

Science Fiction

# The Man Who Never Forgot

By Robert Silverberg



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COVER DESIGN BY CHRIS HARDWICK

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He saw the girl waiting in line outside a big Los Angeles movie house, on a mildly foggy Tuesday morning. She was slim and pale, barely five-three, with stringy flaxen hair, and she was alone. He remembered her, of course.

He knew it would be a mistake, but he crossed the street anyway and walked up along the theatre line to where she stood.

'Hello,' he said.

She turned, stared at him blankly, flicked the tip of her tongue out for an instant over her lips. 'I don't believe I—'

'Tom Niles,' he said. 'Pasadena, New Year's Day, 1955. You sat next to me. Ohio State 20, Southern Cal 7. You don't remember?'

'A football game? But I hardly ever—I mean—I'm sorry, mister. I—'

Someone else in the line moved forward towards him with a tight hard scowl on his face. Niles knew when he was beaten. He smiled apologetically and said, 'I'm sorry, miss. I guess I made a mistake. I took you for someone I knew—a Miss Bette Torrance. Excuse me.'

And he strode rapidly away. He had not gone more than ten feet when he heard the little surprised gasp and the 'But I *am* Bette Torrance!'— but he kept going.

*I should know better after twenty-eight years, he thought bitterly. But I forget the most basic fact—that even though I remember people, they don't necessarily remember me—*

He walked wearily to the corner, turned right, and started down a new street, one whose shops were totally unfamiliar to him and which, therefore, he had never seen before. His mind, stimulated to its normal pitch of activity by the incident outside the theatre, spewed up a host of tangential memories like the good machine it was: *1 Jan. 1955. Rose Bowl Pasadena California Seat G126; warm day, high humidity, arrived in stadium 12:03 P.M., PST. Came alone. Girl in next seat wearing blue cotton dress, white oxfords, carrying Southern Cal pennant. Talked to her. Name Bette Torrance, senior at Southern Cal, government major. Had a date for the game but he came down with flu symptoms night before, insisted she see game anyway.*

*Seat on other side of her empty. Bought her a hot dog, \$.20 (no mustard)—*

There was more, much more. Niles forced it back down. There was the virtually stenographic report of their conversation all that day:

('... I hope we win. I saw the last Bowl game we won, two years ago...')

'... Yes, that was 1953. Southern Cal 7, Wisconsin 0 ... and two straight wins in 1944-45 over Washington and Tennessee ...'

'... Gosh, you know a lot about football! What did you do, memorize the record book?')

And the old memories. The jeering yell of freckled Joe Merritt that warm April day in 1937—*who are you, Einstein?* And Buddy Call saying acidly on 8 November 1939, *Here comes Tommy*

*Niles, the human adding machine. Get him!* And then the bright stinging pain of a snowball landing just below his left clavicle, the pain that he could summon up as easily as any of the other pain-memories he carried with him. He winced and closed his eyes suddenly, as if struck by the icy pellet here on a Los Angeles street on a foggy Tuesday morning.

They didn't call him the human adding machine any more. Now it was the human tape recorder; the derisive terms had to keep pace with the passing decades. Only Niles himself remained unchanging, The Boy With The Brain Like A Sponge grown up into The Man With The Brain Like A Sponge, still cursed with the same terrible gift.

His data-cluttered mind ached. He saw a diminutive yellow sports car parked on the far side of the street, recognized it by its make and model and colour and licence number as the car

belonging to Leslie F. Marshall, twenty-six, blond hair, blue eyes, television actor with the following credits—

Wincing, Niles applied the cutoff circuit and blotted out the upwelling data. He had met Marshall once, six months ago, at a party given by a mutual friend—an erstwhile mutual friend; Niles found it difficult to keep friends for long. He had spoken with the actor for perhaps ten minutes and had added that much more baggage to his mind.

