cool place where he can dig his own house and make the rooms just to suit him."

"Like a catacomb?" asked Barbie, in a voice still damp and tremulous.

"Or a cave?" asked Josh.

"Exactly. Now you run along, and your father and I will fix him up."

"Well," said Josh. "Okay." He held out a finger and John Carter wrapped a paw around it. Josh shook hands solemnly. "Good night." Then he looked up. "Uncle Fred, if he digs like a woodchuck, how come his front feet are like a monkey's?"

"Because," said Fred, "he didn't start out to be a digger. And he is much more like an ape than a woodchuck. But there haven't been any trees in his country for a long time, and he had to take to the ground anyway to keep warm. That's what we call adaptation." He turned to Matt. "How about the old root cellar? It'd be ideal for him, if you're still not using it for anything."

"No," said Matt slowly. "I'm not using it." He looked at John Carter in the dim light from the house, and John Carter looked back at him with those bright unearthly eyes.

Matt put a hand up to his head, aware that it had begun to ache. "My sinus is kicking up – probably going to rain tomorrow. I think I'll turn in myself, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead, honey," Lucille said. "I'll help Fred with the tweener."

Matt took two aspirin on top of his beer, which made him feel no better, and retired into a heavy sleep, through which stalked dark and unfamiliar dreams that would not show their faces.

The next day was Sunday. It did not rain, but Matt's head went on aching.

"Are you sure it's your sinus?" Lucille asked.

"Oh, yes. All in the right side, frontal and maxillary. Even my teeth hurt."

"Hm," said Fred. "Don't ever go to Mars. Sinusitis is an occupational hazard there, in spite of oxygen masks. Something about the difference in pressure that raises hob with terrestrial insides. Why, do you know –"

"No," said Matt sourly, "and I don't want to know. Save your gruesome stories for your medical conference."

Fred winced. "I wish you hadn't mentioned that. I hate the thought of New York in this kind of weather. Damn it, it's cruelty to animals. And speaking of which –" he

turned to Josh and Barbie – "keep John Carter in the cellar until this heat wave breaks. At least it's fairly cool down there. Remember he wasn't built for this climate, nor for this world. Give him a break."

"Oh, we will," said Barbie earnestly. "Besides, he's busy, building his castle. You ought to see the wall he's making around it."

Working slowly, resting often, John Carter had begun the construction of an elaborate burrow in the soft floor of the old root cellar. They went down and watched him from time to time, bringing up earth and then patting and shaping it with his clever paws into a neat rampart to protect his front door. "To deflect wind and sand," Fred said, and Barbie, watching with fascinated eyes, murmured, "I'll bet he could build anything he wanted to, if he was big enough."

"Maybe. Matter of fact, he probably was a good bit bigger once, a long time ago when things weren't so tough. But –"

"As big as me?" asked Josh.

"Possibly. But if he built anything then we haven't been able to find it. Or anything at all that *anybody* built. Except, of course," he added hastily, "those cities I was telling you about."

The heat wave broke that night in a burst of savage line-squalls. "That's what my head was complaining about," thought Matt, rousing up to blink at the lightning. And then he slept again, and dreamed, dim sad dreams of loss and yearning. In the morning his head still ached.

Fred went down to New York for his conference. Matt went to the office and stewed, finding it hard to keep his mind on his work with the nagging pain in the side of his skull. He began to worry. He had never had a bout go on this long. He fidgeted more and more as the day wore on, and then hurried home oppressed by a vague unease that he could find no foundation for.

"All right?" Lucille echoed. "Of course everything's all right. Why?"

"I don't know. Nothing. The kids – ?"

"They've been playing Martian all day. Matt, I've never seen them so tickled with anything in their lives as they are with that little beastie. And he's so cute and patient with them. Come here a minute."

