

Old Rambling House

Frank Herbert, 1958

On his last night on Earth, Ted Graham stepped out of a glass-walled telephone booth, ducked to avoid a swooping moth that battered itself in a frenzy against a bare globe above the booth.

Ted Graham was a long-necked man with a head of pronounced egg shape topped by prematurely balding sandy hair. Something about his lanky, intense appearance suggested his occupation: certified public accountant.

He stopped behind his wife, who was studying a newspaper classified page, and frowned. 'They said to wait here. They'll come get us. Said the place is hard to find at night.'

Martha Graham looked up from the newspaper. She was a doll-faced woman, heavily pregnant, a kind of, pink prettiness about her. The yellow glow from the light above the booth subdued the red-auburn cast of her ponytail hair.

'I just *have* to be in a house when the baby's born,' she said. 'What'd they sound like?'

'I dunno. There was a funny kind of interruption - like an argument in some foreign language.'

'Did they sound foreign?'

'In a way.' He motioned along the night-shrouded line of trailers toward one with two windows glowing amber. 'Let's wait inside. These bugs out here are fierce.'

'Did you tell them which trailer is ours?'

'Yes. They didn't sound at all anxious to look at it. That's odd -them wanting to trade their house for a trailer.'

'There's nothing odd about it. They've probably just got itchy feet like we did.'

He appeared not to hear her. 'Funniest-sounding language you ever heard when that argument started - like a squire of noise.'

Inside the trailer, Ted Graham sat down on the green couch that opened into a double bed for company.

'They could use a good tax accountant around here,' he said, 'When I first saw the place, I got that definite feeling. The valley looks prosperous. It's a wonder nobody's opened an office here before.'

His wife took a straight chair by the counter separating kitchen and living area, folded her hands across her heavy stomach.

'I'm just continental tired of wheels going around under me,' she said. 'I want to sit and stare at the same view for the rest of my life. I don't know how a trailer ever seemed glamorous when -'

'It was the inheritance gave us itchy feet,' he said.

Tires gritted on gravel outside.

Martha Graham straightened. 'Could that be them?'

'Awful quick, if it is.' He went to the door, opened it, stared down at the man who was just raising a hand to knock.

'Are you Mr Graham?' asked the man.

'Yes.' He found himself staring at the caller.

'I'm Clint Rush. You called about the house?' The man moved farther into the light. At first, he'd appeared an old man, fine wrinkle lines in his face, a tired leather look to his skin. But as he moved his head in the light, the wrinkles seemed to dissolve - and with them, the years lifted from him.

'Yes, we called,' said Ted Graham. He stood aside. 'Do you want to look at the trailer now?'

Martha Graham crossed to stand beside her husband. 'We've kept it in awfully good shape,' she said. 'We've never let anything get seriously wrong with it.'

She sounds too anxious, thought Ted Graham. *I wish she'd let me do the talking for the two of us.*

'We can come back and look at your trailer tomorrow in daylight,' said Rush. 'My car's right out here, if you'd like to see our house.'

Ted Graham hesitated. He felt a nagging worry tug at his mind, tried to fix his attention on what bothered him.

'Hadn't we better take our car?' he asked. 'We could follow you.'

'No need,' said Rush. 'We're coming back into town tonight anyway. We can drop you off then.'

Ted Graham nodded. 'Be right with you as soon as I lock up.'

Inside the car, Rush mumbled introductions. His wife was a dark shadow in the front seat, her hair drawn back in a severe bun. Her features suggested gypsy blood. He called her Raimee.

Odd name, thought Ted Graham. And he noticed that she, too, gave that strange first impression of age that melted in a shift of light.

Mrs Rush turned her gypsy features toward Martha Graham. 'You are going to have a baby?'

It came out as an odd, veiled statement.

Abruptly, the car rolled forward.

Martha Graham said, 'It's supposed to be born in about two months. We hope it's a boy.'

Mrs Rush looked at her husband. 'I have changed my mind,' she said.

Rush spoke without taking his attention from the road. 'It is too ... ' He broke off, spoke in a tumble of strange sounds.

Ted Graham recognized it as the language he'd heard on the telephone.

Mrs Rush answered in the same tongue, anger showing in the intensity of her voice. Her husband replied, his voice calmer.

Presently, Mrs Rush fell moodily silent.

Rush tipped his head toward the rear of the car. 'My wife has moments when she does not want to get rid of the old house. It has been with her for many years.'

