

The Future

And then it was Sunday, almost nine p.m. No putting it off any longer. Conrad marked his place near the end of *The Golden Apples of the Sun*, sat up and swung his legs onto the floor.

Time to focus on the task at hand. First, get his sad sack ass out of bed and find his school binder in that two-foot pile of clothes and miscellaneous debris over in the corner. The binder in question was in pretty rough shape, papers sticking out every which way, torn loose from the metal rings or unattached handouts going back to the beginning of the semester. Conrad dropped the mess on his desk and switched on a gooseneck lamp, adjusting the light so it was facing away from him. His eyes definitely feeling the effects of a couple hours of steady reading. Man, that Ray Bradbury could write!

He took his time getting set up. Paged through his notes until he located the assignment (though he'd known where it was all along). He flipped to the back and liberated three or four sheets of blank looseleaf. Then a brief but spirited search for a pen, finally locating a Bic at the back of a drawer. The kind you could shoot into a block of wood and it would still write perfectly afterward. The commercials were *great*.

Tested it out with a few errant lines and squiggles: medium point blue, just the way he liked it.

Then, without hesitation, commencing work on the assignment.

Wrote: *The Shape of the Future*

Then his name: *Conrad Dahl*

Just like that. Well, actually he came up with the title last week. But it was still damn good. It led you right into it and he bent forward in the chair, pen poised over the page, waiting for inspiration to come.

Unfortunately, what popped into his head, completely unbidden, was the face of Bonnie Gottselig. Not an unwelcome sight, by any means, but did it have to be right *now*? Conrad could picture her very clearly, the shallow cleft in her chin, the scar beside her eye from where a swing seat hit her in grade five. And that “V” of skin at the base of her throat when she left the top button undone. He found that particular portion of her anatomy absolutely mesmerizing. To the extent that the other day she caught him staring at her and, get this, slipped him a wink. *The little fox...*

Oops, almost forgot the date. Miss Bigelow was really strict about that. She'd dock you marks. If she wasn't so lustfully good looking, he'd almost hate her.

May 4th, 1975

Would future historians attach special significance to that day? It hardly seemed likely. As far as he was concerned, it was just as dull and pointless as any other. But isn't each *second* important and unique in its own right? Interesting philosophical counter-argument--

That line of thought snipped off by an abrupt change of scene: walking in and surprising Miss Bigelow as she was getting dressed (for some reason) in her classroom. Turning toward him with her shirt unbuttoned, the white cups of her bra showing. And not exactly in any big hurry to cover herself...

Okay, okay, stick to the assignment. Grasping his boner impatiently and adjusting it to a more comfortable angle.

Suddenly, Conrad thought of a first line and started scribbling:

Within 15 years the Soviet Union will land the first man on Mars. A war will break out a short time afterward but our side will win because of a secret base on the Moon which provides us with important strategic advantages. The Russians will be forced to surrender--

He hunted around for his thesaurus, looked up “surrender”, then scratched that out and replaced it with “capitulate”. *Much* better. He found himself noticing that more lately. The way certain words went together and how it sounded when they combined. Bradbury was good at that; he knew how to put things so that you saw a scene so vividly, it was like it was happening right there in front of you.

The other day Miss Huard, his math teacher, confessed to feeling *logy*. *Bowdlerize* and *inchoate* and *sanguine*: he collected funky-sounding words and phrases like some people collected stamps.

Ten years after the war, most of the world is united under one government, except Japan and China, who form a dangerous new coalition.

For the past few months the news had been filled with images of the Americans getting the *hell* out of Saigon, barely escaping ahead of the Commies. There were helicopters taking off and people screaming to be let on board. It was just this tiny country but they were basically kicking made-in-America ass. They had to be pretty tough people to hang a licking on the US of A like that. *Nobody* seemed to like Yankees in that part of the world.

His dad said you could never really trust a *chink*, that they operated according to their own way of thinking. One of his bosses, Mr. Cho, was a prime example. When things went right, guess who took the credit? And when everything went south, guess who dodged the fall-out? Smart, those people.

Conrad's father, Alan Dahl, was currently serving some kind of special probationary thingee because of Cho. There had been a major league screw-up at work and the blame got unfairly deflected on him. Conrad asked but no one seemed willing or able to explain what was going on. Like it was some kind of state secret or something.

By the year 2000 most serious diseases will be--

Destroyed? No, *eradicated!* Much better.

--and people will be living longer lives. There will be an end to world hunger thanks to scientific advances in agriculture and...

He faltered. In truth, he knew little about science and cared less. Science was just another offshoot of math. More numbers and equations to memorize and spew out on demand. Any vocation that required the use of a machine more advanced than a pocket calculator was not for him.