She led him to the door of the children's room, and pointed in. Josh and Barbie arrayed in striped beach towels and some of Lucille's junkier costume jewelry, were engaged in a complicated ritual that involved much posturing and waving of wooden swords. In the center of the room enthroned on a chair, John Carter sat. He had a length of bright cloth wrapped around him and a gold bracelet on his neck. He sat perfectly still, watching the children with his usual half-lidded stare, and Matt said harshly, "It isn't right."

"What isn't?"

"Any ordinary animal wouldn't stand for it. Look at him, just squatting there like a—" He hunted for a word and couldn't find it.

"The gravity," Lucille reminded him. "He hardly moves at all, poor little thing. And it seems quite hard for him to breathe."

Josh and Barbie knelt side by side in front of the throne, holding their swords high in the air. "*Koar!*" they cried to John Carter, and then Josh stood up again and began to talk in gibberish, but respectfully, as though addressing a king.

"That's Martian," said Lucille, and winked at Matt. "Sometimes you'd swear they were actually speaking a language. Come on and stretch out on the couch a while, honey, why don't you? You look tired."

"I am tired," he said. "And I—" He stopped.

"What?"

"Nothing." No, nothing at all. He lay down on the couch. Lucille went into the kitchen. He could hear her moving about, making the usual noises. Faintly, far off, he heard the children's voices. Sometimes you'd swear they were actually speaking a language. Sometime you'd swear —

No. No you wouldn't. You know what is, and what isn't. Even the kids know.

He dozed, and the children's voices crept into his dream. They spoke in the thin and icy wind and murmured in the dust that blew beneath it, and there was no doubt at all now that they were speaking a tongue they knew and understood. He called to them, but they did not answer, and he knew that they did not want to answer, that they were hiding from him somewhere among the ridges of red sand that flowed and shifted so that there was never a trail or a landmark. He ran among the dunes, shouting their names, and then there was a tumble of ancient rock where a mountain had died, and a hollow place below it with a tinge of green around a meager pool. He knew that they were there in that hollow place. He raced toward it, racing the night that deepened out of a sky already dark and flecked with stars, and in the dusk a shape rose up and blocked his way. It bore in its right hand a blade of grass — no, a sword. A sword, and its face was shadowed, but its eyes looked out at him, green-gold and bright and not of the Earth —

"For heaven's sake, Matt — wake up!" Lucille was shaking him. He sprang up, still in the grip of his dream, and saw Josh and Barbie standing on the other side of the room. They had their ordinary clothes on, and they were grinning, and Barbie said, "How can you have a nightmare when it's still daytime?"

"I don't know," said Lucille, "but it must have been a dandy. Come on Matt, and get your dinner, before the neighbors decide I'm beating you."

"Other people's nightmares," Matt snarled, "are always so funny. Where's John Carter?"



"Oh, we put him back down cellar," Josh said, quite unconcerned. "Mom, will you get him some more lettuce tomorrow? He sure goes for it."

Feeling shamefaced and a little sick, Matt sat down and ate his dinner. He did not enjoy it. Nor did he sleep well that night, starting up more than once from the verge of an ugly dream. Next day Gulf Tropical had come in again worse than before, and his head had not stopped aching.

He went to his doctor, who could find no sign of infection but gave him a shot on general principles. He went to his office, but it was only a gesture. He returned home at noon on a two-day sick leave. The temperature had crept up to ninety and the humidity dripped out of the air in sharp crashing showers.

"I'll bet Fred's suffering in New York," Lucille said. "And poor John Carter! I haven't let the kids take him out of the cellar at all."

"Do you know what he did, Daddy?" Barbie said. "Josh found it this morning after you left."

"What?" asked Matt, with an edge in his voice.

"A hole," said Josh. "He must've tunneled right under the foundation. It was in the lawn, just outside where the root cellar is. I guess he's used to having a back door to his castle, but I filled it in. I filled it real good and put a great big stone on top."

Matt relaxed. "He'll only dig another."

Barbie shook her head. "He better not. I told him what would happen if he did, how a big dog might kill him, or he might get lost and never find his way home again."

"Poor little tyke," Lucille said. "He'll never find *his* home again."

