

JUDAS BOMB

Kit Reed

A favourite, and very rewarding, device of science-fiction writers is the reductio ad extremum. First, a present-day movement or trend is isolated. Secondly, it is visualised as running riot. Thirdly, we are offered some sort of judgment, overt or implied, on the desirability of the situation so imagined, and of its outcome. Kit Reed's story belongs to this category, and is notable not only for its visualisation (which makes for great vividness and excitement) but also for the way in which its final, fairly definite, moral verdict is subtly shot with pathos. For the time being Daddy-o may be in subjection to the Hypos and the Judases, but they can no more win against him ultimately than a flick-knife can win against... well, a Bomb. They, after all, are just bodies - bodies crippled, at that, by self-imposed taboos and fetishes. Daddy-o is a mind.

It happened, in the days when the young ruled, that Washington got a bomb. The Hypos found out about it when one of the Judas Gang got swell-headed and started to brag. He stepped over the marker into Hypo country around Delaware, and the Hypos got him and he didn't brag any more. Little Easter, Franko's man, took care of him, and while Little Easter was working on him he said the Hypos had better lay off because Washington had a bomb. Little Easter finished what he was doing and then he told Franko and the Hypos held a council of war. ,

From Buffalo and Philadelphia and Albany the Hypos came, and they parked their 'cicles in ramshackle Rockefeller

Centre, Franko's pad, and they parleyed, sitting crosslegged in the deserted square where skaters had glided before the gangs moved out of the neighbourhoods into the city and the country and the world. They sat, in silver-sheen jackets sewn for them by the squares, and they talked about the bomb, oblivious of the beer cans, the garbage, the cigarette butts that littered the ground and piled high in the corners.

Franko said, "You know what they're gonna do with that bomb."

Netta Rampo was tall and broad and tough. She was from Trenton, and she ran the Hypettes. She made a gesture. "That's what they'll do."

"Oh, man, worse'n that. They're not gonna use it on us. We don't bug them half as much as the Comradskis. They'll find a way to drop it over there. Then———" Franko ground his boot heel into Netta Rampo's hand. "That's what'll happen to us." She didn't even wince. "It'll be the last rumble, man. We'll get it from all over - Kiev, Leningrad, Peiping - they'll be plantin' bombs like appleaseed, and it'll be the end."

Billy from Philly, sprawled on his elbows, kicked at the dirt. "So?"

"So we gotta stop 'em." Automatically, Franko zipped and unzipped his jacket. Twenty heads turned toward him. Twenty pairs of eyes coldly looked him up and down. "We gotta get a bomb. We gotta get *that* bomb."

They talked long into the night, and it was decided that one of them would have to do the job - alone. They wrangled on, and every once in a while one of them would interrupt Franko and Little Easter would get him and it would be very quiet after that.

"Okay," Franko said at dawn. "We gotta decide who's going. Netta's out because she's a girl."

"Bug you," Netta said.

"So it's gotta be one of us guys. We'll face off for it. Guy that's still standing up at the end gets the job. I'll take on any one of you guys, starting now. Anybody..."

"Forget it, Franko." A dark form stood up.

In the dimness, Little Easter started forward. "Nobody interrupts Franko..."

Franko pulled him back.

"Except Johnny Fairhair." Fairhaired Johnny was big, bigger than Netta Rampo, and he was sturdy as a rhino and muscled like a bull. He had big, black eyes and the ugliest face in Christendom, and to his shoulders fell hair as pale and silky as that of a child. "Forget it, Franko." He headed for his 'cicle, parked in a corner of the rink. "I'll go."

Billy from Philly looked after him and said softly, "Just as well. He's nearly twenty. He's almost through."

Without seeming to look at him, Johnny wheeled and threw his knife. It stuck in the back of Billy from Philly's hand.

He set out for Washington without a weapon or a plan, travelling until the brightness of the dawn warned him to take his 'cicle down. He set down at a deserted landmark, the last Howard Johnson's on the Jersey Turnpike, stepping carefully through the shattered glass front, looking

into every possible hiding place before he settled down to sleep. Day fell, and the deserted building was silent, except for the occasional drone of a 'cicle overhead.

