

# FATHER

Ray Nayler

Ray <https://www.raynaylor.net> had his debut as a writer of science fiction in the pages of *Asimov's* in 2015 with the story "Mutability." Since then, his work has appeared in *Asimov's* several times, as well as in *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, *F&SF*, and *Nightmare*. Ray has lived and worked abroad since 2003 in Russia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Caucasus. He is a Foreign Service Officer and was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Turkmenistan. Ray is currently the Cultural Affairs Officer for the U.S. Embassy in Pristina, Kosovo, where he resides with his wife, their one-year-old daughter, and their two rescued street cats (one Tajik, one American). His latest tale takes a poignant look at what it means to be a . . .

## FATHER

I had a father for six months.

I met him when I was seven years old. There was a knock on the door of our prefab house. My mom, who had been in the kitchen throwing mushrooms into a simmering pot of spaghetti sauce, smiled down at me and said, "Who could that be? Why don't you go and see, baby?"

She knew who it was, of course.

It was June 5, 1956. The man who my mom called "your dad" had been dead since before I was born. His face squinted into the sun and his uniform buttons gleamed in a photograph on the mantel.

He'd never been real to me. He was that photo, and a folded flag in a wooden frame. Pictures are just shapes on paper. Flags are just cloth.

I threw the door open.

The robot was very tall, and silver, and polished to a high shine. His eyes were perfectly round. They had a dark orange light in them, like the light of a candle. His mouth was a wire mesh speaker. He held a bunch of daisies in one hand, wrapped in cheap green cellophane and with the price tag still on them. He had a baseball glove in his other hand.

He said, "Hey, buddy."

He said, "How's it going?"

I turned around and yelled: "It's some robot selling flowers!"

He said, "I guess you didn't expect me."

I was confused because he wasn't like the guys who usually wandered around sell-

ing “cheapo flores” door to door in Albuquerque, but all I could think of was that now robots were doing it, too.

From the kitchen my mom said, “Better let him in, honey. It’s hot out there.”

My mom must be nuts, I thought. I’m not letting some robot in our house.

The robot said: “I’m Father. But you don’t have to call me that, just yet. I guess I’ll have to earn that.”

My mom came up behind me, wiping her hands clean on her yellow half-apron.

“Why don’t you come on in?”

The flowers were for my mom. The glove was for me.

That evening Father and I played catch in the flat white light of the motion sensor lamp mounted over our front door. The robot would be still for a moment, and it would go dark. He would move to throw, and the lamp would switch on, and there was the ball, already halfway to my mitt, coming out of nowhere. I would catch it most times, or miss it and it would bounce away, out of the light, a dull whitish spot under the half-grown bushes that framed our property. If I caught it, Father said “Great catch, buddy!” in a way that made me want to cry and throw myself at him, stay there loving him, hugging him so he would never go away. If I missed it he would say “Don’t worry about it,” in a voice that made me want to kill myself because didn’t he know I was a failure, a scabby little brat with an upcoming F in math that I hadn’t told my mom about?

Everything was love and death.

When he stopped moving the light went out with a click, and he was gone.

When he moved he was there again. Like a magic trick. I scrambled to catch the ball.

He had no glove. He caught the ball barehanded. Because he was magic. Because he was my father already, even though it would take me a month to say it to his face.

We lived way off on the western edge of Albuquerque, where it starts petering out into the desert again. We lived a stone’s throw from Route 66. There were plenty of lumpy vacant lots to ride bikes in with the other kids, but that was about it. The ice-cream man didn’t make it out that way much, but there was a market where you could buy push-pops and orangesicles.

Sometimes, in the evening, you could see the rockets going up from the bases out in the desert. You could almost hear them, roaring up and out of the atmosphere on the way to the Moon or Mars. I sped around on my bike, new that Christmas, spectacularly happy because it was summer, because it was Saturday, and because I had a Father.

My friend Jimmy said, “Hey, what’s with that trashcan hanging out around your place?”

“That’s my new robot, you dumb bastard.”

Who could catch a baseball barehanded.

Who could help me with my math homework.

Who organized the garage and built us a new shelf for my mom’s books.

Who fixed the chain on my bike and showed me how to patch a tire.

Who was never too tired to answer questions.

Who read me to sleep, and turned out the light, or left it on if I wanted it.

