

Brokedown

By [Mark Bourne](#). Short story originally published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, March 1993. All rights to this story have reverted back to the author. Distribution in any form without written permission from the author is strictly forbidden.

That old, old black guy in the next booth was eating his soup real slow. He gripped the spoon the way a child clasps a stick, all the fingers wrapped tight in a fist. Boone watched as the spoon slid just under the soup's brown skin like a doctor's scalpel. Then it slowly rose toward the mouth, pulling the arm up with it. The bald head crept forward like a turtle's. Those thick, craggy lips pulled together and puckered up in front of yellow teeth. With a long sucky-slurpy sound, the soup just sort of leaped through the old man's lips. Then the whole cycle would start again, just as it had ten times in the past half-hour.

The old man's eyes flashed up from the spoon and locked with Boone's. Their whites were the color of dirty water, the pupils black like space and as deep as time. Surrounding them was a terrain of lines, an ancient map etched into that weary, haunted face.

Embarrassed at getting caught, Boone shielded himself behind a battered paperback of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. But like before, the words just lay on the page, no more alive than fly specks. They had withered and died with everything else. With Emma. With himself.

He glanced around the diner that had become a necessary shelter these past four hours. Orange-upholstered booths were occupied by similarly mundane locals. Elderly couples and tired-looking single men spooned up the dinnertime special. Mr. Coffee gurgled on the scarred chrome countertop and slices of pie rode a Ferris wheel under glass. The Dr Pepper clock read half past six. Muted voices from the kitchen radio competed with the song on the jukebox, some twangy c&w shit lamenting the loss of a good woman. Boone wondered if he could accidentally kick the box on his way to the john.

"Ready for some dinner, hon?" A woman in a grimy apron had appeared beside him. Forty-five, maybe fifty years old. Graying hair that had once been deep brown. Tall and narrow, she carried herself with sharp-edged energy. Boone decided she could be older than she looked, maybe pushing sixty. She looked down at him with her pen and her smile and her little white pad. Her blue plastic badge proclaimed MARY ALICE.

Boone scooted his cup toward her. "No thanks. Just more coffee."

"You gotta eat, hon. My club sandwich is the best you'll find anywhere."

"No. Thanks."

"How 'bout some pie, then? I got fresh apple and Double Chocolate Surprise fresh from the fridge. I could put ice cream on the pie for you. No charge."

Boone concentrated on dabbing up cracker crumbs with an index finger. "Just coffee."

"Well, Eule Barker will be here real soon now. He runs the garage over by the highway. He'll get your truck fixed up real good. Maybe you'll want to stay over at the Starlight Motel tonight. LizBeth Cranshaw keeps her rooms real nice."

"Maybe." He'd planned to be at the "Y" in Little Rock by now.

"Eule's real good with motors and things. He'll fix y'up." She stuffed the ticket into her apron pocket. "This is on the house, now. Bein' brokedown's bad enough. That pie's fresh, remember. You just holler if you want any, hon." She moved to the old man and offered him more soup.

Brokedown, that's a good way to put it. Can you be emotionally brokedown? Would a mental oil change get him on the road again? Is there a Jiffy Lube for the soul? Laura had been his mental mechanic

for so long, and acting had let him drain pollutants from his psychic radiator. Now he had neither.

Christ. Fucking self-indulgent martyr. Boone hated when metaphors got out of hand.

Through the window, he watched the neon sign flicker orange light onto his pickup's windshield.

The Ol' South Cafe — It's Goo Eating! strobed and popped like a bottled thunderstorm. The sun had melted over the autumn Ozarks, and way out there where the access road met Highway 7, headlights sped north toward Eureka Springs or south toward Little Rock. They ignored Duvall, Arkansas, population 935. Boone would have too, but the goddamn truck finally crapped out on the way down from St. Louis.

Mary Alice was back, coffee in her hand and motherly concern on her face. She filled Boone's cup, then dug a generous handful of Sweet-n-Low and tubs of powdered creamer from an apron pocket. Boone dosed his coffee, stirring slowly. She smelled of burger grease and fried potatoes.