"Oh, the hell with him," Matt said angrily. "Couldn't you waste a little sympathy on me? I feel lousy."

He went upstairs away from them and tried to lie down, but the room was a sweat-box. He tossed and groaned and came down again, and Lucille fixed him iced lemonade. He sat in the shade on the back porch and drank it. It hit his stomach cold and sour-sweet and it tied him in knots, and he got up to pace the lawn. The heat weighed and dragged at him. His head throbbed and his knees felt weak. He passed the place where Josh had filled in the new tunnel, and from the cellar window he heard the children's voices. He turned around and stamped back into the house.

"What are you doing down there?" he shouted, through the open cellar door.

Barbie's answer came muffled and hollow from the gloom below. "We brought John Carter some ice to lick on, but he won't come out." She began to talk in a different tone, softly, crooning, calling. Matt said, "Come up out of there before you catch cold!"

"In a minute," Josh said.

Matt went down the steps, his shoes thumping on the wooden treads. They had not

turned on the lights, and what came through the small dusty windows was only enough to show the dim outlines of things. He banged his head on a heating duct and swore, and Barbie said rather impatiently, "We said we'd be up in a minute."

"What's the matter?" Matt demanded, blundering around the furnace. "Am I not supposed to come down here any more?"

"Sh-h!" Josh told him. "There, he's just coming out. Don't scare him back in again!"

The door of the root cellar was open. The children were crouched inside it, by the earthen rampart John Carter had constructed with such labor. In the circle of the rampart was a dark hole, and from it John Carter was emerging, very slowly, his eyes luminescent in the gloom. Barbie put two ice cubes on the ground before him, and he set his muzzle against them and lay panting, his flanks pulsing in a shallow, uneven rhythm.

"You'll be all right,\*" Josh told him, and stroked his head. To Matt he said, "You don't understand how important he is. There isn't another kid anywhere around who has a real genuine Martian for a pet."

"Come on," said Matt harshly. "Upstairs." The clammy air was making him shiver. Reluctantly the children rose and went past him. John Carter did not stir. He looked at Matt, and Matt drew back, slamming the door shut. He followed the children out of the cellar, but in his mind's eye he could still see John Carter crouched behind his wall in the dark, tortured by a world that was not his, a world too big, too hot, too heavy.

Crouched behind his wall in the dark, and thinking.

No. Animals do not think. They feel. They can be lost, or frightened, or suffering, or a lot of things, but they're all feelings, not thoughts. Only humans think.

On Earth.

Matt went out in the yard again. He went clear to the back of it where the fence ran along the alley, and took hold of the pickets in his two hands. He stood there staring at the neighbors' back fences, at their garages and garbage cans, not seeing them, feeling the vague conviction that had been in the back of his mind grow and take shape and advance to a point where he could no longer pretend he didn't see it.

"No," he said to himself. "Fred would have known. The scientists would know. It couldn't be, and not be known."

Or couldn't it? How did you measure possibility on another world?

The only mammal, Fred had said, and almost the only vertebrate. Why should one sole species survive when all the others were gone, unless it had an edge to begin with, an advantage?

Suppose a race. Suppose intelligence. Intelligence, perhaps, of a sort that human men, Earthly men, would not understand.

Suppose a race and a world. A dying world. Suppose that race being forced to

change with its dying, to dwindle and adapt, to lose its cities and its writings and inventions, or whatever had taken the place of them, but not its mind. Never its mind, because mind would be the only barrier against destruction.

Suppose that race, physically altered, environmentally destitute, driven inward on its own thoughts. Wouldn't it evolve all kinds of mental compensations, powers no Earthman would suspect or look for because he would be flunking in terms of what he knew, of Earthly life-forms? And wouldn't such a race go to any lengths to hide its intelligence, its one last weapon, from the strangers who had come trampling in to take its world away?

