

From the Sept. 94 issue of Magazine of Fantasy & Science

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THE MARTIAN CHILD
by David Gerrold

Toward the end of the meeting, the caseworker remarked, "Oh -- and one more thing. Dennis thinks he's a Martian."

"I beg your pardon?" I wasn't certain I had heard her correctly. I had papers scattered all over the meeting room table -- thick piles of stapled incident reports, manila-folded psychiatric evaluations, Xeroxed clinical diagnoses, scribbled caseworker histories, typed abuse reports, bound trial transcripts, and my own crabbed notes as well: Hyperactivity. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Emotional Abuse. Physical Abuse. Conners Rating Scale. Apgars. I had no idea there was so much to know about children. For a moment, I was actually looking for the folder labeled Martian.

"He thinks he's a Martian," Ms. Bright repeated. She was a small woman, very proper and polite. "He told his group home parents that he's not like the other children -- he's from Mars -- so he shouldn't be expected to act like an Earthling all the time."

"Well, that's okay," I said, a little too quickly. "Some of my best friends are Martians. He'll fit right in. As long as he doesn't eat the tribbles or tease the feral Chtorran."

By the narrow expressions on their faces, I could tell that the caseworkers weren't amused. For a moment, my heart sank. Maybe I'd said the wrong thing. Maybe I was being too facile with my answers.

-- The hardest thing about adoption is that you have to ask someone to trust you with a child.

That means that you have to be willing to let them scrutinize your entire life, everything: your financial standing, your medical history, your home and belongings, your upbringing, your personality, your motivations, your arrest record, your IQ, and even your sex life. It means that every self-esteem issue you have ever had will come bubbling right to the surface like last night's beans in this morning's bath tub.

Whatever you're most insecure about, that's what the whole adoption process will feel like it's focused on. For me, it was that terrible familiar feeling of being second best -- of not being good enough to play with the big kids, or get the job, or win the award, or whatever was at stake. Even though the point of this interview was simply to see if Dennis and I would be a good match, I felt as if I was being judged again. What if I wasn't good enough this time?

I tried again. I began slowly. "Y'know, you all keep telling me all the bad news -- you don't even know if this kid is capable of forming a deep attachment -- it feels as if you're trying to talk me out of this match." I stopped myself before I said too much. I was suddenly angry and I didn't know why. These people were only doing their job.

And then it hit me. That was it -- these people were only doing their job.

At that moment, I realized that there wasn't anyone in the room who had the kind of commitment to Dennis that I did, and I hadn't even met him yet. To them, he was only another case to handle. To me, he was ... the possibility of a family. It wasn't fair to unload my frustration on these tired, overworked, underpaid women. They cared. It just wasn't the same kind of caring. I swallowed my anger.

"Listen," I said, sitting forward, placing my hands calmly and deliberately on the table. "After everything this poor little guy has been through, if he wants to think he's a Martian -- I'm not going to argue with him. Actually, I think it's charming. It's evidence of his resilience. It's probably the most rational explanation he can come up with for his irrational situation. He probably feels alienated, abandoned, different, alone. At least, this gives him a reason for it. It lets him put a story around his situation so he can cope with it. Maybe it's the wrong explanation, but it's the only one he's got. We'd be stupid to try to take it away from him."

And after I'd said that, I couldn't help but add another thought as well. "I know a lot of people who hide out in fantasy because reality is too hard to cope with. Fantasy is my business. The only different is that I write it down and make the rest of the world pay for the privilege of sharing the delusion. Fantasy isn't about escape; it's a survival mechanism. It's a way to deal with things that are so much bigger than you are. So I think fantasy is special, something to be cherished and protected because it's a very fragile thing and without it, we're so defenseless, we're paralyzed.

"I know what this boy is feeling because I've been there. Not the same circumstances, thank God -- but I know this much, if he's surrounded by adults who can't understand what he really needs, he'll never have that chance to connect that everyone keeps talking about." For the first time I looked directly into their eyes as if they had to live up to my standards. "Excuse me for being presumptuous -- but he's got to be with someone who'll tell him that it's all right for him to be a Martian. Let him be a Martian for as long as he needs."

"Yes. Thank you," the supervisor said abruptly. "I think that's everything we need to cover. We'll be getting back to you shortly."

My heart sank at her words. She hadn't acknowledged a word of what I'd said. I was certain she'd dismissed it totally. I gathered up all my papers. We exchanged pleasantries and handshakes, and I wore my company smile all the way to the elevator. I didn't say a word, neither did my sister. We both waited until we were in the car and headed back toward the Hollywood Freeway. She drove, guiding the big car through traffic as effortlessly as only a Los Angeles real estate agent can manage.

"I blew it," I said. "Didn't I? I got too ... full of myself again."

"Honey, I think you were fine." She patted my hand.

"They're not going to make the match," I said. "It would be a single parent adoption. They're not going to do it. First they choose married couples, Ward and June. Then they choose single women, Murphy Brown. Then, only if there's no one else who'll take the kid, will they consider a single man. I'm at the bottom of the list. I'll never get this kid. I'll never get any kid. My own caseworker told me not to get my hopes up. There are two other families interested. This was just a formality, this interview. I know it. Just so they could prove they'd considered more than one match." I felt the frustration building up inside my chest like a balloon full of hurt. "But this is the kid for me, Alice, I know it. I don't know how I know it, but I do."

I'd first seen Dennis's picture three weeks earlier; a little square of colors that suggested a smile in flight.

I'd gone to the National Conference of the Adoptive Families of America at the Los Angeles Airport Hilton. There were six panels per hour, six hours a day, two days, Saturday and Sunday. I picked the panels that I thought would be most useful to me in finding and raising a child and ordered tapes -- over two dozen -- of the sessions I couldn't attend in person. I'd had no idea there were so many different issues to be dealt with in adoptions. I soaked it up like a sponge, listening eagerly to the advice of adoptive parents, their grown children, clinical psychologists, advocates, social workers, and adoption resource professionals.

But my real reason for attending was to find the child.

I'd already been approved. I'd spent more than a year filling out forms and submitting to interviews. But approval doesn't mean you get a child. It only means that your name is in the hat. Matching is done to meet the child's needs first. Fair enough -- but terribly frustrating.

Eventually, I ended up in the conference's equivalent of a dealer's room. Rows of tables and heart-tugging displays. Books of all kinds for sale. Organizations. Agencies. Children in Eastern Europe. Children in Latin America. Asian children. Children with special needs. Photo-listings, like real-estate albums. Turn the pages, look at the eyes, the smiles, the needs. "Johnny was abandoned by his mother at age three. He is hyperactive, starts fires, and has been cruel to small animals. He will need extensive therapy...." "Janie, age 9, is severely retarded. She was sexually abused by her stepfather, she will need round-the-clock care...." "Michael suffers from severe epilepsy...." "Linda needs..." "Danny needs..." "Michael needs..." So many needs. So much hurt. It was overwhelming.

Why were so many of the children in the books "special needs" children? Retarded. Hyperactive. Abused. Had they been abandoned because they weren't perfect. or were these the leftovers after all the good children were selected? The part that disturbed me the most was that I could understand the emotions involved. I wanted a child, not a case. And some of the descriptions in the book did seem pretty intimidating. Were these the only kind of children available?

Maybe it was selfish, but I found myself turning the pages looking for a child who represented an easy answer. Did I really want another set of needs in my life -- a single man who's old enough to be considered middle-aged and ought to be thinking seriously about retirement plans?

This was the most important question of all. "Why do you want to adopt a child?" And it was a question I couldn't answer. I couldn't find the words. It seemed that there was something I couldn't write down.

The motivational questionnaire had been a brick wall that sat on my desk for a week. It took me thirty pages of single-spaced printout just to get my thoughts organized. I could tell great stories about what I thought a family should be, but I couldn't really answer the question why I wanted a son. Not right away.

The three o'clock in the morning truth of it was a very nasty and selfish piece of business.

I didn't want to die alone. I didn't want to be left unremembered.

