

We spent a long time following bad leads before one finally proved good and we found them. We knew their ship had blown its drive somewhere inside a particular sector of space; it was finding out exactly where within that sector that took a long time, and then there was the business of following the faint trail of stray ions from their atmospheric jets. They had used those, knowing they'd be short of fuel for a landing, but concerned, first, with reaching a solar system to crash in. So we followed the trail, blurred as it was by stellar radiation and all the other invisible forces of the universe, and lost it a dozen times before we found them, too late. I'm glad we were too late.

Lew and Norah Harvey were probably the best astrophysics research team the Institute had. There was no question of their being the best-liked. They were young, gay, and unimpressed with their own competence. Norah was a lovely girl, with startling blue eyes set off by her black hair, and a wide, smiling mouth. She was tall, willowy, and graceful. I shall never forget the first time I danced with her, while Lew sat it out with a girl I was squiring about at the time. Norah was light on her feet; like a ballerina, I thought then, but corrected myself. The image is wrong--the frostily graceful, elegant, and perfectly trained figure in its pristine white costume suggests nothing of Norah but the opposite. Norah was warm in my arms--not ethereal at all; yielding, but resilient; light, but full. The qualities of earthiness and youth were perfectly combined in her, so that you knew this was a woman in your arms, and you knew, without a shadow of uncertainty, what a woman was. Her intelligence appealed to your intellect, her youth called to yours, and her femaleness awakened a quality and depth of manhood that you were positive was buried and leached out long ago by the anemic fluid that passes for blood among civilized peoples.

That was Norah. Lew was the quiet one, shorter than Norah by half a centimeter or so, wiry, with a young-old face already full of lines and a pair of brooding, deep-set eyes. He was thoughtful, self-contained, and crammed with a fund of outrageously obscene anecdotes no one but he could have told without vulgarity. Lew had an actor's gift for verisimilitude, and a quiet, deadpan delivery unspoiled by a trace of laughter. He called his little autobiographical stories anecdotes, with the implication that they were true, rather than cleverly constructed and narrated jokes. Perhaps they were. It seemed sometimes that he could never have had time to attend a class in college or, indeed, get the growing young man's necessary minimum of sleep, if all these things had really happened to him.

As a couple, they complemented each other perfectly. Lew was indrawn, Norah was outgoing. Lew loved her with a quiet intensity that came close to desperation. The look was there in his eyes, though it had to be watched for. Norah loved him with effusive generosity.

I have said they were probably the best research team the Institute had. They were. Lew was an astrophysicist with a D.Sc. after his name. Norah was a metrographic engineer and statistical analyst. Neither her gaiety nor Lew's storytelling had anything to do with their ability to take out a research ship, spend six months alone in it while they drifted about in the deeps of an interstellar dust cloud, and come back with half again as much data as the next team. Or perhaps they did--I don't know. Whenever anyone at the Institute remarked on it, Lew would drawl in his noncommittal way: "Well, there's no room in one of those cans for a dance floor. So we might as well work."

We always thought that was one of Lew's most quotable lines. Most research teams are made up of what are called 'young marrieds' by the people who sell saccharine for a living, and you can imagine for yourself what kind of repartee that could give rise to at an Institute staff party.

We had those parties often enough. Six months in isolation made us all yearn for as much in the way of noise and crowds of people as could be mustered, and the mustering process had been evolved to a

point of high efficiency. Every homecoming team found itself welcomed royally, and every outgoing team had a day or two of grace after the socializing before the Institute medical staff would certify their metabolisms fit for service again. We were a feast-and-famine group, a close-knit academic cadre with few ties outside the clan and little desire for them. Most of us were married. Those who weren't were usually as good as, and two by two we formed our questing brotherhood, as Lew Harvey put it once.

