The Prisoner of Space

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THE PRISONER OF SPACE

This morning I am assailed by the command:
SEEK THE INDESTRUCTIBLE IN YOURSELF

I recall last night. In the spaceship with my assistant. And the prisoner. In the yellowing of the spaceship was the tube, the one with the strange goings-on at its bottom. Annihilation, I think. I should know now, should have known then. I did not study well enough. That was always a problem with me - never taking my studies seriously, being easily irritated by detail.

The prisoner wore a blue uniform. His skin was pale, crusty. He had thin light hair on a big head, large pale eyes and very fine hair on his face. There was something disgusting about him.

The ship hurtled through space. I remember thinking exactly that. "This ship is hurtling through space." My father used to say that when I was a child. "The spaceships hurtle through space. The spacemen travel to far, far places. Light is the answer." Light is the answer? Answer? What was the question?

We interrogated the prisoner. He said nothing.

"Take off his cap," I told my assistant. "Bring him here to me."

The prisoner offered no resistance.

"This is my new 7.65 Beretta automatic," I said.

He looked at the gun, moving his head from side to side so he could see it from both sides.

"The clip releases with this button, but I won't release it now. I won't because I am going to shoot you in the head and throw you down the tube."

A moan came from the tube, the hum of its mechanism. A mystery, the things down there, I thought.

We were hurtling through space.

I shot him in the back of the head. He turned to look at me.

"Hold him the other way," I ordered.

My assistant put his arms around him and tried to turn him. The prisoner was solid and strong. He would not be moved. I shot him again, this time in the medulla oblongata. At least that's what I aimed for. Actually, I'm not sure where it is. He still remained on his feet. He was a rock in his blue uniform and with his white, lumpy skin. A Grand Teuton of the universe. I shot him again, several times. There was blood on his head, the side of his face, his neck and his collar. His
nose was smudged with it.

For some reason I sensed the yellowing walls behind us. I say "for some reason" because my awareness of the walls was important, but how can I know why? The tube was still moaning. The prisoner would not fall and he kept looking at me. There was no pain in his eyes nor was there any special anger. There was, of course, condemnation, but nothing personal.

"Here," said my assistant. "This'll do it." He raised a big club, something like the thick branch of a small tree, and with both hands brought it down on the prisoner's head. It forced him to sag, but did not kill him. I checked my Beretta; it was out of bullets. I pressed the button and the clip slid from the handle.

"See," I said.

My assistant hit the prisoner again. Then he said: "Here, give me a hand."

From somewhere either back of the walls or down a tube a voice called:

"IS MY FATHER ALL RIGHT? HAVE YOU HURT HIM? HAVE YOU KILLED HIM?"

"Come on," said my assistant. "Down he goes."

Then he was gone. We hurtled through space. He was gone and yet the room was thick with his presence because he'd taken his secrets with him.

The command to which I awoke this morning repeats itself every half hour:

SEEK THE INDESTRUCTIBLE IN YOURSELF.

I am reminded of my mother-in-law.

Richard Lyons

GOOD COMPANY

Something Nan noticed about Jack when she first met him was that instead of pictures of girls in his wallet he carried snapshots of old cars. Well, she reflected, he'll never leave me for another woman. That was in the middle of her freshman and his junior year at the state University.

Six months later, they eloped in Jack's carefully restored 1936 Ford convertible. During the honeymoon, when they returned to the parked car, often there would be notes tucked under a windshield wiper-

"Want to sell yr. car?"
Call Merv 332-1823

Or -call Bill, call Sam, and one time, call Fanny. In this way Nan learned that Jack was not the only one in the world so possessed.

But Jack did not want to sell his car or, as it turned out, any of his cars.

Five married years later, hands sunk to the wrists in dishwater, Nan looked out of her kitchen window and mused over a rambling country yard filled with old cars.

In five years, Nan had come to know that to Jack an abandoned car was something out of time, a relic of the near past. For him, the shape of a particular cowl or headlamp, the dusty odor of a cushioned interior, conjured up past times as clearly as if the car itself were a kind of time machine. And so he rescued the lost beauty of a 1932 Chevrolet sinking slowly wheel-less into the loam of an ancient farmer's field: and with an eye to comfort and rehabilitation he salvaged a '49 Cadillac abandoned in a gas station and sold for storage.

"Beautiful old sedan," he would say, after dragging a skeletal Plymouth into the yard. "Good tires, Nan, real good tires." Or, "they were going to junk it, Nan. I can always use it for parts."

Parts for what, she wondered, since she could not remember the last day he had found time to work on any of the cars. Jack had become the teacher he planned to be when she married him; more and more, he put his time and energy into his job, but still, he could not resist bringing home the cars.

It was difficult to mow around them and so, in the enormous yard, thick patches of grass grew around fenders and through grills, pierced rusted running boards and spread