It was time to move on, Niles decided. He had been in Los Angeles ten months. The burden of accumulated memories was getting too heavy; he was greeting too many people who had long since forgotten him (*curse my John Q. Average build, 5 feet 9, 163 pounds, brownish hair, brownish eyes, no unduly prominent physical features, no distinguishing scars except those inside*, he thought). He contemplated returning to San



Francisco, and decided against it. He had been there only a year ago; Pasadena, two years ago; the time had come, he realized, for another eastward jaunt.

*Back and forth across the face of America goes Thomas Richard Niles, Der fliegende Hollander, the Wandering Jew, the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Human Tape Recorder.* He smiled at a newsboy who had sold him a copy of the Examiner on 13 May past, got the usual blank stare in return, and headed for the nearest bus terminal.

For Niles the long journey had begun on 11 October 1929, in the small Ohio town of Lowry Bridge. He was third of three children, born of seemingly normal parents, Henry Niles (b. 1896), Mary Niles (b. 1899). His older brother and sister had shown no extraordinary manifestations. Tom had.

It began as soon as he was old enough to form words; a neighbour woman on the front porch peered into the house where he was playing, and remarked to his mother, 'Look how *big* he's getting, Mary!'

He was less than a year old. He had replied, in virtually the same tone of voice, '*Look how big he's getting, Mary!*' It caused a sensation, even though it was only mimicry, not even speech.

He spent his first twelve years in Lowry Bridge, Ohio. In later years, he often wondered how he had been able to last there so long.

He began school at the age of four, because there was no keeping him back; his classmates were five and six, vastly superior to him in physical coordination, vastly inferior in everything else. He could read. He could even write, after a

fashion, though his babyish muscles tired easily from holding a pen. And he could remember.

He remembered everything. He remembered his parents' quarrels and repeated the exact words of them to anyone who cared to listen, until his father whipped him and threatened to kill him if he ever did *that* again. He remembered that too. He remembered the lies his brother and sister told, and took great pains to set the record straight. He learned eventually not to do that, either. He remembered things people had said, and corrected them when they later deviated from their earlier statements.

He remembered everything.

He read a textbook once and it stayed with him. When the teacher asked a question based on the day's assignment, Tommy Niles' skinny arm was in the air long before the others

had even really assimilated the question. After a while, his teacher made it clear to him that he could *not* answer every question, whether he had the answer first or not; there were twenty other pupils in the class. The other pupils in the class made that abundantly clear to him, after school.

He won the verse-learning contest in Sunday school. Barry Harman had studied for weeks in hopes of winning the catcher's mitt his father had promised him if he finished first—but when it was Tommy Niles' turn to recite, he began with *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth*, continued through *Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them*, headed on into *Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made*, and presumably would have continued clear through Genesis, Exodus, and on to Joshua if the dazed proctor hadn't shut him

up and declared him the winner. Barry Harman didn't get his glove; Tommy Niles got a black eye instead.

He began to realize he was different. It took time to make the discovery that other people were always forgetting things, and that instead of admiring him for what he could do they hated him for it. It was difficult for a boy of eight, even Tommy Niles, to understand why they hated him, but eventually he did find out, and then he started learning how to hide his gift.

Through his ninth and tenth years he practised being normal, and almost succeeded; the after-school beatings stopped, and he managed to get a few Bs on his report cards at last, instead of straight rows of A. He was growing up; he was learning to pretend. Neighbours heaved sighs of relief, now that that terrible Niles boy was no longer doing all those crazy things.

But inwardly he was the same as ever. And he realized he'd have to leave Lowry Bridge soon.

He knew everyone too well. He would catch them in lies ten times a week, even Mr Lawrence, the minister, who once turned down an invitation to pay a social call to the Nileses one night, saying, 'I really have to get down to work and write my sermon for Sunday,' when only three days before Tommy had heard him say to Miss Emery, the church secretary, that he had had a sudden burst of inspiration and had written three sermons all at one sitting, and now he'd have some free time for the rest of the month.

