Martian Time-Slip

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Extract

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From the depths of phenobarbital slumber, Silvia Bohlen heard something that called. Sharp, it broke the layers into which she had sunk, damaging her perfect state of nonself.

'Mom,' her son called again, from outdoors.

Sitting up, she took a swallow of water from the glass by the bed; she put her bare feet on the floor and rose with difficulty. Time by the clock: nine-thirty. She found her robe, walked to the window.

I must not take any more of that, she thought. Better to succumb to the schizophrenic process, join the rest of the world. She raised the window shade; the sunlight, with its familiar reddish, dusty tinge, filled her sight and made it impossible to see. She put up her hand, calling, 'What is it, David?'

'Mom, the ditch rider's here!'

Then this must be Wednesday. She nodded, turned and walked unsteadily from the bedroom to the kitchen, where she managed to put on the good, solid, Earth-made coffeepot.

What must I do? she asked herself. All's ready for him. David will see, anyhow. She turned on the water at the sink and splashed her face. The water, unpleasant and tainted, made her cough. We should drain the tank, she thought. Scour it, adjust the chlorine flow and see how many of the filters are plugged; perhaps all. Couldn't the ditch rider do that? No, not the UN's business.

'Do you need me?' she asked, opening the back door. The air swirled at her, cold and choked with the fine sand; she averted her head and listened for David's answer. He was trained to say no.

'I guess not,' the boy grumbled.

Later, as she sat in her robe at the kitchen table drinking coffee, her plate of toast and apple-sauce before her, she looked out on the sight of the ditch rider arriving in his little flat-bottom boat which put-putted up the canal in its official way, never hurrying and yet always arriving on schedule. This was 1994, the second week in August. They had waited eleven days, and now they would receive their share of water from the great ditch which passed by their line of houses a mile to the Martian north.

The ditch rider had moored his boat at the sluice gate and was hopping up on to dry land, encumbered with his ringed binder – in which he kept his records – and his tools for switching the gate. He wore a grey uniform spattered with mud, high boots almost brown from the dried silt. German? But he was not; when the man turned his head she saw that his face was flat and Slavic and that in the centre of the visor of his cap was a red star. It was the Russians' turn, this time; she had lost track.

And she evidently was not the only one who had lost track of the sequence of rotation by the managing UN authorities. For now she saw that the family from the next house, the Steiners, had appeared on their front porch and were preparing to approach the ditch rider: all six of them, father and heavy-set mother and the four blonde, round, noisy Steiner girls.

It was the Steiners' water which the rider was now turning off.

'Bitte, mein Herr,' Norbert Steiner began, but then he, too, saw the red star, and became silent.

To herself, Silvia smiled. Too bad, she thought.

Opening the back door, David hurried into the house. 'Mom, you know what? The Steiners' tank sprang a leak last night, and around half their water drained out! So they don't have enough water stored up for their garden, and it'll die, Mr Steiner says.'

She nodded as she ate her last bit of toast. She lit a cigarette.

'Isn't that terrible, Mom?' David said.

Silvia said, 'And the Steiners want him to leave their water on just a little longer.'

'We can't let their garden die. Remember all the trouble we had with our beets? And Mr Steiner gave us that chemical from Home that killed the beetles, and we were going to give them some of our beets but we never did; we forgot.'

That was true. She recalled with a guilty start; we did promise them . . . and they've never said anything, even though they must remember. And David is always over there playing.

'Please go out and talk to the rider,' David begged.

She said, 'I guess we could give them some of our water later on in the month; we could run a hose over to their garden. But I don't believe them about the leak – they always want more than their share.'

'I know,' David said, hanging his head.

'They don't deserve more, David. No one does.'

'They just don't know how to keep their property going right,' David said. 'Mr Steiner, he doesn't know anything about tools.'

'Then that's their responsibility.' She felt irritable, and it occurred to her that she was not fully awake; she needed a Dexamye, or her eyes would never be open, not until it was nightfall once more and time for another phenobarbital. Going to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, she got down the bottle of small green heart-shaped pills, opened it, and

counted; she had only twenty-three left, and soon she would have to board the big tractor-bus and cross the desert to town, to visit the pharmacy for a refill.

From above her head came a noisy, echoing gurgle. The tank on the roof, their huge tin water-storage tank, had begun to fill. The ditch rider had finished switching the sluice gate; the pleas of the Steiners had been in vain.

Feeling more and more guilty, she filled a glass with water in order to take her morning pill. If only Jack were home more, she said to herself; it's so empty around here. It's a form of barbarism, this pettiness we're reduced to. What's the point of all this bickering and tension, this terrible concern over each drop of water, that dominates our lives? There should be something more . . . We were promised so much, in the beginning.

