

MARS CHILD

by Robert F. Young

art: Jack Gaughan

The author reports that he was born in Silver Creek, "a somewhat uninspiring little town situated on the shores of Lake Erie," and has lived there all his life. His latest novel, The Last Yggdrasil, was published in May 1982 by Del Rey Books.

Our Mars child is a fourteen-year-old girl.

In Mars years, she is little more than half that age.

She is utterly beautiful.

Helen and I were sent holograms of her, of course, and we knew she would be beautiful, but she is the first Mars child we have seen in the flesh, and until this moment we did not realize how breathtaking true beauty can be.

We walk across the Americanization Center's waiting room to meet her. I am struck first of all by the blueness of her eyes. It is pure azure, but it is much too deep to be compared to Earth skies. Perhaps it is the blueness of Mars's skies as they were millions of years ago. She has dark-brown hair which dances in waves to her shoulders. The curvature of her nose is a gentle downward sweep from the curve of her eyebrows; it is as though an artist obsessed with beauty drew her face. Her skin is touched with gold from the summer sun. Her lips are quite full, but there is no hint of sensuality in them. She has a rounded, childlike chin.

Her name is Dawn. Ostensibly it is an American name. Actually, although it is spelled D-a-w-n on the adoption papers, it is merely the name her Mars name sounds most like.

The first thing we do after making her legally ours is to drive into Warren, Pa., which is near the Eastern Americanization Center, and buy her new clothes. After decades of jeans, dresses have come into their own again, and she looks charming in the gay blue summer outfit she chooses to wear in place of the standard gray blouse and slacks the Center provided her. Her feet in summer sandals are those of a prince's daughter.

Perhaps, millions of years ago, she was a prince's daughter.

But she is my daughter now.

"Shall we stop for a bite to eat?" I ask, as we leave the boutique. "Are you hungry, Dawn?" Helen asks.

"Yes, kind of, Mrs. Fairfield."

"You mustn't call me 'Mrs. Fairfield,' Dawn. You may call me 'Helen' if you prefer that to 'Mother'."

"Don't American children call their mothers 'Mom'?"

I can see that Helen is pleased. She has dark-brown hair too, and blue eyes. Although her face is merely pretty, to the casual observer she could pass for Dawn's real mother. "I'd love to have you call me 'Mom'." Dawn turns to me. "And shall I call you 'Dad'?"

I try to take this in my stride. It is difficult. We have wanted a child for so long that getting one almost hurts. "I hope you will, Sweetheart."

"I will then. Mom and Dad. You know, I guess I'm hungrier than I thought. We only had cereal for breakfast."

We climb back into my car. It is a new electricar that was made in this country from parts made overseas. This is as close to an American car as it is possible to get. Helen lets Dawn have the front seat and sits in the back with the packages. I drive north out of Warren and stop at a pleasant roadside restaurant. It is past noon, but I am not very hungry, and Helen does not appear to be either. I guess we

are too excited to eat. But our lovely young daughter makes up for our lack of appetite. The waitress keeps glancing at her, but I do not believe she guesses Dawn is one of the Mars children. The other customers keep stealing glances at our table. I am sure it is Dawn's beauty alone that is responsible for their interest. She has been so thoroughly Americanized, at least on the surface, that I doubt anyone could deduce her provenance.

I ask her if she would like another piece of pie. She says she doesn't think so, that she's full. "I guess we'll head for home then, Sweetheart." "Okay, Dad."

She is all eyes as I drive northward on 62. The Centers, of course, provide excursions for the Mars kids while they are being Americanized and thought-taught, but in Dawn's case the excursions seem only to have added to her eagerness to see new sights and scenes. She looks at houses, fields, woods and little towns. In many of the fields, tomatoes are being picked; in others, cornstalks stand man-high. The leaves of the trees, this late in summer, have turned a darker green.

"Do you think you're going to like Earth?" I ask her.

"Earth is a beautiful planet."

"Yes, I guess it is. We've done everything in our power to make it ugly, but it thwarted us . . . Was Mars beautiful too?"

"Yes. It was quite beautiful."

I do not pursue the subject. At the Center they told us that Mars children do not like to talk about the way Mars was, long, long ago. This is understandable. I would not want to talk about Earth either, if Earth had died.

At length we enter New York State. "Soon you'll be going to school, Dawn," Helen says from the back seat. "Do you think you'll like it?"

"It'll be much different from the Center, won't it?"

"Yes, but a lot more fun. You'll meet all sorts of kids, and there'll be dances you can go to and games you can play. You'll be much freer than you were at the Center."

"I shall probably like it then."