All those books and TV scripts ... they were nothing. They used up trees. They were exercises in excess. They made other people rich. They were useless to me. They filled up shelves. They impressed the impressionable. But they didn't prove me a real person. They didn't validate my life as one worth living. In fact, they were about as valuable as the vice-presidency of the United States.

What I really wanted was to make a difference. I wanted someone to know that there was a real person behind all those words. A dad.

I would lie awake, staring into the darkness, trying to imagine it, what it would be like, how I would handle the various situations that might come up, how I would deal with the day-to-day business of daddying. I gamed out scenarios and tried to figure out how to handle difficult situations.

In my mind, I was always kind and generous, compassionate and wise. My fantasy child was innocent and joyous, full of love and wide-eyed wonder, and grateful to be in my home. He was an invisible presence, living inside my soul, defying reality to catch up. I wondered where he was now, and how and when I would finally meet him -- and if the reality of parenting would be as wonderful as the dream.

-- But it was all fantasyland. The books were proof of that. These children had histories, brutal, tragic, and heart-rending.

I wandered on to the next table. One of the social workers from the Los Angeles County Department of Children's Services had a photo book with her. I introduced myself, told her I'd been approved -- but not matched. Could I look through the book? Yes, of course, she said. I turned the pages slowly, studying the innocent faces, looking for one who could be my son. All the pictures were of black children, and the county wasn't doing transracial adoptions anymore. Too controversial. The black social workers had taken a stand against it -- I could see their point -- but how many of these children would not find homes now?

Tucked away like an afterthought on the very last page was a photo of the only white child in the book. My glance slid across the picture quickly, I was already starting to close the album -- and then as the impact of what I'd seen hit me, I froze in mid-action, almost slamming the book flat again.

The boy was riding a bicycle on a sunny tree-lined sidewalk; he was caught in the act of shouting or laughing at whoever was holding the camera. His blond hair was wild in the wind of his passage, his eyes shone like stars behind his glasses, his expression was raucous and exuberant.

I couldn't take my eyes off the picture. A cold wave of certainty came rolling up my spine like a blast of fire and ice. It was a feeling of recognition. This was him -- the child who'd taken up permanent residence in my imagination! I could almost hear him yelling, "Hi, Daddy!"

"Tell me about this child," I said, a little too quickly. The social worker was already looking at me oddly. I could understand it. My voice sounded odd to me too. I tried to explain. "Tell me. Do you ever get people looking at a picture and telling you that this is the one?"

"All the time," she replied. Her face softened into an understanding smile.

His name was Dennis. He'd just turned eight. She'd just put his picture in the book this morning. And yes, she'd have the boy's caseworker get in touch with my caseworker. But ... she cautioned ... remember that there might be other families interested too. And remember, the department matches from the child's side.

I didn't hear any of that. I heard the words, but not the cautions.

I pushed hard and they set up a meeting to see if the match would work. But they cautioned me ahead of time -- "this might not be the child you're looking for. He's classified as 'hard-to-place.' He's hyperactive and he's been emotionally abused and he may have fetal alcohol effects and he's been in eight foster homes, he's never had a family of his own...."

I didn't hear a word of it. I simply refused to listen. The boy in the picture had grabbed my heart so completely that I'd suddenly expanded all my definitions of what I was willing to accept.

I posted messages on CompuServe asking for information and advice on adoption, on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, on emotional abuse recovery, on everything I could think of -- what were this child's chances of becoming an independent adult? I called the Adoption Warm Line and was referred to parents who'd been through it. I hit the bookstores and the libraries. I called my cousin, the doctor, and he faxed me twenty pages of reports. And I came into the meeting so well-papered and full of theories and good intentions that I must have looked the perfect jerk.

And now ... it was over.

I leaned my head against the passenger side window of my sister's car and moaned. "Dammit. I'm so tired of being pregnant. Thirteen months is long enough for any man! I've got the baby blues so bad, I can't even go to the supermarket anymore. I find myself watching other people with their children and the tears start welling up in my eyes. I keep thinking `Where's mine?'"

My sister understood. She had four children of her own, none of whom had ended up in jail; so she had to have done something right. "Listen to me, David. Maybe this little boy isn't right for you -- "

"Of course he's right for me. He's a Martian."

She ignored the interruption. "And if he isn't right, there'll be another child who is. I promise you. And you said it yourself that you didn't know if you could handle all the problems he'd be bringing with him."

"I know -- it's just that. . . I feel like -- I don't know what I feel like. This is worse than anything I've ever been through. All this wanting and not having. Sometimes I'm afraid it's not going to happen at all."

Alice pulled the car over to the curb and turned off the engine. "Okay, it's my turn," she said. "Stop beating yourself up. You are the smartest one in the whole family -- but sometimes you can be awfully stupid. You are going to be a terrific father to some very lucky little boy. Your caseworker knows that. All of those social workers in that meeting saw your commitment and dedication. All that research you did -- when you asked about the Apgar numbers and the Connors scale, when you handed them that report on hyperactivity, which even they didn't know about -- you impressed them."

I shook my head. "Research is easy. You post a note on CompuServe, wait two days, and then download your e-mail."

"It's not the research," Alice said. "It's the fact that you did it. That demonstrates your willingness to find out what the child needs so you can provide it."

"I wish I could believe you," I said.

She looked deeply at me. "What's the matter?"

"What if I'm really not good enough?" I said. "That's what I'm worried about -- I can't shake that feeling."

"Oh, that -- " she said, lightly. "That's normal. That's the proof that you're going to do okay. It's only those parents who don't worry who need to."

"Oh," I said. And then we both started laughing.

She hugged me then. "You'll do fine. Now let's go home and call Mom before she busts a kidney from the suspense."

Two centuries later, although the calendar insisted otherwise, Ms. Bright called me. "We've made a decision. If you're still interested in Dennis, we'd like to arrange a meeting -- " I don't remember a lot of what she said after that; most of it was details about how we would proceed; but I remember what she said at the end. "I want to tell you the two things that helped us make the decision. First, all that research you did shows that you're committed to Dennis's needs. That's very important in any adoption, but especially in this one. The other thing was what you said at the end of the meeting -- about understanding his need to be a Martian. We were really touched by your empathy for his situation. We think that's a quality that Dennis is going to need very much in any family he's placed in. That's why we decided to try you first."

I thanked her profusely; at least, I think I did; I was suddenly having trouble seeing, and the box of tissues had gone empty.

I met Dennis three days later, at the Johnson Group Home in Culver City. He was one of six children living-at the facility; four boys, two girls. Because the caseworkers didn't want him to know that he was being auditioned, I would be introduced as a friend of the group home parents.

The child who came home from school was a sullen little zombie, going through the motions of life. He walked in the door, walked past me with no sign of recognition, and headed straight to his room. I said, "Hi." He grunted something that could have been "H'lo" and kept on going. For a moment, I felt somehow cheated. I recognized him, why hadn't he recognized me? And then I had to remind myself with a grin that I was the grownup, not him. But, after a bit, he came out from his retreat and asked me to play electric hockey.

For the first few minutes, he was totally intent on the game. I didn't exist to him. Then I remembered an exercise from one of my communications courses -- about simply being with another person. I stopped trying so hard to do it right, and instead just focused my attention on Dennis, letting it be all right with me for him to be exactly the way he was.

And yet, I couldn't turn off the analytical part of my mind. After reading all those reports, and hearing all the opinions of the caseworkers, I couldn't help but watch for evidence. I couldn't see it. None of it. All I could see was a child. And then that thing happened that always happens to an adult who is willing to play with a child. I rediscovered my own childhood again. I got involved in the game, and very shortly I was smiling and laughing when he did, returning the same delight and approval at every audacious play. And that's when it happened. He began to realize that there was a real human being on the opposite side of the game board. Something sparked. He started reacting to me instead of to the puck. I could feel the sense of connection almost as a physical presence.

Then, abruptly, it was time for him to do his chores. We loaded up the wagon with the cans from the recycling bin and walked them over to the nearby park. We talked about stuff. He talked, I listened. Sometimes I asked questions, sometimes he did. On the way back, he insisted that I pull the wagon so he could ride in it. By now, he was glowing. He was the boy in the photograph.