Even Mr. Lawrence lied, then. And he was the best of them. As for the others—

Tommy waited until he was twelve; he was big for his age by then and figured he could take care of himself. He borrowed

twenty dollars from the supposedly secret cashbox in the back of the kitchen cupboard (his mother had mentioned its existence five years before, in Tommy's hearing) and tiptoed out of the house at three in the morning. He caught the night freight for Chillicothe, and was on his way.

\* \* \* \*

There were thirty people on the bus out of Los Angeles. Niles sat alone in the back, by the seat just over the rear wheel. He knew four of the people in the bus by name—but he was confident they had forgotten who he was by now, and so he kept to himself.

It was an awkward business. If you said hello to someone who had forgotten you, they thought you were a troublemaker or a panhandler. And if you passed someone by, thinking he had forgotten you, and he hadn't—well, then you were a snob. Niles

swung between both those poles five times a day. He'd see someone, such as that girl Bette Torrance, and get a cold, unrecognizing stare; or he'd go by someone else, believing the other person did not remember him but walking rapidly just in case he did, and there would be the angry, 'Well! Who the blazes do you think *you* are!' floating after him as he retreated.

Now he sat alone, bouncing up and down with each revolution of the wheel, with the one suitcase containing his property thumping constantly against the baggage rack over his head. That was one advantage of his talent: he could travel light. He didn't need to keep books, once he had read them, and there wasn't much point in amassing belongings of any other sort either; they became overfamiliar and dull too soon.

He eyed the road signs. They were well into Nevada by now, The old, wearisome retreat was on.



He could never stay in the same city too long. He had to move on to new territory, to some new place where he had no old memories, where no one knew him, where he knew no one. In the sixteen years since he had left home, he'd covered a lot of ground.

He remembered the jobs he had held.

He had been a proofreader for a Chicago publishing firm, once. He did the jobs of two men. The way proofreading usually worked, one man read the copy from the manuscript, the other checked it against the galleys. Niles had a simpler method: he would scan the manuscript once, thereby memorizing it, and then merely check the galley for discrepancies. It brought him fifty dollars a week for a while, before the time came to move along.

He once held a job as a sideshow freak in a travelling carnie that made a regular Alabama-Mississippi-Georgia circuit. Niles had really been low on cash, then. He remembered how he had gotten the job: by buttonholing the carnie boss and demanding a tryout. 'Read me anything—anything at all! I can remember it!' The boss had been sceptical, and didn't see any use for such an act anyway, but finally gave in when Niles practically fainted of malnutrition in his office. The boss read him an editorial from a Mississippi county weekly, and when he was through Niles recited it back, word perfect. He got the job, at fifteen dollars a week plus meals, and sat in a little booth under a sign that said The Human Tape Recorder. People read or said things to him, and he repeated them. It was dull work; sometimes the things they said to him were filthy, and most of the time they couldn't even remember what they had said to him a minute later. He

stayed with the show four weeks, and when he left no one missed him much.

The bus rolled on into the fogbound night.

There had been other jobs: good jobs, bad jobs. None of them had lasted very long. There had been some girls too, but none of *them* had lasted too long. They had all, even those he had tried to conceal it from, found out about his special ability, and soon after that they had left. No one could stay with a man who never forgot, who could always dredge yesterday's foibles out of the reservoir that was his mind and hurl them unanswerably into the open. And the man with the perfect memory could never live long among imperfect human beings.

*To forgive is to forget*, he thought. The memory of old insults and quarrels fades, and a relationship starts anew. But for him there could be no forgetting, and hence little forgiving.

He closed his eyes after a little while and leaned back against the hard leather cushion of his seat. The steady rhythm of the bus lulled him to sleep. In sleep, his mind could rest; he found ease from memory. He never dreamed.

