

A strikingly different view of mankind, and a most unusual story for Gordy, the greatest discovery-delight I had in reading these pages. And I'm not sure I can explain why without creating the wrong impression.

You see, I have read a lot of slushpile – the technical term for unsolicited manuscripts, sent to magazines or writers' workshops by aspiring amateurs. And the theme of this story is a slushpile regular – second in popularity only to the one about the only two survivors of a planetary disaster who ground their lifeship safely on a habitable new planet and it turns out their names are Adam and Eve. For some reason beyond my grasping, God in His Downtown Providence ordained that everyone who ever tried to write, tried to write this story. They are, invariably, awful.

Well, everybody makes an ashtray their first week in shop class (and sometimes their last), and they always stink too. Here's the ashtray the shop teacher made.

How terrible (goes the ubiquitous theme) it must be to be a god . . . and be cursed with empathy. It wouldn't be so bad if you could just hate the little buggers!

But to be a god is, by definition, to be . . .

OF THE PEOPLE

But you know, I could sense it coming a long time off. It was a little extra time taken in drinking a cup of coffee, it was lingering over the magazines in a drugstore as I picked out a handful. It was a girl I looked at twice as I ran out and down the steps of a library.

And it wasn't any good and I knew it. But it kept coming and it kept coming, and one night I stayed working at the design of a power cruiser until it was finished, before I finally knocked off for supper. Then, after I'd eaten, I looked ahead down twelve dark hours to daylight, and I knew I'd had it.

So I got up and I walked out of the apartment. I left my glass half-full and the record player I had built playing the music I had written to the pictures I had painted. Left the organ and the typewriter, left the darkroom and the lab. Left the jammed-full filing cabinets. Took the elevator and told the elevator boy to head for the ground floor. Walked out into the deep snow.

"You going out in January without an overcoat, Mr. Crossman?" asked the

doorman.

"Don't need a coat," I told him. "Never no more, no coats."

"Don't you want me to phone the garage for your car, then?"

"Don't need a car."

I left him and set out walking. After a while it began to snow, but not on me. And after a little more while people started to stare, so I flagged down a cab.

"Get out and give me the keys," I told the driver.

"You drunk?" he said.

"It's all right, son," I said. "I own the company. But you'll get out nonetheless and give me the keys." He got out and gave me the keys and I left him standing there.

I got in the cab and drove it off through the nightlit downtown streets, and I kissed the city good-bye as I went. I blew a kiss to the grain exchange and a kiss to the stockyards. And a kiss to every one of the fourteen offices in the city that knew me each under a different title as head of a different business. You've got to get along without me now, city and people, I said, because I'm not coming back, no more, no more.

I drove out of downtown and out past Longview Acres and past Manor Acres and past Sherman Hills and I blew them all a kiss, too. Enjoy your homes, you people, I told them, because they're good homes – not the best I could have done you by a damn sight, but better than you'll see elsewhere in a long time, and your money's worth. Enjoy your homes and don't remember me.

I drove out to the airport and there I left the cab. It was a good airport. I'd laid it out myself and I knew. It was a good airport and I got eighteen days of good hard work out of the job. I got myself so lovely and tired doing it I was able to go out to the bars and sit there having half a dozen drinks – before the urge to talk to the people around me became unbearable and I had to get up and go home.

There were planes on the field. A good handful of them. I went in and talked to one of the clerks. "Mr. Crossman!" he said, when he saw me.

"Get me a plane," I said. "Get me a plane headed east and then forget I was in tonight."

He did; and I went. I flew to New York and changed planes and flew to London; and changed again and carne in by jet to Bombay.

By the time I reached Bombay, my mind was made up for good, and I went through the city as if it were a dream of buildings and people and no more. I went through the town and out of the town and I hit the road north, walking. And as I walked, I took off my coat and my tie. And I opened my collar to the open air and I started my trek.



Illustration by RICK BRYANT

I was six weeks walking it. I remember little bits and pieces of things along the way – mainly faces, and mainly the faces of the children, for they aren't afraid when they're young. They'd come up to me and run alongside, trying to match the strides I'd take, and after a while they'd get tired and drop back – but there were always others along the way. And there were adults, too, men and women, but when they got close they'd take one look at my face and go away again. There was only one who spoke to me in all that trip, and that was a tall, dark brown man in some kind of uniform. He spoke to me in English and I answered him in dialect. He was scared to the marrow of his bones, for after he spoke I could hear the little grinding of his teeth in the silence as he tried to keep them from chattering. But I answered him kindly, and told him I had business in the north that was nobody's business but my own. And when he still would not move – he was well over six feet and nearly as tall as I – I opened my right hand beneath his nose and showed him himself, small and weak as a caterpillar in the palm of it. And he fell out of my path as if his legs had all the strength gone out of them, and I went on.

