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## Charley

by  
Perry A. Chapdelaine, Sr.

“I won’t have it!” Charley’s mother hysterically screeched from the kitchen. “He’s becoming a -- a MONSTER.”

Charley’s father sighed deeply -- a sound of frustration, a call of loneliness, a tiredness that dissipated souls, “Martha, can’t you at least wait until I change clothes. Why, I haven’t placed my briefcase in the study, and already we’re engaged in a shouting contest.”

Charley turned the page, simultaneously hunching himself deeper into the soft pillows that lined the sofa. He read:

*The green man held one of his three legs before him, carefully pressing out the wounds of the hunt. Two hands shifted to restrng his bow, while the third reached for the carcass, a fine Glympher, red pelted, thick with the season and killed at peak of ferocity for taste.*

*Homecoming filled Jmpke’s thoughts. How warm would be the fire. Alkss and Trmble, two females shared with Mpke and Srta -- both good hunters and family-strong like himself-- would joy at the sight of fresh Glympher. His mind’s eye visioned the running, when their children would burst. . .*

“Charley’s become a criminal! That’s what he is! A common criminal.” taunted Charley’s mother.

“Oh come,” scorned Charley’s father, Chris. “It’s just magazines. A criminal? Really!”

“Well --” her voice rose, “-- what do you call it when he lies about his studies? And spends his allowance for that -- that trash?”

“I agree it’s wrong, Martha. But you’re overwrought. Exaggerating. I read *Wild Westerns* at his age. My parents were upset, too, but that’s just youth. Imagination. Vicarious excitement.”

*Alkss snuggled to Jmpke’s left side, her back to the slowly dying fire; Trmble pushed against his right side. He touched their breasts, Alkss’ huge and round and soft like the sweet forest Red Fruit, Trmble’s contoured and pointed. Mpke and Srta having decided to search out the white two-legged strangers in their soaring thing, had charged him with hearth care. Soon Glymphers would moult, after which their meat would be poisoned. Jmpke, concerned for his singular responsibility, and the length of co-husband’s stay, only absently responded to wives’ caresses. . . .*

“You don’t understand,” Martha distraughtly screamed again. “He’s not just imagining. He’s questioning the very -- the -- Oh! How can I make you understand?”

Charley’s father passed through the living room to his study, where he deliberately laid down his briefcase. Had Charley looked when his father passed, he might have seen sagging eye pouches and shadows, lines that prognosticated early drooping jowls, yet to come -- and tiredness. Fighting for the Travers’ account had not been so wearing as the foot shuffling and coughs out of context and smiles where no smiles should be and serious expressions where there should be none. The Old Man wanted him at the party tomorrow night. A sign that his promotion had come at last? Or the feast before bad news? The accolade prior to sympathies?

Charley’s father sighed deeply again. He passed from the study to the deep-carpeted bedroom,



desultorily changing clothes. He returned to the kitchen. No supper again, but copious water, hot and cold, for coffee or tea. He decided on coffee.

She was crying.

“All right. I’m changed. I’m home. Tell me about it. What is it, Honey?”

“It’s Charley.” She pushed her wet face into his chest. “Yesterday -- no -- this morning. I took Charley to the Hampsteads because school was out, and Mrs. Hampstead invited me to her Planned Parenthood meeting.”

Martha pushed away long enough to wipe her eyes with a soft paper napkin. “You remember Mrs. Hampstead is niece to your boss, and I just couldn’t refuse when they invited us at the office Christmas party --.”

“Yes. Go on. About Charley?”

“Oh, Chris. It was so embarrassing. There we were. Mrs. Hampstead, Genevieve, your boss’s wife, Mrs. Larkin, Mrs. O’Neil -- oh, and a half dozen more.

I permitted Charley to sit on one of the chairs behind the ladies, thinking it’d be best if he were not tempted by Mrs. Hampstead’s valuable antiques scattered everywhere, and I must say, he was a perfect gentlemen, as far as that goes,

Chris.” She looked up from the corners of her eyes.

“Yes. What happened, Martha?”

“Beastly dreadful. Really. Mrs. Hampstead’s speaker, Reverend Gordons, explained just how important it is to plan one’s family, to ensure that only planned children be brought into the world, and how such planning would solve the food crisis, and eventually pollution, and -- oh -- just so many things, and then it happened.”

She burst into tears again, pressing her whole body against his.

He pushed away, “Damnation Martha. What happened? I’m catching nervous fidgets waiting for the plot line.”

