



Stopover
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HE HAD been living with us for a week before I found out he was a Lifter. Even the discovery was an accident. I had started for the store, but then remembered a chore I wanted him to do. I heard the sounds of wood-chopping coming from the shed, so I went behind the house to the small wooden structure. I must have gasped or something, because he turned around to look at me, dropping the axe he had poised over a block of wood as he turned. Only he hadn't been holding the axe; it had been hanging in mid-air without support.

The first time I saw him was when he knocked on my door. I don't think I'll ever forget how he looked—tall and thin, old clothes and older shoes, an unruly mop of blond hair. It was only when I looked at his face that I realized that he was more than a mere boy of eighteen or nineteen. The tired lines around his mouth, the sad, mature look in his eyes, the stoop already evident in his young shoulders; he had been forced to mature too quickly, and seemed to have knowledge a boy his age had no right to be burdened with.

"I—I was wondering if I might get a bite to eat, sir," he said.

I grinned. No matter how he looked, he was no different from anyone else his age where food was concerned. "Sure; come on in and rest a spell," I told him. "Marty, can you fix a plate of something? We've got a guest." Marty—my wife—glanced through the kitchen doorway. After a cursory look at the boy, she smiled at him and went back to work.

"Sit down, son, you look pretty done-in. Come far today?"

He nodded. "Guess it shows, huh?" he said, brushing the road dust from his trousers.

"Uh-huh. Where you from? Not around here, I know."

"Far back as I can remember, Oregon has been home."

It wasn't hard to guess why he was almost a thousand miles from home. During the war, over ten million American families had been separated, their way of life destroyed by the hell of atomic bombings. Ever since its end, people had been seeking their loved ones; many, only to find them dead or dying. Sometimes the searches stretched across continents or oceans. In that respect the boy sitting opposite me was no different from hundreds of others I've seen in the past ten years. The only difference was in his face.

"Looking for your family," I said, making it a statement.

"Yessir." He smiled, as though the sentence had double meaning.

After he had eaten, he went down to the town store to look through its records. They all do. They turn the pages of the big stopover book, hoping a relative or friend had passed through the same town. Then they sign the book, put down the date and where they're headed, and set out once more. Almost all towns have stopover books nowadays, and a good thing, too. They helped me find Marty back in '63, when the truce was finally signed. In fact, I found her right here in this town. We got married, settled down, and haven't been more than a hundred miles away since then.

Martha called me into the kitchen almost as soon as he was gone. "He's a nice boy."

"That he is," I agreed. "You know, I've been thinking; we could use a young fella around here to help with the work."

"If he'll stay. There was something in his eyes; a sort of longing for someone very close to him. That kind usually takes off after a night's rest."

"I know. Guess I'll drop by the store; see if I can talk him into staying."

By the time I reached the store, school was out, and a group of kids were gathered around him, listening to his description of the Rocky Mountains, which he had crossed during the summer. The kids weren't the only ones listening. Even the adults were standing around in the store, remembering the places they had once seen themselves, and getting such bits of news as he dropped about the other towns he had passed through. The Searchers are, next to the town radio stations, the only source of information we have now, so it's no wonder they're so warmly greeted wherever they stop.

Soon as he'd finished telling about the Rockies, I said we'd appreciate it if he would stay for supper. He said he would, and later, while he and Tommy, my eight-year-old son, and I were walking home, I asked him if he'd stay with us for a while.

For a moment he looked wistful, as if wishing he could stay here, and forget whoever he was trying to find. Then he smiled and said, thanks, he would stay for a week or so.

He was real helpful, too, cutting stove and fireplace wood for the coming winter, running errands, hunting for game animals, and teaching at the school. Almost all Searchers teach when they can be persuaded to stay in town for a spell. Since there are no more colleges to produce teachers, anyone who knows something useful takes a turn at teaching.

'Fore the war, I was a mathematics major in college, so twice a week I teach all kinds of math at school, from numbers through calculus. Mostly, Searchers teach about what the places they had passed through are like.

Then, when I opened the door to the shed that day, and saw the axe suspended in mid-air, I suddenly realized why he had that sad, tired look about him all the time.

He picked up the axe from where it had fallen, and stood it against the wall. Reaching for his jacket, he said, "I—I guess I'd better be moving along, Mr. Tranton. I'm really sorry if I've caused you any trouble." He started past me for the door.

"Hold on, son." I grabbed his arm. "Why the rush?"

"I don't want to cause you any trouble. Now that you know what I am—" he gritted the words out bitterly, "the word will get around. I wouldn't want the others in town to be angry with you because of me. You and Mrs. Tranton have been swell to me. Thanks for everything." He tried to pull his arm loose, but I held fast.