"Whatcha readin', hon?"

He turned the cover toward her.

She liked it. "Murder stories scare the daylights outta me." She noticed the two other paperbacks next to the chrome napkin dispenser. "Now, I always did like them magic and make-believe stories. Ain't that sump'm?" She grinned, placing the coffee pot on the table. "You hear about them flyin' saucers on the radio? Someone done gone and reported 'em to the state police down in Little Rock."

"No kidding," Boone said without enthusiasm.

"Shoot, they been seein' them things round here for so long you'd think folks'd get tard of hearin' about 'em. But every few years, some kid says he seen a Martian land in the woods, so the whole county gets all crazy for a spell. Then we got your ghost lights out by the graveyards. Shoot, we even got our own Bigfoot just up northahere. Call him Momo. That's for Missouri Monster. Now, ain't that just the silliest thing?"

Boone sipped his coffee, wishing she would go away.

"You read a lot," Mary Alice said. "Now that's just real good." She refilled his cup, then returned to the kitchen, the double doors flapping behind her.

By 8:00, the dinner crowd had thinned out to two darts players, a young couple sitting on stools at the counter, and an elderly woman who looked like the classic retired school marm. The old, old man was dipping saltines into his soup and chewing them real slow. His eyes seemed focused on something a million miles away. Hank Williams crooned on the jukebox. Holmes put five bullets into the Hound, just like he always did. Boone went to the men's room to unload the coffee, grateful for the kind of piss that leaves you feeling like you just slept for six hours.

Afterward, Mary Alice was waiting at his booth with a sandwich and a huge slice of apple pie slathered with ice cream. It was on the house, she said, because she was fixing to close up and didn't like ending the day with lots of leftovers.

"I can't imagine what's keepin' Eule," she said. "I keep callin' his house, but he don't answer. Not at the garage, neither. Maybe he went huntin' today." She sounded doubtful.

At 9:00, Mary Alice turned the door sign around to Sorry We're Closed. One of the two darts players waved "g'night" and left, jingling the bells over the glass door; his partner took a seat on a counter stool. Everyone said "bye bye" to the young couple, who smiled and held hands on their way out.

"Ain't they cute together?" said the school marm. "That Beyer boy's grewed up like a weed. And Annie Laura's just as perty as June flowers."

"Shame 'bout her pa, though," the darts player said.

"Yeah," said the woman. "Drank hisself right to the grave."

"Yeah."

The jukebox went whirr-click and stopped. Boone felt like he'd wandered into the wrong funeral. He rose to leave, pulling on his jacket and leaving a dime on the table.

Mary Alice called to him from behind the counter. "You goin' out to the Starlight? I can give you a ride. Or Billy can, he's goin' that way."

The darts player started digging for his car keys. "It's on my way home," he said.

"No thanks. I'll just—" He stopped. He had neither a plan nor money for a motel. Like that time outside Omaha. Damn it. "I've got my truck rigged into a camper, sort of. I'll be fine. I've done it before." It was going to be chilly tonight, and probably rain, and the truck was too cramped for luxuries such as comfort.

Mary Alice set down her bottle of Spray-n-Wipe. "Nonsense, hon. I got a spare room upstairs with a cot and some blankets. You can stay there if you want. It ain't the Starlight, but it's better than sleepin' in a smelly ol' truck in the rain."

Boone saw the concern on the faces around him (except for the old man's) and felt genuinely, warmly touched. It was a feeling he had forgotten.

"Okay," he said. "I'll, um, bring my things in."

"I'll put some more coffee on," Mary Alice said.

As Boone stepped out onto the asphalt parking lot, the orange neon buzzed once, twice, then went dark and silent. The air was cool, sweet with the scent of autumn, and charged with the promise of approaching rain. The dogwood and locust trees droned with a rhythmic chanting of insects and wind whispers.