When we got back to the group home, however, the other children had arrived home from school and were already playing together in the back yard. As soon as he saw them, Dennis broke away from me and ran to the back of the yard. He flung himself into the corner of a large old couch and curled up in a ball. He was as apart from the other children -- indeed the whole world -- as it was possible to get.

What had suddenly triggered his unhappiness? Was it the thought that now that there were other children to play with, I would reject him? Did he have to reject me first? Or was there something else going on? From inside the house, I watched him as he sat alone. He was a very unhappy little boy. And he had stopped glowing. At that moment, I knew I couldn't leave him here. Whatever other problems he might have, my commitment was bigger. Or so I believed.

The group home parents invited me to stay to dinner with the children. I hadn't planned on it, but all the children insisted that I stay, so I did, specifically making a point of sitting next to Dennis. He didn't talk at all, he was subdued, as if he was afraid of losing something that he wanted very much -- or maybe that was only my perception. He ate quietly and timidly. But then Tony, one of the more excitable children, suddenly piped up, "Do you know what Dennis said?"

Tony was sitting directly across from me. He had that look of malicious mischief common to children who are about to betray a confidence. "What?" I asked, with a queasy foreboding.

"Dennis said he wishes you were his dad." Even without looking, I could see that beside me, Dennis was cringing, readying himself for the inevitable politely worded rejection.

Instead, I turned to Dennis, focusing all my attention on him, and said, "Wow, what a great wish. Thank you!" There was more I wanted to add, but I couldn't. Not yet. The "game plan" required me to be Dennis's "special friend" for at least six weeks before I made any kind of commitment to him. He couldn't know that I had the same wish he did. I felt cheated at not being able to add, "So do I." But I understood the rationale, and I would follow it.

"Better watch out," Tony said. "He might make it a Martian wish, and then you'll have to."

At the time, I didn't understand what Tony had meant. So I forgot about it.

The next time I heard about Martians happened thirteen months later.

I was in Arizona, at a party at Jeff Duntemann's sprawling house. Jeff is a two-time Hugo nominee who gave up science fiction to write books about computer programming. Apparently, it was far more profitable than science fiction; now he was publishing his own magazine, PC-Techniques. I write a regular

column for the magazine, an off-the-wall mix of code and mutated zen. It was the standing joke that my contribution to the magazine was the "Martian perspective."

I was sitting on the patio, watching Dennis splash enthusiastically across the pool. He was doing cannonballs into the deep end. A year ago, I couldn't pry him loose from the steps in the shallow end; he wouldn't even let me teach him how to dog-paddle -- now he was an apprentice fish. He spent more time swimming across the bottom of the water than the top.

A year ago, he'd been a waif -- capable of joy, the picture proved that -- but more often sad, uncertain, alienated, and angry. A year ago, he'd told his caseworker, "I don't think God listens to my prayers. I prayed for a dad and nothing happened." On the day he moved in, I asked his caseworker to remind him of that conversation and then tell him that sometimes it takes God a little while to make a miracle happen.

A miracle -- according to my friend Randy MacNamara -- is something that wouldn't have happened anyway. Now, after the fact, after the first giddy days of panic and joy, after the days of bottomless fears, after the tantrums and the testing, after a thousand and one peanut butter and jellyfish sandwiches, I understood what he meant. And more. A miracle takes real commitment. It never happens by accident. I'd had other miracles happen in my life -- one which I'd written about, one which I may never write about -- but this one was the best. I had the proof of it framed on my wall.

One afternoon I'd opened Dennis's lunch kit to see how much he'd eaten and found the note I'd packed that morning. It said, "Please eat your whole lunch today! I love you! Daddy." On the other side, written in a childish scrawl was Dennis's reply: "I love you to. you are very specil to me. I realy think your the best. I love you very much dady I never loved eneyone more than you. I never new anyone nicer than you." At the bottom, he'd drawn three hearts and put the word "dady" in the biggest of them.

So the miracle was complete. Dennis could form a deep attachment. And he could express it. And all I had to do was sit and glow and realize that despite all my doubts and all my mistakes, I was getting the important part of the job done right. I had passed from wannabe to gonnabe to finding-how-to-be to simply be-ing. I was glowing as brightly as the warm Arizona evening. Pink clouds were striped across the darkening twilight sky.

I didn't know anyone else at the party besides Jeff and Carol -- and the world-famous Mr. Byte who was in the kitchen begging scraps he wasn't supposed to have. But that was all right. I was content just to sit and watch my son enjoying himself. And then I heard the word "Martian" in back of me, and without moving, my attention swiveled 180 degrees.

Four of the wives were sitting together -- it was that kind of party; the programmers were talking code, the wives were talking children. I didn't know enough about either subject, I still felt like a dabbler in both fields, so I made the best kind of listener. One of the women was saying, "No, it's true. Since she was old enough to talk she's insisted that she's a Martian. Her mother has never been able to convince her otherwise. She asked her, 'How do you explain that I remember going to the hospital and giving birth to you?' and she said, 'I was implanted in your tummy.' She's twelve now and she still believes it. She has a whole story, an explanation for everything. She says UFOs are implanting Martian babies all the time."

The other women laughed gently. I found myself smiling to myself and watching Dennis. Remembering for the first time in a long while what he'd once told his caseworker -- that he was a Martian too. Interesting coincidence.

Then, one of the others said, "We had a boy in my daughter's school who wore a T-shirt to school almost every day that said, 'I am a Martian.' He took a lot of teasing about it. The principal tried to make

him stop wearing it, but he refused. All the kids thought he was crazy."

"That was probably the only way he could get the attention he needed."

"Well," said the fourth voice, "it's a common childhood fantasy -- that the child is really a changeling or an orphan and that you're not her real mother. Adding Mars to it is just a way to take advantage of the information in the real world to make it more believable."

I didn't hear any more of that conversation; we were interrupted by Carol announcing that dessert was served; but a seed of inquiry had been planted. If nothing else, I thought it might make an interesting story. If only I could figure out an ending for it. Let's see, a man adopts a little boy and then discovers that the child is a Martian.

Hm. But what's the hook?

Horror story? Too easy. Too obvious -- the Martian children are going to murder us in our beds. Besides, Richard Matheson could do it better, if he hadn't already. John Wyndham already had. A hidden invasion? The Martians will take us over without our ever knowing? Fred Brown had beaten me to it by four decades. His story had even ended up as an episode on Hitchcock. Maybe something tender and gentle instead? Parenting a starlost orphan? That would be the hardest to write -- and Zenna Henderson had already written it several times over. Sturgeon was another one who could handle that angle. I wished I could pick up the phone and call him. He would have had the most interesting insight for the ending, but the connect charges would have been horrendous. I could call Harlan, of course, but he'd probably bitch at me for interrupting him during Jeopardy. Besides, I didn't think he would take this question seriously. "Harlan, listen -- I think my son's a Martian, and I'm trying to write it up as a story...." Yeah, right, David. Have you had your medication checked recently?

I made a mental note to think about it later. Maybe my subconscious would think about it during the drive home. Maybe I'd stumble across an ending by accident. I really couldn't do anything at all without an ending in mind. It's easy to start a story, but if you don't know the ending, you don't know what you're writing toward and after a while the story goes adrift, the energy fails, and you've got one more thing to be frustrated about. I had a file cabinet full of unfinished stories to prove that this was not the best way to generate pay copy.

The next day ... we were slicing across the desolate red desert, seemingly suspended between the blazing sky and the shimmering road, not talking about anything, just listening to a tape of Van Dyke Parks and sipping sodas from the cooler. The tape came to an end and the white noise of the wind rushed in to envelop us. Convertibles are fun, but they aren't quiet.

Abruptly, I remembered last night's conversation.

"Hey," I asked. "Are you a Martian?"

"What?"

"Are you a Martian?" I repeated.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Ah, obviously you're a Jewish Martian. You answer a question with a question."

"Who told you I was a Martian?"

"Kathy did. Before I met you, we had a meeting. She told me all about you. She said that you told her you were a Martian. Do you remember telling her that?"

"Yes."

"Are you still a Martian?"

"Yes," he said.