Ted Graham said, 'Oh.' Then: 'Are you Spanish?'

Rush hesitated. 'No. We are Basque.'

He turned the car down a well-lighted avenue that merged into a highway. They turned onto a side road. There followed more turns - left, right, right.

Ted Graham lost track.

They hit a jolting bump that made Martha gasp.

'I hope that wasn't too rough on you,' said Rush. 'We're almost there.'

The car swung into a lane, its lights picking out the skeleton outlines of trees: peculiar trees - tall, gaunt, leafless. They added to Ted Graham's feeling of uneasiness.

The lane dipped, ended at a low wall of a house - red brick with clerestory windows beneath overhanging eaves. The effect of the wall and a wide-beamed door they could see to the left was ultramodern.

Ted Graham helped his wife out of the car, followed the Rushes to the door.

'I thought you told me it was an old house,' he said.

'It was designed by one of the first modernists,' said Rush. He fumbled with an odd curved key. The wide door swung open onto a hallway equally wide, carpeted by a deep pile rug. They could glimpse floor-to-ceiling view windows at the end of the hall, city lights beyond.

Martha Graham gasped, entered the hall as though in a trance. Ted Graham followed, heard the door close behind them.

'It's so-so - so *big*' exclaimed Martha Graham.

'You want to trade *this* for our trailer?' asked Ted Graham.

'It's too inconvenient for us,' said Rush. 'My work is over the mountains on the coast.' He shrugged. 'We cannot sell it.'

Ted Graham looked at him sharply. 'Isn't there any money around here?' He had a sudden vision of a tax accountant with no customers.

'Plenty of money, but no real estate customers.'

They entered the living room. Sectional divans lined the walls. Subdued lighting glowed from the corners. Two paintings hung on the opposite walls - oblongs of odd lines and twists that made Ted Graham dizzy.

Warning bells clamored in his mind.

Martha Graham crossed to the windows, looked at the light far away below. 'I had no idea we'd climbed that far,' she said. 'It's like a fairy city.'

Mrs Rush emitted a short, nervous laugh.

Ted Graham glanced around the room, thought: *If the rest of the house is like this, it's worth fifty or sixty thousand.* He thought of the trailer: *A good one, but not worth more than seven thousand.*

Uneasiness was like a neon sign flashing in his mind. 'This seems so ... ' He shook his head.

'Would you like to see the rest of the house?' asked Rush.

Martha Graham turned from the window. 'Oh, yes.'

Ted Graham shrugged. *No harm in looking,* he thought.

When they returned to the living room, Ted Graham had doubled his previous estimate on the house's value. His brain reeled with the summing of it: a solarium with an entire ceiling covered by sun lamps, an automatic laundry where you dropped soiled clothing down a chute, took it washed and ironed from the other end ...

'Perhaps you and your wife would like to discuss it in private,' said Rush. 'We will leave you for a moment.'

And they were gone before Ted Graham could protest.

Martha Graham said, 'Ted, I honestly never in my life dreamed-'

'Something's very wrong, honey.'

'But, Ted -'

'This house is worth at least a hundred thousand dollars. Maybe more. And they want to trade *this* -' he looked around him - 'for a seven-thousand-dollar trailer?'

'Ted, they're foreigners. And if they're so foolish they don't know the value of this place,

then why should -'

'I don't like it,' he said. Again he looked around the room, recalled the fantastic equipment of the house. 'But maybe you're right.'

He stared out at the city lights. They had a lacelike quality: tall buildings linked by lines of flickering incandescence. Something Like a Roman candle shot skyward in the distance.

'Okay!' he said. 'If they want to trade, let's go push the deal ... '

Abruptly, the house shuddered. The city lights blinked out. A humming sound filled the air.

Martha Graham clutched her husband's arm. 'Ted! Wha - what was that?'

'I dunno.' He turned. 'Mr Rush!'

No answer. Only the humming.

The door at the end of the room opened. A strange man came through it. He wore a short toga-like garment of gray, metallic cloth belted at the waist by something that glittered and shimmered through every color of the spectrum. An aura of coldness and power emanated from him - a sense of untouchable hauteur.

He glanced around the room, spoke in the same tongue the Rushes had used.

Ted Graham said, 'I don't understand you, mister.'

The man put a hand to his nickering belt. Both Ted and Martha Graham felt themselves rooted to the floor, a tingling sensation vibrating along every nerve.