Jimmy and I were licking orangesicles in the shade of the open garage door. Father was shaping a block of wood on a lathe. He wouldn’t say into what. “It’s a surprise, buddy” was all I could get out of him.

One of the greaser kids from the neighborhood came down hard in his hot rod, landing it with a thud and a cloud of summer dust a couple meters off from us. He got out, slammed the door, then just leaned on the fender, staring at us, a Lucky hanging out of the corner of his mouth.

I knew who he was—Archie Frank. Rumor was he’d stabbed a teacher, gotten kicked out of school. Now he worked at the dump. People said he smelled like trash.

This was the closest I’d ever been to him: all I could smell was his cigarette.

“He’ll be dead in a year,” my mom said once, seeing him rip the leaves off the top of a sycamore tree down the road in his hot rod and then bank hard, almost clipping a faded billboard left over from FDR’s reelection campaign back in ’52. “Maybe sooner.”

“How you afford that trashcan, kid?”

“Saved up, I guess.”

“Yeah, I bet you did. I bet your mom saved up by working the midnight shift down at the truck stop. I bet she goes through a lot of lipstick.”

“My mom’s a nurse,” I said. “She works over at the hospital.”

“Jesus, yer dumb.” Archie flicked the Lucky into the dirt and walked past us into the garage.

“Hey,” I said—but Jimmy grabbed my shoulder, and I shut up.

Archie walked up to Father where he was at the lathe, working that block of wood.

“Whatcha makin’, trashcan?”

Father turned his head. His hands, though, kept working the wood on the lathe.

“Hello, young man.”

“I said whatcha makin’, trashcan?”

Father’s orange eyes glowed a little in the shade of the garage, I noticed. Sometimes they got a little brighter when he was thinking hard. The light from the side window caught at his silver hands.

“I am making a surprise for my boy.”

“Your *boy*?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

Archie spat on the ground at Father’s feet. But Father just turned back to the lathe, as if nothing at all had happened.

When Archie was safely gone, Jimmy said, “I hope that creep falls out of his stupid terraplane someday and gets speared on a telephone pole.”

\* \* \*

That evening, Father, my mom, and I sat in lawn chairs on the porch. Father told us the names of the constellations. He pointed out the satellites going by. He knew the names of every one of them and what they did and who had built them. He even knew the names of the dead Russian satellites we’d knocked out during the Afterwar, when we and the remnants of the Wehrmacht had pushed the commies back to Moscow and freed Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe. That was the war my “real” dad had died in.

*Pictures are just shapes on paper. Flags are just cloth.*

How had we afforded Father? I guess it had never crossed my mind: I’d never thought of us as poor, even though we were, and Father didn’t seem like something we’d bought. He just seemed like someone who’d found us.

What I didn’t know then is that Mom had applied to a lottery program at Veterans Affairs. The VA was distributing Fathers to kids whose dads had been killed in the wars. Our lottery number had come up—one in a thousand. Father even came with free maintenance.

My mom had been over the moon about it: we needed help around the house, and everyone had been telling her for years that one parent just wasn’t enough. My mom had hair the color of postcard sand, and brown-gold eyes. Like whiskey in the bottle, with the sun coming through it. People couldn’t understand why she didn’t try harder. Why didn’t she put some make-up on, find a man?

My mom thought Father could solve a lot of problems for both of us.

What Father had been shaping for me on the lathe turned out to be a soapbox derby car for my Cub Scout competition. He’d painted it silver, just like himself, with an orange stripe that matched his eyes when he was thinking hard. I kept it on the nightstand by my bed.

Mom bought Father a glove and a bat and we played ball out in the lumpy vacant lot. High pop flies lost in the evening sky. The chirping of crickets that fell silent when you came too close. His multi-jointed arm lofting the ball and the crack of the bat.

"Great catch, buddy."

"Don't worry about it."

Love and death.

Evenings we sat around the table and ate macaroni and cheese and drank Pepsis. Father didn't eat, of course: he would just tell us dumb jokes, or quiz me on science stuff. Sometimes, he would stay in the garage to work on a project, or tend to the roses he had planted along the gravel-landing pad.

After dinner, when mom was tired from a long shift at the hospital, she sat at the table in the kitchen turning the pages of a book or a magazine while the blue light of the television flashed in the living room with nobody watching it. Usually I would sit in the kitchen with her, reading one of my *Terraformer Tom* books. On one of those evenings we were sitting there when we heard a loud bang from outside.