It might seem that thought-teaching techniques would have eliminated the need for schools. But schools in America long ago came to be far more than mere citadels of learning; they became institutes for socialization. Thought-teaching may be able to educate a child over a brief period of time, but by its very nature it robs the child of a chance to socialize. On the other hand, when an American kid goes to school, he automatically enters and contributes to the thought world of his peers. He learns to act like them, to think like them and to talk like them, the while adding his ounce of individuality to the pot. Thus, while the Centers are able almost overnight to educate the Mars children and to instill in them our *modus vivendi*, in-depth Americanization can be accomplished only by sending them to school. To this end, the adopter of a Mars child is required by law to enroll the adoptee in public school at a grade level suitable to the adoptee's age.

So Helen and I *have* to send Dawn to school.

I wonder what the American kids will do to her.

She seems delighted when she sees the special room we remodeled and furnished for her in the upstairs of our American Colonial. We have wanted a child for so long that perhaps we overdid. Everything in the room is brand new: the bed, the vanity, the bureau, the shag rug. We even bought a small lounge chair for her to sit in, and a portable 3V. In addition, we bought a small maple desk and placed upon it a brand new electric portable typewriter. It sits there beneath its transparent cover, its keys yearning for the touch of her fingertips. I spent a whole weekend painting the room. Helen chose pink for the walls and white for the ceiling. The pinkness of the walls lends the room a virginal air, a motif repeated by the rose-embroidered counterpane Helen bought for the bed. There are two windows, one looking out into the side yard, the other upon the expanse of lawn between the house and the street.

"We bought the typewriter in case you decided to take up typing in school," I tell my lovely young daughter.

"I learned how at the Center, Dad. Oh, it was just wonderful of you!"

She sits down at the desk, finds paper in the drawer and rolls a sheet of it into the machine. *Dawn Fairfield*, she types. *1101 Wisteria Drive, Greenview, NY.*

Helen and I tiptoe down the stairs.

Maybe, lodged in the genes of the American people, is the mass memory of the transport plane laden with Vietnamese children that crashed during the evacuation of Saigon. Maybe this is why almost all of us opened our arms to the decryonicized children of Mars.

But maybe we would have opened our arms anyway, not only because of the children's beauty but because in America youth is revered. These two factors alone might have caved in our ethnocentrism even if exhaus-tive examinations and extensive tests had not revealed that the Mars children are physically no different from us and are alien only in name.

And then, too, our hearts must have been touched because of the thousands of Mars children who perished in their cryonic tanks when the Martian winds, ages ago, broke through the sealed entrances of two of the tetrahedral pyramids and disrupted the cryonic controls.

Only the poor among us have remained untouched. The logistics involved in transporting the decryonicized children to Earth and in establishing the Centers have staggered our economy, still stagger it, in fact, for the transport ships we built are incapable of carrying more than two hundred children at a time and the one bearing the last two hundred is still en route from Mars. Federal allocations to the states have been drastically cut and there are demonstrators in Washington who, among millions of others, have had their welfare checks slashed. The demonstra-tors walk day and night before the White House gate, carrying signs that ask, What about OUR kids?

During the long dead years when Clomiphrene therapy and HMG and HCG and bromocriptine failed to cure Helen's pill-induced infertility, I used to picture the way it would be if we had a son or a daughter, how he or she would see me from the doorway of our house when I arrived home from work and come running to meet me as I climbed out of the car. "Daddy, daddy! — you're home!"

All of us live in a world that hates hopes, that grinds dreams beneath its heel. Often even the smallest things we hope for, dream of, are thus summarily dispensed with. When a man dreams big, he is asking for pain. Nevertheless, I dreamed of a son or a daughter.

I did not really care which it was — just so he or she would be a child I could call my own. As Helen's infertility continued, we talked often of adopting a child. But we could never quite take the step till the Mars children came upon the scene. I am glad now that we did not. Only childless couples are eligible to adopt the children of Mars, and they are limited to only one. Moreover, they must take the next child on the list. Helen and I applied. It was a long, long wait, but now we have Dawn.

She is always there in the doorway or waiting in the front yard when I drive into the driveway after work, and she always comes running to meet me. "Daddy, Daddy! — you're home!" Yes, yes, my darling daughter — at last I am truly home.

The neighbors love Dawn. So do the neighborhood kids. It is impossi-ble to look at her and not love her. We have told our parents about the adoption. Helen's live in West Virginia and we know they will be up to visit us soon. My parents operate a dairy farm near Wales Center. It is unlikely they will come to visit us. They were talked into becoming Jehovah's Witnesses when they were old enough to know better. Most churches and religious sects have bent over backwards in order to accept the Mars children, but the Jehovah's Witnesses simply have not been able to find a niche in their credo in which to place them, though no doubt they have tried. How, for instance, can the Mars children be fitted into the forces of good when they are not only outsiders, but *outside* outsiders? No, I do not think my parents will come to visit us.