Matt trembled. He looked up at the sky, and he knew what was different about it. It was no longer a solid shell that covered him. It was wide open, ripped and torn by the greedy ships, carrying the greedy men who had not been content with what they had. And through those rents the Outside had slipped in, and it would never be the same again. Never more the safe familiar Earth containing only what belonged to it, only what men could understand.

He stood there while a shower of rain crashed down and drenched him, and he did not feel it.

Then again, fiercely, Matt said, "No. I won't believe that, it's too — it's like the kids believing their games while they play them."

But were they only games?

He started at the sound of Lucille's voice calling him in. He knew by the sound of it she was worried. He went back toward the house. She came part way to meet him, demanding to know what he was doing out in the rain. He let her chivvy him into the house and into dry clothes, and he kept telling her there was nothing wrong, but she was alarmed now and would not listen. "You lie down," she said and covered him with a quilt, and then he heard her go downstairs and get on the telephone. He lay quiet for a few minutes, trying to get himself in hand, frightened and half ashamed of the state of his nerves. Sweat began to roll off him. He kicked the quilt away. The air inside the room was thick with moisture, heavy, stale. He found himself panting like —

Hell, it was no different from any summer heat wave, the bedroom was always hot and suffocating. It was always hard to breathe.

He left it and went downstairs.

Lucille was just getting up from the phone. "Who were you calling?" he asked.

"Fred," she said, giving him that no-nonsense look she got when she decided that something had to be done. "He said he'd be here in the morning. I'm going to find out what's the matter with you."

Matt said irritably, "But my doctor —"

"Your doctor doesn't know you like Fred does, and he doesn't care as much about you, either."

Matt grumbled, but it was too late to do anything about it now. Then he began to think that maybe Fred was the answer. Maybe if he told him —

What?

All right, drag it out, put it into words. I think John Carter is more than a harmless little beast. I think he's intelligent. I think that he hates me, that he hates this Earth where he's been brought so casually as a pet. I think he's doing something to my children.

Could he say that to Fred?

Lucille was calling the children for supper. "Oh lord, they're down in that damp cellar again. Josh, Barbie, come up here this minute!"

Matt put his head between his hands. It hurt.

He slept downstairs that night, on the living-room couch. He had done that before during heat waves. It gave the illusion of being cooler. He dosed himself heavily with aspirin, and for a time he lapsed into a drugged slumber full of dark shapes that pursued him over a landscape he could not quite see but which he knew was alien and hateful. Then in the silent hours between midnight and dawn he started up in panic. He could not breathe. The air was as thick as water, and a weight as of mountain ranges lay along his chest, his thighs, his shoulders.

He turned on a lamp and began to move up and down, his chest heaving, his hands never still, a glassy terror spreading over him, sheathing him as a sleet storm sheathes a tree.

The living room looked strange, the familiar things overlaid with a gloss of fear, traces everywhere of Josh and Barbie, of Lucille and himself, suddenly significant, suddenly sharp and poignantly symbolic as items in a Dali painting. Lucille's lending-library novel with the brown paper cover, Lucille's stiff Staffordshire figures on the mantel staring with their stiff white faces. An empty pop bottle, no, two empty pop bottles shoved guiltily behind the couch. Small blue jacket with the pocket torn, a drift of comic books under the lamp, his own chair with the cushion worn hollow by his own sitting. Patterns. Wall-paper, slipcovers, rug. Colors, harsh and queer. He was aware of the floor beneath his feet. It was thin. It was a skim of ice over a black pool, ready to crack and let him fall, into the place where the stranger lay, and thought, and waited.

All over Mars they lie and wait, he thought, in their places under the ground. Thinking back and forth in the bitter nights, hating the men, human men who pull them out of their burrows and kill them and dissect them and pry at their brains and bones and nerves and organs. The men who tie little strings around their necks and put them in cages, and never think to look behind their eyes and see what lurks there.

Hating, and wanting their world back. Hating, and quietly driving men insane.

Just as this one is doing to me, he thought. He's suffering. He's crushed in this gravity, and strangling in this air, and he's going to make me suffer too. He knows he

can never go home. He knows he's dying. How far can he push it? Can he only make me feel what he's feeling, or can he...?