Loudly, from a nearby house, the racket of a radio blared up suddenly; dance music, and then an announcer giving a commercial for some sort of farm machinery.

'. . . Depth and angle of the furrow,' the voice declared, echoing in the cold bright morning air, 'pre-set and self-adjusting so that even the most unskilled owner can – almost the first time—'

Dance music returned; the people had turned to a different station.

The squabble of children rose up. Is it going to be like this all day? she asked herself, wondering if she could face it. And Jack, away until the week-end at his job – it was almost like not being married, like not having a man. Did I emigrate from Earth for this? She clapped her hands to her ears, trying to shut out the noise of radios and children.

I ought to be back in bed; that's where I belong, she thought as she at last resumed dressing for the day which lay ahead of her.

★

In his employer's office in downtown Bunchewood Park, Jack Bohlen talked on the radio-telephone to his father in New York City. The contact, made through a system of satellites over millions of miles of space, was none too good, as always; but Leo Bohlen was paying for the call.

'What do you mean, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Mountains?' Jack said loudly. 'You must be mistaken, Dad, there's nothing there – it's a total waste area. Anybody in real estate can tell you that.'

His father's faint voice came. 'No, Jack, I believe it's sound. I want to come out and have a look and discuss it with you. How's Silvia and the boy?'

'Fine,' Jack said. 'But listen – don't commit yourself, because it's a known fact that any Mars real estate away from the part of the canal network that works – and remember that only about one-tenth of it works – comes close to being an outright fraud.' He could not understand how his father, with his years of business experience, especially in investments in unimproved land, could have gotten on to such a bum steer. It frightened him. Maybe his dad, in the years since he had seen him, had gotten old. Letters told very little; his dad dictated them to one of his company stenographers.

Or perhaps time flowed differently on Earth than on Mars; he had read an article in a psychology journal suggesting that. His father would arrive a tottering, white-haired old relic. Was there any way to get rid of the visit? David would be glad to see his grandfather, and Silvia liked him, too. In Jack Bohlen's ear the faint, distant voice related news of New York City, none of any interest. It was unreal to Jack. A decade ago he had made a terrific effort to detach himself from his community on Earth, and he had succeeded; he did not want to hear about it.

And yet the link with his father remained, and it would be shored up in a little while by his father's first trip off Earth; he had always wanted to visit another planet before it was too late – before death, in other words. Leo was determined. But despite improvements in the big interplan ships, travel was hazardous. That did not bother him. Nothing would deter him; he had already made reservations, in fact.

'Gosh, Dad,' Jack said, 'it sure is wonderful that you feel able to make such an arduous trip. I hope you're up to it.' He felt resigned.

Across from him his employer, Mr Yee, regarded him and held up a slip of yellow paper on which was written a service call. Skinny, elongated Mr Yee in his bow tie and single-breasted suit . . . the Chinese style of dress rigorously rooted here on alien soil, as authentic as if Mr Yee did business in downtown Canton.

Mr Yee pointed to the slip and then solemnly acted out its meaning; he shivered, poured from left hand to right, then mopped his forehead and tugged at his collar. Then he inspected the wrist watch on his bony wrist. A refrigeration unit on some dairy farm had broken down, Jack Bohlen understood, and it was urgent; the milk would be ruined as the day's heat increased.

'OK, Dad,' he said, 'we'll be expecting your wire.' He said goodbye and hung up. 'Sorry to be on the phone so long,' he said to Mr Yee. He reached for the slip.

'An elderly person should not make the trip here,' Mr Yee said in his placid, implacable voice.

'He's made up his mind to see how we're doing,' Jack said.

'And if you are not doing as well as he would wish, can he help you?' Mr Yee smiled with contempt. 'Are you supposed to have struck it rich? Tell him there are no diamonds. The UN got them. As to the call which I gave you: that refrigeration

unit, according to the file, was worked on by us two months ago for the same complaint. It is in the power source or conduit. At unpredictable times the motor slows until the safety switch cuts it off to keep it from burning out.'

'I'll see what else they have drawing power from their generator,' Jack said.