"Oh," I said. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Okay," he said. "I was made on Mars. I was a tadpole. Then I was brought to Earth in a UFO and implanted in my Mommy's tummy. She didn't know. Then I was borned."

"Ahh," I said. "That's how I thought it happened. Is that all?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why did the Martians send you here?"

"So I could be a Earth-boy."

"Oh."

"Can we go to Round Table Pizza for dinner?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject as if it was the most natural thing to do.

"Do Martians like pizza?"

"Yes!" he said excitedly. Then he pointed his fingers at me like a funny kind of ray gun. Most children would have pointed the top two fingers to make a pretend gun, but Dennis pointed his index and little fingers, his thumb stood straight up for the trigger. "If you don't take me out for pizza tonight, I'll have to disneygrade you."

"Ouch, that sounds painful. I definitely do not want to be disneygraded. Then I'd have to stand in the dark and sing that awful song forever while boatloads of Japanese tourists take pictures of me. But we're not going tonight. Maybe tomorrow, if you have a good day at school."

"No, tonight! " He pointed his fingers menacingly -- both hands now -- and for a moment I wondered what would happen if he pressed his thumbs forward. Would I be turned into a giant three-fingered mouse?

"If you disneygrade me," I said, "for sure you won't get any pizza."

"Okay," he said. Then he closed up both weapons, first one hand, then the other. First the little finger of his left hand, then the index finger; then the little finger of his right hand, then the index finger. Each time he made a soft clicking sound with his mouth. Finally he folded his thumbs down -- and abruptly he had hands again.

Later, I tried to do the same thing myself. A human can do it, but it's like the Vulcan salute. It takes practice.

I have a pinched nerve in my back. If I do my twisting exercises a couple of times a week, and if I take frequent breaks from the keyboard, and if I remember to put myself into the spa every couple days and let the bubbles boil up around me, then I can keep myself functioning pretty much like a normal person. It's a fair trade. Usually I wait until after dinner to sit in the spa. After the sun sets is a perfect time for a little skinny-dipping.

Several days after the Phoenix trip, Dennis and I were alone in the pool. The pool has a blue filter over the light, the spa has a red one; when the bubbles are on, it looks a little like a hot lava bath. Sometimes we talk about nothing important, sometimes we just sit silently letting the bubbles massage our skins, sometimes we stare up into the sky and watch for meteors; once we'd seen a bright red starpoint streak across the sky like a bullet.

But tonight, as he splashed in the bubbles, I found myself studying the way the light shaped his features. I'm not an expert on the development of children's skulls, but abruptly I was struck by the odd proportions of his forehead and eyes.

Before I'd adopted him, I'd been given copies of various doctor's reports. One doctor, who was supposed to be looking for fetal alcohol effects, had described the five-year-old Dennis as "an unusual-looking" child. I couldn't see what he was talking about. To me, Dennis had always been an unusually good-looking boy.

There are only two shapes of faces -- pie and horse. Dennis was a pie-face, I'm a horse. In that, he was lucky because his smile was so wide he needed a round face to hold it all. He was blessed with dark blond hair which was growing steadily toward shoulder-length. His eyes were puppy-brown and hidden behind lashes long enough to trouble the sleep of mascara manufacturers. His complexion was as luminous and gold as an Arizona sunset.

His body was well-proportioned too; he had long legs and a swimmer's torso. He was thin, but not skinny. He looked like a Disney child. I expected him to be a heartbreaker when he grew up. The girls were going to chase him with lassos. Already I wondered what kind of a teenager he would become -- and if I would be able to handle it.

Now ... seeing him in the reflected red light of the spa -- is this the same color light they have on Mars? -- he did look a little alien to me. His forehead had a roundish bulge toward the crown. His cheekbones seemed strangely angled. His eyes seemed narrow and reptilian. Probably it was the effect of the light coming from underneath instead of above, combined with the red filter, but it was momentarily unnerving. For a moment, I wondered what kind of a thing I'd brought into my life.

"What?" he asked, staring back.

"Nothing," I said.

"You were looking at me."

"I was admiring you. You're a beautiful kid, do you know that? "

"Uh-huh." And suddenly he was Dennis again.

"How do you know that?"

"Everybody says so. They all like my eyelashes."

I laughed. Of course. Here was a child who'd learned to work the system. He was a skilled manipulator. He'd learned real fast how to turn on his special smile and get what he wanted out of people. Of course he knew how much attention his eyelashes attracted.

But -- for a moment there, he hadn't been Dennis the little boy. He'd been something else. Something cold and watchful. He'd noticed me studying him. He'd sensed the suspicion. Or was it just the power of suggestion at work? Most of the books on parenting advised not to feel guilty for wondering if your child is going to suddenly catch a fly with his tongue. It's a very common parental fear.

And then.. .whenever I had doubts about Dennis and my ability to keep up with him, all I had to do was ask myself one simple question. How would I feel if Kathy Bright said she had to remove him from my home? Ripped apart was the simplest answer. The truth was, I didn't care if he was a Martian or not, I was as bonded to him as he was to me.

But out of curiosity, and possibly just to reassure myself that I was imagining things, I logged onto CompuServe. The ISSUES forum has a parenting section. I left a message under the heading, "Is your child a Martian?"

My little boy says he's a Martian. I've heard of two other children who claim to be Martians as well. Has anyone else heard of children who believe that they're from Mars?

Over the course of the next few days -- before the message scrolled off the board and into the bit-bucket -- I received thirty-three replies.

Several of the messages were thoughtful analyses of why a child might say such a thing; it was pretty much what that mother in Phoenix had surmised; it's common for children to fantasize that they have glamorous origins. In the past, children might have believed they were secretly princes and princesses and one day their real parents would arrive to take them to their golden castles. But because that mythology has now been superseded by starships and mutants, it's more appropriate for children to fantasize about traveling away on the Millennium Falcon or the Enterprise. But if a child was experienced enough to know that those stories were just fiction, he would also know that Mars was a real planet; therefore ...

Mars gave credibility to the fantasy. Etcetera. Etcetera. Local mileage may vary, but if the delusion persists, see a good therapist. It may be evidence of some deeper problem. Etcetera some more.

I knew what Dennis's deeper problems were. He'd been bounced around the foster care system for eight years before landing in my arms. He didn't know where he came from or where he belonged.

Several of the replies I received were from other parents sharing pieces of weirdness their own children had demonstrated. Interesting, but not particularly useful to my inquiry.

But ... there were over a dozen private messages.

"My sister's little girl used to insist that she'd been brought to Earth in a UFO and implanted in her mommy's tummy while her mommy was asleep. She kept this up until she was about fourteen, then abruptly stopped. After that, she wouldn't answer questions about it at all."

"My next door neighbors had a boy who said he wasn't from Earth. He disappeared when he was twelve. Without a trace. The police assumed he was kidnapped."

"My ex-wife was a child psychologist. She used to joke about her Martian children. She said she could tell how crazy New York was by the number of Martians she saw in any given year. At first she used to tell the parents that same old same old about children needing to fantasize about a glamorous background, but later on she began to wonder. The stories the kids told were all very similar. They began life as Martian tadpoles brought to Earth and implanted in the uteruses of Earth women. She always wanted to do a study on Martian children, but she could never get a grant."

"I dated a girl once who said she was from Mars . She was very insistent on it. When I tried to get serious with her, she turned me down flat. She said she really liked me, but it wouldn't work out between us. When I asked her why, she said it was because she was from Mars. That's all. I guess Martians have a rule against marrying outside their species."

"I heard about a Martian when I was in high school. He killed himself. I didn't know him. I only heard about it afterward."

"I thought I was from Mars once. I even had memories of being on Mars. It had a pink sky. That's how I knew it was Mars. When the photos came in from JPL showing that Mars really did have a pink sky, just like in my memories, I thought that proved something. When I told my parents, they took me to see a doctor. I was in therapy for a long time, but I'm fine now. Maybe you should get your son into therapy

It was the last one that really got to me. I knew the person who sent it meant to be reassuring, but instead, his message had the opposite effect.