\* \* \* \*

In Salt Lake City he paid his fare, left the bus, suitcase in hand, and set out in the first direction he faced. He had not wanted to go any farther east on that bus. His cash reserve was only sixty-three dollars now, and he had to make it last. He found a job as a dishwasher in a downtown restaurant, held it long enough to accumulate a hundred dollars, and moved out again, this time hitchhiking to Cheyenne. He stayed there a month and took a night bus to Denver, and when he left Denver it was to go to Wichita.

Wichita to Des Moines to Minneapolis, Minneapolis to Milwaukee, then down through Illinois, carefully avoiding Chicago, and on to Indianapolis. It was an old story for him, this travelling. Gloomily he celebrated his twenty-ninth birthday alone in an Indianapolis rooming house on a drizzly October day, and for the purpose of brightening the occasion, summoned up his old memories of his fourth birthday party in 1933 ... one of the few unalloyedly happy days of his life.

They were all there, all his playmates, and his parents, and his brother Hank, looking gravely important at the age of eight, and his sister Marian, and there were candles and favours and punch and cake. Mrs Heinsohn from next door stopped in and said, 'He looks like a regular little man,' and his parents beamed at him, and everyone sang and had a good time. And afterwards, when the last game had been played, the last present opened, when

the boys and girls had waved good-bye and disappeared up the street, the grownups sat around and talked of the new president and the many strange things that were happening in the country, and little Tommy sat in the middle of the floor, listening and recording everything and glowing warmly, because somehow during the whole afternoon no one had said or done anything cruel to him. He was happy that day, and he went to bed still happy.

Niles ran through the party twice, like an old movie he loved well; the print never grew frayed, the registration always remained as clear and sharp as ever. He could taste the sweet tang of the punch, he could relive the warmth of that day when through some accident the others had allowed him a little happiness.

Finally he let the brightness of the party fade, and once again he was in Indianapolis on a grey, bleak afternoon, alone in an eight-dollar-a-week furnished room.

*Happy birthday to me,* he thought bitterly. *Happy birthday.*

He stared at the blotchy green wall with the cheap Corot print hung slightly askew. I could have been something special, he brooded, one of the wonders of the world. Instead I'm a skulking freak who lives in dingy third-floor back rooms, and I don't dare let the world know what I can do.

He scooped into his memory and came up with the Toscanini performance of Beethoven's Ninth he had heard in Carnegie Hall once while he was in New York. It was infinitely better than the later performance Toscanini had approved for recording, yet no microphones had taken it down; the blazing performance was as far beyond recapture as a flame five minutes snuffed, except in

one man's mind. Niles had it all: the majestic downcrash of the tympani, the resonant, perspiring basso bringing forth the great melody of the finale, even the french-horn bobble that must have enraged the maestro so, the infuriating cough from the dress circle at the gentlest moment of the adagio, the sharp pinching of Niles' shoes as he leaned forward in his seat—

He had it all, in highest fidelity.

\* \* \* \*

He arrived in the small town on a moonless night three months later, a cold, crisp January evening, when the wintry wind swept in from the north, cutting through his thin clothing and making the suitcase an almost impossible burden for his numb, gloveless hand. He had not meant to come to this place, but he had run short of cash in Kentucky, and there had been no helping it. He was on his way to New York, where he could live



in anonymity for months unbothered, and where he knew his rudeness would go unnoticed if he happened to snub someone on the street or if he greeted someone who had forgotten him.

But New York was still hundreds of miles away, and it might have been millions on this January night. He saw a sign: BAR. He forced himself forward towards the sputtering neon; he wasn't ordinarily a drinker, but he needed the warmth of alcohol inside him now, and perhaps the barkeep would need a man to help out, or could at least rent him a room for what little he had in his pockets.

There were five men in the bar when he reached it. They looked like truck drivers. Niles dropped his valise to the left of the door, rubbed his stiff hands together, exhaled a white cloud. The bartender grinned jovially at him.

'Cold enough for you out there?'

Niles managed a grin. 'I wasn't sweating much. Let me have something warming. Double shot of bourbon, maybe.'

That would be ninety cents. He had \$7.34.