We lost very few to the impersonal dangers of the universe. When Lew and Norah disappeared, it was a stab in all our hearts. Even the Board of Trustees in charge of the research program, instructed to act with Olympian detachment in promulgating its success, managed to bend a little: it found an extra appropriation at just that time to finance the sending of ten ships into space simultaneously. The official purpose was to accelerate the program, and thus increase Man's knowledge of the universe so much more quickly, of course--but somehow it was made plain to those of us who went that if we did not bring back much routine data, that would be considered only a natural hiatus in the always unsteady curve of human progress.

So we stripped the recording instruments out of the ships and made room for a relief observer, and his extra complement of food and air. It was tricky, but it meant we could stay out searching a little longer, and be a little more alert. So equipped, we left the Institute far behind and converged on the sector where the Harveys had been--a sector only a hundred light- years deep, containing an estimated mere hundred thousand bodies where their ship might have crashed. And we began to search.

We found them; my ship found them, that is. And much too late. We couldn't have saved Lew if we had known the exact pinpointed spot to go to--not if we had had the wings of angels. But we might have saved Norah, with a little luck. I'm glad for both of them that we didn't.

What we found was a rogue body where nothing had any business being. It was forging blindly through the deep--sunless, perhaps a thousand miles in diameter, and the mass readings were fluctuating wildly as we came near. Dozen, the extra on my team, showed me the figures. He was very young. Cleancut, handsome--fresh fish, and unassigned as yet when the emergency had come up.

"The machines have dropped a stitch, Harry," he said. "Look at these--new mass readings every thousand miles as we come closer."

I looked at them and grunted. "No. The readings are right."

"Oh, come on now, Harry--how could they be?"

"If a gravitic generator were buried in the heart of that body."

"Gravitic generator! My left-footed aunt, Harry."

I can't say I ever cared for loudly positive people. I winced and tapped the other readings scribbled down on the scratch pad. "Just because nobody's ever seen it before, never say what you're looking at isn't there." I could have launched into my favorite diatribe on explorers who resisted making discoveries, but what was the use? "Look at these: Atmosphere one hundred percent inert gases, mostly neon. Furthermore, it's fluorescing. Hardly a likely state of affairs in nature. You will also notice the presence of some neon snow on the ground, but not much. But the mean temperature is down nudging absolute zero. Why isn't all of that atmosphere piled up in drifts? I'd say the reason is that it was, until very recently. That something, like a spaceship crash on the surface, activated a series of machines which are busily raising the temperature and otherwise moving the ecology from a dormant to an active state. I doubt if Nature includes that kind of reaction when it constructs a planetoid. I'd say that whole business down

there might be a machine--or, rather, a complex of mechanisms with some particular purpose in view."

He looked at me as if I were crazy. I looked at him as if he were being deliberately stupid. Some day, an expedition equipped with recorders instead of our ship's simple analyzers is going to have to go out there and prove one of us right. I don't wish to be on that expedition. Dozzen can go, if he wants to. I wish him joy of it.

Whatever it was--natural anomaly or artificial leftover from a day and people I am glad are gone--we landed there, coming down on a relatively flat place in the vicious terrain. The sky flamed yellow above us and its fluorescence might have been a working light for autonomous machines, long since gone. It is impossible to speculate on the history of the place; I say, again, that it would be a mistake to go there and try. And for all I know, it was entirely different in appearance as recently as when Lew and Norah Harvey's ship came hurtling out of the sky and smashed itself like a bug on a windscreen. But if anything endowed with biological life ever lived in that place as we saw it, I have only horror for that thing.

What we saw was Hell. All about us, boundless and bare, were scarps and ridges of bleak, decayed metal so desolate, so pitilessly torn and twisted into razor-edged shapes that for a moment I seriously expected to hear a scream of agony from the swirling air.

There was light. There was no heat. The incredible chill of the place was sucking at our ship already; the cabin heaters were whirring furiously. We shivered as we peered out through the windows and outraged our eyes with that masochist's landscape.

Not all of Nature's forms are beautiful--even a dedicated research man occasionally has his soul intruded upon by some particularly offensive example. But all of them, even the most revolting, have a certain organic rightness to them. One can see the reasonableness, if not accept the architectural style, of every form the universe erects.