Okay, maybe it's me. Maybe it's because I'm a writer. I read subtext where none is intended. And maybe the cumulative effect of all these messages, especially the wistful, almost plaintive tone of the last one left me with a very uncomfortable feeling.

I replied to all of these messages.

I know this sounds silly, but please indulge me. What did your Martian friend/relative look like? Did he/she have any special physical characteristics or medical problems? What was his/her personality like? Do you know what happened to him other? Does he/she still believe that he/she is from Mars?

It took a week or two to compile the responses. Of the ten Martians specifically mentioned, two had committed suicide. One was successful in business. Three refused to talk about Mars. Two were "cured." The whereabouts of the others were unknown. Three were missing. Two of the missing had been repeated runaways during their teen years. I wondered where they thought they were running to.

Of the ten Martians, six were known to have had golden-brown skin, round faces, brown eyes and very long eyelashes. The hair color was generally dark blond or brown. That was an interesting statistical anomaly.

Of the ten Martians, five were hyperactive, two were epileptic. The other three weren't known.

I asked the fellow whose ex-wife had been a child psychologist if she'd ever noticed any statistical patterns among her Martians. He said he didn't know and he didn't even know her whereabouts anymore. She had disappeared two years earlier.

I called my friend, Steve Barnes. He'd written one of the character references I'd needed to adopt Dennis, and because of that I regarded him as an unofficial godfather to the boy. We chatted about this and that and the other thing for awhile. And then, finally, I said, "Steve -- do you know about the Martian phenomenon?" He didn't. I told him about it. He asked me if I was smoking dope again.

"I'm serious, Steve."

"So am I."

"I haven't touched that crap since I kicked out she-who-must-not-be-named," I said it angrily.

"Just checking. You gotta admit that's a pretty bizarre story, though."

"I know that. That's why I'm telling you. You're one of the few people I know who will actually consider it fairly. Geez -- why is it that science fiction writers are the most skeptical animals of all?"

"Because we get to deal with more crazies than anyone else," Steve replied without missing a beat.

"I don't know what to do with this," I said, admitting my frustration. "I know it sounds like one more crazy UFO mystery. Only this one is something that can actually be validated. This is the kind of statistical anomaly that can't be explained away by coincidence. And I bet there's a lot more to it too. Like, what was the blood type of all those children? What was the position of the Earth and Mars when they were conceived? What was the phase of the moon? What are their favorite foods? How well did they do in school? What if there's something really going on here? -- maybe not Martians, maybe some kind of social phenomenon or syndrome -- I don't know what it is, I don't know what else to ask, and I don't know who to tell. Most of all, I don't want to end up on the front page of the Inquirer. Can't you just see it? `SCI-FI WRITER HAS MARTIAN CHILD!'"

"It might be good for your career," Steve said thoughtfully. "I wonder how many new readers you could pick up."

"Oh, yeah, sure. And I wonder how many old readers I'll lose. I'd like to be taken seriously in my old age, Steve. Remember what happened to what's-his-name."

"I'll never forget old what's-his-name," Steve said. "Yeah, that was a real sad story."

"Anyway ... " I said. "You see my point? Where do I go from here?"

"You want my real advice?" Steve asked. He didn't wait for my reply. "Don't go anywhere with it. Drop it. Let someone else figure it out. Or no one. You said it yourself, David. 'It's almost always dangerous to be right too soon.' Don't go borrowing trouble. Turn it into a story if you must and let people think it's a harmless fantasy. But don't let it screw up your life. You wanted this kid, didn't you? Now you have him. Just parent him. That's the only thing that's really wanted and needed."

He was right. I knew it. But I couldn't accept it. "Sure. That's easy for you to say. You don't have a Martian in the house."

"Yes I do." He laughed. "Only mine's a girl."

"Huh -- ?"

"Don't you get it? All children are Martians. We get thirteen years to civilize the little monsters. After that, it's too late. Then they start eating our hearts out for the rest of our lives."

"You sound like my mother now."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"It's a good thing you don't know her, or you wouldn't say that."

"Listen to me, David," and his tone of voice was so serious that six different jokes died before they could pass my lips. "You're right on schedule. Have you ever really looked at the faces of new parents? Most of them are walking around in a state of shock, wondering what happened -- what is this loathsome reptilian thing that has suddenly invaded their lives? It's part of the process of assimilation. The only difference is that you have a more active imagination than most people. You know how to name your fears. Trust me on this, Toni and I went through it too with Nicki. We thought she was a -- never mind. Just know that this normal. There are days when you are absolutely certain that you've got a cute and stinky little alien in your house."

"But every day?"

"Trust me. It passes. In a year or two, you won't even remember what your life was like before."

"Hmm. Maybe that's how long it takes a Martian to brainwash his human hosts...."

Steve sighed. "You've got it bad."

"Yes, I do," I admitted.

The Martian thing gnawed at me like an ulcer. I couldn't get it out of my head. No matter what we did, the thought was there.

If we went out front to swat koosh-balls back and forth, I wondered if the reason he was having trouble with his coordination was the unfamiliar gravity of Earth. If we went in the back yard and jumped in the pool together, I wondered if his attraction to water was because it was so scarce on Mars. I wondered about his ability to hear a piece of music a single time and still remember the melody so clearly that he could sing it again, note for note, a month later; he would walk through the house singing songs that he could not have heard except on the tapes I occasionally played; how many nine-year-olds know how to sing *My Clone Sleeps Alone* like Pat Benatar? I wondered why he had so little interest in comic books, but loved to watch television dramas about the relationships of human beings. He hated *Star Trek*, he thought it was "too silly." He loved the Discovery channel -- especially all the shows about animals and insects.

There was no apparent pattern to his behavior, nothing that could be pointed to as evidence of otherworldliness. Indeed, the fact that he was making his father paranoid was a very strong argument that he was a normal Earth kid.

And then, just when I'd forgotten ... something would happen. Maybe he'd react to something on television with an off-the-wall comment that would make me look over at him curiously. There was that Bugs Bunny cartoon, for instance, where the rabbit is making life difficult for Marvin the Martian, stealing the eludium-235 detonator so he can't blow up the Earth. In the middle of it, Dennis quietly declared, "No, that's wrong. Martians aren't like that." Then he got up and turned the television set off.

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

"Because it was wrong," he said blandly.

"But it's only a cartoon." One of my favorite cartoons, I might add.

"It's still wrong." And then he turned and went outside as if the whole concept of television would never be interesting to him again.

And now, almost two years to the day since I'd filled out the first application, the nickel finally dropped and I sat up in bed in the middle of the night. Why were so many adopted children hyperactive?

The evidence was all around me. I just hadn't noticed it before. It was there in the photo-listing books. It seemed as if every third child was hyperactive. It was acknowledged in the books, the articles, the seminars, the tapes ... that a higher proportion of foster children have Attention Deficit Disorder, also called Hyperactivity. Why was that?

Some theorists suggested that it was the result of substance abuse by the parents, which is why we saw it more in abandoned and unwanted children. Some doctors believed that hyperactivity was the result of the body's failure to produce certain key enzymes in response to physical stimulation; therefore the child needed to overstimulate himself in order to produce an equivalent amount of calming. Still others postulated that there was an emotional component to the disorder; that it was a response to a lack of nurturing. Most interesting of all to me was the offhand note in one article that some theorists believed that many cases of ADD were actually misdiagnoses. If you were unattached and didn't know who you were or where you had come from or where you were going, you'd have a lot to worry about; your attention might be distracted too.

Or ... what if the behavior that was judged abnormal for Earth children was perfectly normal for Martian children? What if there was no such thing as ADD ... in Martians?

At this point, I'd reached the limits of my ability to research the question. Who could I tell? Who would have the resources to pursue this further? And who would take me seriously?

Suppose I picked up the Los Angeles Times tomorrow and saw that Ben Bova had called a press conference to announce that he'd been kidnapped by aliens and taken into space where they'd performed bizarre sexual experiments on him ... would I believe him? Ben is one of the most believable men in the world. Once, he almost talked me into voting for Ronald Reagan. But if I saw a report like that in the newspaper, the first thing I'd do would be to call Barbara and ask if Ben were all right.