“He did it.” She wiped her eyes with her handkerchief, at last directly facing her husband. “Charley. He spoke up. He asked Reverend Gordons what was the function of marriage, if children were simply secondary to sexual intercourse? And before I could stop him, he began to describe a story in one of those -- those -- BEAST magazines.”

Glen Peavey, reputed to be the finest history teacher, was also the students’ terror. As a disciplinarian, he’d have made a fine first sergeant. In his right hand was the pointer which, though against the law to use as a striking agent, was an excellent prod, to sing out breezily while passing ears. The pointer swung back and forth, equally and indiscriminatingly fetching map, or chalk board, or dallying student.

Meanwhile Charley scrunched lower behind his hulking classmate. His hands held the large history book at roughly forty-five degrees from desk top to his classmate’s back; and his thumbs held inside the opened history book a pulp magazine that fitted nicely, so that no casual observer could see it from the front of the room. Charley read:

*“You’ve got to see the problem in perspective,” Sark told his junior officer. “The Natural History of Aggression’ was drawn from a book by Konrad Lorenz. The scientific meeting was held in Britain’s Institute of Biology, and in such a rarefied atmosphere, such a title might have provoked aggression itself, but times change.”*

Instructor Peavy waved his baton at the small girl with brilliant yellow braids. “You -- Teresa. Name the true causes for World War I and World War II?”

In traditional time-tested manner, Teresa Higway rose. “Mr. Peavey, the history books list economic



① factors, depression, and political alignments, but daddy says it was just arrogant kings, and later a mad dictator that was in power at the wrong time, and that they did the most damage.’’

Mr. Peavey smiled. “I’m glad you read your assignments, Teresa.” He nodded.

“I’ll not criticize your father, either. He’s placed his finger on one of the important history lessons, and we’ll discuss. . . .”

Charley surreptitiously turned the page:

*“Can this world be so much like Earth? The junior officer momentarily shifted behind the stumbling explorers plucking a gorgeous multi-hued bloom from a mottled, scrawling vine.*

“. . . and then Hitler, and Mussolini, and that little Japanese fellow -- I forgot his name -- joined together to rule the world.”

Little Johnny Page finished recitation, and seated himself.

Mr. Peavey positively gleamed.

*Sark at last stopped his troops. They scattered in defense formation along the ridge. Magnetic Glasers were emplaced, as were rockmolters, and tunnels begun.*

*With defenses approved, and the long wait for the Alstairians begun, Sark was able to further explain the thesis to his junior officer, saying, “James Fisher, D.I. Wallis, Harrison Matthews, K.R.L. Hall, and Konrad Lorenz gave the main case for the universality of innate aggressive behavior in the animal world, and the means by which evolution chooses to ritualize it, subject to rules and regulations and otherwise harmless consequences. According to our own people -- Ardrey, Stanislav Andreski, John Burton, Denis Hill -- Cecily de Monchaux presented the primary arguments for interpreting aggression as purely human.*

*“Derek Freeman, the Australian psychologist, joined the ethnologists; he presented an interpretation of Dart’s theory of the predatory transition from ape to man, and the horrible consequences of man’s failure to behave according to animal rules and regulations.”*

*“Then that’s the reason you expect the Alstairians to reason likewise?” asked the junior officer. “Their analogues with man? Their isomorphism by structure and economics predicts such analogues? Territorial Imperative? Social Contract?”*

*“Yes,” Sark nodded, pleased that at last his charge saw the point.*

*Scouts reported an Alstairian column perhaps 35 kilometres ahead, and immediately behind the Cold Ridge Ranges. . . .*

The instructor's stick painfully prodded Charley between his 12th and 13th rib. Simultaneously his pulp magazine was torn from its tentative hiding place behind the class book, whence pieces of it fluttered to the floor and desk -- shreds of garbage scattered by one glowering, most righteous Mr. Peavey.

“You --” growled instructor Peavey “-- will march directly to principal’s quarters.”

Charley, much disturbed by loss of his magazine, did so march into principal’s quarters, but not quite as humbly as perhaps Mr. Peavey and others might have wished. He flounced into the hard straight-back chair, and waited. Soon the inner sanctum permitted him entry, whence he was hardback-seated before the fat Papa Ray, that name not exactly used in Papa Ray’s presence.

“You have --,” began principal Ray, softly, almost pompously, “-- been sent to me because of inattention, and --” he referred to his notes, “-- reading trashy materials behind your history book. Would you like to explain?”