We ran out of the house in time to see Archie's hot rod arcing off into the sky, wobbling dangerously from side to side on its aftermarket stabilizers.

There were four or five faces sticking out of it. Laughing faces: a girl in red lipstick with her hair up in a kerchief, and the hard, narrow greaser faces of Archie's friends. As the hot rod zipped off one of them yelled: "Home run!" and hooted, the sound doppling off in the crickety night as they lurched away against the stars.

Father was laying on the ground. His head was dented, and one of his eyes had gone dark. As we came over to him, he was already getting up to his feet.

"Are you all right, Father?" I said.

He swung around to look at me. It was awful—his dented head, the one eye snuffed out. But the other one glowed, warm as a kitchen window from home when you're hungry for dinner.

"That's the first time you called me Father," he said. "I couldn't possibly feel better, hearing that word from my boy."

"We should call the cops," my mom said.

"I doubt they'll do much," Father said. "And that young man and his friends really have trouble enough as it is. I feel none of them are headed toward a good end."

"I've said the same myself, many times," Mom said. She was rubbing a dirty mark off of Father's head with a kitchen cloth. "What did they get you with?"

"A baseball bat, I'm afraid." He paused. "Perhaps they mistook me for a mailbox."

"Hilarious," Mom said.

"I'm here all week, folks . . ." Father's bad eye flickered back to life for a moment, then went dead again.

\* \* \*

The VA repairman showed up the next morning in a military issue Willys van that he settled on the gravel with a nifty little half-turn just before the landing. He was a blond guy, square chinned. He was neatly dressed in an army tech unit uniform—polished boots and all kinds of gear and shiny belts across his olive-drab jumpsuit, garrison cap cocked over to one side.

"Heya, bud," he said to me as he climbed down from the van. "I hear there's a bit of a problem with your Father unit. Want to show me where he is?"

Jimmy was over to see it all, of course—and a bunch of other neighborhood kids, including one or two from my school who wouldn't have a thing to do with me, most days. I was, for the moment, the most popular kid in the neighborhood.

Father was in the garage. He'd asked to be put in low-energy mode the evening before. Sitting slumped there, head dented in, among the discarded auto parts, the old vacuum cleaners, the work benches, power tools, and air tanks, he looked like just

another piece of household tech. Suddenly I wanted to cry, but knew if I did I'd never be able to lift my head up among the neighborhood kids again. I bit my lip until it almost bled.

"Here he is," I said.

"Well, let's have a look at you, Dad."

We stood in a ring around them as the repairman put Father into diagnostic mode. He had him hooked up to some kind of terminal on wheels. They sat there, the two of them, trading number sequences in low tones, like some kind of secret language.

The repairman took Father's head off, and carried it back to the van with him. And then I almost did cry, but as Father's head went by, under the tech's arm like a football, his one good eye flickered, and he said, "Nothing to worry about, son. Just one of my little party tricks. I'll be back in a flash."

In the garage, the kids were circled around Father's headless body, aching to touch it but afraid. Finally one of them tapped it on the shoulder. When the arm came up and wagged a finger at them, they all scattered screaming into the yard.

We sat around out there, on the lawn Father had put in, like a bunch of miniature adults in a hospital waiting room, nervous to see what would come out of the van. Finally the tech emerged, carrying Father's head under his arm, and went back to the garage. We scrambled over to watch him put it back on.

Even Mom came out to watch. The repairman gave Father's head a last buff, and turned to my mom.

"Just replaced the eye and the housing. Doesn't look like there was any neural damage to the unit: he runs the tests okay. Let me know if he does anything odd, but I don't imagine he will."

"We're so grateful to you. Those kids . . ."

"Ah," the repairman waved a dismissive hand. "It's not just kids. We've had plenty of trouble with these Father units being smashed up. Gets a lot worse than what happened here—a whole lot worse. I suggest—look, it's none of my business, but I suggest you keep your Father unit in the house, nights. Or at least don't have him out there alone. Just till everyone in the neighborhood gets used to him."

Father turned his head toward us. "Say, who's got baseball mitts? You kids up for catching some pop flies?"

The kids all shouted and ran to grab their gear.