In other words ... there was simply no way for me to research this question without destroying all of my credibility as a writer.

Even worse, there was no way to research it without also destroying my credibility as a parent.

Up until this time, I'd always been candid with the caseworkers and therapists; I'd talked to them about our discipline problems, about my feelings of frustration, about every little step in the right direction and every major victory. But ... suddenly, I realized this was something I couldn't talk to them about. Suppose I called Kathy Bright. What could I say? "Uh, Kathy, it's David. I want to talk to you about Dennis. You know how he says he's a Martian? Well, I think he might really be a Martian and ... "

Uh-huh.

If the adoptive father was starting to have hallucinations about the child, how long would the Department of Children's Services leave the child in that placement? About twenty minutes, I figured. About as long as it took to get out there and pick him up. She'd pull him out of my house so fast they'd be hearing sonic booms in Malibu. And I wouldn't even be able to argue. She'd be right to do so. A child needs a stable and nurturing environment. How stable and nurturing would it be for him to be living with an adult who suspects he's from another planet and is wondering about his ultimate motives.

If I pursued this, I'd lose my son.

The thought was intolerable. I might never recover. I was sure that he wouldn't. For the first time in his

life, he'd finally formed an attachment. What would it do to him to have it broken so abruptly? It would truly destroy his ability to trust any other human being.

I couldn't do that to him. I couldn't do anything that might hurt him.

And what about me? I had my own "attachment issues." I couldn't stand the thought of another failure. Another brick in the wall, as they say.

That was where I stayed stuck for the longest time. I walked around the house in physical pain for three weeks. My chest hurt. My head hurt. My legs hurt. My back hurt. My eyes hurt. My throat hurt. The only part of me that didn't hurt was my brain. That was so numb, I couldn't think.

I didn't know if he was a Martian or not. But something weird was going on. Wasn't it? And if it was just me -- if I was going insane -- then what right do I have to try to parent this child anyway? Either way I lose. If he's a Martian, I can't tell anyone. And if he isn't a Martian, then I'm going crazy.

I started looking for local evidence. I began browsing through my journal. I'd been making daily notes of interesting incidents, in case I ever wanted to write a book about our experiences. At first, I couldn't find anything. Most of the incidents I'd written about were fairly mundane. Not even good Readers` Digest material.

For instance, the week after he moved in, I'd taken him to the baseball game at Dodger Stadium. For the first part of the game, he'd been more interested in having a pennant and getting some cotton candy than in what was going on down on the stadium floor. But along about the fifth inning, he'd climbed up onto my lap and I began explaining the game to him. "See that man at home plate, holding the bat. Wish for him to hit the ball right out of the park."

"Okay," said Dennis.

Cra-a-ack! The ball went sailing straight out into the right field stands. Someone in the lower deck caught it and the runner sauntered easily around the bases while the organist played, "Glory, glory, Hallelujah."

"You're a good wisher, Dennis. That was terrific. Want to try it again?"

"No."

"Okay."

Two innings later, the Dodgers were one run behind. I asked Dennis to wish for hits again. Four pitches later, there were runners at first and third.

It didn't matter to me who came up to bat now; I hadn't remembered the names of any ballplayers since Roy Campanella was catching for Don Drysdale and Sandy Koufax. As far as I was concerned, Who

was on first, What was on second, and I Don't Know still played third. I liked baseball only so long as I didn't have to be an expert; but I'd never seen the Dodgers win a game. Every time I came to the stadium they lost; so I'd made it a point to stay away from Dodger Stadium to give them a fair chance at winning. I didn't expect them to win tonight; but Dennis's wishes had brought them from three runs behind.

"Okay, Dennis," I said, giving him a little squeeze. "It's time for one last wish. See that guy at the home plate, holding the bat. You gotta wish for him to hit a home run. All the way out of the park. Just like before. Okay?"

"Okay."

And just like before -- cra-a-ack -- the ball went sailing deep into right field, triggering a sudden cluster of excited fans scrambling down across the seats.

The Dodgers won that night. All the way home, I kept praising Dennis for his excellent wishing.

A couple of weeks after that, we were stopped at a light, waiting for it to change. It was one of those intersections that existed slightly sideways to reality. Whenever you stopped there, time slowed down to a crawl. Without even thinking, I said, "Dennis, wish for the light to turn green please."

"Okay," he said.

-- and abruptly the light turned green. I frowned. It seemed to me the cycle hadn't quite completed.

Nah. I must have been daydreaming. I eased the car through the intersection. A moment later, we got caught at the next red light. I said a word.

"Why'd you say that?"

"These lights are supposed to be synchronized," I said. "So you only get green ones. We must be out of synch. Why don't you wish for this light to change too please."

"Okay."

-- green.

"Boy! You are really a good wisher."

"Thank you."

A minute later, I said, "Can you wish this light to turn green too?"

"No," he said, abruptly angry. "You're going to use up all my wishes."

"Huh?" I looked over at him.

"I only have so many wishes and you're going to use them all up on stoplights." There was a hurt quality in his voice.

I pulled the car over to the side of the road and stopped. I turned to him and put my hand gently on his shoulder. "Oh, sweetheart. I don't know who told you that, but that's not so. The wish bag is bottomless. You can have as many wishes as you want."

"No, you can't," he insisted. "I have to save my wishes for things that are important."

"What's the most important thing you ever wished for?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

He didn't answer.

"What's the most important wish?" I repeated.

Very softly, he admitted, "I wished for a dad. Someone who would be nice to me."

"Uh-huh. And did you get your wish?"

He nodded.

"So, you see, sweetheart. There's no shortage of miracles."

I didn't know if he believed me. It was still too early in the process. We were still learning who each other was. I noted the conversation in my journal and let the matter slide. But it left me with an uncomfortable feeling. What has to happen to a child to make him believe there's a limit to wishes?

A year later, I looked at the words I'd written glowing on the computer screen, and wondered about Dennis's ability to wish. It was probably a coincidence. But maybe it wasn't. That time we'd matched four out of six numbers in the lottery and won eighty-eight dollars -- was that the week I'd asked him to wish real hard for us to win?

Maybe Martians have precognitive or telekinetic powers ... ?

Dennis likes cleaning things. Without asking, he'll go out and wash the car, or the patio. He'll give the dogs baths. He'll vacuum the rugs and take the Dustbuster to the couch. He'll mop the floors. His favorite toys are a sponge and a squirt-bottle of Simple Green. I've seen him take a rusty old wrench he found in a vacant field and scrub the rust off of it until it shone like new. One night after dinner, after he finished methodically loading the dishwasher, I sat him down at the kitchen table and told him I had a surprise for him.

"What?"

"It's a book of puzzles."

"Oh." He sounded disappointed.

"No, listen. Here's the game. You have twenty minutes to do these puzzles, and then when you finish. I add them up and we'll find out how smart you are. Do you want to do this?"

"It'll really tell you how smart I am?"

"Uh-huh. "

He grabbed for the book and a pencil.

"Wait a minute -- let me set the timer. Okay? Now once you start, you can't stop. You have to go all the way through to the end. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Ready? "

"Ready. "

"One, two, three ... go."

He attacked the first three puzzles with a vengeance. They were simple. Pick the next shape in a series: triangle, square, pentagon ... ? Which object doesn't belong: horse, cow, sheep, scissors? Feather is to Bird as Fur is to: dog, automobile, ice cream ... ?

Then the puzzles started getting harder and he started to frown. He brushed his hair out of his eyes and once he stopped to clean his glasses; but he stayed interested and involved and when the timer went off, he didn't want to stop. He insisted that he be allowed to finish the puzzle he was working on. What the hell. I let him.

"What does it say?" Dennis asked as I computed the percentile. He wanted to grab the test book out of my hand.

"Well ... let me finish here. " I held it out of his reach as I checked the table of percentiles.

The test showed that he had above-average intelligence -- not unexpected; hyperactive kids tend to be brighter than average -- but well within the normal range for a nine-year-old. "It says that you are fifty-two inches high, that you weigh sixty-six pounds, and that your daddy loves you very much. It also says that you are very smart."

"How smart?"