Not this place. If you have seen a tin can left to rust for a year, its walls broken down and flaking away, then you have seen something of the contours that metallic landscape took, but only something. If you have seen a giant meteorite; pitted, burnt, leprous, half-molten and congealed in gobbets, barely suggestive of some other shape now lost that might once have been regular and purposeful, then you have experienced some of the feeling that place gave us. But not much of it.

The Harvey's broken ship made an island of sanity in that place. It was smashed and scattered, but its fragments, pieced together, would have made a whole.

We could land nowhere near it. We put our own ship down six miles away. We stood at the ports, looking out, and finally I said: "We have to go out."

Doris, my regular teammate, said: "I'll get the suits." She got all three. In the backs of all our minds, I think, was an irrational fear that something might happen to the ship while we were all gone. But there was an even greater fear of being separated in that place, and, to avoid that, we were immediately willing to chance being marooned. We were not very sane in our decision, but in that savage place the nerves were much more potent than the intellect. So we locked our suits on and, armored against any external fearsomeness, clambered down the ladder.

"This way," I said, looking at my direction finder, and set off across the terrain. I tried to look only straight ahead. Doris and Dozzen followed me, at some small distance, staying close to each other. I envied them, for I was very much alone.

I had expected that Doris would find better company than me. It was not a new experience for me to lose my teammate, though it had never before happened in my immediate presence. If Norah and Lew were known for their constancy, I was known for my lack of it. One, perhaps two trips were as long as I and my teammate of the moment ever lasted. If there had been something spectacular or particularly noteworthy in my many partings, the board of directors would long since have removed me. But they were only quiet, amicable dissolutions of temporary working partnerships. No one found them scandalous, though juicy gossip was as well received by the Institute staff as it is anywhere. Each new occurrence was simply another example of Harry Becker's not having found the right girl--or of the girl's not having found the right man in Harry Becker.

Good old Harry Becker, decent fellow, nothing wrong, fine companion--on all levels, one might add--but apparently just not the right man for Doris; or Sylvia, or Joan, or Ellen, or Rosemary.

"Harry!" I was inching around a jagged wave of pitted metal, and Doris's cry in my headphones almost sent me stumbling against a razor edge. I caught my balance, and turned. Doris had shrunk back against Dozzen.

"Harry, I saw something . . ." Her voice trailed away. "Oh--no, no, I didn't." She laughed in embarrassment. "It's that formation over to your right--for a minute there, it looked like an animal of some kind. I only saw it out of the corner of my eye, and I played a little trick on myself." She made her voice light, but she was shaken.

I looked around, and said nothing. It was Dozzen who put into words what I had seen and been trying to avoid. Our nerves were taut enough. But Dozzen said it anyway: "There's another. And some more over there. The place is crawling with them. It looks like a lunatic's zoo."

It did. It did, and it was nothing to try to be matter-of-fact about--not then, not ever.

Now that we were down in it, the terrain assumed individual features. I wished it hadn't, for it had become evident what those features were.

Beasts prowled around us; frozen forever, but prowling. Unfinished, misshapen, terribly mangled, they bared their teeth and claws at us only to become tortured metal as we looked at them directly. We saw them beside and a little behind us, always, and not only beasts, but the cities and dwellings they had overrun--the homes they had gutted, the streets they had littered with the remains of their prey. We walked on among them and they followed us, always at the corners of our eyes, and when we turned to see them better they were gone, to lurk where we had been looking.

"It's a common form of illusion," Dozzen said weakly.

"Yes," I said, and led the way through their gantlet.

"This is a terrible place," Doris said.

It was.

We reached the crashed ship, and Dozzen said: "Look!"

The ship lay mashed, but a hull section had held together. There were weld scars on it. Perhaps it had not survived the crash whole, but it was airtight now. There was a cairn beside it, with a cross welded

together out of structural members atop it.