So dump the science crapola and focus on *people*:

--will not only be living longer lives, but they can also be provided with special transplants so that their organs never wear out.

Oho, he thought, but that means--

With people living extended lives, the population will skyrocket to astronomical

levels, which leads to a demand for colonies, the human species venturing deeper and deeper into the solar system...

Now Conrad was on firmer ground and could let his imagination run wild. As he wrote, he envisioned an ambitious, space-faring civilization: enormous ships, half a mile long, and small, tugboat-like craft to ease them out of drydock and nudge them on their way. And a massive wheel of a space station, hovering above the blue splendor of Mother Earth, rotating to give inhabitants the impression of gravity. Ten thousand people lived on the *Clarke*, the facility serving as a way station for liners and ore transporters and all manner of vehicles that flitted about human space.

The first years of the 21st century will be a time of great wealth and a desire for adventure. Space will become a tourist destination for travelers who are bored with life on Earth and who wish to experience the wonder and beauty of strange, unknown places.

He re-read the paragraph he had just written, nodding in satisfaction. He was about to continue when he heard the front door opening; that would be his father, finally making it home. He wondered if there was going to be a row. He and his sister Peggie were constantly expecting a big blow up but it never happened. It would be ugly once the accusations started to fly but at least it would clear the air and end this awful stalemate.

“When does a marriage stop being a marriage?” Peg cracked. But she could make jokes. She wasn’t around to watch the weirdness unfold, night after night. He could hear his father hanging up his coat in the closet, cursing when a hanger dropped to the floor. Conrad snuck over and cracked open his door. His father was moving around in the kitchen. Sheila, his mother,

was in the living room, likely curled up with a book and her third (or fourth) glass of wine. They rarely spoke these days, their exchanges short and to the point. Business-like.

It was obvious something had happened between them, something that poisoned the air, causing a deep and permanent rift. Whatever it was, neither side was willing to confront it. Better, maybe, to ignore the problem, pretend it didn't exist...or hope it would go away on its own.

These days his father was prickly, easily wounded. Withdrawn, barely participating in family life. For her part, Sheila basically ignored him, left his food out and did his laundry, that was about it. She seemed dismissive of her husband and hardly took notice of him most of the time. And lately he'd been demoted to sleeping on the couch. They thought he didn't know but he did.

A chair scraped linoleum. A fragile silence, the air in the house unnaturally still. Alan Dahl had had another long, hard day at work. Making up for whatever they thought he'd done. Probably stopped off for a few belts on the way home.

The fridge cut in with a *clunk*. Bad compressor or something.

And then movement from the living room as Sheila stirred herself, padding through the kitchen on her way to the bathroom. Not pausing to greet him or acknowledge his existence. Closing the door to the john behind her. Moments later the shower curtain rattled and the water came on. She did love her baths.

No sound from the kitchen. *Nothing*.

It was downright creepy. Conrad went back toward the desk, switching directions so he could grab his transistor radio off the nightstand. Piece of shit *Realistic*; the earphones cut in and out and it only picked up AM. He caught the tail end of a news update and then a bombshell:

The flags are flying at half-mast in Stoogeville tonight, folks. Moe Howard from the Three Stooges has passed away from lung cancer. Moe Howard, dead at seventy-seven. Truly the end of an era. Those guys were great, weren't they? Hey, I got a Stones super-set coming up, but first--

He had an extension in his room and used it to call Neil. "Holy shit, man, did you hear? Moe's dead. From the Three Stooges?"

"No way. *Crunch, crunch.*"

"Are you eating something?"

"Yeah. Your mama. *Crunch, crunch.*"

"You've been listening to too many Richard Pryor albums, man."

"Yeah. Hey, you catch Boom-Boom on Friday?" Neil's nickname for Miss Bigelow. "*Crunch, crunch.* That blouse she was wearing. Those buttons must of been sewn on with fuckin' fishing line. To hold those babies in. *Crunch, crunch, crunch.*"

Conrad made a face. Sad, but true: his best friend was the worst sex deviant in grade seven. Neil's knowledge of female anatomy was mind-blowing. He knew all the lingo and could tell you *in great detail* what went where. Sometimes he stole his father's old *Hustlers*. They showed *everything*. Even stuff you didn't want to know.

Now Neil was on about the new girl, Naomi whatever-her-name-was. Apparently she looked amazingly hot in gym shorts.

“Hey, man, you finish that English assignment yet?”

“Which one? *Crunch, crunch, crunch?*”

“About life in the future.”

“Oh, yeah. *Crunch, crunch.* I mostly copied from a *Newsweek*. One we had lying around.”