"Let's go inside and have a cup of coffee," I suggested. "I don't know about the other towns you've been through, but here we don't hate a person because he might happen to have powers we don't."

"Yesterday I was down at the store, and I heard one of the men sounding off about us," he said. "He didn't sound like he cared much for us."

"Must have been John Atherson. He never could understand ESP, and he blames the war on it. We just let him talk; can't change a person like that." We went up the back steps and through the door into the kitchen. "Go on, show Marty," I said, taking off my jacket.

He looked at me to make sure I meant it. Then he raised the coffee pot from the stove, and watched it move across the room under its own power to the table where I was sitting. Leaving the pot in mid-air, he made the cupboard open, and still standing in the middle of the room, floated three cups and saucers to the table. Then he got the cream, sugar and three spoons, put them on the table, and poured the coffee. Marty watched the coffee pot move back to the stove, her mouth open in amazement, "I heard of it, but I don't think I'd have believed it if I hadn't seen it." I nodded, and she smiled at him. "Now that I know," she said, "I'm even gladder you chose to stay here for a while."

He grinned. "Thanks." He sat down with us at the table, and stirred some sugar into his coffee.

"It must be hard on you," Marty said quietly, in a knowing way. "Are you really looking for your family, or for others with ESP?"

"My father was killed during the bombings. After that, Mom and I were alone. She only had a little talent; Dad and I were the ones who were really adept. Anyway, we stayed on the small farm we owned until last spring. Then Mom married again, and I was free to leave. I think her new husband was sorry to see me go, because it meant a lot of manual work for him that I had been doing an easier way. I decided to see if I couldn't find any others like myself, so I left and started across the country."

"Do you have any other powers, or can you just control things?" Marty asked.

He grinned. "If you mean, am I an all-around superman, no. Dad wasn't either. I do have a scattering of other psi talents, though, but nothing as well-developed as my telekinesis. I'm still working on them."

Tommy came in from school just then. "Could you teach him how to use his mind that way, or do you have to be born with it?" I said.

He smiled again. "No, you don't have to be born with it. Everyone could do it if they started training themselves young enough to use their minds to the fullest extent. All through history certain people have had strange powers. The trouble was, they were thought to be freaks instead of the better developed humans they actually were. Even now, we're only on the threshold of learning the full power of the mind." He turned to Tommy. "Would you like to learn how to do things, Tommy?"

"Sure. Like what?"

He glanced at Marty and me. "Like making the world a better place to live."

Two weeks later, at a meeting of the town council, I wasn't too worried about getting the proposal accepted. We might have some trouble with Atherson, but I figured between the two of us we could handle him. When the new business came up, I stood up and led Tommy to the front of the hall. There were a few whispers as we went, as children under fifteen aren't allowed in the hall during a council meeting.

"Tommy has something to say to you which, I think, will interest everyone here. Go on, son."

Seconds afterwards, we all heard, a clear "Hello," but not with our ears; the word came from inside our heads.

Someone said: "The kid's a telepath," and the silence was broken.

Everybody was talking at the same time.

"I suppose you think it's an honor to have one of them damn things for your son," Atherson yelled. "I'm glad you're the one who got stuck, and not me."

"Tommy was not *born* a telepath, John," I told him. "He has been *deliberately trained* to make use of the latent power in his brain. And I don't think I'm 'stuck' either. We all know we've been slowly slipping into retrogression ever since '63. None of us like it, but there isn't anything we can do to halt it—yet. We don't want our children, or their children, to keep slipping backwards. If we don't stop it in our lifetime, we may not be able to stop it at all.

"As I see it, the best chance we have to at least achieve a status quo is to accept the aid those among us with psi talents are willing to give. After all, it's their world, too. With their help, we may be able to build a better civilization, one without the socio-political diseases that led to the war.

"The young man who has been staying at my house for the past three weeks taught Tommy to do what he just did. He says he thinks he can do it with any child under ten years old, and is even willing to try it with some teen-agers. Of course, Tommy's training has just begun. He will keep on learning for years.

"Here's my idea. If some of the children get a grounding in how to develop their dormant brain power, by the time they're twenty, they'll be able to mold a new society, one geared to the present culture instead of the past traditions. How about it?"

I waited. For a minute there was silence. Finally one of the older men stood up. "Is he sure he can do it?"

"All we know is it worked with Tommy," I replied.

"I don't like it; it's unnatural," Atherson said.

"No one asked you to like it," someone said.

Another called: "Do you think three world wars in fifty years *is* natural? Let's take a vote."

A vote was taken, and it was decided to add an extra class for those children whose parents wanted them to attend. After a month, the council would expect a report on what progress—or lack of it—had been made.