Charley glowered. “He had no right to tear up my magazine.”

Principal Ray’s frown, though stern, was not frightening. “No right?” He fingered his glasses and



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waited.

"It was my money," quickly came Charley's hot response. "Peavey could have kept it 'til after school; or even threatened to keep it 'til I promised not to read in class again."

Papa Ray thoughtfully tapped his old-fashioned roll-top desk, then, "Charley. Would you have promised?"

Charley looked down.

Papa Ray shifted into his standard democracy-is-everybody's concern; he explained to morose Charley that in a democracy, the rule of the majority dominates; that schools were a function of that kind of democracy, and that the right to an education was foremost among all other rights, excepting the right to freedom of speech.

"But isn't the right to read what one pleases also the right to freedom of speech?" asked Charley, belligerently lifting his head, and looking directly into the principal's eyes.

"That's my point, Charley. If every student did what they wished, there would be no education, no understanding of history, of what motivates men -- and history would recur again and again. Very likely --" said Ray with dignity, and not without noticeable concern, "-- man might even destroy himself when repeating errors."

"I read a story once where students -- see -- they were kind of like a cross between porpoises and monkeys -- well, they were permitted to explore with natural curiosity, and their knowledge grew swiftly. They didn't have long lectures and dull books. Anyone who wanted could study whatever they wanted, and --" Charley's eyes sparkled excitedly, "--well, they had sort of teaching machines, for things that took repetition, and everybody could just learn as fast as they wanted, and --"

"Tut, tut!" Papa Ray raised his hands. "That's not real life, Charley. Those are dreams, images, really; someone else's fabrication. School is practical; school is bound by that precious concept of freedom to teach truths, and to ensure that every student is guided through basic fundamentals upon which sit our great democratic institutions."

"That's another thing, Sir. Why must our political systems be the way they are? According to stories I've read, society is made up of rather arbitrary customs; there could be nearly an endless variety of ways to put together a society. Why doesn't man decide on what kind of culture is best, for everyone, and then design a society to fit? That would eliminate hunger, and --"

Papa Ray shook his head, concernedly frowning for the first time. "You've not got the point, Charley. That's just the kind of society we have now, don't you see? Men. Very smart men, sat down and decided what is best for the President to control and what is best left to Senators and Representatives, and what is best under control of the Judiciary. Who would watch those who made the new society?"

"You see, Charley, we must take into consideration the normal human greed and power hunger, and create checks and balances to control that normal greed. That's what a democracy is."

Charley paused. "Well, Sir. In this one story I read of a society where there was no ownership of land or property by others, not even the state, and everyone was raised in a way that they had no frustrations and needs and therefore. . . ."

"That's almost communistic. I'm sorry, Charley," Papa Ray frigidly interrupted. "I see I'm not getting through to you. I'll take this matter up with your parents. You're dismissed. Go back to class."

The medical doctor's thin-line moustache twitched: a formal honorarium bequeathed him by fraternity brothers during his recent medical training. His pencil, already dulled by copious notes made on yellow paper, stilled momentarily. "Now young man -- er -- Charley," he said. "I've made all the possible and reasonable physical checks. There is positively nothing wrong. You are as healthy as a little -- er -- tiger cub. Have you been taking drugs?"

Charley buttoned his shirt, and slipped back his tie. "No Sir. I don't believe in drugs, Sir. I remember



in this one story where the whole society took drugs: one yellow pill when the lady she wanted to feel blue, then another pill when she wanted to feel excited, another pill when she wanted to be angry, and another when she wanted sexual --.”

“You don’t take any drugs at all? Nothing? Absolutely nothing.”

“No, Sir.”

“Think -- er -- Charley. Are you exposed to any drugs? Anything in your household?”

Charley thought. He wiggled, and then frowned, faint creases showing across his youthful brow. Then, from silence, “Well -- do you count what my folks do?”

The doctor nodded.

“Mother, she takes tranquilizers, especially when she’s got to go to one of the ladies’ meetings. Then there’s aspirin for, I guess, relieving headaches after drinking at dad’s boss’s house. Those blue pills I’m not supposed to know, but they’re so I won’t have any brothers or sisters. Mom, she takes a lot of those. Then there’s --.”

“Think, young man -- er -- Charley. Where are those pills located.”

“In the medicine chest, Sir. Except for the blue pills, they’re --.”

“In the medicine chest?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Think carefully -- er -- Charley. Have you ever, just once, or maybe several times, helped yourself to those pills, any kind, without permission?”