My brother Horace and his wife and kids come to visit us, though. And Helen's two spinster sisters. All are enchanted by Dawn.

We have premonitions when, after Labor Day, we enroll our darling daughter in school. It is a fine school; our School Board makes certain we get the best teachers that can be had. Now that drug use has

been legalized, the thrill of breaking the law is no longer a factor, and in our school drug use poses no problem. But inevitably, the same little demon who dwells in run-of-the-mill schools also dwells in ours. His name is Sex, and he lurks in the lavatories and hides out under the classroom desks.

He is not a newcomer, of course. He has been dwelling in schools for decades out of mind. But he has grown bolder with the passage of the years.

I am told that obscenities within obscenities are written on school desks, but I have refused to accept them as the principal products of immature minds. They were not the principal product of my immature mind when I went to school, for desk-writing was in vogue, then, too —had been for many years. I may even have contributed to the graffiti myself, but if I did, my obscenities were probably naive.

I regard such childish manifestations of the sex urge, even those that are scatological, as having largely been induced from without: by TV and the movies originally, and by 3V in my own day and age.

Nevertheless, the little demon Sex still lurks in the lavatories and hides out under the classroom desks, and our premonitions persist.

They prove to be groundless. School does not change Dawn: she remains her sweet, virginal self. A few slang phrases are added to her vocabulary, but her naivete is not weighed down with so much as a hint of sophistication.

She begins going with a Mars boy.

Yes, there are other Mars children in our school. Not many, but a few. The boy she starts going with is about her own age. His name is Tim, and he has blue eyes like hers, although his hair is lighter. I think perhaps that what brought them together is the inability of the Mars children to succeed in the more strenuous sports. Earth is the villain in this instance. Tim would be hopeless on a football field, and Dawn would never make a volleyball team. This shared weakness may have attracted them to each other. And then again, perhaps they knew each other on Mars, or possibly in the Center. I do not ask her, because it does not matter. I know that someday I shall have to give her up, and I would as soon it were to a Mars boy as to an American. But I am making distinctions that do not exist, because both Dawn and Tim *are* Americans — naturalized Americans, but Americans withal. And I am also being absurd, because I shall not have to give her up for a long, long time, and even then, not altogether.

Sometimes, looking into Dawn's eyes, I try to picture the Mars skies as they were all those millions of years ago when the Mars people, foreseeing the ice age that would wipe out all life on the planet, built the indestructible three-sided pyramids in Elysium in which to entomb their children in cryonic tanks on the chance that in the future an extra-Martian race might find and decryonicize them and take them into its arms. But when I look into her eyes for any length of time I become absorbed by the eyes themselves. They are a deep, still blue, but they possess an odd translucence through which you can glimpse undercurrents of thoughts at odds with their placid surface. What kind of thoughts are they, I often wonder, and why are they never allowed to break free?

One evening, Helen says, "Mom called this afternoon. She and Dad are coming up for the weekend. They're dying to see Dawn."

"I thought they'd be up long before this."

"They would have, but Dad's been working weekends. They're real busy at the plant. They wanted to come up over Labor Day, but he had to work Labor Day, too. Double time."

"He'll work himself into the grave."

"He wants to make all he can. He's going to retire next year."

"Retire and play golf."

"What's wrong with playing golf?"

"That's what they all do."

"That's what you'll do, too, when you retire, I'll bet."

"I hope not. But it's too faraway to even think about."

But she is probably right. What else is there for old people to do beside play golf? Except eat and sleep and watch 3V.

Her parents arrive late Friday night. Dawn has already gone to bed. I can see they are tired from the long drive. My father-in-law is tall and thin, but he is developing a potbelly. His name is George. He is toolmaker and has been working in the same place for almost forty years. My mother-in-law is short and dumpy. Her name is Grace. Helen inherited her father's tallness, and her features are much like his. I often wonder why I do not like him when I am in love with his daughter.

He and I have beer in the kitchen; Helen and her mother, coffee. I am not ordinarily a beer drinker, but when George is around I drink it to be companionable. He is twenty, perhaps thirty, years behind the times, but he tries to be modern. He has been reading up on the Mars children, probably in the *Reader's Digest*. "They estimate those kids were in cold storage for twenty million years," he says.

"All such estimates," I tell him, "are a wild guess."