Again the strange language rolled from the man's tongue, but now the words were understood.

'Who are you?'

'My name's Graham. This is my wife. What's going - '

'How did you get here?'

'The Rushes - they wanted to trade us this house for our trailer. They brought us. Now look, we -'

'What is your talent - your occupation?'

'Tax accountant. Say! Why all these -'

'That was to be expected,' said the man. 'Clever! Oh, excessively clever!' His hand moved again to the belt. 'Now be very quiet. This may confuse you momentarily.'

Colored lights filled both the Grahams' minds. They staggered.

'You are qualified,' said the man. 'You will serve.'

'Where are we?' demanded Martha Graham.

'The coordinates would not be intelligible to you,' he said. 'I am of the Rojac. It is sufficient for you to know that you are under Rojac sovereignty.'

Ted Graham said, 'But -'

'You have, in a way, been kidnapped. And the Raimees have fled to your planet - an unregistered planet.'

'I'm afraid,' Martha Graham said shakily.

'You have nothing to fear,' said the man. 'You are no longer on the planet of your birth - nor even in the same galaxy.' He glanced at Ted Graham's wrist. 'That device on your wrist - it tells your local time?'

'Yes.'

'That will help in the search. And your sun - can you describe its atomic cycle?'

Ted Graham groped in his mind for his science memories from school, from the Sunday supplements. 'I can recall that our galaxy is a spiral like -'

'Most galaxies are spiral.'

'Is this some kind of a practical joke?' asked Ted Graham.

The man smiled, a cold, superior smile. 'It is no joke. Now I will make you a proposition.'

Ted nodded warily. 'All right, let's have the stinger.'

'The people who brought you here were tax collectors we Rojac recruited from a subject planet. They were conditioned to make it impossible for them to leave their job untended. Unfortunately, they were clever enough to realize that if they brought someone else in who could do their job, they were released from their mental bonds. Very clever.'

'But-'

'You may have their job,' said the man. 'Normally, you would be put to work in the lower echelons, but we believe in meting out justice wherever possible. The Raimees undoubtedly stumbled on your planet by accident and lured you into this position without -'

'How do you know I can do your job?'

'That moment of brilliance was an aptitude test. You passed. Well, do you accept?'

'What about our baby?' Martha Graham worriedly wanted to know.

'You will be allowed to keep it until it reaches the age of decision - about the time it will take the child to reach adult stature.'

'Then what?' insisted Martha Graham.

'The child will take its position in society - according to its ability.'

'Will we ever see our child after that?'

'Possibly.'

Ted Graham said, 'What's the joker in this?'

Again the cold, superior smile. 'You will receive conditioning similar to that which we gave the Raimees. And we will want to examine your memories to aid us in our search for your planet. It would be good to find a new inhabitable place.'

'Why did they trap us like this?' asked Martha Graham.

'It's lonely work,' the man explained. 'Your house is actually a type of space conveyance that travels along your collection route - and there is much travel to the job. And then - you will not have friends, nor time for much other than work. Our methods are necessarily severe at times.'

'Travel?' Martha Graham repeated in dismay.

'Almost constantly.'

Ted Graham felt his mind whirling. And behind him, he heard his wife sobbing.

The Raimees sat in what had been the Grahams' trailer.

'For a few moments, I feared he would not succumb to the bait,' she said. 'I knew you could never overcome the mental compulsion enough to leave them there without then- first agreeing.'

Raimee chuckled. 'Yes. And now I'm going to indulge in everything the Rojac never permitted. I'm going to write ballads and poems.'

'And I'm going to paint,' she said. 'Oh, the delicious freedom!'

'Greed won this for us,' he said. 'The long study of the Grahams paid off. They couldn't refuse to trade.'

'I knew they'd agree. The looks in their eyes when they saw the house! They both had ... '

She broke off, a look of horror coming into her eyes. 'One of them did not agree I'

'They both did. You heard them.'

'The baby?'

He stared at his wife. 'But - but it is not at the age of decision.'

'In perhaps eighteen of this planet's years, it *will* be at the age of decision. What then?'

His shoulders sagged. He shuddered. 'I will not be able to fight it off. I will have to build a transmitter, call the Rojac and confess!'

'And they will collect another inhabitable place,' she said, her voice flat and toneless.

'I've spoiled it,' he said. 'I've spoiled it!'