"Which one?" I thought. "Which one?" and leaped clambering over the ridges and heaps of fused metals, panting with urgency. I ran at the cairn and flung myself up it, and sprawled at the foot of the cross to read in bright scratches: "Lewis Harvey, Explorer." I slid down the cairn in a shower of fragments, and pounded on the sealed hull section hatch, shouting "Norah! Norah! Norah!" until Doris and Dozzen came and pulled me gently away.

They cut open the door while I sat facing away. They had looked in the port and seen her lying still in her suit; I could not have done either. And once inside, it was they who picked her up tenderly and laid her down on the bunk, the suit out of power, the inside of the faceplate frosted over, and the suit limp, limp and boneless--almost--but too heavy to be empty, though the stupid hope came to me.

They rigged power lines from their suits to the report recorder we found set up beside where she had fallen, and lines back into our audio circuits, and when I heard her voice I did not make a sound.

"Last report," it said in her voice, exhausted and laboring. "Power going fast. I'm in my suit now, and when that goes, that'll be it.

"I don't know where we are. Whatever this place is, it must have just drifted into this sector. I don't know what it was--what purpose a race would have for a machine like this." She stopped momentarily, and the breath she drew was a gasp. I thought of her, starving for air, starving for heat, broken by the crash as she must have been, and I remembered again, the first night she had danced in my arms.

"The changes outside are still going on," she resumed. "But much more slowly. I think they'll stop soon. I see them try, try to complete themselves, and fail, and stop, and start again. But they are slowing down, and each attempt is less forceful than the last. I wish I could understand what was causing them.

"I wish Lew were here," she said wistfully. And there was no question now whether she had given up hope or not. She began to speak for a record greater than the Institute's.

"I loved you, Lew," she said quietly and serenely. "Even though you never believed me. Even though sometimes you hated me. I loved you. If I could never prove it to you in that one narrow way, still, I loved you." Her voice was growing very faint. "I hope I shall meet you," she said. "And if I do, then I would like these to be the first words I say to you: I love you."

That was all. She was dead. Doris reached over and pulled the audio line out of our suits.

There was a long silence. Finally Dozzen sighed and said: "I don't suppose that will mean much to anyone. There are probably earlier spools in the recorder, from when she was still thinking clearly."

"Probably," I said. Doris was watching me closely. I looked at her and thought I had never been as clever as I thought I had--nor as clever at hiding myself from women as I had been at hiding from myself.

I went over to the bunk and picked up Norah in my arms, and carried her outside. Dozzen may have tried to follow me. If he did, Doris held him back. I was left alone.

I built the new cairn beside the other, and welded a new cross with the tools we all carried in our suits, and etched her name upon it. I had plucked the lumps of toothed metal one by one from the surface of the machine-world, and piled them carefully, and opened her faceplate so that the inert atmosphere could flood in, wash out the trapped carbon dioxide and the last trickles of oxygen, and leave her ageless,

perfect forever, frozen.

I was done at last, and came down from the cairn. Doris was waiting for me. She took my arm and touched helmets with me so Dozzen could not hear. She said:

"Harry--it's often the most feminine women who..."

"Who aren't female at all?"

"That's a terrible way to put it," she answered softly. "I wonder if that's the way Lew thought of it--if he tortured himself out of shape inside, because he chose the cruelest way of thinking of it? You knew Norah--she was warm, and friendly, and a wonderful person. Who can say, now, what may or may not have happened when she was just becoming a woman? If Lew thought she was a living lie, he ought to have thought that perhaps she knew she was lying to herself, as well. If he'd ever thought to be kind..."

"Don't tell me these things!" I said bitterly, instantly sorry. "I wasn't married to her."

"Are you sorry or glad, Harry?" she asked quietly.

I didn't know, then. It was while we were on our way back to the ship that Doris touched my arm again. "Harry...look!"

I raised my head, and the beasts of the place were gone.

It was a subtle change--a shift of planes, a movement of curvatures; no more than that--not yet. We never stayed to see the end of that process. It was moving too quickly for us to endure.