“No Sir. Not once. Mom’s given me aspirin, and such, but I remember this story where this big, green blob made from synthetic chemicals, like most pills are made, simply absorbed people, and it grew, and grew --.”

“You’re sure. not once, even.”

“No Sir. No pills.”

The little black moustache again quivered, and the yellow pencil darted back to the little yellow pad.

Charley grasped the car’s arm rest when his father carelessly screeched tires around a curve. During the straight stretch, he turned a page, reading:

*Computer Big Check I snickered and spat out electronic signals.*

*Roxl I, first Handmaiden to Big Check I, rolled to the console, plugged in it’s connection, called up the data, and swallowed it megabyte by megabyte. Then Roxl I connected to communications, transmitting, “Crossing Andromeda dwarf 36945XL, space vector 12th dimension, now substructuring superspace to breakout at 10th dimension. Urgent protoplasmic stasis field be fully protected. Stress predicted through alternate histories may damage sensitive genetic structures.”*

“I don’t care what the doctor says,” Martha argued, her motherly instincts on the upswing, “Charley is not a psychiatric case.”

“Just the same, Sweetheart, the doctor knows best. Says there’s nothing physically identifiable; anything else is for the headshrink -- uh -- I mean trained psychiatrist.”

*Roxl II activated, rolled to the largest console, and pressed buttons. The huge ship seemed to blur, almost to blink, then stabilized before a giant red dwarf.*

*Measurements stirred other equipments; and almost as though no ship had ever existed at all, the giant ship disappeared.*

When they almost sideswiped an oncoming bus, Martha accused Charley’s father of too many



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drinks.

Charley's father, feeling that any accusations were unfair at a time like this, sulked, nearly running down a pedestrian.

Finally they arrived, parked, and ushered themselves upward, third floor, turn right, then left, Doctor Zimmerman's.

*One stasis field lighted and motion within the field accelerated, until two proto-humans moved normally. One, grey haired but smooth of feature, certainly the eldest, spoke to the tallow haired female. "The Einstein-Schroedinger geometrodynamics did not predict the stasis field -- absolute reality, in a manner of speaking -- but all the rest --" his arm stretched outward, sweeping together the total circle -- change of reality -- infinite dimensions -- and infinite opportunities for new life."*

*"Yes," the young girl agreed, "and infinite opportunities for mistakes."*

*"That, too," he nodded.*

*Within moments he'd compared physical constants back against the stasis field, finding only that light speed had changed a fraction of a per cent downward.*

*"Well," he said, "at least we've still human form. Two or three more superspace jumps, we're sure to be close to planet-bearing suns, and from there --"*

*"Yes, Dad, I know. A new life, a new start. Maybe this time things will work out." She leaned over, and kissed him gently.*

Dr. Zimmerman opened Rorschach cards, placing them with infinite care exactly at the secret spot he'd marked before his patient. "This," said he, his voice cultured and careful, "is a game, Charley. I'm going to turn the pages and ask you what you see. You look at the picture. Let your mind suggest ideas to you of what the picture seems to be. Don't be afraid to tell me what you see. There are no right or wrong answers, and this is not a test." Dr. Zimmerman briefly, almost barely, chuckled. "There will be no making fun, no criticism of what you see. I will record your answer on this tape, and from the answers, I'll later form judgement. Understand?"

Charley thumbed over the page in his new magazine, closed it, and sat on it. He'd had to borrow money to replace the torn copy. Now he'd nearly finished this month's issue. He nodded to Dr. Zimmerman.

The card flipped, the weird black object -- maybe a bug, maybe a skull's head grinning grotesquely, maybe two people dancing a quiet minuet, maybe most anything depending upon ghostly images that dance in minds -- maybe -- *Maybe* looked brazenly upward at Charley, and Charley unabashedly peered back. At last he said, "It's just like that monster in the last *Isaac Asimov Magazine*. It squished when walking, but it could also fly, or run, or jump, or even circle the moon had it wanted."

Charley warmed to his subject. Looking upward at Zimmerman, he went on, "They were alien beings who wanted to remake the world in their image. Zork, their leader, had this thing about being right or wrong. Reminded me a lot of a preacher. He knew just why things were supposed to behave, where they come from and why, and where they were going." Charley's memory flowed smoothly now. "Thing is, none of the earth people wanted Zork -- uh -- values, I guess they were called, and they -- the earth people I mean -- had to find ways to rid themselves of the Zonks."