He nursed the drink when it came, sipped it slowly, let it roll down his gullet. He thought of the summer he had been stranded for a week in Washington, a solid week of 97-degree temperature and 97-per cent humidity, and the vivid memory helped to ease away some of the psychological effects of the coldness.

He relaxed; he warmed. Behind him came the penetrating sound of argument.

'—I tell you Joe Louis beat Schmeling to a pulp the second time! Kayoed him in the first round!'

'You're nuts! Louis just barely got him down in a fifteen-round decision, the second bout.'

'Seems to me—'

'I'll put money on it. Ten bucks says it was a decision in fifteen, mac.'

Sounds of confident chuckles. 'I wouldn't want to take your money so easy, pal. Everyone knows it was a knockout in one.'

'Ten bucks, I said.'

Niles turned to see what was happening. Two of the truck drivers, burly men in dark pea jackets, stood nose to nose. Automatically the thought came: *Louis knocked Max Schmeling out in the first round at Yankee Stadium, New York, 22 June 1938.* Niles had never been much of a sports fan, and particularly disliked boxing—but he had once glanced at an almanac page cataloguing Joe Louis' title fights, and the data had, of course remained.

He watched detachedly as the bigger of the two truck drivers angrily slapped a ten-dollar bill down on the bar; the other matched it. Then the first glanced up at the barkeep and said. 'Okay, bud. You're a shrewd guy. Who's right about the second Louis-Schmeling fight?'

The barkeep was a blank-faced cipher of a man, middle-aged, balding, with mild, empty eyes. He chewed at his lip a moment, shrugged, fidgeted, finally said, 'Kinda hard for me to remember. That musta been twenty-five years ago.'

*Twenty*, Niles thought.

'Lessee now,' the bartender went on. 'Seems to me I remember—yeah, sure. It went the full fifteen, and the judges gave it to Louis. I seem to remember a big stink being made over it; the papers said Joe should've killed him a lot faster'n that.'

A triumphant grin appeared on the bigger driver's face. He deftly pocketed both bills.

The other man grimaced and howled, 'Hey! You two fixed this thing up beforehand! I know damn well that Louis kayoed the German in one.'

'You heard what the man said. The money's mine.'

'No,' Niles said suddenly, in a quiet voice that seemed to carry halfway across the bar. *Keep your mouth shut, he told himself frantically. This is none of your business. Stay out of it!*

But it was too late.

'What you say?' asked the one who'd dropped the ten-spot.

'I say you're being rooked. Louis won the fight in one round, like you say. 22 June 1938, Yankee Stadium. The barkeep's thinking of the Arturo Godoy fight. *That* went the full fifteen in 1940. February 9.'

'There—told you! Gimme back my money!'

But the other driver ignored the cry and turned to face Niles. He was a cold-faced, heavy-set man, and his fists were starting to clench. 'Smart man, eh? Boxing expert?'

'I just didn't want to see anybody get cheated,' Niles said stubbornly. He knew what was coming now. The truck driver was weaving drunkenly towards him; the barkeep was yelling, the other patrons backing away.

The first punch caught Niles in the ribs; he grunted and staggered back, only to be grabbed by the throat and slapped three times. Dimly he heard a voice saying, 'Hey, let go the guy! He didn't mean anything! You want to kill him?'

A volley of blows doubled him up; a knuckle swelled his right eyelid, a fist crashed stunningly into his left shoulder. He spun,

wobbled uncertainly, knowing that his mind would permanently record every moment of this agony.

Through half-closed eyes he saw them pulling the enraged driver off him; the man writhed in the grip of three others, aimed a last desperate kick at Niles' stomach and grazed a rib, and finally was subdued.

Niles stood alone in the middle of the floor, forcing himself to stay upright, trying to shake off the sudden pain that drilled through him in a dozen places.

'You all right?' a solicitous voice asked. 'Hell, those guys play rough. You oughtn't mix up with them.'

