The Children of Was

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A SILENT nine-year-old boy watches sadly as the last tube of fluorescent light begins to fade. It flickers softly, almost innocently. Then, as its ends become streaked with black, the tube sputters, turns yellow, and dies.

Darkness captures the room as four walls of eternal blackness collapse against the cooling fluorescent cylinder. Its final barrier removed, the darkness subtracts the room forever from the world of visibility. Within an instant the room has become cold, dark, and unimaginable as the universe itself.

But, hidden in the black cubicle, a hundred machines continue their self-destruction. They know no day or night. To the machines . . . worn, broken, and overheated . . . it is still a world of chattering vibration and never-ending
work. Worn parts squeal and screech like a fairy-tale giant having its first nightmare. Each unoiled bearing voices its shrill complaints into the vacuum of an unattentive world. The metallic screams of an escalator on the second floor send a ripple through the shroud of darkness each time one of its bearings is ground to dust under the force of the driving mechanism. Finally, as the last steel ball disintegrates, the escalator barks once and screams no more. Only the snarl of the broken gears continues. A power transformer hums a monotone serenade to itself like a man whistling in the dark.

But what can a small, frightened, nine-year-old boy do to stop this disaster? The schools hadn’t taught him how to repair equipment such as this. Sometimes he had fixed his bicycle chain when it broke. Once, with a sudden stroke of luck, he had even taken an alarm clock apart and put it back together again, but he could never repair electric motors, escalator and ventilators. He knew what his father and his instructors had said about machines being the future world, but it will be many years before he can hope to be a match for a world where everything goes wrong at once; yet to let the machines destroy themselves is to let the world die, because the machines are the world now . . . his world and his responsibility. Frantically his young memory searches the small files of experience stored beneath the crop of yellow hair, trying to find an answer to a thousand problems. He can’t find the power switches and pouring oil on the hot bearings does no good because it’s too late. There is no hope for his dying world. He can only stand here in the middle of the new darkness, cold and frightened, listening to the machinery destroy itself piece by piece. He can only wish that the city was gay and neon-lighted as it used to be so long ago.

But this is the city of Was. He named it himself. It was gay. It was neon-lighted. It was large and beautiful and full of exciting people . . . his friends. But now it is only a half-city, full of dead and dying, and noise. His city . . . his world.

Solemnly the small boy turns toward the plastic doorway. As he approaches, the door swings automatically out into an ordinary August evening, lets him pass, and then sighs back into its frame. The door clicks faintly as it sinks into
place, and as it closes, the noise of the Hades chorus is sealed inside the building, and the building waits to become a tomb.

Now all is quiet. The sudden peace, combined with the cool air of an early autumn, begins to realign the world into a sensible sphere once more, and soon a small boy forgets some of the worries which should not have been his.

Slowly the boy scuffs his way along the street towards the edge of Was, the click of his loose heel plates echoing from the dark store fronts. He sniffs once, pulls the collar of his Junior Space Cadet jacket up around his neck, and wipes a tear from his eye. Twice he stops to look through the open doors at the candy and other foods scattered on the shelves and floor. In the soft moonlight they don't look as dry and mouldy as they do in the daytime, although the smell of rot and decay is even stronger than before. Each time he looks into a shop the rats go scurrying into the dark with another load of mouldy luxuries. They are the fattest rats he has ever seen.

But it makes no difference about them. Food is no problem. There is good fresh food stored in the caves, put there by the adults several months ago. Truck-loads of food, just as though the adults had filled them extra full on purpose . . . like the ants in the story about the ant and the grasshopper. Only the ants in the story didn't die.

He walks on without any particular destination. All directions from here are the same. The sidewalk passes slowly beneath him and the stars overhead continue in their monotonous arcs across the heavens, but at the same time, appear to follow him down the street. They start and stop and move with him, billions of them, like a well-coordinated but horribly out of line boy scout parade. Well, let them follow . . . clear to the end of the world, two blocks away.

He can hear the crickets now. Crickets which dared to come close to the city and sit in the ashes and sing, just as though they don't remember what the ashes used to be. Or maybe there is a new generation which doesn't know about cities. Each night there seems to be a million new voices out there, all singing the identical tune of the past generations. He remembers how he used to lie in the grass on the side of the hill and listen to them singing at night and wishes he could do it again. Just lie and listen and count
the stars . . . and forget. Forget saying goodbye to his brother who went away wearing funny brown clothes and never came back. Forget the sudden wail of the sirens from the main part of the city on the other side of the hill, and the people rushing, too late, to the subways, pushing, shoving, and trampling Jerry, his boyfriend. Forget the blinding flash, the horrible, stinging heat, the roar like a million billion cannons, the smoke, the screams, the trembling earth, boulders crashing down the hill smashing houses and people, trees set aflame, torn from their roots and hurdled clear across the city, the sudden, sickening, hot tornado sweeping automobiles and children into the flames around the city.