"Come in for a cup of coffee? It's the least we can do," Mom was saying to the repairman.

"Don't mind if I do."

That evening Mom and I walked down to the liquor store. Father stayed behind, in the garage. He was working on repairing the drape runners in the living room. The evening was warm. The ground kept the day's heat inside itself. It pulsed with heat like skin. You could feel the earth breathe. We went the long way and under the street lamps I stared at her. The filament glow of her sand-colored hair, her crooked front tooth when she smiled down at me.

"The repairman seemed real nice," I said.

She put her hand on my head. I loved it when she did that. I knew it meant that I'd done something right.

\* \* \*

The weather started to change. School started, and soon enough the high desert wind came after the setting of the sun, bringing the taste of winter and a dirty scum of snow and black ice mornings at the curb.

Father and I went trick-or-treating on Halloween. I dressed up in a costume we fabricated out of aluminum foil, papier-mâché, and cardboard from Quaker Oats containers. It turned out perfectly: walking down the street, we were robot father and

robot son.

While we were out, Mom handed out candy to the gangs of roving witches, werewolves, spacemen, and skeletons.

Just after nine, someone rained a sack full of broken bricks on the roof of our house. At the same time, someone threw a rock through our kitchen window.

When Father and I returned with my pillowcase full of candy, there was a police black and white in the middle of the lawn. Mom was in the living room on the couch, calmly talking to two police officers.

One of them was in the middle of saying: "Anyhow, it's a hell of a way to treat a war widow. We don't tolerate that kind of disrespect for the families of the fallen around here. We have a pretty good idea of who it is, given what you've told us. We'll go over and have a talk with them."

"I just don't understand. It's just a robot . . ."

"It's a crazy world, ma'am. Flying cars and robots, death rays and cure-all potions from outer space . . . some people just can't get used to it. The tech on that saucer that crashed in '38 tore the world right open. Seems like every year the government or the universities release some new contraption onto the market. People are just nervous, is all . . ."

The officer trailed off when he saw Father and me come in.

"Uh . . . anyway, we won't take up any more of your time. And we'll be sure and send an extra patrol around, now and then. Just to make sure you're okay."

I had taken my robot helmet off, and the other officer bent down and grinned at me.

"That's a pretty great costume, son. You make that yourself?"

"Father helped," I said.

Father shrugged. "I didn't do much. Mostly just collected the old newspapers and mixed the glue. Did something happen here?"

The officers didn't respond to him. Wouldn't even look at him.

After a long silence one of them said "Well, good night, ma'am." They tipped their hats and went out.

I heard one of them whisper: "Does give you the heebie jeebies, though, doesn't it . . ." as they left.

Mom went through my sack of candy, admiring and organizing while Father fretted about sugar content and insisted we come up with a system of distribution that would keep me from gorging myself.

\* \* \*

Later that night I woke up in a sweat, not knowing what had disturbed me from my sleep. I crept through the house—peeking in on Mom where she lay, safe in her bed, then checking the front and back doors to make sure they were locked.

I opened the door to the garage: Father was there, where he should be, hooked into his maintenance bench. But not, for some reason, in sleep mode: I saw the incandescent dots of his eyes in the dark, and heard him speaking quietly to himself, just a murmur among the shapes in the garage, as if he had called a secret meeting of vacuum cleaners, work benches, air tanks, and old push lawnmowers.

"Father?"

The eyes winked out.

The next day, after school, I went with Father down to the hardware store for roofing nails and sealant. A gray day. Shattered pumpkins and burning leaves, paper skeletons and bats still taped up in the store windows.

I held the ladder while Father climbed up on the roof to work, and we sang, "When the Saints Go Marching In" and "Over There."

Maybe because we were singing, I did not hear Archie's hot rod as it swept in, arcing down from behind me toward where Father was, on the roof. But Father stopped singing, and raised his head. Instead of looking where he was looking, I just looked at

him and watched as he raised the arm with the tacking hammer in it, in a single fluid motion, and threw it.

Then a scream as the hot rod went past over my head and just over Father on the roof, out of control, ripping branches off the tops of trees, nearly going over, then righting itself with a lurch. A lipsticked teenage face in the passenger seat, mouth a screaming O. I felt something warm on my face, like a summer drop of rain. Wiped at it.