Another page, another *Maybe* looked upward. "*Analog* is where I saw that beast. It was ugly, but could think beautifully. It created a world from its own image, and peopled it, and later gave its language to its people. But engineers and scientists from earth discovered the world and polluted it so badly that the image was distorted. No longer in love with its own image, it had to destroy it's creation, all the earth scientists and engineers who were then on it."

Dr. Zimmerman wiped his brow. Preserving a steadfast manner, he flipped to the next *Maybe*.



Charley, enjoying himself, studied it intently. “*Fantasy and Science Fiction*, for sure. Just like the Poltergeist and Mrs. Minerva. See, Mrs. Minerva was really a robot, and the poltergeist was really a little old lady with all sorts of energy. That’s the little old lady. Really, Doctor,” Charley explained, boyishly enthusiastic, “It was a funny story. Mrs. Minerva was the examiner in a society where everyone was a nut, except the little old lady. And whatever she did got her in trouble. The whole society thought she was a nut, but she wasn’t, Doctor Zimmerman, she wasn’t crazy at all.”

Doctor Zimmerman lowered the thermostat. The room was overwarm.

“Oh that’s a Bug Eyed Monster. This one is from the mechanical city that almost destroyed humanity until saved by the Bug Eyed Monster, and the next,” Charley laughed delightedly. “Why the next is just like a character I saw in the *Isaac Asimov Magazine* --”

Dr. Zimmerman later faced the anxious parents. “Your son, Charley,” he said, with learned erudition,” is in many ways a normal boy. His imagination is overactive. He apparently has been permitted to read certain -- ah -- non-literary magazines, and therein seems to lie your present difficulty.”

“But that’s what we came to see you about,” Charley’s mother stated positively and puzzledly. “We know he reads those magazines. We can’t stop him. His teachers can’t stop him, and now the principal threatens expulsion.”

Peacefully waiting outside, Charley turned the page, reading :

*“When a world screams, dead ghosts must awaken, ” shouted the ship across the void, and another rupture tore at the planet’s surface below.*

*A tenuous thought stretched from void to void, from black hole to black hole, nether regions to emptiness, searching, ever searching, for a loved one long lost. It touched the hell ship, and stayed, clinging to an almost invisible network of electrostatic charge caused by friction between not quite empty space and the ship’s surface.*

Touching finger tip to finger tip, as his veneered role demanded, the psychiatrist said, “Charley also has serious symptoms of incipient schizophrenia; and he’s --”

“Oh my God!” Charley’s mother cried, her hand catching thin lips.

Charley’s father placed an arm about her, but she shrugged it aside.

Dr. Zimmerman parted his fingers, a most patient gesture. “Now, now. Things aren’t bad yet. Everybody has a touch of -- ah -- schizophrenia, and Charley’s is incipient. We are fortunate we’ve caught it at an early stage.” He reached into his right-hand drawer, drawing forth the prescription pad. “We’ll simply start him off on this medicine, and watch closely.” He scribbled rapidly and tore off the sheets, handing it to Charley’s father. “If your boy doesn’t relax, we’ll try another medicine. Afterwards, if the symptoms remain stubborn, we’ll arrange for -- ah -- other possible treatments.”

They travelled swiftly toward home along the highway. Charley turned the page to his very last story. Martha glared ominously, almost flinging blame against Charley’s father.

Charley’s father did his very best to seek proper response against her venom, but was unequal to the problem.

Charley read:

*Morgan pointed to a society that lay in crumbled ruins, like a city long dead from age and dust, yet not yet buried. To Lola, he said: “Your tribe is like a star glowing long and bright in the night, it yet wanes either from its own consumption, or from anger, the swords thrown by unknown Gods -- Or might they*



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*be scientists of a kind unimagined by us, those who use the fires of the stars, and quench their hungry thirst for power, for energy?’’*

*Lola cared not. So long had she tried to see male’s image, and just so long she remained woman. What mattered the sparks of time, the glory of dust still risen, the happiness of flighty birds in their long equinox across the heavens, if Lola could but child, and start life anew?*

Life is eternal, *thought Lola*, no matter what Morgan would say. Could not he see that life begat life? That everywhere was life, and that nowhere is there not life? Even the very stars by which this strange man swore held life that burgeoned and reached elsewhere for tenuous contact!

*No. Lola would not go with this lover. She’d hold her truths as self-evident, and even offer her ashes to that which must be.*

The horrendous accident might not have been, but was.