"scuse me," a voice said, and Boone jumped, startled. A middle-aged couple with a small child brushed past him and entered the diner, ignoring the Sorry We're Closed sign. Another pickup and an old Dodge Dart were pulling into the parking lot.

Boone pulled his duffel bag from the cab, then lowered the tailgate to get at the boxes in the pickup's bed. He grabbed the one labeled CHILDREN'S first. These had been Emma's favorites. The memory almost made him smile.

Car doors slammed. Shoes and boots crunched gravel on the asphalt. Bells jangled every time the diner door opened. "Howdy!" and "Ain't seen you in a while" and "How ya been doin', you ol' fart?" and "Didja hear the radio" drifted toward him on the breeze. He placed the duffel bag on the box and carried them toward the diner. Mary Alice was lowering the blinds, but he could see that many of the booths were occupied. The place was filling up fast. There hadn't been this many people in there all day. Feeling the first taps of rain, Boone wondered if he'd been invited to a Bible service or a Klan meeting.

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The attic was dry and comfortable. An electric heater was waiting for him, glowing warm and red. After unpacking his duffel bag and placing his pillow on the cot, he noticed a bentwood rocker in the corner, facing the television. He sat in it, then pushed with his feet and gently rocked, going rum rum rum on the floorboards. Laura had bought a rocker like it at a garage sale. Dreams had come alive in that chair, had soaked into the wood, been recorded in the grain. Mother Goose. Pooh. Dr. Seuss. Narnia. Alice and Oz. There was magic in hearing Laura read a story aloud, encouraged by the special sounds of Emma's happiness.

A sour taste rose in his throat. Just go to bed, he thought. Cozy with the familiar blanket of bitterness snug as a straightjacket.

TOK-tok-tok. The knock on the door was followed by Mary Alice's voice. "Hon?" she called. "We're all gettin' together downstairs. Maybe the radio will talk about them UFOs. You can come wait for Eule down here with us. There's fresh coffee."

Boone felt caught in the act of doing something distasteful. He held his breath without meaning to, and stood flustered while the moment dangled before him.

"Well, g'night," Mary Alice finally said. "Let us know if we get too rowdy. See you in the mornin'." Her footsteps faded down the stairs.

He could go down there and watch others have a good time. Or stick to his usual routine and hit the sack pissed off and remorseful. And aware of the self-indulgence, which made it worse.

A burst of laughter filtered through the floor.

Fuck it. He stood, swallowed the sourness, and walked down the stairs, through the kitchen, and into a roomful of strangers waiting for the UFOs. Hell, maybe Elvis would drop by.

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Mary Alice smiled as he sat at his earlier booth. She brought him coffee with Sweet-n-Low and creamer. The old guy with the soup was gone, but his was the only vacant spot in the place. A cross-section of rural banality chatting over their coffee and beers.

Shit, I've walked into *Our Town*.

But the atmosphere wasn't the dreary dead air of small-town folks just sitting around in a diner. There was an electrical charge of excitement, or anticipation, as if they were all waiting for a parade to begin, or a bomb to explode.

"Where the hell's Eule?" shouted a fat guy in a plaid shirt and John Deere hat. "He shoulda been here by now!"

"He ain't never been this late before," someone added.

"I went to his house. Ain't no one home 'cept the dog."

"Maybe he got a call!" Billy said. "Maybe—" The chatter stopped and heads turned toward him. The radio said it was sixty-five degrees and cloudy.

"Maybe whut?" said the fat guy.

Billy flashed a glance at Boone, then shoved a forkful of tater tots into his mouth. "Nuthin'. Never mind."

Mary Alice piped up. "I want y'all to meet Mr. Boone. His truck broke down out on the highway this afternoon. It had just enough go to get him to the parkin' lot." Assorted voices said Hi and Ain't that a shame and How y'doin'. "I told him Eule could get him fixed up."

"Shit," said a small man at the counter. He was a lean lump of rumpled brown suit. "Eule couldn't fix a broke wheel on a red wagon."