A few weeks later, when my math class was over, I hung around to watch the new class. It was divided into small groups, each training on a different psi talent. One group was lifting pencils and gently returning them to desks by telekinesis. Another was sitting quietly, once in a while breaking into shouts of laughter; probably telepathy. There were other groups, but I didn't know enough about the talents to identify their work.

During the time he was teaching, he met a girl. They spent quite a bit of time together, and she joined the special class. By the time the report to the council came due, it wasn't hard to tell they were in love.

Just about everyone in town turned out for that meeting. The boys and girls who were taking the class were seated at the front of the hall. The report was first on the agenda, so the kids could go home to bed.

"When we started," he said, "I asked those children who weren't interested, or who were—um—unsuited to the work, to leave. Then we ran through a general training exercise, and after a week, I split the class up into groups. Each group was to concentrate on one talent, but general sessions for the entire class give everyone practice in all talents. I think we've made fairly good progress. Some of the older teen-agers have shown an interest in the talents (he glanced at his girl), and although progress has not been as rapid as with the younger children, they are sufficiently developed to help instruct. Now your children are going to demonstrate what they have learned."

For the next half hour we watched Tommy and fourteen other boys and girls work. Tommy and the others who had concentrated on telepathy read silently to us from books and talked to each other, projecting their thoughts so we could also listen in. The telekinesis group all worked together to build a small table. All the necessary materials were stacked at the front of the room. The kids sat in a half circle, their brows furrowed in concentration as lumber, nails and hammers moved under the guidance of their minds. When they had finished, the table was complete, even to the sanding and a coat of varnish.

Finally, the only one with precognition—a girl about six years old, with long blonde hair—gave the weather forecast for the next two weeks. Copies of her prediction were passed out to us, so we could check her accuracy.

Once the kids were gone, he stood up again. "I hope you are all convinced as to what can be accomplished through the use of psi. The talents can and should be used for the betterment of society, not for

carnival side shows. Of course, there are more than those just demonstrated. Unfortunately, I couldn't find them present in this group. I was hoping for either a healer or a sensitive, but no one had the necessary ability.

"If you want the class continued, the decision is yours. Thanks for having open minds, and for giving me a chance." He picked up his jacket and walked out.

Atherson didn't bother to come to the meeting, so the vote to continue the class was unanimous.

He stayed on, teaching part-time, helping out with the work at my place, and seeing his girl. Then, one afternoon two weeks after the council meeting, she came to see me. "You've got to stop him, Mr. Tranton," she said. "He's going to leave. He told me he was going right after he finished the class today. He's probably down at the store right now, buying things to take with him. You've got to make him stay."

"Why?" I asked quietly, watching the tears well up in her eyes. She hadn't lost her composure yet, but she felt so strongly about him she was on the verge of breaking down.

"Because I love him and he loves me," she retorted. "That's why. Won't you talk to him? At least get him to take me with him. Please."

"You said you love him. Would you rather he stayed here, and was never fully happy, or left to continue searching, maybe to return someday, ready to settle down? If you really love him there's no question."

"Couldn't he take me with him?"

I shook my head. "I don't think you should even ask him to take you. You'd be a burden that would slow him down. He'd worry about you, have to get your food, find shelter for you. He might let you go with him, but don't ask him to. He's too young to be tied down. Now go on, and wish him good luck and kiss him goodbye. He's coming up the road now."

She glanced out the open window, jumped up, and ran out into the sunlight, to wait at the side of the road. I picked up the book I had been reading, but the window was too close to the road for me to concentrate on the pages. She didn't say anything until he was standing before her.

"I'll be waiting," she said. "Take care of yourself."

He nodded. "I have to go," he told her. "Partly because it was Dad's last wish, partly because I need others of my own kind. Alone, we can't

help the world much; together, there's a good chance for results. I left a letter for the council saying you were going to take over the class, because you have the ability to carry on. Watch Cathy, and help her all you can. She's got it; her weather forecast proved that much. You've got to drum that into her; never let her forget it. Maybe I'll be back—I hope so. But first, I have to find others. I need them, and they might need me. We're still not completely self-sufficient.

"Give the kids my love, and keep them at it. Just don't forget they *are* kids. Give them a chance to grow up as normally as possible. That's a chance I didn't have."

He kissed her tenderly, then started off down the road. When he reached the crest of the hill, he turned and waved. Marty joined me at the doorway, and we waved too. Outlined against the bright blue afternoon sky, he stood immobile for a moment. To many, he would have been just a young man with a tired-out face; but to me, the symbol of a better life for Tommy and his children ... a life unmarred by the threat of instant death as punishment for something he had little control over.

He's gone now, but the work will go on, and the Athersons of the world will come to realize he is giving us another chance, a chance we don't really deserve. Somehow he reminds me of another man. A man who said: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God."

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