"Well, if this test were given to one hundred children, you would be smarter than ninety-two of them."

"How good is that?"

"That's very good. You can't get much better. And it means we should go out for ice cream after dinner. What do you think?"

"Yeah! "

Oh, that was another thing. He didn't like chocolate. He preferred rainbow sherbet. I'd never seen that in a kid before.

A couple of weeks later, we played another game. I made sure to pick a quiet evening, one with no distractions. "This game is even harder," I explained. "It's a kind of card game," I explained. "See these cards? There are six different shapes here. A circle, a square, a star, three squiggly lines, a cross, and a figure-eight. All you have to do is guess which one I'm looking at. See if you can read my mind, okay?"

He frowned at me, and I had to explain it two or three more times. This was not a game he wanted to play. I said okay and started to put the deck away. If he didn't want to cooperate, the results would be inconclusive. "Can we go for ice cream after we do this?" he asked abruptly.

"Sure," I said.

"Okay, let's do it then."

"All night. We have to do it five times. Do you think you can do it that many times?"

He shrugged. I laid out a paper in front of him, showing him the shapes so he would be able remember them all. I told him he could close his eyes if it would help him concentrate. The test conditions were less than perfect, but if there were any precognitive or telepathic powers present, five trials should be enough to demonstrate them.

Half an hour later, I knew.

Martians aren't telepathic.

But they do like rainbow sherbet. A lot.

There were other tests. Not many. Not anything too weird. Just little ones that might indicate if there was something worth further investigation. There wasn't. As near as I could determine, there was nothing so unusual about Dennis that it would register as a statistical anomaly in a repeatable testable circumstance. He couldn't levitate. He couldn't move objects. He couldn't make things disappear. He didn't know how to grok. He could only hold his breath for thirty-three seconds. He couldn't think muscles. He couldn't see around comers.

But --

He could predict elevators. Take him into any building, anywhere. Take him to the elevator bank. Let him push the up button. Don't say a word. Without fail, the door he stands in front of will be the one where the first elevator arrives. Was he wishing them or predicting them? I don't know. It's useful only at science fiction conventions, which are legendary for recalcitrant elevators. It has little value anywhere else in the world.

He could make stop lights turn green -- sometimes. Mostly, he waited until he saw the lights for the cross street turn yellow before he announced his wish. Maybe he could still make the Dodgers score four runs in two innings -- but it wasn't consistent. We went back to Dodger Stadium in May, and either Dennis wasn't wishing or he really had used up all his wishes.

He could sing with perfect pitch, especially if the lyrics were about Popeye's gastrointestinal distress. He could play a video game for four hours straight without food or water. He could invent an amazing number of excuses for not staying in bed. He could also hug my neck so hard that once I felt a warning crack in my trachea. My throat hurt for a week afterward.

I began to think that maybe I had imagined the whole thing.

On school nights, I tucked him in at 9:30. We had a whole ritual. If there was time, we read a storybook together; whatever was appropriate. Afterward, prayers --

"I'm sorry God for ... I didn't do anything to be sorry for."

"How about sassing your dad? Remember you had to take a timeout?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm sorry God for sassing my dad. Thank you God for ... um, I can't think of anything."

"Going swimming."

"No. Thank you God for Calvin, my cat."

"Good. Anything else you want to say to God?"

"Does God hear the prayers of Martians?"

"Uh ... of course he does. God hears everybody's prayers."

"Not Martians."

"Yes, even Martians."

"Uh-uh."

"Why do you say no?"

"Because God didn't make any Martians."

"If God didn't make the Martians, then who did?"

"The devil."

"Did the devil make you?"

"Uh-huh."

"How do you know?"

"Because ... I'm a Martian."

"Mm," I said, remembering a little speech I'd made just about a year ago. Let it be all right for him to be a Martian for as long as he needs to be. "All right," I said. "But let me tell you a secret," I whispered. "The devil didn't make any Martians. That's just a lie the devil wants you to believe. God made the Martians."

"Really? "

"Cross my heart and hope to die. Stick a noodle in my eye."

"How do you know?" He was very insistent.

"Because I talk to God every night," I said. "Just like you, I say my prayers. And God made everything in the world."

"But Martians aren't from this world -- "

"That's right. But God made Mars too. And everything on it. Just like she made this world, she made a whole bunch of others, and Mars was one of them. Honest."

"How come you say `she' when you talk about God?"

"Because sometimes God is female and sometimes God is male. God is everything. And now it's time for you to stop asking questions and go to sleep. Hugs and kisses -- ? "

"Hugs and kisses."

"G'night. No more talking."

"I love you."

"I love you too. Now no more talking."

"Dad?"

"What?"

"I have to tell you something."

"What? "

"I love you."

"I love you too. Now, shhh. No more talking, Dennis."

"G'night."

"Sleep tight -- "

Finally, I got smart. I stopped answering. Control freaks. We each wanted to have the last word.

I padded barefoot down the hall. I stopped in the living room long enough to turn off the television set, the VCR, and the surround-sound system. I continued on through the dining room and finally to my office. Two computers sat on my desk, both showing me that it was 9:47. The monster-child had manipulated an extra seventeen minutes tonight.

I sat down in my chair, leaned back, put my feet up on my desk, and stared out at the dark waters of the swimming pool in the back yard . The pool glowed with soft blue light. The night was ... silent. Somewhere, a dog, barked.

Somewhere -- that was his name, yes; he was a writer's dog -- lived under my desk. Whenever I said, "Let's go to work," wherever he was in the house, Somewhere would pick himself up and laboriously pad-pad-pad into my office where he'd squelch himself flat and scrooch his way under the desk, with a great impassioned Jewish sigh of, "I hope you appreciate what I do for you. `

He'd stay there all day -- as long as the computer was on. Somewhere would only come out for two things: cookies and the doorbell...and the doorbell was broken. It had been broken for as long as I'd lived in this house. I'd never had the need to get it fixed. If someone came to the door, the dog barked.

Somewhere, the dog, barked.

That was why I loved him so much. He was a living cliché. He was the only possible justification for one of the most infamous sentences in bad writing. It was just a matter of placing the commas correctly.

Somewhere had just enough intelligence to keep out of the way and more than enough intelligence to find his dinner dish -- as long as no one moved it. He spent his mornings resting under my desk, his afternoons snoozing behind the couch, his evenings snoring next to Dennis; he spent the hours before dawn in the dark space underneath the headboard of my bed, dreaming about the refrigerator.

Almost every night, just as Dennis began saying his prayers, Somewhere would come sighing down the hall, a shaggy, absent-minded canine-American. He'd step over everything that was in his way, uncaring if he knocked over a day's worth of Lego construction. He'd climb onto the bed, over my lap, over Dennis, grumbling softly as he found his position next to Dennis. With his prehensile tongue, he could slurp the inside of Dennis's right ear from the left side of his head, taking either the internal or external route.

Tonight, though, he knew I wasn't finished working. I had some serious thinking to do. He remained under the desk, sighing about the overtime. "You're in super-golden hours," I said to him; he shut up.

Whenever I'm in doubt about something, I sit down and start writing. I write down everything I'm feeling or thinking or worrying about. I say everything there is to say until there's nothing left to say. The first time I did this was the day after my dad died. I sat and wrote for two days. When I was finished, I had a Nebula nominated story, *In the Deadlands*. To this day I still don't fully understand what the story was about, but the emotional impact of it is undeniable. It still gives me the shudders.

But the lesson I learned from that experience was the most important thing I've ever learned about storytelling. Effective writing isn't in the mechanics. Anyone can master the mechanical act of stringing together words and sentences and paragraphs to make a character move from A to B. The bookstores are full of evidence. But that's not writing. Writing isn't about the words, it's about the experience. It's about the feeling that the story creates inside of you. If there's no feeling, there's no story.

But sometimes, there's only the feeling without any meaning or understanding. And that's not a story either. What I was feeling about Dennis was so confusing and troubling and uncertain that I couldn't even begin to sort it out. I needed to write down all the separate pieces -- as if in the act of telling, it would sort itself out. Sometimes the process worked.