Reverend Gordons, enclotted in proper black and saddened demeanor, mounted the pedestal. He paused, carefully holding the Bible to view before the assembly. His eyes swept slowly over those grieving, and at last they stopped at Charley’s mother and father, both bandaged, Martha’s legs encased in plaster and Chris’s head and left arm bandaged also.

Charley lay still in his splendid casket veneered with pink nylon, covered by hundreds of odorous blooms, the central object for the moment.

The time came. And it had to be said: “Brethren,” Reverend Gordons began, so softly he hardly breathed. “It has come to my duty to send a simple soul on his way. He was a child of tender years, barely started through the richest heritage that could be offered by a mother and father, his school years. There he lies. Dead. A broken neck by cruel, unpredictable fate.”

Pause. Head bowed.

Reverend Gordons raised his eyes. His voice slightly rose in pitch and loudness. “Charley was one of us. He was loved by fine parents, by his schoolmates; his teachers and principal speak well of him, and, indeed, he was a fine, young citizen.

“But God speaks with a wisdom that cannot be denied, for we are His, all of us. We are God’s.” The preacher’s palm hit the railing, beating its rhythm.

After the preacher had covered the ground as to Charley’s many alternatives, had he lived: doctor, lawyer, preacher, salesman like his fine father, and after Charley was placed in absentia, so to speak, into a well ordered society, they prayed for Charley’s soul, that it should now rest in a better place for all eternity.

Much later Reverend Gordons made a note on his pad of yet-to-be-written sermons. “Trashy literature, its evil influence upon men’s minds, souls, and welfare.”

What of Charley?

Does this young, bright but naive young boy lie mouldering in the damp ground, a victim of alcohol and quarreling parents who, conditioned by an indifferent and unimaginative society, set about misunderstanding their only child?

Not this time, not this once in a million, billion, trillion times!

Here’s what happened:

*The grey haired man rechecked physical constants on this, their one hundred and twelfth jump, that last having taken them six billion light years inward. He shook his head, and his forehead wrinkled, as he said, “Theory predicts greater changes. I can’t shake the feeling that something is overlooked, that everything is too easy, too -- well -- pat.”*



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*She sighed. "You worry overmuch, Father. Why not let Roxl I and Big Check do their job? I'll monitor the stasis field again, but really -- the others' didn't want you to worry them to safety."*

*His daughter's sparkling blue eyes and clean, smooth, white teeth and her finely spun hair, a pure delight to study, caught his attention. At last he shrugged, pressuring unease downward; and he nodded at Big Check I.*

*Roxl I's Handmaiden rolled swiftly over to its master console, plugging into the bigger computer.*

*Invisible and silent activities commenced: reality was again severed, permitting all that was and would ever be to seem to move pastward, as though existence itself were a large, airy ballon in free-flight.*

*Big Check gallumphed as it worked, and everything was as it should be, except that when their particular super-space bubble was pierced in some unknown, unpredictable, and unexpected way it affected the skeane of all other reality-bubbles. The tenuous threads shivered and warped and twisted and snarled and broke and stretched and compressed and changed!*

*Tiny molecules within Jmpke's body resonated, and suddenly became something else made of similar elements, but arrayed slightly differently. Jmpke's concern for co-husband's over-long trip rushed into his thoughts like an unpenned and now raging river.*

*He bolted upward with the strange thought, thrusting aside wives' tender three-armed caresses.*

*Frightened and bewildered, they passed over his weapons.*

*"The two-legged strangers are not meat," he declared without preamble. "Mpke and Srta may be hurt on this hunt. I have further reasoned that the two-legs are intelligent, and will aid us in future hunts."*

*Neither Alkss nor Trmble understood the reasoning, except for a strange and new flickering that burned slowly beneath ordinary thoughts.*

*"There is more than the hunt and meat." Jmpke explained on parting.*

Meanwhile, in a separate reality pocket:

*The Alstairian column, consisting of humanoids, marched stolidly behind their long, offensive weaponry, dust powdering upward in thin streamers that colored the late sun. Breathing heavily, a sweating runner stopped beside Roskr, the High Commandant. He said: "They've taken the ancestral ridge. Surely we'll attack now!"*

*But changes had swept this world of colorful blooms and close-clutching vines.*

*Roskr squinted toward the Terran emplacements, visualizing the Magnetic Glasers and the terrible power that would be lashed into their ranks. The Ancestral Ridge? he asked of himself. Is the land our personality? Our soul?*

*Through the curtain of buzzing machinery, and soft whispers of soldiery keened into fitness, thrashed life-forms that flitted and hopped and ran, each protecting their allotted space, and many dying for it.*

*A light shower began and ended almost at the same time, scattering sprinkles that glistened on each colorful flower and each leaf of the ubiquitous, twisting vines.*

*Is it worth lives? Roskr asked himself. Why should we trade living for the idea of a territory which we use only in our minds? Are we not more than animals and insects?*

*He turned the troops about. The world was big and the forest huge. Let these strangers hunt vainly. Perhaps in time peace would find its own way.*

Again, far outward and perhaps distant in time, too -- if such has meaning as threads break and tangle and change -- a new ordering had come.