Suppose he can. Suppose he knows I'm going to tell Fred. Suppose he stops me.

After that, what? Josh? Barbie? Lucille?

Matt stood still in the middle of the floor. "He's killing me," he thought. "He knows."

He began to shake. The room turned dark in front of him. He wanted to vomit, but there was a strange paralysis creeping over him, tightening his muscles, knotting them into ropes to bind him. He felt cold, as though he were already dead.

He turned. He did not run, he was past running, but he walked faster with every step, stiffly, like a mechanical thing wound up and accelerating toward a magnetic goal. He opened the cellar door, and the steps took him down. He remembered to switch on the light.

It was only a short distance to the north corner, and the half-open door.

John Carter made a sound, the only one Matt had ever heard him make. A small thin shriek, purely animal and quite, quite brainless.

It was the next morning, and Fred had come on the early train. They were standing, all of them, grouped together on the lawn near the back fence, looking down. The children were crying.

"A dog must have got him," Matt said. He had said that before, but his voice still lacked the solid conviction of a statement known and believed. He wanted to look up and away from what lay on the ground by his feet, but he did not. Fred was facing him.

"Poor little thing," said Lucille. "I suppose it must have been a dog. Can you tell, Fred?"

Fred bent over. Matt stared at his own shoes. Inside his pockets, his hands were curled tightly into fists. He wanted to talk. The temptation, the longing, the lust to talk was almost more than he could endure. He put the edges of his tongue between his teeth and bit it.

After a minute Fred said, "It was a dog."

Matt glanced at him, and now it was Fred who scowled at his shoes.

"I hope it didn't hurt him," Lucille said.

Fred said, "I don't think it did."

Miserably, between his sobs, Josh wailed, "I used the biggest stone I could find. I never thought he could have moved it."

"There, now," said Lucille, putting her arms around the children. She led them away

toward the house, talking briskly, the usual mixture of nonsense and sound truth that parents administer at such times. Matt wanted to go away too, but Fred made no move, and somehow he knew that it was no use going. He stood with his head down, feeling the sun beat on the back of it like a hammer on a flinching anvil.

He wished Fred would say something. Fred remained silent.

Finally Matt said, "Thanks."

"I didn't see any reason to tell them. They'd find it hard to understand."

"Do *you* understand?" Matt cried out. "I don't. Why did I do such a thing? How could I have done such a thing?"

"Fear. I think I mentioned that once. Xenophobia."

"But that's not—I mean, I don't see how it applies."

"It's not just a fear of unknown places, but of unknown *things*. Anything at all that's strange and unfamiliar." He shook his head. "I'll admit I didn't expect to find that at home, but I should have thought of the possibility. It's something to remember."

"I was so sure," Matt said. "It all fitted together, everything."

"The human imagination is a wonderful thing. I know, I've just put in ten months nursing it. I suppose you had symptoms?"

"God, yes." Matt enumerated them. "Last night it got so bad I thought—" He glanced at the small body by his feet. "As soon as I did that it all went away. Even the headache. What's the word? Psycho-something?"

"Psychosomatic. Yes. The guys out there developed everything from corns to angina, scared of where they were and wanting to leave it."

"I'm ashamed," Matt said. "I feel..." He moved his hands.

"Well," said Fred, "it was only an animal. Probably it wouldn't have lived long anyway. I shouldn't have brought it."

"Oh for Chrissake," Matt said, and turned away. Josh and Barbie were coming out of the house again. Josh carried a box, and Barbie had a bunch of flowers and a spade. They passed by the place on the lawn where the big stone had been moved and the hole opened up again—only part way, and from the outside, but Matt hoped they would not know that. He hoped they would not ever know that.

He went to meet them.

He kneeled down and put an arm around each of them. "Don't feel bad," he said desperately. "Look I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll go and find the best place in the country to buy a pup. Wouldn't you like that, a fine new puppy, all your own?"

MNQ

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