The school marm looked at him sternly. "Now, Claude. There ain't no call for that!"

"It's true." The man's voice was barely a whisper. "We all know it, Rita."

A white-haired old man stood up, parrying the air with a butter knife. "Knew someone like that in the war." A groan drifted from the crowd. Someone whispered "Here we go agin." The white head shot a glare at the offender. Even the radio got quiet.

"Our receiver got busted after a bad hit," he said. "This soldier was s'posed to fix it. But he went out for a solo reccy and never came back. That's when we knew the enemy was close by." He stared ahead, eyes open wide. Boone tried to imagine what invisible scene the man was viewing. Not in a million years. "They kept a-comin' and a-comin! From ever'where! The whole sky in every direction lit up like it was afire!" His eyes turned downward, and gravity seemed to pull his face into long folds. "Lost some good friends in that one." He sat, staring into his buttered biscuits.

"We've heard it all before," said Claude. He slurped his beer. "Give it a rest, willya?"

"Now, Claude," the school marm, Rita, drawled.

Boone surprised himself by chiming in. "Which war was it?"

Claude twisted on his stool. "What the fuck difference does it make? They're all the same."

Jeez, sorry. Asshole.

Rita's teacup clinked against her saucer. With her pale hands and flower-pattern dress, she looked as delicate as old china. "Pete misses his friends." She looked at Boone. "Pete's a war hero, you know." Then at Claude. "I know I miss my friends." The ache of loss grayed her voice. A sympathetic resonance pressed against Boone's chest.

"I had these two little friends where I grew up," she said. "They was twins, two peas in a pod." She giggled at the memory. "Their mama used to let 'em come play at my home, and my mama would let me go to theirs. We'd play like we was grown up, or we'd go to our special place and tell secrets. Those were the best times." She sipped her tea with a shaky hand. "Then they went away, just moved off real

sudden. Maybe it was the war. I don't know. I never saw them again, but — "

"—but I think about 'em every day," Claude mocked acidly.

Boone looked for something to throw at the little prick.

Claude pounded his fist on the countertop. "Fer cryin' out loud, woman! Maybe they left 'cuz they was bored listening to your yap!"

The big guy with the John Deere hat stood up. "Claude! That's enough. I don't know what's up your ass tonight, but I know I can throw you outta here so fast you'll leave skid marks on the moon. Now look at whatcha done!" He pointed to Rita, who was crying into a pink handkerchief. Boone wondered if he could leave without anyone noticing.

The small man squirmed in his suit like it was trying to crawl off his back. "Sorry," he said softly, then his voice rose in intensity. "But shit, John, why do we gotta hear the same crap every time we get together?" Claude gestured around the diner. "Billy there's gonna tell us what a great athlete he was, before he got stuck pumpin' gas for tourists. Lou Ann there likes to travel, see different people and places. Well, where you gone lately, Lou Ann? I don't see no luggage by the door!"

Lou Ann — young and beautiful — turned away with bitterness.

John took a step toward the counter. The tension in the room pulled Boone's skin tighter, like a crank turning in his spine.

Claude spun on his stool, pointing everywhichway. "Jeremy's a science wiz. Edith there is a great artist!" His voice dripped sarcasm. "John, tell us how you lost your family in a terrible accident that still gives you nightmares. Jesus! Why don't we at least make up some new ones, 'cuz these're gettin' stale! Like the fuckin' food around here!" He shoved his cup off the counter. It shattered at Mary Alice's feet, all porcelain shards and wet black streaks.

John's fist struck Claude's mouth like a champion shotput, sending Claude sprawling on his ass across the floor to collide with Boone's booth. A baggy bundle of roughly man-shaped brown suit lay at Boone's feet. Boone tensed, not knowing if he should lend a hand or run like hell. Throughout the diner, voices sprouted, multiplied, and blossomed in gasps and exclamations. "Oh, my!" Rita mewed.