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*The tenuous thought was reinforced again, and still again, until its power was like that of a first magnitude star that blazes glory outward for all to witness. Sensing its own unique changes, it whipped on the death ship, slashing inward like a torch in fury. Again, and still again it sliced, until the planet below was peppered with tiny grains, the fruit of its wrath.*

*Ever-afterward the thought searched from void to void, black hole to black hole, into and out of nether regions stark with paradoxes, now its quest dual: one, for a loved one long lost, the other, for the power, the tremendous, unthinkable power that it had momentarily held, and had dissipated against insane non-life set to destroy a planet.*

And now to Charley:

Changes also swept over Earth as a roiling surf floods mounds of beach sand, and briskly sweeps it away. Gone was Charley's death, the accident, the sombre coffin and its role as center-piece for culturally-conditioned sermons.

And gone was Charley's father, Chris, and mother, Martha, as indeed, they had now never been.

Reality changed, reaching backward and shifting their particular super-space so that the particular Charley of our narrative never-was.

And with it, too, went the dreadful Mrs. Hampstead, and Reverend Gordon, Glen Peavey, history instructor par-excellent, Little Miss Right, Teresa Higway, and Principal Papa Ray, and Doctor Zimmerman with his fabulous Maybes, those superficial ink-blots.

Gone, all gone!

In place of all that is -- was -- well -- what you see about you now, just plain folks, like you and me, and an Earth life turned about, so to speak, like it is now, with all of its foibles and follies and might-have-beens.

But what of Charley

A million, billion light-years inward, skipping along discontinuous geodesics (thus moving both space-ward and time-ward) we find him, his spirit free and indomitably thirsting with life.

His name? What does he call himself?

Like the space and time that changes from moment to moment, his free spirit, too, changes identity.

Oh how his adventures begin, and continue!

For example:

*Having sorely tried the Royal House's patience, Romero is sentenced to a Galactic-line ship that will respond to his every command except one. It will not be persuaded to turn aside from its initial bearing, thus sentencing Romero to a life-time of captivity within.*

*With Romero is the Magnificent Cythetic, grown to be humanoid in all but one respect, and tailored to be companion to Romero. With them -- the female-voiced ship, Romero, and Adonis, the cythetic -- is the rare species of Bihara, those peculiar and little known lizards, clever, vicious, poisonous, and exceptionally long-lived.*

*Oh, what glorious adventures await them, when their steadfast trip is captured by strange forces. They land on Cairema a strange planet surrounded by artifacts, suns of Red, White, and Blue, and a world gone mad with genetic changes that descend man in a literal sense.*

*The Heart Changeling, a female that appears in whatever guise man's heart most desires, interweaves her own story back and forth through Romero's.*

*She is born of another planet, descendant of ship-survivors that have lost their cultural-heritage;*



and she's cast into "God," a vast, cauldron, a mawlike depth that sweeps winds and moistures into another world, also Cairema.

On Cairema she determines to continue serving as priestess for the giant machine that controls all on Cairema, and searches for a solution for Cairema's sad problems.

Meanwhile, Adonis, the Magnificent Cythetic, weaves through Romero's lifetimes, and through the Heart Changeling's, growing from child to manhood outwardly, even as Romero grows inwardly and as Lola, the Heart Changeling matures and becomes wiser.

On this world, through this adventure, Charley is the observer, the philosopher, the rebel, the slave, the child, the wise sage, and the man of action.

What of Charley?