Outside, New Jersey stretched quiet and drab. In dull cities, squares worked under the eyes of the Hypos who lounged on catwalks, quick with knives and curses. The Hypos were only around when they felt like it, but the squares kept at it because sure as they flagged there'd be a Hypo around - because he felt like it. Squares and families of squares nested in sordid little villages of identical clapboard houses, living as quietly as possible, subdued by the terrifying brashness of youth.

Aroused by the sound of soft breathing, Fairhaired Johnny lurched to his feet and closed his hands about a muscular throat. He shook himself awake and took a look at the person who stood, unmoving, between his hands.

"Oh, it's you." He tightened his grip a little.

"Lay off, Johnny. I come along to help." It was Netta Rampo. She raised heavy forearms and broke his hold.

He started to hit her.

"Wait a minute, Johnny. You got a plan?"

He lowered his head and kicked at a piece of glass.

"Okay." She drove her hands into her pockets and looked at him, all business. "I do. We cross the marker and grab a guy. Maybe I pretend I'm a Judy and go up to this guy and distract him, and you jump him. We make him tell us where the bomb is and we go on from there. Okay?"

He hesitated.

"It's more plan than you've got."

"Okay, Netta, you're on. But don't go getting yourself knocked off. You've got three good years left. You're only seventeen."

"Let's go to Squareville and get a meal."

They stopped in one of the square villages-a miserable Levittown - and one of the nursewomen gave them some cake and cheese. They sprawled on the lawn, eating, and watched the neighbourhood kids. Johnny, who had run in packs since his childhood, had never talked to another person alone. Sharing the food gave him a strange sense of intimacy. They began to talk.

"You grow up in a place like this?" Netta asked.

"From when I was two until I was old enough to join a pack. My old lady shot herself the same day my old man got his. He was a brave one." Johnny's eyes softened. "Did it with a belly-bomb - wiped out about fifty guys in a rumble with the Bishops' mob."

"I had a mother," Netta sneered. "The old lady didn't have the guts to die when Pop got his. Said she was only eighteen and she couldn't see cashing in just because it was time for Pop to die."

"You going to do that?"

"I'll die with my guy- if I ever get a guy-if I don't get one, I'll just go when it's time. I'll find a way." She spat.

"It's gonna be soon for me." Johnny looked thoughtful.

In the days when the young ruled, a guy was through at twenty, and he did the only decent thing a guy could do when his life was over. He went out in a rumble and got his, and if he couldn't do it that way he found some other way to die.

With girls it didn't matter so much. If they lived there were always kids they could raise. There had to be a lot of kids.

You could spot the guy who was too chicken to die while you were still a kid, running in one of the neighbourhood packs, and you never let him earn his jacket and become one of the gang. He stayed in Squaresville all his life and he worked his fool head off for you, because if he worked, and kept his nose clean, the gang might let him live. He got squarer and squarer. He got old.

Johnny and Netta were ready to go when a pack of kids spotted their jackets and came over, shrilling a thousand questions and jumping up and down. When they were on their 'cicles, the pair discovered that the kids had stolen Netta's knife. It made them proud.

They circled over the marker that divided the Hypos' territory from the land of the Judas Gang, and at dark they went over the Delaware River, looking for a scout from the other gang. They set down near a roadhouse, where noise and yellow light spilled out into the dark, and hid their 'cicles in the bushes. Crouched in the darkness, they watched the Judas guys and their Judys come out, two by two, and go into the shadows to neck. A guy came out alone and Netta gave Johnny a dig in the ribs. He nodded and she stood up, reversing her jacket so the Hypo silver was turned to the inside, and made a low sound that could mean only one thing, no matter which gang you ran with. The Judas flipped a knife into the tree just behind Netta's head. She grinned.

"Well, well, well..." He ambled forward until he saw her face-then his lip crinkled in distaste and he started to back away, but it was too late. Johnny was on him. When they got him into the bushes Netta, remembering the look, hit him especially hard.

"Easy, or we'll never get anything out of him," Johnny said. Then, as she sat astride the Judas's chest, waiting for instructions, he said, "You were pretty good about that knife."

"Enh."

"Let's find out about the bomb." Johnny gave their prisoner's ear a twist. "Where's the bomb?"

"Bug you."

"Where'd you get the bomb?"

"Cash in."

He twisted a little harder, while Netta gave the Judas a well-calculated dig in the ribs. They kept at it until the Judas raised his head limply and said, "Okay, okay. I'll tell. Knock it off."

"Well?"