John helped Claude to his feet. The smaller man leaned on Boone's table to steady himself. He shook his head woozily. "Shit," he said, so softly only Boone could hear it. He rubbed his mouth and groaned. Christ, thought Boone. He's going to puke and bleed all over me. Boone handed him a napkin to catch the blood, but when Claude looked up, there was no blood around his lips, not even a bruise or a loose tooth. The little bastard was tough. Claude staggered to the far end of the counter. He sat and shook his head. "Sorry," he said.

"sall right," John replied, already at his booth and lighting another cigarette. "Me too."

Well, this is fun, Boone sighed.

"So, Boone!" John gestured with the cigarette. "Where you headed, up or down?"

Boone shrugged, trying to look more casual than he felt. "Down. Little Rock."

"Mmm. You look like a city fella. What's waitin' for you down there?"

"Work, I hope."

"What sorta work you do?"

A large brick materialized in his stomach. "I'm— well, I used to be an actor. Taught school for a while. Right now, any job will do." He began tearing a napkin into little paper bits.

John nodded. "Mmm."

Rita raised her hand. "Do you do Shakespeare? I just love Shakespeare!"

Boone hesitated. When he finally spoke, the words came out quieter than he expected. "Some. I, um, was with a performing company in Miami." He coughed self-consciously. "I— we did Shakespeare in the park every year. Played Romeo one summer."

"Oh, do some Shakespeare for us, please!" Rita bounced in her booth and primly clapped her hands in delight.

A chorus of "Yeah!" and "Come on, do some!" rose with a smattering of encouraging applause. A familiar electric tingle arced across Boone's skin. An eager audience waiting for his performance. But it

had been too long. That part of him was gone.

John spoke between puffs. "Sure, show us whatcha got!"

Damn it, I don't "got" anything anymore. "No. I don't think so."

"I think acting is so romantic," Rita cooed. She ran a hand through her thin hair. "I always wanted to be a actress."

"Yeah, right," Claude grunted. "A regular Bette Davis."

Mary Alice was refilling Boone's cup. "He reads a lot, too," she announced. "All kinds of things."

Come on, let's drop it, okay?

A little girl in a booth near the door waved her hand in the air. Seven years old. Could be eight. Blonde, shiny hair. Like a kid on a toilet paper package. A smile that adults lose the ability to make. Emma's smile.

"Will you tell us a story?" she said. Her eyes were that same shade of blue.

The woman sitting with her leaned toward the girl. "Now, Rachel, don't be botherin' the nice man." She smiled at Boone apologetically. Kids, her body language said.

"That's all right," Boone replied, though he hadn't planned on saying it out loud. The little girl grinned back at him. Buried memories pushed themselves into his thoughts. The sound of rocking chairs, the smell of books and freshly washed pajamas. A little girl's laughter. The squeal of bald tires on a wet road, then the crunching collapse of metal like a can crushed in a big fist. The steering column pressing hard against his sternum. Glittering snowflakes of glass cutting into his cheeks. Rain on asphalt. The smell of gasoline. Ludicrous thoughts about what he was going to tell Laura. Reaching for Emma with an arm that felt broken. An empty passenger seat. A dense filigree of spider-web cracks across the windshield. Streetlight playing off blonde hair under the dashboard. The pain that finally took him out before he could scream.

A tight band squeezed his chest, constricted his breathing.

"Okay," he said, instantly frightened at the word. The band gripped tighter. He could still back out, not do this. But something stirred within him, trying to step into the light.

He stood in the aisle between his booth and the counter. Mary Alice clicked off the radio. Rita was leaning forward over her table, anticipation on her face. Claude sat up straight with clear-eyed intensity. Light danced in the little girl's eyes. His audience wrapped him in their attention. Boone wanted to give something back. But it hurt. Oh God, it hurt.

Old skills awakened, as if from a long, troubled slumber. He thought about the rocker upstairs, and of another he had left behind a lifetime ago.

"I've, um—" He stopped, cleared his throat, started again. "I lost someone, miss someone, too. This is for Emma." He inhaled deeply, feeling the grip on his chest. "And for Laura, who decided our house just got too empty. I don't know where she is now."