It was hard, working for Mr Yee, he thought as he went upstairs to the roof where the company's 'copters were parked. Everything was conducted on a rational basis. Mr Yee looked and acted like something put together to calculate. Six years ago, at the age of twenty-two, he had calculated that he could operate a more profitable business on Mars than on Earth. There was a crying need on Mars for service maintenance on all sorts of machinery, on anything with moving parts, since the cost of shipping new units from Earth was so great. An old toaster, thoughtlessly scrapped on Earth, would have to be kept working on Mars. Mr Yee had liked the idea of salvaging. He did not approve of waste, having been reared in the frugal, puritanical atmosphere of People's China. And being an electrical engineer in Honan Province, he possessed training. So in a very calm and methodical way he had come to a decision which for most people meant a catastrophic emotional wrenching; he had made arrangements to emigrate from Earth, exactly as he would have gone about visiting a dentist for a set of stainless steel dentures. He knew to the last UN dollar how far he could cut his overhead, once he had set up shop on Mars. It was a low-margin operation, but extremely professional. In the six years since 1988 he had expanded until now his repairmen held priority in cases of emergency – and what, in a colony which still had difficulty growing its own radishes and cooling its own tiny yield of milk, was not an emergency?

Shutting the 'copter door, Jack Bohlen started up the

engine, and soon was rising above the buildings of Bunchewood Park, into the hazy dull sky of mid-morning, on his first service call of the day.

Far to his right, an enormous ship, completing its trip from Earth, was settling down on to the circle of basalt which was the receiving field for living cargoes. Other cargoes had to be delivered a hundred miles to the east. This was a first-class carrier, and shortly it would be visited by remote-operated devices which would fleece the passengers of every virus and bacteria, insect and weed-seed adhering to them; they would emerge as naked as the day they were born, pass through chemical baths, sputter resentfully through eight hours of tests – and then at last be set free to see about their personal survival, the survival of the colony having been assured. Some might even be sent back to Earth; those whose condition implied genetic defects revealed by the stress of the trip. Jack thought of his dad patiently enduring the immigration processing. Has to be done, my boy, his dad would say. Necessary. The old man, smoking his cigar and meditating . . . a philosopher whose total formal education consisted of seven years in the New York public school system, and during its most feral period. Strange, he thought, how character shows itself. The old man was in touch with some level of knowledge which told him how to behave, not in the social sense, but in a deeper, more permanent way. He'll adjust to this world here, Jack decided. In his short visit he'll come to terms better than Silvia and I. About as David has . . .

They would get along well, his father and his boy. Both shrewd and practical, and yet both haphazardly romantic, as witness his father's impulse to buy land somewhere in the FDR Mountains. It was a last gasp of hope springing eternal in the old man; here was land selling for next to nothing, with no takers, the authentic frontier which the habitable parts of Mars

were patently not. Below him, Jack noted the Senator Taft Canal and aligned his flight with it; the canal would lead him to the McAuliff dairy ranch with its thousands of acres of withered grass, its once prize herd of Jerseys, now bent into something resembling their ancestors by the unjust environment. This was habitable Mars, this almost-fertile spiderweb of lines, radiating and crisscrossing but always barely adequate to support life, no more. The Senator Taft, directly below now, showed a sluggish and repellent green; it was water sluiced and filtered in its final stages, but here it showed the accretions of time, the underlying slime and sand and contaminants which made it anything but potable. God knew what alkalines the population had absorbed and built into its bones by now. However, they were alive. The water had not killed them, yellow-brown and full of sediment as it was. While over to the west – the reaches, which were waiting for human science to race back and pass its miracle.

The archaeological teams which had landed on Mars early in the '70s had eagerly plotted the stages of retreat of the old civilization which human beings had now begun to replace. It had not at any time settled in the desert proper. Evidently, as with the Tigris and Euphrates civilization on Earth, it had clung to what it could irrigate. At its peak, the old Martian culture had occupied a fifth of the planet's surface, leaving the rest as it had found it. Jack Bohlen's house, for instance, near the junction of the William Butler Yeats Canal with the Herodotus; it stood almost at the edge of the network by which fertility had been attained for the past five thousand years. The Bohlens were latecomers, although no one had known, eleven years ago, that emigration would fall off so startlingly.

The radio in the 'copter made static noises, and then a tinny version of Mr Yee's voice said, 'Jack, I have a service call for

you to add. The UN Authority says that the Public School is malfunctioning and their own man is unavailable.'

Picking up the microphone, Jack said into it, 'I'm sorry, Mr Yee – as I thought I'd told you, I'm not trained to touch those school units. You'd better have Bob or Pete handle that.' As I know I told you, he said to himself.

In his logical way, Mr Yee said, 'This repair is vital, and therefore we can't turn it down, Jack. We have never turned down any repair job. Your attitude is not positive. I will have to insist that you tackle the job. As soon as it is possible I will have another repairman out to the school to join you. Thank you, Jack.' Mr Yee rang off.

Thank you, too, Jack Bohlen said acidly to himself.