"Got the bomb from Daddy-o." Johnny gave Netta a puzzled look and bit him again. "Daddy-o gave it to us. With that bomb, man, the Judas Gang is on top!"

"Where is it?"

"Bug you."

They worked on him a little harder, and when they finished, he told them the bomb was in the centre of Judas territory, and when Johnny applied a special hold he knew, he told them it was under guard in the safest spot in town-the top of the Washington Monument. When Johnny hit him again, he said the bomb was for the Comradskis, but the Hypos would get theirs, and the Dragons and the Bishops too, and man, the Judas Gang would take over the world, because they had a bomb and there were more where that came from. Netta and Johnny asked him what he meant, but all he would say was, "Ask Daddy-o."

Afterward they threw him in the bushes and took his jacket. Netta got a Judy before the girl even knew what had happened, and then she had a Judy jacket too.

It was nearly daylight when they got on their 'cicles again and there was no hurry. They didn't want to try the monument until after dark. They spent the day in Wilmington, hanging around the joints and finding out

what they could find. Everybody seemed to know about the bomb and they talked about it with a frantic pride, but underneath the cockiness there seemed to be some sort of fear. Conversations were spotted with talk about the Big Bang, and the catchword in all the places was, "Ask Daddy-o."

Johnny picked a fight because there was nothing better to do. He flipped the elbows from under a guy propped at a bar and the two squared off. Johnny lunged with the wild joy of a Hypo feeling his stuff, and then backed away.

"Creep. What's the matter with you?"

"I don't feel like it, man. Ask Daddy-o."

"Enh." Johnny waded in again, but the tangle was no fun. The Judas fought with a strange unsureness, like a man who is off his feed. When Johnny closed in on him he clawed frantically, baring sharp teeth like a cornered rabbit. Disgusted, Johnny flung him in a corner.

"You just watch it." The Judas's voice was high and hysterical. "Watch out for Daddy-o."

Johnny tried it several more places, but all he got was the same nervous, girlish scratching that left him puzzled and disgusted. He and Netta left Wilmington and set down in Hyattsville for something to eat. A square served them at the cheap lunch counter, and when they finished their hamburgers and started to leave he said, "Don't I get paid?"

"Get *paid*? You crazy?" Johnny kicked in the front of the juke box. "Be glad that's not you."

The square watched him, but there was no fear in his eyes. Baffled by the man's calm, assured look, Johnny gave the juke box a final kick, grabbed a piece of cake from under a plastic cover and left.

"Guy was pretty cool for a square," Netta said.

"Enh. It's these Judas guys. They ain't got the guts to do things right. No wonder they think they need a bomb."

"They won't have it much longer."

"Boy, from what I've seen, without that bomb this place'll be wide open."

"Ready for the Hypos to take over." Netta paused. "Or somebody."

Johnny shifted uneasily. Then his eyes brightened. "That'd be a rumble for sure. Wait'll Franko hears what chicken these guys have turned out to be."

It was nearing dark so they headed into Washington. Before long they spotted the monument and zeroed in to land on the Mall. The stone needle loomed, tall and pockmarked, in the soft half-darkness.

Johnny sank on the grass. "We'd better wait till it's dark."

Netta settled beside him. "Yeah."

"Well leave the 'cicles here, so we can get to 'em in a hurry and get the bomb back to Franko. If anything happens to me, you take it and get back."

"Not as long as I can help you." She looked fierce in the twilight.

"You heard me. Get that thing to Franko. He wants it."

"He must want it real bad."

Musing, Johnny looked up at the monument. "Wonder what's inside."

"Few guys, probably. It oughta be some fight."

"You stay out of it unless I call you, huh?" He made his voice stern. "No use you cashing in-you got three good years left."

The hell you say." Netta drove her fist into her hand several times. "Does it bug you bein' nineteen?"

"Ill cash in when it's time. Maybe tonight, if I have to, to get the bomb. Only one thing does bug me. Before I go, I'd like to have a girl. Maybe leave a kid."

"You don't have one now?" In the dark, Netta's heavy face glowed.

"Nope." Johnny sprawled, resting on his elbows. "But I know her, and I've watched her, and someday I'll get her." He threw his head back. "Franko's girl, all golden, like a tiger..."

"Oh." Her voice was small.

"Couple of guys comin' out over there. C'mon, Netta. It's time."