He pulled a battered paperback from a jacket pocket. It was dogeared and worn, with a cracked spine. It smelled, wonderfully, as a book should smell. He opened it carefully, then cleared his throat.

"Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank and of having nothing to do: once or twice she peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, 'What is the use of a book,' thought Alice, 'Without pictures or conversations?'—"

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After a while, he came to Emma's favorite part. Without missing a word or interrupting the flow of his reading, he glanced up from the page. Throughout the diner, faces held the same enraptured delight Emma had always given him. He paused for a second, using silence for dramatic effect. He made eye contact with some of them. Rita blushed but smiled encouragingly. Big John nodded his approval, ignoring the cigarette that was a leaning tower of gray ash burning toward his fingers. Lou Ann closed her eyes dreamily, as though carried to another place by his words. Boone continued reading. He thought he heard Laura's laughter at one point, but he did not see her when his eyes flashed across his audience.

"—and she would gather about her other little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago; and she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days."

He closed the book and sat down. The Dr Pepper clock told him it was much later than he thought. He felt drained and his throat hurt.

Someone was clapping, then faster, more vigorously. Boone turned. Mary Alice was at the counter, smiling like a bride and applauding. It must have been contagious, because the applause crescendoed and filled the diner. From all around the room, faces looked at him with such open appreciation that he was overwhelmed by the flood of emotion pushing against him. He found the little blonde girl. Her grin, like her eyes, was wide and bright. She clapped her small hands in a blurred frenzy.

Boone inhaled deeply again, then released the air slowly, amazed at how good it felt. The squeezing pressure on his chest was gone. He felt buoyant, as though a dead weight had been taken away. He closed his eyes. For the first time in months, he might not be afraid to dream tonight. Goodbye, Emma. Sweet dreams.

Bells jangled raucously as the glass door swung open so fast Boone thought it would fly off its hinges. A six-foot thing with red stripes scuttled into the diner. At the top of its spade-shaped head, four black glassy orbs reflected the fluorescents, and its six — no, eight — stick-like arms gestured wildly in the air.

"They're comin'!" the thing declared in a thick Arkansas drawl. "I've been listenin'! It's real this time!" Its long head jerked quickly back and forth, then stopped when it saw Boone. All sound stopped, except for the blood pounding in Boone's ears.

"Eule," John said real slow, crushing a cigarette between thumb and index finger. "You done gone and fucked up real good this time."

Fear kicked out surprise in Boone's brain. He got cold all over, like during the accident, and his heart hurt in his chest. Oh, God, he cried inside, then someone reached out and stroked his mind with soft, mothering fingers.

A wave of calm flowed over him. Don't be frightened, it told him, and he was amazed to find that he wasn't. There were no words, but ideas and images burst in his head like fireworks. Warm hands touched his thoughts, laying on comfort and care. The swirling montage became more ordered, carefully selected, and was laid end to end into a compressed chronicle that Boone's mind strained to comprehend. His mind was a stage on which was playing wondrous dramas — comedies, romances, histories, and tragedies. He gasped at the grandeur of the production.

A Ship tweaking the space between the stars. Passengers and crew from the over-populated regions in the galaxy's fat middle. A pleasure cruise, that's all. To the sparse stars out there on the fringe. To lose oneself in new experiences. Or find oneself. To forget lost loves, and a war; to see fresh wonders after the old ones go stale. To get away from it all.

Then disaster. A failure (impossible to show). The Ship pulls over to small, wet world. Not even in the brochure. Brokedown.

Almost fifty years ago now. New lives among the locals. Playing roles, hiding behind protective mental costumes. Revealing all to only a few, carefully chosen natives (those who can't handle it soon forget). There's a young, brown-haired girl delighted by tales of the stars and the folks who live out there. She grows to mother them, give what human care she can while they await rescue. Ship gives what gifts it can, which they share with her. She makes a place for them in her world, and finds a place in theirs.