But he has been sold on twenty million years. "How in Hell could they have built buildings that would last twenty million years? How in Hell could they have made cryonic tanks that wouldn't leak in all that time?"

"You're talking about technologists that make us look like a bunch of chicken-wire mechanics."

"What I don't understand is, if they were so smart, why didn't they invent space travel like we did? Then they just could of moved to another star when the ice age came."

"Didn't the *Reader's Digest* article explain why?"

"How'd you know I'd been reading the *Reader's Digest*?"

I refrain from telling him that, other than newspapers, the *Reader's Digest* is the only publication people like him ever read. "They probably did invent space travel. But where were they to go with their ships? All of those millions of years ago — and I'm talking about sixty, seventy or eighty, not twenty — Earth was a hostile place, and all the seven other planets were dead, just as they are today. That left them the stars. Alpha Centauri A, B, and C are the nearest, and they're 4.3 light years away. If the spaceships could have traveled at twelve percent the speed of light, the flight time one way would have been something like thirty-eight years. But we don't know whether any of the Centauri stars have planets and probably they didn't either. So even assuming they could have built enough ships to transport the whole of their civilization 4.3 light years, what good would it have done if there hadn't been a livable planet to land on? What they finally decided to do was the only sensible thing they could have done: they decided to try to save their children."

"Well they didn't save all of them. The article says they must have drawn the line and let those under five and those over sixteen die with the rest of the race."

"Probably they had to. Probably there wasn't enough space."

"It seems they could have saved the babies," my mother-in-law says.

"I doubt that a baby could survive cryonicization."

"What does Dawn say about it?" my father-in-law asks.

"Nothing, and we don't ask her. The Center made it clear the Mars kids shouldn't be asked questions about the past. They don't want to talk about it."

"That's funny, if you ask me."

"There's nothing funny about it," Helen says. "If the American race had been destroyed and you were one of the few survivors, would *you* want to talk about it?"

"I just can't wait to see her," my mother-in-law says. "Do you think, Helen, that I could peek in on her before I go to bed?"

"Sure, Mom."

"I should think it would kind of get on your nerves, having an alien in your house," my father-in-law says.

Sooner or later, he always makes me mad. "She's not an alien! She's a naturalized American!"

Helen is angry too. "She was never an alien in the first place! God put the same kind of people on Mars that He put on Earth. Most all of the churches are agreed on that."

"Then why don't the kids say 'God' instead of 'The Ku?'" my father-in-law asks.

"It's the same concept," I tell him. "They merely think of God as being an extra-galactic, vastly superior race of intelligent beings who seed planets with life."

"It doesn't sound like the same concept to me."

"Come on, George, let's go to bed," my mother-in-law says. "You can't talk two minutes without getting into an argument!"

My father-in-law finishes his beer and stands up. "The Ku," he grunts. "They sure don't sound like God to me."

(I have doubts about the Ku too, but all the doubts in the world cannot change the fact that an exterior force of some kind — God or the Ku — had to be at work in order for human beings to be present, even at widely different intervals of time, on both Earth and Mars.)

Whatever misgivings my father-in-law may have had are eclipsed the following morning when he sees Dawn. I guess he wanted a grandchild as much as Helen and I wanted a child. He is awed by the one he got.

My mother-in-law, who was awed when she peeked at her in bed, is awed again when she walks into the kitchen.

Their awe turns to love when she bestows a kiss on each of their faces and says, "Hi, Grandma. Hi, Grandpa."

They leave late Sunday afternoon, the richer for their darling granddaughter.

I wonder if I should take Dawn to visit my parents. I decide they are too deeply entrenched for Armageddon for her to be able to break through their defenses.

It is announced over 3V that the last of the Mars children have arrived at the space station and are being shuttled down to the various Centers. No new applications for adoption are being accepted because of the backlog that has built up. The INS has petitioned Congress for additional appropriations. In Washington, three of the anti-Mars children demon-strators are arrested for throwing I.U.D.s and packages of condoms on the White House lawn. The demonstrators' signs now read, **Birth Con-trol is a Farce!**

We invite Dawn's boyfriend to dinner. His eyes have undercurrents of thoughts too. Neither child mentions Mars; they talk instead of doings at school. Perhaps they might reminisce if Helen and I were not present. I ask Tim what he is going to be when he grows up. He does not have a ready answer; it is as though he has never given the matter any thought.

After it grows dark outside, he and Dawn go out into the backyard. Looking through the kitchen window, I see them walking hand in hand in the starlight. They come to a halt at the hedge that borders the back of our lot, and they stand there looking up at the sky. Perhaps they are looking at Mars. I expect them momentarily to turn toward each other and kiss, but they do not.