I was six weeks walking it. And when I came to the hills, my beard was grown out and my pants and my shirt were in tatters. Also, by this time, the

word had gone ahead of me. Not the official word, but the little words of little people, running from mouth to mouth. They knew I was coming and they knew where I was headed – to see the old man up behind Mutteeanee Pass, the white-bearded, holy man of the village between two peaks.

He was sitting on his rock out on the hillside, with his blind eyes following the sun and the beard running white and old between his thin knees and down to the brown earth.

I sat down on a smaller rock before him and caught my breath.

"Well, Erik," I said. "I've come."

"I'm aware you have, Sam."

"By foot," I said. "By car and plane, too, but mostly by foot, as time goes. All the way from the lowlands by foot, Erik. And that's the last I do for any of them."

"For them, Sam?"

"For me, then."

"Nor for you, either, Sam," he said. And then he sighed. "Go back, Sam," he said.

"Go back!" I echoed. "Go back to hell again? No thank you, Erik."

"You faltered," he said. "You weakened. You began to slow down, to look around. There was no need to, Sam. If you hadn't started to slacken off, you would have been all right."

"All right? Do you call the kind of life I lead, that? What do you use for a heart, Erik?"

"A heart?" And with that he lowered his blind old eyes from the sun and turned them right on me. "Do you accuse me, Sam?"

"With you it's choice," I said. "You can go."

"No," he shook his head. "I'm bound by choice, just as you are bound by the greater strength in me. Go back, Sam."

"Why?" I cried. And I pounded my chest like a crazy man. "Why me? Why can others go and I have to stay? There's no end to the universe. I don't ask for company. I'll find some lost hole somewhere and bury myself. Anywhere, just so I'm away."

"Would you, Sam?" He asked. And at that, there was pity in his voice. When I did not answer, he went on, gently. "You see, Sam, that's exactly why I can't let you go. You're capable of deluding yourself, of telling yourself that you'll do what we both know you will not, cannot do. So you must stay."

"No," I said. "All right." I got up and turned to go. "I came to you first and gave you your chance. But now I'll go on my own, and I'll get off somehow."

"Sam, come back," he said. And abruptly, my legs were mine no longer.

"Sit down again," he said. "And listen for a minute."

My traitorous legs took me back, and I sat.

"Sam," he said, "you know the old story. Now and then, at rare intervals, one like us will be born. Nearly always, when they are grown, they leave."

Only a few stay. But only once in thousands of years does one like yourself appear who must be chained against his will to our world."

"Erik," I said, between my teeth. "Don't sympathize."

"I'm not sympathizing, Sam," he said. "As you said yourself, there is no end to the universe, but I have seen it all and there is no place in it for you. For the others that have gone out, there are places that are no places. They sup at alien tables, Sam, but always and forever as a guest. They left themselves behind when they went and they don't belong any longer to our Earth."

He stopped for a moment, and I knew what was coming.

"But you, Sam," he said, and I heard his voice with my head bowed, staring at the brown dirt. He spoke tenderly. "Poor Sam. You'd never be able to leave the Earth behind. You're one of us, but the living cord binds you to the others. Never a man speaks to you, but your hands yearn toward him in friendship. Never a woman smiles your way, but love warms that frozen heart of yours. You can't leave them, Sam. If you went out now, you'd come back, in time, and try to take them with you. You'd hurry them on before they are ripe. And there's no place out there in the universe for them – yet."

I tried to move, but could not. Tried to lift my face to his, but I could not.

"Poor Sam," he said, "trapped by a common heart that chains the lightning of his brain. Go back, Sam. Go back to your cities and your people. Go back to a thousand little jobs, and the work that is no greater than theirs, but many times as much so that it drives you without a pause twenty, twenty-two hours a day. Go back, Sam, to your designing and your painting, to your music and your business, to your engineering and your landscaping, and all the other things. Go back and keep busy, so busy your brain fogs and you sleep without dreaming. And wait. Wait for the necessary years to pass until they grow and change and at last come to their destiny.

"When that time comes, Sam, they will go out. And you will go with them, blood of their blood, flesh of their flesh, kin and comrade to them all. You will be happier than any of us have ever been, when that time comes. But the years have still to pass, and now you must go back. Go back, Sam. Go back, go back, go back."

And so I have come back. O people that I hate and love!

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