Their despair and loss seeped into Boone's bones. He felt the weight of thousands of years of life among those stars, roaming, traveling, experiencing. He learned of the loneliness that came from being isolated on a world so backward you can't even show your real body; from having half a galaxy between you and the ones you love. He learned how they had survived with what they had left: each other, and the

flickering warmth of hope.

The impressions blurred and scattered, pressed away by soft mental fingers that apologized for intruding this way. As they carefully slid out of his mind, they left behind swirls of sadness like smudgy fingerprints. Sorrow from folks who understood, in their own way, what hurt him. The last tendril of thought he felt was disappointment that they had nothing to give him. When he opened his eyes, Boone saw the old black man in the next booth. The man was staring into him with those deep, dark eyes, and Boone knew where the comforting mental touches had come from. That old, old, old man had been there all along.

Boone thought of Laura and Emma, and the last residue of hurt quietly evaporated. Anxiety drained down his back, freeing clenched muscles for the first time since. . . too long. Be happy, he said softly. Wherever you are.

Like a tower of cards, the tension throughout the room collapsed.

John stood up, looking relieved, and flicked his cigarette across the room. It bullseyed the trash can next to Mary Alice. "You sure this time, Eule?"

Eule, looking just the way Boone expected him to — a balding, pudgy man in a plaid flannel shirt-nodded fervently.

"You betcha! I've been tracking 'em all afternoon. I would've phoned you, but—" he shrugged, "I didn't want to lose 'em. And I guess I got too excited to think straight. The beacon's on, they know where we are, and they're on their way! We finally got ourselves a tow-truck, everybody!"

A rebel yell erupted from a far booth. A whistling sound came from somewhere else. Something like bells chimed from a booth near the men's room.

Then all hell broke loose.

Rita was the first to lose her shape, twisting like wet Play-Doh in a kid's fists. Patterns of light trickled down her form. When they faded, a green plant with gold-tipped fronds was sipping tea from a china cup.

John was going all fuzzy like bad TV reception, wrapped in an electric blue nimbus. For a second, Boone thought he saw a bulky brown mass where John used to be. Its tentacles fused together and it shifted and flowed like a sidewalk chalk painting in the rain. When the nimbus faded, a walrus in Victorian apparel sat happily munching on oysters. The white-haired war hero became a Fabergé egg with hundreds of undulating cilia, then joined the walrus as a familiar well-fed carpenter. Boone's hand flew to his mouth just in case his heart decided to make a flying leap up his throat.

The door bells jangled. Flowing out into the parking lot was a pandemonium of glowing, jumping, running, flying, shifting, shouting, chirping impossibilities. Where Lou Ann had been, Sherlock Holmes peered through an eyeglass at the paw prints of an enormous hound. The Great Detective looked up and met Boone's stare. The chiseled features melted. Boone was gazing into the gold coin eyes of a Bradbury Martian. (In the flickering instant between detective and Martian, Boone glimpsed a jade green snake with slender arms.)

Hamlet's father's dead and buried ghost cast dark prophecies near the ladies' room. At the cash register, a vintage Asimov robot rummaged through the postcards. The Tin Woodsman clinked beer glasses with the Cat in the Hat.

Boone looked for Claude. On the stool sat a man-sized kernel of popped corn. With no remotely human features, it still managed to look downright glum, sitting there clutching a Miller Lite with a chitin-shelled claw. A yellow stain marred a small spot on its front. Something soft and slightly hairy clasped Boone's hand. He looked down to see a hobbit tugging him toward the door, where a lovely fairy tale princess dimpled invitingly. She flew into the parking lot as the same tale's dragon. Boone followed.

Mary Alice was out there, her laughter ringing over the raucous carnival. A miniature Buck Rogers rocketship buzzed past her head. She twirled to follow its flight. Boone thought of Emma chasing a butterfly.