Conrad gritted his teeth. “Gotta go, man.”

“Me too. *Crunch, crunch, crunch.* *The Six Million Dollar Man* is on.”

“You’re the idiot son of an ugly, fat chick.” Slamming the receiver down.

Let him crunch on *that*.

He turned up the radio and managed to catch the last half of “Space Oddity”. Perfect mood music.

Except then he remembered, holy shit, it was “Space Oddity” that was playing when Bonnie came up to him and asked him to dance. Good grief. Neil and Tom were egging him on but he made some dopey excuse, completely chickening out on the greatest moment of his life. And the thing was, he knew at the time he was going to regret it *and went ahead and did it anyway*. Which was, to his mind, the ultimate sign of stupidity. Yet one more compelling reason why he was doomed to remain a virgin to his dying day.

By the year 2010 (he continued doggedly), mankind will reach the outer limits of our solar system. Thanks to advances in computers, we can send robot ships to the nearest stars. Soon we come into contact with different species other than our own and are asked to join a federation of free planets.

Holy crap, Conrad thought to himself, this is taking place in *my* lifetime. I'll be, what, forty-five or fifty years old. But by then people will be living to a hundred and twenty so when you actually look at it--

He heard his father in the hallway outside the bathroom door.

Tap tap tap

Conrad never caught what she said but it must have been stabbing sharp because Big Al practically *scuttled* away, retreating to the living room with his tail between his legs. Where, out of sheer spite, he switched on the TV and upped the volume. Which meant once her bath was done, Sheila would stomp off to the bedroom with her book...and so much for another thrilling evening here at the Dahl residence.

All at once he missed Peggie. She could be a giant pain, especially around her period, but at least she was someone who knew about the strange dynamics in this house and what living here was like. He thought about calling her but dreaded having to deal with Rafe. Rafe zoned out or Rafe being a bullying asshole or Rafe conveniently forgetting to mention he'd phoned and left a message. Living with Rafe, presumably, was preferable to sticking it out at home but for the life of him, Conrad couldn't see *how*.

Having Peg around had given their folks someone to focus their insanity on, but once she took her strange act elsewhere it was like the entire place imploded. Everyone shooting off in separate directions. His parents could barely stand to be in the same room together and as long as Conrad kept a low profile, they seemed content to leave him be. He watched them sometimes and it was like they were both waiting for the other to say or do something. But each day continued on into the next and nothing changed and gradually a pattern of well, *nothingness*

developed. Every so often Peg would pop in and introduce some chaos into their dull and carefully maintained existence but those visits petered out as the months went by.

Where was I? Oh, yeah, 2010...

Twenty-ten, which was, uh, thirty-five years away. By then he'd have his own kids and a job and a wife and, let's face it, it probably wouldn't be Bonnie Gottselig.

Or...maybe it would. Stranger things had happened.

And *maybe* he'd come home one bright summer day in 2010 and find Bonnie crying. Standing in their spotless, automated kitchen with tears streaming down her face.

"Darling, what's wrong?" Taking her in his arms. One hand resting on her soft, inviting butt.

"Oh, it's nothing, nothing. Only having a weak moment, that's all."

But eventually he got it out of her. What it came down to was that she was *bored*. Stuck in this self-maintaining, semi-sentient house and not having to lift a finger. Tyler and Wendy both gone now--Tyler in line for chief pilot of Pan Am's new moon shuttle and their daughter finishing up her Ph.D on Titan--so there was little to keep her stimulated. As they necked passionately on the couch, he rubbed her breasts soothingly and soon she was putty in his hands. Afterwards, he told her that he'd come to an important decision: namely, that his fancy, high-paying job wasn't going to get in the way of their happiness. That there was more to life than money and all the toys that went with it.

Because it turned out they were both of the same mind, needing a change of scenery, fresh challenges to combat the staleness that had crept in. They weren't exactly young any more

but thanks to the miracles of modern science it wasn't too late to haul up stakes and start over somewhere else, somewhere not so safe and predictable and well-managed.

There were freezer ships leaving every week. All you had to do was sign the necessary forms, climb into a box...and ten or twenty years later you woke on a new world, with an unfamiliar, alien sun shining overhead.

And Bonnie would be right there beside him, not a day older. Still beautiful and vigorous and impatient to get on with the job.

I wonder what year it is? Almost impossible to tell. Because of the time dilation and all that science junk. But it didn't matter anyway. From this point on, there could be no regrets, no turning back. That's wasn't how you won a planet.

He took Bonnie's hand. Neither of them showing the slightest sign of fear or apprehension, even as that first night approached, darkness racing at breakneck speed toward them.

"We're home," he told her. It sounded so good, he said it again.

Home.

End