Presently they turn and face the house. I do not move from the kitchen window because the light is off and they cannot see me. I find it odd that despite the distance between us I can see their eyes. How blue they are! The blueness seems to incandescence, to stab at me out of the darkness; and I step involuntarily back from the window. Then I realize that the two children cannot possibly have been looking at me, that the house is the sole object of their gaze.

I step back to the window. They are no longer looking at the house, they have left the hedge and are walking toward the gazebo we built several summers ago to embellish our backyard. They step inside, and through the lattice walls I see them sit down on one of the benches. Surely they will kiss now. They do not. Perhaps they have not been thoroughly Americanized yet. Perhaps the little demon who lurks in school lavatories and who hides underneath school desks has thus far found them immune to his importunities. Perhaps on Mars promiscuity was frowned upon to such an extent that it became an aversion — an antipathy which even in-depth Americanization will never be able to wash away.

I leave the kitchen and go into the living room where Helen is watching 3V. I sit down beside her on

the sofa.

How much do we really know about our darling daughter?

One afternoon after I arrive home from work and Dawn and I walk hand in hand into the house, I can tell instantly from the look Helen gives me and from her too mechanical kiss that something is wrong. But I pretend not to notice, and later on, during dinner, I refrain from asking her why she is so quiet. If something really is wrong, there is no reason to worry Dawn about it.

It is Friday, and there is a disco dance at the school. Dawn and Tim are going to it, and I wait till after she leaves with him before I corner Helen. But there is no need to corner her, because she has been waiting too. She gets her oversized purse from the hall closet, brings it into the living room and withdraws several sheets of 8 1/2 x 11 typing paper which are paper-clipped together. A manuscript. "Dawn's English teacher held a short story contest."

I am not surprised. Most English teachers have the notion they are keen judges of the short story and like to exercise their *soi-disant* literary acumen. "Is that Dawn's you've got there? Why didn't she turn it in?"

"She did turn it in. This morning her teacher called me and asked if I could stop in and see her at one o'clock. She showed it to me and asked me to read it."

"What did Dawn think? Seeing you in school?"

"She didn't see me. Miss Laucello had a free period and we met in the Faculty Room."

"Pretty sneaky."

"No, it wasn't sneaky. Miss Laucello thought it would be better if Dawn didn't know her story had upset anyone."

"How could a short story written by a fourteen-year-old girl upset anyone?"

Helen hands me the manuscript. Her hands are trembling. "After I read it, I asked Miss Laucello if I could bring it home so you could read it too."

The story is typewritten. Dawn probably typed it on her new machine. I glance at the title and byline. *Mr. and Mrs. Neanderthaler, by Dawn Fairfield*. It pleases me to see her name joined with mine. The Mars children do not have last names of their own, or if they have, they have never revealed them. "It's a clever title. It captures the reader's attention right away."

"Please read it, Herb."

"I am reading it."

Once upon a time there was a time warp and a little girl named Sue got caught in it. Time is a funny thing. Sometimes when you think you're going ahead in it you're really going back in it. This was what happened to Sue. She thought for sure she would wind up in a glorious future, but instead she wound up in an inglorious past. At first she couldn't believe her eyes when she found herself among the Neanderthalers.

The whole tribe was bewitched by her beauty, and its members set about teaching her Neanderthaloid ways. All of the mothers and fathers wanted to adopt her, but of course the chief won out, and he and his wife took her to live with them in their cave. They hadn't any children of their own, and were delighted at last to get one.

She hated her new parents, but she realized they meant her no harm, that in their Pleistocene way they loved her and wanted her to be like them. So she decided to cooperate. She really didn't have much choice, since their language was so simplistic she couldn't impart to them any civilized ideas.

Presently Sue discovered that she wasn't the only modern child to have been caught in the time warp, that many others had been whisked back into the past too, and were being indoctrinated by the tribe. Some of them, like her, had already been adopted. She didn't feel quite so alone then, because now she had someone she could talk to. It was weary trying to talk to the Neanderthaloid children. All of them were nerds, and sexual weirdos as well.

By common consent, however, Sue and all the other modern children became Neanderthalers on the surface. They learned how to eat with their fingers and how to devour raw meat. But it was hard on

them, though — especially Sue — when someone died and they had to partake of his or her brains.