A drop of blood.

The hot rod careened off, into the distance, carrying the wailing and shouting with it.

Father came down the ladder. His eyes were ember-bright against the silver-gray of his face, the colorless sky. He put a hand on my shoulder.

“Now we will have a secret between us, son.”

I nodded.

“And we will need to purchase a new hammer.”

\* \* \*

In November a group of ravens took up residence in the cottonwood tree across from our house. Father built a feeder for them, and a bath with water that was heated with a little battery device he built. We worked together on a rocket: a little short-range, stubby thing we were planning to send off at the amateur rocketry field down the road, once we got it perfected.

I took Father to school for show-and-tell, against my mom’s wishes. She was afraid it would cause problems, but she was wrong—he was a big hit, with the kids and the teachers. During physical education Father hit pop flies for our whole class, and later even opened up his chest to show the kids in junior robotics how he ran.

Walking home we saw Archie standing on the Woolworth’s landing pad, leaning against his hot rod with a bunch of his greaser friends. He’d rattlecanned the rod black, and on the door was an uneven white circle with a few paint drips trailing down from it. In the center of the circle was a stenciled silhouette of a witch on a broom and the words “bad luck.” The hood was off, with the polished core and an octopus of red power cables on display.

His hot rod was looking pretty cool, but Archie himself had a white bandage around half his head, covering one eye, and when we walked past them the greasers all went quiet and stiff. Scared? Angry? I couldn’t tell. After we turned the corner I heard laughter, out of key in the cold air, and Archie saying “shut yer goddamned mouths” in a voice that made me want to walk faster.

Father squeezed my shoulder.

“Nothing to fear, son. I’m here with you.”

When we got home the Willys repair van was on the gravel landing pad. We heard laughter from the kitchen when we came in. The blond repairman grinned at us from over his mug of coffee.

“Heya, pops. Heya, kid. Just here for the standard check-up.”

Mom looked guilty, like I’d caught her at something she shouldn’t have been doing. But pleased, as well. She had a glow to her.

The repairman took Father into the van for what he called his “check-up,” and Mom quizzed me about how Father had done at show-and-tell. I told her what a hit he’d been, how cool the kids in junior robotics had thought he was. Nobody had ever seen anything like him. Then I ran outside to see what was going on with the repairman.

They were in the back of the van, talking back and forth in that number code again. Then the repairman came out and lit a cigarette.

“How’s your Father unit? Give you any trouble?”

*Now we have a secret between us, son.*

I shook my head. “Nah. We’re building a rocket. And I took him to show-and-tell.”

He nodded. “Glad to hear it. I bet he was a hit.”

"What's he doing in there?"

"Oh, we're just running an update to his routines. Takes a few minutes. We can play catch while we wait, if you like."

"Nah."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself. You probably get lots of practice in with your Father, yeah?"

"Did you fight in the war?" I asked.

He looked up at the sky. "Yeah. I guess we pretty much all did, guys my age." Then he looked at me strange. "Why do you ask?"

"My dad died in the war."

"No, he didn't *die*, kid. He was shot, really banged up, but we got him fixed. Wait. Did he tell you about that? Because he shouldn't remember . . ."

"What do you mean?" I said. "My dad, he died in the war."

He stared at me a second, then said: "Oh, yeah." He put an arm on my shoulder. "Sorry, kid. I misunderstood you. Yes, he did. Your dad died in the war. He was a hero. And I'm sure if he had known you . . ."

"Who did you think I was talking about?" I demanded, with that kid's instinct for ferreting out adult evasiveness.

"Nobody, kid. It's just been a long day. I got confused. Let's go see how pops is doing in there—he should be just about done, and I bet you two want to get back to building that rocket."

\* \* \*

We finished the rocket in early December and took it out to the amateur rocketry field, riding a bus from the autodrome downtown, a lumbering wartime thing that barely got itself above the rooftops of downtown's stubby buildings. There were five or six other people on the bus, and it seemed like they didn't have anything better to do than stare at Father and me. One old lady had her stupid mouth open all the way to the county line stop where she finally got off. I swear she walked backward off the bus, gawping at us the whole way.

But at the rocketry field, it was different. We set our rocket up on one of the scarred pads, and got back behind a blast shield to watch it go. It was Father's design—liquid-fueled and painted cherry red—but I'd put most of it together, under his instruction. We'd named it "Hootenanny I" because I just liked the word.