Now only the crickets singing in the cool evening air. From somewhere out of infinity a gentle breeze drifts down the street, taking with it small captured treasures from the planet Earth, only to drop them as too much bother and pass on to another world more suited for pleasure. A tower clock somewhere in the city begins to count off the hour of the night, its once familiar tone now a dead echo from a dead world. Driven unfailingly by its solar-powered motor, it rolls almost noiselessly on its permanently oiled bearings . . . two minutes slow.

As the boy approaches the edge of Was, the crickets silence for a moment, then begin again several feet from his small silhouette. Here is where the ashes of the one-time city begin.

Now and then the re-covered snow peak of the mountain across the valley appears in all its pure whiteness. It is a landmark beyond which the young boy has never been. Someday maybe he will be old enough to venture around the mountain and look over the edge of the world as people have told him it was possible to do. What if you fell off? Where would you fall to? For an hour he stands in the starlight and moonlight, pondering these problems until his foot begins to go to sleep.

Turning back into the limits of his world, he heads towards the city park. The adults are there . . . what are left of them. Perhaps they will invite him in and talk to him. The thought causes him to move a little faster along the dusty sidewalk and soon he is walking, half running
across the wide entranceway to the park. He stops at the

gate, undecided.

Inside the park near the children’s playground, a bright
orange flame whips about in the breeze. Its flickering
light illuminates the figures of five people, four of them
sitting near a dry water fountain holding a quiet discus­

tion, while huddled in an old-fashioned rocking chair is
the humped figure of a little, grey-haired old woman,
dreamily petting a dirty kitten. Five people, complete stran­
gers to the boy and maybe to each other, who come to the
park night after night, build their bonfire, work and talk
for a few hours and then disappear until the next night.

The boy stands watching, wondering if he dares to in­
terrupt them tonight. The five of them are the only people
he has seen since the day of the explosion, but so far they
have refused to talk to him, or even to act as though they
know he is there. He talks to them but they walk around
him or bump him out of their way. When he is there
they won’t even talk to each other. Not even the old wo­
man, who looks a little like his grandmother, has noticed
him, but only sits there day after day, petting her kitten
. . . the kitten which died three days ago. If only they would
look his way so he could smile and say hello and maybe be
invited to watch them work. Maybe he could even help.
But they didn’t notice him and so he remains outside
the gate.

After a few minutes the adults begin to chatter gaily to
each other about the long metal tube they have been work­
ing on for so long. The word Venus is mentioned several
times. He doesn’t know what Venus means but the long
tube looks something like the picture of a torpedo in his
history book back in school. It is pointed on one end, has
three fins on the other end, and is about ninety feet long.
But why would they make a torpedo when there is no lake
or ocean within hundreds of miles? Not unless the world
doesn’t end on the other side of the mountain like they said.

Anyway, he is curious to get a closer look at the tube, no
matter what it is. That would make an excuse for inter­
rupting their work too, and they probably wouldn’t mind if
he didn’t get in their way.

But now they have stopped working and begun their
nightly games. Maybe they would let him play with them. Leapfrog and drop the handkerchief aren’t much fun, but it is the talking and friends which count . . . not the games. He reaches for the gate latch.

As suddenly as they started they stop. Now they are joining hands and dancing around the thing they call a space ship, and, as usual, they will soon run into the darkness of the park where he can’t find them. They vanish too quickly to be followed.

He turns away from the park and the glowing red coals which were once a bonfire and walks toward a warm house he knows about where he can spend another lonely night with only his thoughts to bid him goodnight. Tomorrow there will be machines to fix, machines to watch die, and clocks to be wound, just for something to do. Tomorrow the adults will be back and maybe then . . . but he is afraid not. As he walks into the midnight, the boy marvels at the skill and intelligence of the adults who can play games at night, and, during the daytime, build a space ship, as they call it, out of old rusty oil barrels.

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The Promise

THE alarm went off and Cindy stumbled out of bed; she winced as her bare feet touched the cold uncarpeted floor. She felt her way across the dark room to the dresser and the clock which had jolted her to consciousness but a second or so before.

“Turn on the heat, Sue,” she called to her sleepy roommate as she pushed the plug in on the clock, “I’m freezing.”