Here is one moment, where he is both youth and aged:

*Amati would not live very long. One brisk Blue Romero was summoned to squat beside the great one. "I shall name you Amati, the Singer of Souls!" he quietly pronounced to Romero.*

*Amati did not seem drugged, though he was as radiant as the white sun. The Patriarch asked: "Have you heard of Mati?"*

*"Yes, but I would learn dear Amati?"*

*"It is the God who guides us, who feeds us, who clothes us and makes us well when we sicken."*

*"I understand some of the ways of Gods, Oh Great One, but I see that many who plant and reap also feed us, and there are Ness'ibushes to heal when all else fails."*

*"Healing tubes cost our hair, and they blaspheme against God's will."*

*"But master. You and I have hair. Why is hair so important?"*

*"Ah!" Eyes seemed to glow of an inner light. "Hair is a characteristic of Godhood."*

*Romero smiled. "Then Mati has hair."*

*"It is so, Oh Cleansed One."*

*Romero restrained laughter. He had long been away from those of hair, his memory, however, still quite capable of restoring the prickle and tingle of scratchy parts pressed in vibrant love against his own. He thought: I do not suffer amenti in that respect.*

*"Where do I find this Mati?"*

*"It is near, yet far. Only those who are properly cleansed may reach."*

*"I have a lifetime, Oh Master," Romero soberly replied, thinking of his already overlong life.*

*"You are as old as my colony. Look after my children. Lead them to Mati."*

*"Me?" Romero asked, startled.*

*"Yes."*

*They stared together at the rising haze, and watched through the magenta change into red: one outwardly seeing and perplexed, the other inwardly seeing and sure. They seemed to grow closer. Romero spoke again: "Master, I have been with you for long. You have been stolid and honest with me, as strong as the boulders of this mountain, as deep as the gorges. You have led a distraught and suffering people with a wisdom seldom found elsewhere. Can you tell me how this came about?"*

*"It is Mati."*

*"I fail to understand."*

*As if an amice were thrown over his head, the older one moved and looked upward at the now dark red sun. "Neither do I, My Son. But I sense that one day you will."*

*"Master, I have traveled many lands, even other worlds, and I live overlong."*



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*The patriarch smiled. "I knew that, my Son. The moment I first touched your hairs."*

*"Is life to continue with me forever?"*

*"Life is part of all. We come from all. The very dust that puts us together is conscious of our being for it is itself."*

*"I am speaking literally, Oh Master. I have already lived one of your lifetimes, and do not seem to age. Maidens and young wives find me refreshing and vigorous and seek after my roots."*

*The elder smiled again. "Gods can be amoristic!"*

*Romero took his hand and kissed it. Later he also wept.*

*When Romero woke, Red had passed again, and White was already midway. Amati the elder stood over Amati the younger. The elder seemed to suffer amphibology, for his sentences were not. "Depart, I have come, must."*

*He waved a scepter consisting of red, white and blue rocks embedded in black clay over Amati the Younger.*

*"Master!" Romero exclaimed, and shouted after the dwellers.*

*Though totally blind, the old one directed his gaze into the white sun. "Go!"*

*Seeking to delay, Romero asked, "Where, Oh Master?"*

*Others crowded about. The old one sat.*

*"Where, Oh Master? Where do you go?"*

*But the radiance was gone, the husk empty and coarse.*

Charley, the indomitable spirt, roams freely -- here -- there -- everywhere. . . .

As every particle that makes up you and me is the daughter or son of vibrantly surging stars a million, billion miles distant in space-time, as we are the creatures of all we observe, so Charley is the spirit of all that he experiences.

Perhaps in some other reality bubble, now called super-space by mathematicians and physicists, the reader, like the writer, can yet hear crisp pages slowly turned: There runs the green man with Mpke and Srta, and before them fresh Glympher and, behind, Alkss and Trmble wait patiently for co-husbands in search of fresh two-legged meat. Sark's trained men blast the Alstairians back beyond the ancestral barrier. Big Check I at last creates the desired universe, an unending paradise all filled with growth and promise for a ship-load of now near humans. Dr. Zimmerman reads his Maybes: they change shape beautifully, grotesquely, humanly, naively, while Dr. Zimmerman hangs on, clutching with dulled fingernails. The death ship dies in the long, open void, contaminated by thought. . . .

But here, in this bubble, Romero de Morgan, with Adonis, the Magnificent Cythetic, leaves Cairema. Life lives through Lola, the Heart Changeling, and through Lola a new social order evolves upward, as the twisted genes are cured. . . .

*"...everywhere is life, and that nowhere is not life? Even the very stars by which this strange man swore held life that burgeoned and reached elsewhere for tenuous contact. . . ." Lola has wisely concluded.*

What of Charley?

Like you, like me, he is nothing, nothing at all,  
Except the imagination of lovers who love the possible,  
The child of change, and what might have been!