A cloud of sweetly scented smoke settled in front of Boone's face. It twisted in a breeze that

wasn't there, and formed five fat fingers that pointed toward the back of the pickup, where a tremendous caterpillar sat smoking a hookah and serenely blowing colorful smoke rings. It peered at Boone with wise eyes. Familiar eyes. Black like space, as deep as time. In his mind, Boone felt something about believing six impossible things before breakfast.

Mary Alice was beside him, squeezing his arm. "They're thanking you," she said. "For the readin'. And for hurtin' a little with 'em." The autumn breeze toyed with her hair, and Boone glimpsed what she must have looked like fifty years ago. She had changed very little, actually. "All this was at the top of your head when they spoke to you. They figgered you'd like it." A sliver of sadness pierced her voice. It was going to be hard for her to say goodbye. They stared out into the parking lot together, at the shifting wondrousness and unabashed cartoon cheeriness of the scene.

Lights appeared over the trees. Two, four, a half-dozen of them. They grew larger as they approached, round disks gliding silently in formation.

"Here they come!" the Wizard Merlin shouted.

Everyone casually shifted to their natural forms. The lights came nearer, scraping the tops of the dogwoods. They hovered over the parking lot, throbbing with unearthly energies. Colors flowed along their smooth, round shapes. They descended toward the asphalt. Then, in tight choreography, they flashed brilliantly, made a rude noise in unison, and whooshed up into the sky. They merged into a single bright dot and vanished through a hole in the clouds, lost among the thin sprinkle of autumn stars.

For a long moment, only the insects and the wind made any sound. Then the Claude-thing stamped an appendage on the asphalt.

"Fuck! The bastards didn't even stop to give us a lift!" It transformed into a small, brown-suited man for the sole purpose of clenching his hand in an ancient, very human, gesture. The middle finger jabbed the sky. "BASTARDS!"

*

Mary Alice poured Boone some fresh decaf. Rita and Billy were pushing chunks of pie around on their plates with their forks. Claude sat on his stool, mumbling curses that Boone knew had never been heard on Earth before. Eule sat with John, shaking his head so that light gleamed off his bald spot like a distress signal.

"Now, Eule," John said, opening a fresh pack of Pall Malls. "You done good. You didn't know they was just punks on a joy ride. Hell, we wouldn't've wanted to ride with 'em anyway. Who knows where we woulda ended up?"

"Yeah," Eule said glumly, poking his finger into a Double Chocolate Surprise with extra whipped cream.

It hurt to watch. They had hoped for so much, only to be jerked around like that.

Mary Alice touched Boone's arm. "You can stay here as long as you like," she said. "I could use an extra hand 'round here. 'Sides, they sure do like them stories of yours. I'll bet they'd like you to keep on readin' to 'em, if you think you want to. Till they get their spaceship fixed."

A willing audience. Folks who understood what childlike wonder was all about. A family. He thought of his wife and daughter. The memories would remain a hollow ache in his soul. But, like the universe, life is a big place, with plenty of room for both pleasure and pain. Sometimes you have to help the good stuff outshine the bad. And he still had some good stuff to give.

"O.K.," he said. For now. Just long enough to heal his own wounds, and help with theirs.

Boone watched Mary Alice as she went back behind the counter and wiped the Coke machine with a gray rag. "Mary Alice," he said. "Where is their ship?"

"Well now, hon," she said, and pulled a spigot on the soda fountain. A basso profundo rumble shook the room, and the diner went fuzzy around the edges. The floor trembled and dishes rattled angrily in the sink. Everything almost became something else. Then the fuzziness faded and the diner came back into sharp, orange-upholstered focus. Mary Alice skewered Boone with a mischievous-child look.

"That's just a secret I'll keep to myself, thank you."

From the next booth, the old, old black man raised his cup and tipped it ever so slightly toward Boone. Those ancient, wrinkled lips pulled upward into a smile.

Boone stirred in more sweetener, then sprinkled in a little creamer. A nondairy spiral galaxy evolved on the black coffee. Its wispy arms formed and broke apart and formed again as it revolved.