Some of the modern girls and boys started going together, and the Neanderthals thought this was quite quaint. Sue began going with a modern boy named Bud. When she and Bud were together they talked about the future, but they didn't talk about it nostalgically because they knew better than to be homesick, they merely used it as a sort of yardstick by which to measure the age they were now living in. Beneath their troglodytic exteriors hatred held sway, and their measuring device served to make it incandescent. They hated everything about their new way of life, and they particularly hated the caves they had to live in. Eventually the caves came to epitomize everything they despised, and what made the caves more despicable yet was the smug attitude of their owners. Each owner thought his cave was better than his neighbors', and the way the chief acted you'd have thought his cave was a palace.

The day came when Sue and Bud decided they had to vent their frustration in some manner, otherwise they would go crazy, and since the caves were Number One on their Hate List, Bud said he thought they should blow them up, one at a time.

"But there isn't any blasting powder," Sue said.

"No problem there. We'll simply make some."

"When we blow them up, are we going to do it when the Neanderthals are inside?" Sue asked laughingly.

"Of course. We'll do it at night when they're asleep."

"Maybe we should give them some kind of warning."

"We will. One warning per family. The dumb fuzznuts won't believe us, but at least our consciences will be clear."

"I'll warn my 'mother' and 'father' first — okay?"

"Okay," Bud said.

So Sue warned her mother and father, but naturally they didn't believe her, and then she and Bud made powder out of potassium nitrate, charcoal and sulfur, and the fun began. Bud's parents' cave was the first to go, with his "mother" and "father" in it, even though he'd warned them, or said he had. The other Neanderthals pretended to be horrified, but they weren't really, because now Bud was available for someone else to adopt.

They began blowing up other caves with the Neanderthals in them, and soon the trend caught on and the other modern children began blowing up caves too.

The dumb Neanderthals never tumbled to what was really going on and thought the Thunder God was picking on them. They began holding rituals during which they beseeched him to vent his anger elsewhere. The modern kids laughed and laughed and laughed.

Sue could hardly wait to blow up her "parents' " cave, but she held off for a long while because she liked to see them gape when their neighbors' caves blew up. At last her impatience caught up with her and she set the charge one night when they were sound asleep and blew them and their scroungy cave to smithereens.

After a while there were no more adult Neanderthals left in the tribe. The few Neanderthaloid kids who had survived walked around with their mouths open and soon were eaten up by saber-toothed tigers. The modern kids found other caves to live in — big, elaborate ones — and began a better way of life. Centuries later, they acquired the name of Cro-Magnon from remains found in a cave near Perigueux, France. They painted bison on their caves' walls so their dwelling places would be pleasing to the eye, and they did such a good job that Picasso, many centuries afterward, admired their art.

After I finish reading the story I sit silently for a long while, staring at the last page. Helen becomes impatient. "Well?"

I flip the pages back to page one. "Miss Laucello forgot to grade it."

"Why should she grade it if it's part of a short story contest?"

"It deserves at least an A."

"I think the story is horrifying."

"What you're really thinking is that it's an allegory."

"Isn't it?"

"Helen, do you honestly believe that Dawn regards the United States as a tribe of Neanderthals?"

Helen lowers her eyes to her hands. They are clasped tightly on her lap. "I — I don't know."

"Does Miss Laucello?"

"She didn't say. All she said was that the story had upset her and that she thought I ought to read it."

"Why should it have upset her?" I demand. "What did she expect Dawn to write about? How she spent her summer vacation? How she lost her cat one time and then found it? Do you know what's wrong with English teachers, Helen? They think they have the God-given right to make judgments in a field they've viewed only from the outside. They set themselves up as literary connoisseurs in their classrooms, and they wouldn't know a good short story from a can of beans! And in this case, what happens? A story comes along that's altogether different from the ones the other kids wrote, and instead of being pleased to run across something original for a change, the teacher's upset!"

"Stop shouting, Herb!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know I was shouting."

"I'll take the story back to Miss Laucello, Monday."

"No you won't. I'm going to keep it."

"But it's part of the short story contest. She has to have it."

"She's probably judged it already."

"But what if Dawn won?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Helen!"

"Miss Laucello will insist that we return it."

"If she does, tell her to call me at my office."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you."

"She needs straightening out."

"I still think the story is horrifying and I can't imagine why you want to keep it."

"Well I'm going to keep it, and that's all there is to it! Why don't you turn on 3V? There's a documentary on Channel 51 about a new electric car the Japanese are building."

I do not sleep well that night. I keep waking up again and again. And every time I wake up I see Dawn and Tim through the kitchen window with their incandescent blue eyes fixed upon the house.

The President makes a long speech tonight about the Mars children. "Almost all of them," he says, "are already safe and sound in the homes of fine, upstanding citizens, and the more recent arrivals soon will be. America, once again, has flung wide her doors to those in need, and taken them to her breast."