Below him now he saw the beginnings of a second settlement; this was Lewistown, the main habitation of the plumbers' union colony which had been one of the first to be organized on the planet, and which had its own union members as its repairmen; it did not patronize Mr Yee. If his job became too unpleasant, Jack Bohlen could always pack up and migrate to Lewistown, join the union, and go to work at perhaps an even better salary. But recent political events in the plumbers' union colony had not been to his liking. Arnie Kott, president of the Water Workers' Local, had been elected only after much peculiar campaigning and some more-than-average balloting irregularities. His regime did not strike Jack as the sort he wanted to live under; from what he had seen of it, the old man's rule had all the elements of early Renaissance tyranny, with a bit of nepotism thrown in. And yet the colony appeared to be prospering economically. It had an advanced public works programme, and its fiscal policies had brought into existence an enormous cash reserve. The colony was not only efficient and prosperous, it was also able to provide decent jobs for all its inhabitants. With the exception of the

Israeli settlement to the north, the union colony was the most viable on the planet. And the Israeli settlement had the advantage of possessing die-hard Zionist shock units, encamped on the desert proper, engaged in reclamation projects of all sorts, from growing oranges to refining chemical fertilisers. Alone, New Israel had reclaimed a third of all the desert land now under cultivation. It was, in fact, the only settlement on Mars which exported its produce back to Earth in any quantity.

The water workers' union capital city of Lewistown passed by, and then the monument to Alger Hiss, the first UN martyr; then open desert followed. Jack sat back and lit a cigarette. Under Mr Yee's prodding scrutiny, he had left without remembering to bring his thermos of coffee, and he now felt its lack. He felt sleepy. They won't get me to work on the Public School, he said to himself, but with more anger than conviction. I'll quit. But he knew he wouldn't quit. He would go to the school, tinker with it for an hour or so, giving the impression of being busy repairing, and then Bob or Pete would show up and do the job; the firm's reputation would be preserved, and they could go back to the office. Everyone would be satisfied, including Mr Yee.

Several times he had visited the Public School with his son. That was different. David was at the top of his class, attending the most advanced teaching machines along the route. He stayed late, making the most of the tutorial system of which the UN was so proud. Looking at his watch, Jack saw that it was ten o'clock. At this moment, as he recalled from his visits and from his son's accounts, David was with the Aristotle, learning the rudiments of science, philosophy, logic, grammar, poetics, and an archaic physics. Of all the teaching machines, David seemed to derive the most from the Aristotle, which was a relief; many of the children preferred the more dashing teachers at the

School: Sir Francis Drake (English history, fundamentals of masculine civility) or Abraham Lincoln (United States history, basics of modern warfare and the contemporary state) or such grim personages as Julius Caesar and Winston Churchill. He himself had been born too soon to take advantage of the tutorial school system, he had gone to classes as a boy where he sat with sixty other children, and later, in high school, he had found himself listening and watching an instructor speaking over closed-circuit TV along with a class of a thousand. If, however, he had been allowed into the new school, he could readily have located his own favourite: on a visit with David, on the first parent-teacher day in fact, he had seen the Thomas Edison Teaching Machine, and that was enough for him. It took David almost an hour to drag his father away.

Below the 'copter, the desert land gave way to sparse, prairie-like grassland. A barbed-wire fence marked the beginning of the McAuliff ranch, and with it the area administered by the State of Texas. McAuliff's father had been a Texas oil millionaire, and had financed his own ships for the emigration to Mars; he had beaten even the plumbers' union people. Jack put out his cigarette and began to lower the 'copter, searching against the glare of the sun for the buildings of the ranch.

A small herd of cows panicked and galloped off at the noise of the 'copter; he watched them scatter, hoping that McAuliff, who was a short dour-faced Irishman with an obsessive attitude towards life, hadn't noticed. McAuliff, for good reasons, had a hypochondriacal view of his cows; he suspected that all manner of Martian *things* were out to get them, to make them lean, sick, and fitful in their milk production.

Turning on his radio transmitter, Jack said into the microphone, 'This is a Yee Company repairship. Jack Bohlen asking permission to land on the McAuliff strip, in answer to your call.'

He waited, and then there came the answer from the huge ranch. 'OK, Bohlen, all clear. No use asking what took you so long.' McAuliff's resigned, grumpy voice.

'Be there any minute now,' Jack said, with a grimace.

Presently he made out the buildings ahead, white against the sand.

'We've got fifteen thousand gallons of milk here.' McAuliff's voice came from the radio speaker. 'And it's all going to spoil unless you get this damned refrigeration unit going soon.'

'On the double,' Jack said. He put his thumbs to his ears and leered a grotesque, repudiating face at the radio speaker.