The two heavy forms, almost identical in the darkness, moved toward the opening to the monument. A bored Judas stood outside, idly flipping his knife into a plank. Johnny got him before he could pull the knife out for another throw.

Inside, there were two more. Moving as if the stolen Judas jackets belonged to them, Johnny and Netta flipped the two a casual greeting and started up the stairs. One of the Judas's called up.

"You say Moe said it was okay for you to come in?"

"Yeah. Said we could take a look at this crazy bomb."

"Well," the Judas said, "I dunno..."

"C'mon," his partner whined. "C'mon, let's go over to the locker and get a beer." They headed for a freezer in the long-disabled elevator and Netta and Johnny disappeared around a bend in the towering stone stairs.

They toiled up in total darkness, listening to the hollow sound of their feet rattle up and down the empty shaft. Once Netta tripped and fell against the wire netting that covered the elevator track, and Johnny took her arm. They went on and on until they rounded the last bend and dim light shone on the steps from a doorway at the top. They stood in the half-darkness until their eyes were acclimated and then burst into the small stone room.

In a transparent casing on a - square pedestal glowed the bomb. Johnny headed for it without even stopping to see who guarded it. Suddenly he felt something hard in his ribs.

"And who do you think you are?"

"Bug you," Johnny said, and he turned. "Wha-ah——"

The man with the gun had a hard face and a cool, grey eye. His hand was steady and he was ready to kill. He was old - almost forty. He was a square. Johnny turned cold eyes on him. "Daddy-o?"

"Not just me. All of us."

Sternly, the man dug at his ribs. "I thought Daddy-o told you to stay away from this room. Daddy-o told you he'd watch the bomb for the Judas Gang."

"You think we're Judas, man?" Ignoring the gun, Johnny whipped off the jacket. "We're Hypos."

The square smiled thinly. "And I suppose you came up here to steal the bomb."

"Something like that, man." Johnny backed away to stand beside Netta on the far side of the room. The man with the gun moved closer to them.

"You'll get your own bomb, Hypos. The sooner the better."

"From *squares*? Bug you."

"You'll get your bomb, because every other mob will have a bomb, just like the Judas Gang." The square laughed. "You'll get your little present from old guys. Us Daddy-os."

"We'll *blast* you, Daddy-o." Johnny ached to jump for the gun.

"Oh, no. You'll be just like the Judas Gang. They think they control us,

but they don't. They think they have the bomb, but they don't." He smiled. "They have us, and *we* have the bomb."

Johnny growled.

The square went on. "They sense that now, but they don't want to admit it. They sense it and it's put them off their feed. They don't even enjoy a good girl, or a good fight, because somehow the word's begun to spread that if they fight, or if they fool around too much, the bomb just *might* go off, and that would be too bad. They're *lucky* boys to get bombs from their Daddy-o." The man patted the casing of the bomb. "When we've given one to every other gang in this country, we'll tell them whose bomb it *really* is."

He stepped closer to Johnny. "And they'll throw down their knives and their guns and their bats because they'll be afraid the bomb will go off."

He waved the gun at Johnny's nose. "And they'll stop terrorizing their elders for fear the bomb will go off."

"The hell!" With a look Johnny couldn't interpret, Netta pushed him aside and threw herself on the gun. There was an explosion and she collapsed, carrying the man to the floor as she fell.

Johnny beat Daddy-o and he beat him and he beat him, and when there was nothing left to beat he started to pick up the bomb. Then he cursed and split the case that protected it and dismantled the bomb and destroyed the important parts of it, and began to carry Netta down the hundreds of shallow stone stairs. The Judas at the bottom took one look at his face and let him pass.

He buried Netta near the reflecting pond at the end of the Mall and stuck a piece of twisted wire at the top of the grave. It was all that was left of the trigger device of the bomb.

"I gotta tell Franko," he mumbled, flinging himself on his 'cicle and taking to the air. "We gotta stop the squares."

He heard the first rumblings of the news when he set down in New York, near battered Rockefeller centre. "Got one..."

"Daddy-o gave us one..."

"Got..."

"We got..."

Trembling, he raced through the deserted lobby into the room that was Franko's pad. "Hey, Franko, Franko, it's a trick... we gotta watch out for..."

Franko looked up at him and grinned. "We don't gotta watch out for

nothing, Johnny boy. We got a bomb."