"Daddy, daddy! — you're home!" Dawn cries as she comes running to meet me. She jumps up and kisses me on the cheek, and we walk hand in hand into the house. My darling daughter and I.

One night, the fire whistle awakes me. I count the number of blasts to find out if the fire is in our section of Greenview. It is not. The blasts do not awaken Helen — they are not loud, for the Fire House is distant from our street. Presently they cease and I fall at once back to sleep. In the morning we hear on the local news that that Halsey house burned down and that Mr. and Mrs. Halsey died of smoke inhalation. Miraculously their only child survived. He is a Mars child whom they adopted. His name is Tim.

I do not like the way Helen looks at me over her coffee. I refuse to return her gaze. Instead, I look at Dawn. She is eating cereal. Rice Krispies. "Poor Tim," she says. "But he'll be okay — he'll find another home."

He does indeed. Another Greenview family adopts him. The Ellsworths. They live only a few blocks from us. Dawn and he begin seeing each other even more often than before. He spends a great deal of time at our house. It is as though I have a son now, as well as a daughter.

The Greenview Fire Investigator determined that the Halsey fire was caused by a bad gas leak in the cellar, but he has been unable to determine what ignited the gas, since the furnace was out and the Halseys employed solar heat for their hot-water tank.

But people have already lost interest in the Halsey fire because of the many fires that are occurring across the country. The news media seem to have lost track of the fact that many fires constantly occur across the country, or perhaps they are hard put for sensational news. Some of the fires that are occurring involve the homes of people who have adopted Mars children. I do not find this strange, and the media have not remarked on it. After all, with the Mars children scattered throughout the whole country, some of the houses involved are bound to be those they live in. I do not find it strange either that in each such case the Mars child survives and the parents do not. Nor have the media remarked on this. After all, coincidence has a long arm.

But I do not try to convince Helen of this. She has grown paranoid. "You've got to do something," she keeps telling me. "You've got to *do* something!"

"About what?" I ask.

I am finding it difficult to sleep. I keep finding myself wide awake, staring into the darkness. It is as though I have grown old and am afflicted with nocturnal myoclonus, but I can detect no jerking in my legs. Sometimes the darkness into which I am staring becomes the darkness of our backyard at night, and I can make out two figures by the darker hedge, looking at the house. If I keep staring long enough, the figures disappear and the darkness becomes, for a while, the darkness of sleep.

It is noted by the media that many of the fires throughout the country are caused by peculiar gas leaks and by faulty electrical wiring.

There is another fire in Greenview. The charred remains of a man and his wife are found in the debris. Their only child, a Mars adoptee, escaped the flames.

One Saturday afternoon while Helen is shopping and Dawn is attending a high school football game, I go through every corner of Dawn's room. I go through her desk and through her closet. I search her vanity and bureau drawers. I do not know what I am looking for. Perhaps if I found it I would not recognize it. I am sure it does not exist anyway. She is a sweet, simple Americanized girl. I find nothing.

One evening, when Dawn is out with Tim, Miss Laucello knocks on our door. Helen invites her into the living room and asks her to sit down. She comes straight to the point. "I want Dawn's short story back, Mrs. Fairfield."

"Did Dawn write a short story?" I ask.

"Please, Herb," Helen says.

"I hate calling on you like this and asking for it, Mrs. Fairfield, but I expected you to return it, and when you didn't, I —"

"Why do you want it back, Miss Laucello?" I ask.

"So I can give it back to her after I announce the winners of the contest. Otherwise she'll wonder what became of it."

"I thought maybe it was because she won the contest."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Fairfield, but she didn't."

"I thought it was a good story. But we're talking in circles. What's the real reason you want it back, Miss Laucello?"

Miss Laucello swallows. She is young and very thin, and has large, wide-apart brown eyes. "In — in view of what it says and in view of all the recent fires, I — I thought that —"

"Miss Laucello, if there were any connection between the fires and the Mars kids, don't you think the fire investigators would have made it by this time?"

"They would have if they'd read the story," Helen says coldly. "Well they haven't read it and they're not going to!"

"It's not that I really believe there's a connection either, Mr. Fair-field," Miss Laucello says. "But I can't help feeling that what your daughter wrote should be made available to the police."

I get to my feet. "The Mars kids aren't pyromaniacs! Do you think the Centers would have farmed them out to the American people if they were? If there'd been anything wrong with them whatsoever?"

"But they may have fooled the people at the Centers, Mr. Fairfield. They may be far more intelligent than they let on. We really know next to nothing about them."

"You'll be telling me next that after they burn everybody out of house and home they plan to take over the country!"