It pinged us from an altitude of 145,000 feet before it finally disintegrated.

The rest of the rocketeers at the field spent hours getting Father's advice on their creations. One of them was a real sharp-looking woman just a little older than my mom, with short-cropped hair and a leather mechanic's jacket with a patch from General Hedy Lamarr's Technical Corps on her shoulder.

"He build that in your garage, kid?"

"We built it." I said.

She winked at me. "Well, I wish we'd had you in our Corps during the war, kid. We coulda used you both."

\* \* \*

I was walking home from school on the last day before Christmas break when Archie Frank came from around a corner and stood in the middle of the sidewalk in front of me. The bandage was gone, but he had a black cloth patch over one eye. I thought it looked pretty cool.

"Hey, kid," he said. He was holding one hand up, palm toward me, to get me to stop. "I just want to talk, okay?"

I stopped. My heart was hammering away in my chest. It seemed like there was nobody else on the frozen street but us, even though people just kept waking by like normal.

"I've been a real jerk," Archie said. "And I know that."

I didn't say anything.

"You can say it. Go ahead."

"Yeah, you've been . . . mean."

"A jerk."

"Yeah. A jerk."

"There. You said it. And you're right. I guess I was just jealous, you know?"

"Of what?"

"Of your robot. I mean . . ." he paused. "I never had anything that cool. Look. Let's not talk out here in the street. Let's go over to the Woolworth's, grab a malt. What do you say?"

I looked around.

"Jeez, I'm not gonna poison you, kid. And the Woolworth's is full of people."

"I gotta get home."

"I'll getcha home. Don't you worry."

He stuck his hands in his pockets, and said "Please? I really feel like a heel for what I did. For everything. Let me make it up to you."

*He never had anything that cool.*

"Yeah. Okay. Just for a bit."

He grinned so wide I caught a glimpse of one of his rotted back molars. "Great. Let's go. What's your flavor?"

"Vanilla."

"Jeez, kid. You sure are boring."

I glared at him.

"Take it easy! I'm just joking with you. A vanilla malt it is."

The Woolworth's was a secret world I had never entered, at this afterschool hour. It seethed with adolescent posturing. It vibrated with laughter, yelps, and calls that seemed like a language all their own. The soda jerks struggled to keep up with orders and banter.

Archie and I took our places near the end of the counter, on two stools vacated by a greaser friend of his and a girl whose face I should have recognized, but did not. A *lipsticked teenage face in the passenger seat, mouth a screaming O*. She smiled at me as I walked up with Archie, curtsyed elaborately as she gestured to the vacated stool, tousled my hair as I sat down. The greaser saluted Archie. "Seeya, cat. We gotta blow." Archie nodded to him, then turned to the soda jerk sliding up. "A vanilla malted for the champ, here. And a Coke for me."

Mom was on swing shifts these days. She'd come in exhausted from her shifts at around midnight. Father cooked me dinners, but that wasn't until seven. Would he worry about me? Father never seemed to worry. And he wouldn't tell Mom, I was sure of it. . . .

*Now we will have a secret between us, son.*

Now we could add another secret.

And this was good, right? Me and Archie having a shake together. A truce.

At around this time, a call was placed to my house, from a pay phone in the back of the Woolworth's. I can imagine it, though they don't know the details: a woman's voice on the line telling Father that I'd been found wandering on old Route 66. She'd come across me just walking on the side of the road. I looked shaken up, but I wasn't hurt. No, just a bit scared. And cold. If he could come and collect me, she'd appreciate it. Maybe he could bring a jacket. Yeah, at the old Phillips 66 filling station.

Archie punched me on the shoulder. "I heard you and your Father built quite a rocket."

"How'd you know that?"

He grinned, showing that rotten molar again. "I got eyes and ears all over, you know?"

I glanced at his eyepatch.

"The doc says it'll heal. I just need to keep it covered for a bit, is all."

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, as they set the malt in front of me. "I . . ."

"It was my fault, kid. Seriously."

I hadn't had a vanilla malt for months. I sucked at it greedily.

Most of the infrastructure money was going into building beacon chains for the terraplanes, and Route 66 was more and more potholed and neglected. There weren't many ground cars anymore—just recreational off-road buggies, or the occasional old jalopy owned by some dirt farmer too poor to upgrade.