The snow stopped and the snow on the ground burst into curling vapor that shrouded us in sparkling mist, as though Spring had come into this place at last.

The metal shapes were still molten, their outlines still broken, and they were still metal, still cold and hard. But the beasts were gone--the pent-up nightmares of frustration were lost with even that beginning of a change. Everywhere the corners of our eyes could see, there was striving. The illusions, Dozzen would have said--did say, the fool--were softening, turning into calm, friendly shapes. The raw hatred had gone, and the viciousness. Now there were spires, minarets, the fragile battlements of faerie cities, and here were hedges, trees, and there--I saw it, if Dozzen did not and Doris never spoke of it--I saw two lovers with their arms entwined.

"It's turning beautiful!" Doris said. It was. It was wild, eerie--many things; not all of them, perhaps, as wispily graceful as the best beauticians would have them--but it was vibrantly alive, glorious with growth.

We left it quickly. There was that about it which unsettled Dozzen badly, and made Doris moody. It did many things to me.

Dozzen made the formal report, without benefit of the recorders and analyzers that would have made fallible human impressions unnecessary. Doris and I initialled it, and I will never know if she, in her own way, was being as evasive as I. We have never talked about it, because what is there to ask?

Illusions are subjective phenomena, and no two people can possibly be expected to see the same face in a shifting cloud, nor can one see anything but the lion in the jumbled granite mountainside where another insists he sees a sheep. These things are nothing but reflections of the viewer's self. How can they possibly be measured or compared?

Dozen's report says the terrain of the place is broken into free forms which the mind readily supplies with familiar shapes, in a search for the familiar where the familiar does not, in fact, exist. That is as far as he will go, on paper, though he knows there is enough more to the truth to make him unhappy. But he knows he doesn't know just where that truth might lie, so he will not push himself beyond the point where he feels safe.

I think I know what a machine of planetary dimensions might be intended to do, though I cannot picture a race which would choose metal in an inert atmosphere for a medium in which to attempt the creation of life.

I think that is what we found. I think all races must come to it someday in the prime of their greatness. I think the race that built this machine failed, and died, or we would not be here today. But I think that race came very, very close when it launched its machine into space, a messenger and vessel of nearly fruitful hope. I think they may have missed only one ingredient of life, even though they chose so strange a thing as metal for its womb.

I think I know why the snow was falling again when we first came there. Norah buried Lew, and not in his suit, for that was still hanging in its locker. And when she buried Lew, the planet-machine began to stir to movement again, and take to itself what it had always lacked and, lacking, almost died. And now, having that thing--that spark--it began to change--to search after its goal once more, to strive, to fail, but trying, trying nonetheless, with all it could get from Lew Harvey. And failing, and going back into its ageless somnolence again, leaving only its half-successful attempts behind it to haunt us when we landed. For whatever it was that unfulfilled, tortured Lew Harvey yielded up in the crash, Lew Harvey was not enough.

And I do not say that a Mark Four suit will trap and restrain the kind of thing required for the creation of life . . . or that a dead girl can say I love you. But the snow stopped after I opened Norah's suit, and the beasts departed. And I saw movement in that planet's metal, at the last. I don't think it was a trick of the light, or of the evaporating snow.

I think, someday, when Doris and I are out there again, we shall meet something. I think she thinks so, too, though we never speak of it or plan for it, because no planning is possible.

I wonder, sometimes, if that primordial race, so great, could be so thoughtless, ever, as to fail--if greater plans were made than I am quite ready to believe. I hope not. I would rather believe that blind chance was the catalyst. In that belief, there is a kind of hope.

I am afraid, and proud, and troubled. I think of what might have been if Norah had loved me, if Lew Harvey had not met her before I ever knew them. I think of the thing between them, the thing we never suspected and they never betrayed. I am glad for them now, if I am sometimes terrified for the universe of Man.

For I think that someday, in the deeps we sift, we shall meet Lew and Norah Harvey's children.

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**TomorrowSF Vol. 10.4 September 4,1998**