'I'm all right,' Niles said hollowly. 'Just ... let me ... catch my breath.'

'Here. Sit down. Have a drink. It'll fix you up.'

'No,' Niles said. *I can't stay here. I have to get moving.* 'I'll be all right,' he muttered unconvincingly. He picked up his suitcase, wrapped his coat tight about him, and left the bar, step by step by step.

He got fifteen feet before the pain became unbearable. He crumpled suddenly and fell forward on his face in the dark, feeling the cold iron-hard frozen turf against his cheek, and struggled unsuccessfully to get up. He lay there, remembering all the various pains of his life, the beatings, the cruelty, and when the weight of memory became too much to bear he blanked out.

\* \* \* \*

The bed was warm, the sheets clean and fresh and soft. Niles woke slowly, feeling a temporary sensation of disorientation,



and then his infallible memory supplied the data on his blackout in the snow and he realized he was in a hospital.

He tried to open his eyes; one was swollen shut, but he managed to get the other's lids apart. He was in a small hospital room—no shining metropolitan hospital pavilion, but a small country clinic with gingerbread moulding on the walls and homey lace curtains, through which afternoon sunlight was entering.

So he had been found and brought to a hospital. That was good. He could have easily died out there in the snow; but someone had stumbled over him and brought him in. That was a novelty, that someone had bothered to help him; the treatment he had received in the bar last night—was it last night?—was more typical of the world's attitude towards him. In twenty-nine years he had somehow failed to learn adequate concealment,

camouflage and every day he suffered the consequences. It was so hard for him to remember, he who remembered everything else, that the other people were not like him, and hated him for what he was.

Gingerly he felt his side. There didn't seem to be any broken ribs—just bruises. A day or so of rest and they would probably discharge him and let him move on.

A cheerful voice said, 'Oh, you're awake, Mr Niles. Feeling better now? I'll brew some tea for you.'

He looked up and felt a sudden sharp pang. She was a nurse—twenty-two, twenty-three, new at the job perhaps, with a flowing tumble of curling blonde hair and wide, clear blue eyes. She was smiling, and it seemed to Niles it was not merely a professional smile. 'I'm Miss Carroll, your day nurse. Everything okay?'

'Fine.' Niles said hesitantly. 'Where am I?'

'Central County General Hospital. You were brought in late last night—apparently you'd been beaten up and left by the road out on Route 32. It's a lucky thing Mark McKenzie was walking his dog, Mr Niles.' She looked at him gravely. 'You remember last night, don't you? I mean—the shock—amnesia—'

Niles chuckled. 'That's the last ailment in the world I'd be afraid of,' he said. 'I'm Thomas Richard Niles, and I remember pretty well what happened. How badly am I damaged?'

'Superficial bruises, mild shock and exposure, slight case of frostbite,' she summed up. 'You'll live. Dr Hammond'll give you a full checkup a little later, after you've eaten. Let me bring you some tea.'

Niles watched the trim figure vanish into the hallway.

She was certainly an attractive girl, he thought, fresh-eyed, alert ... *alive*.

*Old cliché: patient falling for his nurse. But she's not for me, I'm afraid.*

Abruptly the door opened and the nurse reentered, bearing a little enamelled tea tray. 'You'll never guess! I have a surprise for you, Mr Niles. A visitor. Your mother.'

'My moth—'

She saw the little notice about you in the county paper. She's waiting outside, and she told me she hasn't seen you in seventeen years. Would you like me to send her in now?'

'I guess so,' Niles said, in a dry, feathery voice.

A second time the nurse departed. *My God*, Niles thought! *If I had known I was this close to home—*

*I should have stayed out of Ohio altogether.*

The last person he wanted to see was his mother. He began to tremble under the covers. The oldest and most terrible of his memories came bursting up from the dark compartment of his mind where he thought he had imprisoned it forever. The sudden emergence from warmth into coolness, from darkness to light, the jarring slap of a heavy hand on his buttocks, the searing pain of knowing that his security was ended, that from now on he would be alive, and therefore miserable—

The memory of the agonized birth-shriek sounded in his mind. He could never forget being born. And his mother was, he thought, the one person of all he could never forgive, since she had given him forth into the life he hated. He dreaded the moment when—

'Hello, Tom. It's been a long time.'