When I looked up again, three hours had passed. My back and shoulders ached. The dog had gone to bed, and I felt I had accomplished nothing at all except to delineate the scale of my frustration.

Why would an alien species come to this planet? The last time I spent that much time on this question, I came up with giant pink man-eating slugs in search of new flavors. Why would Martians send their children to Earth?

The most logical idea that I came up with was that they were here as observers. Spies.

Haven't you ever been pulling on your underwear and realized that your dog or your cat is watching you? Haven't you ever considered the possibility that the creature is sharing your secrets with some secret network of dogs and cats? "Oh, you think that's weird? My human wears underwear with pictures of Rocky and Bullwinkle on them."

But dogs and cats are limited in what they can observe. If you really want to know a culture, you have to be a member of it. But an alien couldn't step in and pretend to be a member of this culture, could he? He'd have to learn. He'd have to be taught....

Where could a Martian go to get lessons in being a human? Who gives lessons in human beingness?

Mommies and Daddies. That's right.

"You're too paranoid," my sane friend said. He asked me to leave his name out of this narrative, so I'll just call him my sane friend.

"What do you mean?"

"You think that aliens are all motivated by evil intentions. You've written four novels about evil aliens eating our children, and you're working on a fifth. Isn't it possible that you're wrong?"

"Moi? Wrong?"

"Do you ever think about the cuckoo?" my sane friend asked.

"No," I said.

"Well, think about the cuckoo for a moment."

"Okay."

"How do you feel about the cuckoo?" he asked.

"It's an evil bird," I said. "It lays its egg in the sparrow's nest. The cuckoo chick pushes the other babies out of the nest. The sparrow ends up raising it -- even at the expense of her own young. It's a parasite."

"See, that's your judgment talking -- "

"That's the truth -- " I started to object.

"Is it? Is that what you tell Dennis about his birth-mother?"

"Uh -- I tell him that his birth-mom couldn't take care of him. And that she loves him and misses him. And that's the truth. Sort of ... whitewashed."

My sane friend grinned at me.

"Okay," I admitted. "I'm protective of my son. So what?"

My sane friend shrugged. "How do you think the cuckoo feels?"

"Birds don't feel."

"If it could feel, how do you think it would feel?"

I thought about it. The first image that came to mind was the silly little bird from the Dr. Seuss story; the one who flew off, leaving Horton the elephant to hatch her egg. I shook my head. "I'm not getting anything useful -- ~}

"How do you think Dennis's mother feels?"

I shook my head again. "Everything I've heard about her ... I can't empathize."

"All right, try it this way. Under what circumstances would you give Dennis up?"

"I'd die before I'd give him up," I said. "He makes me happier than anybody I've ever known before. Just looking at him, I get an endorphin rush. If anybody started proceedings to take him out of my home, I'd have him on a plane to New Zealand so fast -- " I stopped. "Oh, I see what you mean." I thought about it. "If I wasn't able to take care of him, or if I thought I was hurting him, or if I thought I wasn't doing a good enough job -- " There was that old familiar twinge again. "If I thought he'd really be better off with someone else, I'd want him to have the best chance possible. But I just can't see that happening."

"Uh-huh...." My sane friend grinned. "Now, how do you think the Martians feel?"

"Huh?"

He repeated the question.

I thought about it for a while. "I'd have to assume that if they have the capability to implant their children in human wombs that they would have a highly developed science and technology and that implies -- to me anyway -- a highly developed emotional structure and probably a correspondingly well-developed moral structure as well. At least, that's what I'd like to believe."

"And if what you believe is true ... " he started to say.

I finished the thought for him. " ... then the Martians are trusting us with their children."

"Aren't they?" he asked.

I didn't answer. I didn't like where that train of thought might lead. But I followed it anyway.

"Would you trust your child to apes or wolves?" my sane friend asked. "No," I said. "You know what happens to feral children."

He nodded. "I've read the same books you have."

"So, if the Martians are trusting us with their children ... then that implies that either they don't care about their children very much -- or they do."

"You want my best guess?"

"This is where you resolve everything for me, isn't it?"

"No. This is where I tell you what I think. I think they're engaged in a long-term breeding experiment ... to upgrade the level of intelligence and compassion in the human race."

"Yeah?" I gave him my best raised-eyebrow look. "Remember what happened to Spock? He was a half-breed too. His parents wanted to breed a logical human. Instead, they got an emotional Vulcan."

"Have you got a better guess?"

"No," I admitted. "But what kind of Martians are we raising?"

"What kind of Martian are you raising?" he corrected.

And that really did it for me. That was the question. "I don't know," I finally admitted. "But -- he is mine to raise, isn't he?"

"Yep," my sane friend agreed.

That thought echoed for a long long moment. Finally, I acknowledged the truth of it with a grin. "Yeah," I said. "I can live with that...."

As a literary puzzle, this is incomplete. As a story, it doesn't work. There's no ending.

There isn't enough evidence for me to even suggest a conclusion. What do we know about the Martians? For that matter, what do we really know about ourselves? There's nothing to extrapolate. And if the Martians are really engaged in some kind of large-scale genetic engineering we won't really know what their intentions are until the Martian children start reaching adulthood. Dennis will be old enough to vote in 2005. And that raises another question. How long have the Martians been planting their babies in human homes? Maybe we already live in a Martian-influenced world?)

Maybe the Martian children will be super geniuses, inventing cold fusion and silicon sentience and nanotechnological miracles -- Stephen Hawking and Buckminster Fuller. Maybe they'll be spiritual saviors, bringing such superior technology of consciousness that those of us brave enough to follow will achieve the enlightenment of saints. Maybe they'll be demagogues and dictators. Or maybe they'll be madmen and all end up in institutions. And maybe they'll be monsters, giving us a new generation of serial killers and cult-leaders -- Jack the Ripper and Charles Manson.

All we can do is wait and see how it works out.

There's one more thing.

In reviewing the material for this story, I came across a curious coincidence. Kathy Bright had given me several huge stacks of reports on Dennis, written by various therapists and counselors. I hadn't had time to read them all, and after the first few, I stopped -- I didn't want their experience of Dennis; I wanted to make up my own mind. But as I paged through the files, looking for Martian stuff, one of them caught my eye. On Saturday, June 27th, 1992, Carolyn Green (the counselor on his case at the time) had noted, "Dennis thinks God doesn't hear his prayers, because he wished for a dad and nothing happened."

I first saw Dennis's picture on Saturday, June 27th, 1992, at about two in the afternoon. According to Carolyn Green's report, that was the exact time of his weekly session. I cannot help but believe that he was wishing for a dad at the exact moment I first saw his picture. A Martian wish. Was that what I felt so strongly?

Does it mean anything? Maybe. Maybe not. In any case, I know better than to argue with Martian wishes. Tonight, at bed time, he wished for me to be happy.

I had to smile. "Was that a Martian wish?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, in a voice that left no room for disagreement.

"Then, I'm happy," I said. And in fact, I was.

I hadn't realized it before, because I hadn't acknowledged it, not even to myself; but as I walked back down the hall to my office, I had to admit that I was glowing. I'd gotten everything I'd wanted, a wonderful son, a profound sense of family, a whole new reason for waking up in the morning. So what if he's a Martian, it really doesn't matter, does it? He's my son, and I love him. I'm not giving him up. He's special.

When Dennis puts his mind to it, he can predict elevators and make stoplights turn green and help the Dodgers win baseball games. He can make lottery tickets pay off (a little bit, four numbers at a time) and he can wish a father into his life. That's pretty powerful stuff.

I think we might experiment with that a little bit more. We haven't bought any lottery tickets in a while. Maybe we should buy a couple tonight. And if that works, who knows what else he could wish for. I was thinking of asking him to wish for a Hugo award for his dad -- just a test, you understand -- but this morning, he announced he was going to wish for a mom instead. I'll be very interested to see how that one works out.

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD:

This story is, to the best of my knowledge, a work of fiction.

Yes, I have an adopted son. Yes, his name is Dennis. No, he is not a Martian.

I asked him if he was. He said he wasn't. Then he came over and whispered in my ear, "I said no because we're not supposed to tell."