The abandoned Phillips 66 gas station was four miles outside of town. It was twilight when Father got there—the sun below the horizon, full dark coming on fast. He had my sheepskin and corduroy jacket with him, and a sandwich he'd made for me.

A blonde girl came up in a crinoline skirt and started chatting with Archie. Her perfume smelled better than the vanilla malted.

"Who's the kid, Arch?"

"New friend of mine," Archie said. "He's gonna copilot my hot rod for me."

"Speakin' of," she said, drawing a flirtatious half-moon on the tile with the toe of her saddle shoe. "I need a ride home. Think you could drop me?"

Archie looked at me. "Whaddaya say, kid? You want to take a little spin in The Witch?"

"I should get home too," I mumbled. "My Father . . ."

"I'll drop you off after."

"Nah, I should just . . ."

"It'll be my pleasure, kid. Seriously." He looked at the blonde. "You want the kid to come, don't you?"

"Sure do," she said, chucking my chin. "Keep me safe from any animals flying around up there."

I'd never been in a terraplane before. Sure, I'd flown—but always in some clunky bus, waddling over the treetops. Never in anything fast . . .

A few minutes later, we were curving out in a long arc over downtown, Archie pointing the nose almost, it seemed, at the pale coin of the moon high up in the sky. I was in the rumble seat, wrapped in an old Pendleton coat Archie had given me, clutching the bar in front of me in joy and terror. The blonde girl's perfume, the smell of her hair, hovered on the cold edge of the air. The girl whooped with glee as The Witch banked hard and shot out over Nob Hill. The streetlights winked and shuddered beneath us.

Father must have been standing near the pump island of the Phillips 66 when the buggy came in, lights off, full speed. It was an old army land jeep stripped to the frame, with big oversize tires, a mesh screen for a windshield, and a rusty old cattle-guard bolted to its front.

He must have thought it was just going past on the road before it swerved and punched straight into him. He clipped one of the pumps, rotated in the air, and went through the filling station's plate glass. The four greasers climbed out of the car. Three of them had lead pipes, and one had a stubby plasma-saw he'd stolen from his dad's machine shop.

Father lay in the middle of the filling station floor. His eye-lights were out. His chest-cavity was dented in, and one of his legs was damaged at the knee joint. A greaser brought a lead pipe down on his head. The kid with the plasma saw's name was Hal Greenway. He sat on Father's smashed chest and started the plasma saw. He was halfway through Father's left arm when Father's orange eye lights flickered on.

Two seconds later, Hal Greenway was dead. Father had crushed his windpipe and his spinal column in one of his hands.

The other greasers scattered, headed for the jeep. Father tossed Hal Greenway's limp body aside and staggered to his feet. One of the greasers said he was talking, saying: "... unit partially disabled. One target destroyed. Moving to close with further combatants. Unit partially disabled. Requesting reinforcements at coordinates . . ."

At about this time we were coming to a landing on the blonde girl's family pad—a black concrete number with its white target inlaid in quartz. She lived up in the hills, in a house about the size of ten of mine.

"Not even a little kiss for my trouble?"

"Not in front of the kid. And get out of here before my parents come home."

"Girls, kid. Can't trust 'em." Archie whirled The Witch up into the air in a tornado of show-off 360s. "Stay away from girls, kid. You hear?"

I nodded.

"You look a little airsick."

I shook my head.

Archie chuckled. "All right, tough guy. Let's go for a little spin, then I'll drop you home."

"Okay."

"Climb on up shotgun."

I didn't want the ride to end.

I wasn't thinking about Father. I wasn't thinking about anything except the blonde girl's perfume, like something forbidden and adult—an illicit sip of whiskey. And the way The Witch bucked and surged underneath me. And how Archie liked me now. How I was his friend now.

We charged across the treetops, me and Archie. I clutched the dashboard in white-knuckled hands as we scattered crows and twigs scraped and rattled across The Witch's undercarriage.

Finally Archie dropped me at home, breathless and overjoyed. The house was dark, except for the motion-sensing lamp that lit up Archie's face—lit it up so white it seemed carved out of Ivory soap, with the slash of the eyepatch across it cutting it in two. He winked at me with his one good eye.