Miss Laucello shakes her head. "No. If that were true, it wouldn't be so bad. But they're only kids, and if they are setting the fires they're only doing it for fun."

"Are you implying my daughter would burn down a house just for fun?"

"Herb, she's not implying anything," Helen says. "She's concerned, is all. And so am I."

"Well there's no reason to be concerned!" I shout. "This country has been having housefires ever since the first settlers began building houses. It's a natural phenomenon. And nobody's going to tell me that the Mars kids are responsible for those we're having now. And if you go around traducing my daughter, Miss Laucello, you'll find yourself on the bad end of a slander suit!"

Miss Laucello departs.

Helen has stopped speaking to me. Good. I now have more time to talk to my darling daughter.

If she has noticed Helen's silence she gives no sign. We go to a spectacular one night. It is about the fire bombing of Dresden. All special effects, of course, but special effects have become such a consummate art that it is impossible any more to distinguish between them and reality.

Afterward, Dawn and I stop for ice cream. She has a big chocolate sundae. I settle for a float. "Did you like the spectacular?" I ask.

"So-so," she says.

The next day there is a fire in school. They discover it in time, and little damage is done. Faulty electrical wiring.

There is a fire in Poughkeepsie. It demolishes two blocks. There are half a hundred casualties. One of the houses was that of the parents of a Mars child. They are listed among the dead. The Mars child escaped.

I search Dawn's room again. Again I find nothing.

Finally Helen breaks her silence. "If you don't do something, I will!" She goes to the Greenview Fire Chief. When she comes home she is crying. "He didn't believe a word I said!"

One night when Dawn and Tim go to a school dance I wait up for her. When I hear them climb the front porch steps I go to one of the living-room windows. I can see them through it sideways. They are standing on the porch, talking. No, not talking. Giggling. They are holding hands, but they do not kiss.

I manage to get back to my chair before the 3V before Dawn comes in. "Hi, Dad," she says. "Mom in bed?"

"She went up early."

She yawns. "Guess I'd better go too."

She kisses me good night and climbs the stairs.

I turn and toss beneath the covers. Sleep keeps coming and then fading away. What were they giggling about? I lie there in our bedroom, listening. Dawn's room is across the hall. I hear the whisper of a footstep on the hall rug. Today there was a fire in Syracuse. It was not as bad as the Poughkeepsie fire. Only one block went this time. Listed among the dead were the parents of another Mars child. I turned the newscast off before further mention was made of the Mars child.

Yes. The whisper of a footstep. I am out of bed now, slipping into my bathrobe. My feet find slippers in the darkness. A faint *click* comes from the hall. Then a second *click*. More footfalls. The sound comes

from the stairs now. I step into the hall. The upstairs smoke alarm is on the wall next to the door to Dawn's room. I wait till the whisper of footfalls fades away, then remove the cover, masking the click with pressure from my hands. The battery is gone.

I start down the stairs. The light from a streetlight makes pale rectangles of the living-room windows but only slightly alleviates the darkness. A vague shape is moving across the room. The faint light from the windows lends it a silvery cast. It pauses beside the dining-room archway, seems to attenuate as it stretches upward toward the downstairs smoke alarm. There are two *clicks* as the cover is removed and replaced, and the shape slips into the dining room. I descend the rest of the stairs and cross the living room. I do not bother to check the alarm; I know the battery is gone. I enter the dining room. There is no one there. I cross it and enter the kitchen. The basement door is open. I remove a knife from the knife rack. Its blade is long and cruel. I descend the basement stairs.

The shape is no longer silvery. It is a darker blur in the darkness. It is reaching up between the joists. It is giggling.

Laughing before the deed is done.

I advance upon it in the darkness. I seize its slender wrist. The object the little hand was attaching to the gas pipe falls free. I catch it. My fingers tell me it is a tiny vial with a little cylinder attached. After the acid seeping from the vial ate through the pipe, the batteries in the cylinder would have ignited the escaping gas. Tim probably made it. It could easily have been carried in a bookbag.

Fingernails claw into my cheeks. I do not feel the pain. The negligee I paid a small fortune for accentuates the softness of my darling daughter's body. How such primitive attire must have affronted her civilized flesh! I can smell the expensive perfume Helen bought for her. How its crude scent must have insulted her civilized nostrils!

You did not have to go all the way back to the Neanderthals, my dear. You had only to go back to Columbus and the simple-minded savages he found. You did not even have to go back that far. You had only to go back to the African slaves. Old civilizations and new. The one must always condemn the other. Laughingly you would have murdered us in our beds. I am crying as I plunge the long, cruel blade into my darling daughter's chest.