Seventeen years had faded her, had carved lines in her face and made the cheeks more baggy, the blue eyes less bright, the brown hair a mousy grey. She was smiling. And to his own astonishment Niles was able to smile back.

'Mother.'

'I read about it in the paper. It said a man of about thirty was found just outside town with papers bearing the name Thomas R. Niles, and he was taken to Central County General Hospital. So I came over, just to make sure—and it *was* you.'

A lie drifted to the surface of his mind, but it was a kind lie, and he said it: 'I was on my way back home to see you. Hitchhiking. But I ran into a little trouble en route.'

'I'm glad you decided to come back, Tom. It's been so lonely, ever since your father died, and of course Hank was married,

and Marian too—it's good to see you again. I thought I never would.'

He lay back, perplexed, wondering why the upwelling flood of hatred did not come. He felt only warmth towards her. He was glad to see her.

'How has it been—all these years, Tom? You haven't had it easy. I can see. I see it all over your face.'

'It hasn't been easy,' he said. 'You know why I ran away?'

She nodded. 'Because of the way you are. That thing about your mind—never forgetting. I knew. Your grandfather had it too, you know.'

'My grandfather—but—'

'You got it from him. I never did tell you, I guess. He didn't get along too well with any of us. He left my mother when I was a little girl, and I never knew where he went. So I always knew

you'd go away the way he did. Only you came back. Are you married?'

He shook his head.

'Time you got started, then, Tom. You're near thirty.'

The door opened, and an efficient-looking doctor appeared. 'Afraid your time's up, Mrs Niles. You'll be able to see him again later. I have to check him over, now that he's awake.'

'Of course, doctor.' She smiled at him, then at Niles. 'I'll see you later, Tom.'

'Sure, mother.'

Niles lay back, frowning, as the doctor poked at him here and there. *I didn't hate her.* A growing wonderment rose in him, and he realized he should have come home long ago. He had changed, inside, without even knowing it.



Running away was the first stage in growing up, and a necessary one. But coming back came later, and that was the mark of maturity. He was back. And suddenly he saw he had been terribly foolish all his bitter adult life.

He had a gift, a great gift, an awesome gift. It had been too big for him until now. Self-pitying, self-tormented, he had refused to allow for the shortcomings of the forgetful people about him, and had paid the price of their hatred. But he couldn't keep running away forever. The time would have to come for him to grow big enough to contain his gift, to learn to live with it instead of moaning in dramatic, self-inflicted anguish.

And now was the time. It was long overdue.

His grandfather had had the gift; they had never told him that. So it was genetically transmissible. He could marry, have children, and they, too, would never forget.

It was his duty not to let his gift die with him. Others of his kind, less sensitive, less thin-skinned, would come after and they, too, would know how to recall a Beethoven symphony or a decade-old wisp of conversation. For the first time since that fourth birthday party he felt a hesitant flicker of happiness. The days of running were ended; he was home again. *If I learn to live with others, maybe they'll be able to live with me.*

He saw the things he yet needed: a wife, a home, children—  
'—a couple of days' rest, plenty of hot liquids, and you'll be as good as new, Mr Niles,' the doctor was saying. 'is there anything you'd like me to bring you now?'

'Yes,' Niles said. 'Just send in the nurse, will you? Miss Carroll, I mean.'

The doctor grinned and left. Niles waited expectantly, exulting in his new self. He switched on Act Three of *Die Meistersinger* as

a kind of jubilant backdrop music in his mind, and let the warmth sweep up over him. When she entered the room he was smiling and wondering how to begin saying what he wanted to say.

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