"So long, kid." Archie said to me as I mounted the steps. "Say hi to your mom for me. Tell her I'll give her a ride any time she wants one." And he was gone, The Witch slicing through the circle of the moon.

Out of breath, just inside the door, I yelled, "I'm home!"

And I'm Archie's friend, I thought. I rode The Witch all over town.

This is what I can never stop feeling guilty about. The fact that I wasn't thinking about Father at all.

But Father never stopped thinking about me. Not entirely. He must have remembered my jacket in that moment. Must have been worried, must have gone looking for it, instead of going after the greasers.

He had the jacket in his hand when they hit him with the Molotov cocktail.

That's how the cops found him: standing steadfast there in the middle of that abandoned Phillips station, carapace charred, circuits melted down, my burned jacket clutched in his hand.

Love and death.

\* \* \*

The black and white police cruiser landed on the lawn maybe half an hour later.

By then, I had started to get really scared. Father wasn't anywhere in the house, or in the garage. He wasn't anywhere. But maybe the repairman had come and taken him away for servicing, I thought. Maybe . . .

The cruiser poured its red and blue lights into the living room. Mom came bursting in the door with the two cops from before, and with the blond repairman. Mom held me, and cried, and then yelled at me, and then cried some more.

Much of the night was spent with me in the kitchen, over a cup of cocoa, catching pieces of the conversations in the other room. People came and went—other cops, other military. I heard the blond repairman in the hallway, talking to another military man:

“. . . doesn't make sense. None of those combat subroutines should have been left in there. They were all scrubbed after the war. He's no killer."

"Yeah," the other military man said, "I'm no killer either. And neither are you, right? But we were, back in Germany and Poland. And maybe, under the right circumstances . . . just maybe, if you pushed us the wrong way . . ."

"But he's a robot. These are subroutines. Just programs. We wiped them."

"Yeah, just programs. I know. And you know what? I woke up in a cold sweat a week ago."

"Sure, it happens."

"Yeah. It happens. But not always like this. I woke up in a cold sweat with a knife in my teeth, Jim. Crawling down the hallway on my belly."

"Christ, Bill. No kidding?"

"On our new carpet, on my belly. Thank God nobody saw. Thank God I got the knife back in the kitchen drawer and climbed back into bed before my wife noticed the army hadn't quite cleaned out my subroutines. Right, Jim?"

"Jesus. What a mess this thing is. It'll be the end of the Fathers program. A dead kid."

"I guess in my book, that trashcan had a right to defend himself. But I suppose nobody will want to hear that. That's between us."

\* \* \*

The cops came in and took a statement from me. They were real gentle, and kept telling me what a brave kid I was, even though I didn't know what for. I hadn't done anything the least bit brave, and I knew it.

I told them all I could, but it wasn't much. Part of me still thought Archie was my friend.

*Jesus, yer dumb.*

The three greasers who burned Father got a few months in juvie: destruction of government property, mitigating circumstances, et cetera et cetera. Nobody could stomach giving them more, after they'd watched their friend die.

Archie got nothing at all. Nobody would rat. Why had the greasers gone after Father? They'd just seen him standing there, thought he was a piece of old junk it would be fun to smash into, that's all. Stupid, a lark. Just some delinquent nonsense.

Archie smirked his way through every grilling the cops gave him. The eye patch? He'd clipped a tree branch in his hot rod. The malt? He just wanted to make a kid happy. What's the crime? The phone call? C'mon—had the kid seen him make a phone call?

As far as anyone could prove, he just wanted to buy me a vanilla malt and take me for a ride in The Witch.

The Fathers were all recalled. The program was canceled. I guess they scrubbed all their Father programming out, the way they had their war programming.

Later, I heard they all ended up in the terraforming colonies on Mars, doing the heavy lifting and the dangerous repair jobs the colonists couldn't do.

I wonder, sometimes, if they ever dream of their sons and daughters up there where they labor in the red dust. Of playing catch on crickety evenings back on Earth, of porch swings, of walking to the store for push-pops and orangesicles.

Jim, the VA repairman? He stuck around. And eventually, I got around to calling him Dad.

I never called him Father, though.

**July/August 2020**

Even though we hit pop flies, and built rockets, and he helped me make a soapbox derby car, and I came to love him.

I only had one Father. I had him for six months. I'd never have another.