

Operation Stinky
Clifford D Simak

I was sitting on the back stoop of my shack, waiting for the je with the shotgun at my right hand and a bottle at my left, whe the dogs began the ruckus.

I took a quick swig from the bottle and lumbered to my fee

I grabbed a broom and went around the house.

From the way that they were yapping, I knew the dogs hE cornered one of the skunks again and those skunks were jitte enough from the jets without being pestered further.

I walked through the place where the picket fence had fall~ down and peered around the corner of the shack. It was getth dusk, but I could see three dogs circling the lilac thicket an from the sound of it, another had burrowed half-way into it. knew that if I didn't put an end to it, all hell was bound to po

I tried to sneak up on them, but I kept stumbling over old t cans and empty bottles and I decided then and there, con morning, I'd get that yard cleaned up. I had studied on doing before, but it seemed there always was some other thing to d

With all the racket I was making, the three dogs outside tt thicket scooted off, but the one that had pushed into the lila, was having trouble backing out. I zeroed in on him and smackc him dead centre with the broom. The way he got out of therewell, he was one of those loose-skinned dogs and for a second, swear, it looked like he was going to leave without his hide.

He was yelping and howling and he came popping out like cork out of a bottle and he ran straight between my legs. I tri to keep my balance, but I stepped on an empty can and sat down undignified. The fall knocked the breath out of me and I seemed to have some trouble getting squared around so I could get on my feet again.

While I was getting squared around, a skunk walked out of the lilac bush and came straight toward me. I tried to shoo him off, but he wouldn't shoo. He was waving his tail and he seemed happy to find me there and he walked right up and rubbed against me, purring very loudly.

I didn't move a muscle. I didn't even bat my eyes. I figured if

I didn't move, he might go away. The skunks had been living under the shack for the last three years or so and we got along fine but we had never been what you'd call real close. I'd left them alone and they'd left me alone and we both were satisfied.

But this happy little critter apparently had made up his mind that I was a friend. Maybe he was just plumb grateful to me for running off the dogs.

He walked around me, rubbing against me, and then he climbed up in my lap and put his feet against my chest and looked me in the face. I could feel his body vibrating with the purring noise that he was making.

He kept standing there, with his feet against my chest, looking in my face, and his purring kept getting soft and loud, fast and slow. His ears stood straight up, like he expected me to purr back at him, and all the time his tail kept up its friendly waving.

Finally I reached up a hand, very gingerly, and patted him on the head and he didn't seem to mind. I sat there quite a while patting him and him purring at me, and he still was friendly.

So I took a chance and pushed him off my lap.

After a couple of tries, I made it to my feet and walked around the shack, with the skunk following at my heels.

I sat down on the stoop again and reached for the bottle and took a healthy swig, which I really needed after all I had been through, and while I had the bottle tilted, the jet shot across the treeline to the east and zoomed above my clearing and the whole place jumped a foot or two.

I dropped the bottle and grabbed the gun, but the jet was gone before I got the barrel up.

I put down the gun and did some steady cussing.

I had told the colonel only the day before that if that jet ever flew that close above my shack again, I'd take a shot at it and I meant every'word of it.

"It don't seem right," I told him. "A man settles down and builds himself a shack and is living peaceable and contented and ain't bothering no one. Then the government comes in and builds an air base just a couple miles away and there ain't no peace no more, with them jets flying no more than stove-pipe high. Sometimes at night they bring a man plumb out of bed, standing to attention in the middle of the room, with his bare feet on the cold floor."

The colonel had been real nice about it. He had pointed out how we had to have air bases, how our lives depended on the planes that operated out of them and how hard he was trying to arrange the flight patterns so they wouldn't upset folks who lived around the base.

I had told him how the jets were stirring up the skunks and he hadn't laughed, but had been sympathetic, and he told me how, when he was a boy in Texas, he had trapped a lot of skunks. I explained that I wasn't trapping these skunks, but that they were, you might say, sort of living with me, and how I had become attached to them, how I'd lay awake at night and listen ;~ to them moving around underneath the shack and when I heard them, I knew I wasn't alone, but was sharing my home with others of God's creatures.

But even so, he wouldn't promise that the jets would stop flying over my place and that was when I told him I'd take a shot at the next one that did.

So he pulled a book out of his desk and read me a law that said it was illegal to shoot at any aircraft, but he didn't scare me none.

So what happens when I lay for a jet ? It passes over while
I'm taking me a drink.

I quit my cussing when I remembered the bottle, and when I thought of it, I could hear it gurgling. It had rolled underneath the steps and I couldn't get at it right away and I almost went mad listening to it gurgle.

Finally I laid down on my belly and reached underneath the steps and got it, but it had gurgled dry. I tossed it out into the yard and sat down on the steps glum.

The skunk came out of the darkness and climbed the stairs and sat down beside me. I reached out and patted him kind of absent-minded and he purred back at me. I stopped fretting about the bottle.

"You sure are a funny skunk," I said. "I never knew skunks purred."

We sat there for a while and I told him all about my trouble with the jets, the way a man will when there's nobody better around than an animal to do the listening, and sometimes even when there is.

I wasn't afraid of him no more and I thought how fine it was that one of them had finally gotten friendly. I wondered if maybe, now that the ice was broken, some of them might not come in and live with me instead of living under the shack.

Then I got to thinking what a story I'd have to tell the boys down at the tavern. Then I realized that no matter how much I swore to it, they wouldn't believe a word of what I said. So I decided to take the proof along.

I picked up the friendly skunk and I said to it: "Come along.

I want to show you to the boys."

I bumped against a tree and got tangled up in an old piece of chicken wire out in the yard, but finally made it out front where

I had Old Betsy parked.

Betsy wasn't the newest or the best car ever made, but she was the most faithful that any man could want. Me and her had been through a lot together and we understood each other. We had a sort of bargain--I polished and fed her and she took me where I wanted to go and always brought me back. No reasonable man can ask more of a car than that.

I patted her on the fender and said good evening to her, put the skunk in the front seat and climbed in myself.

Betsy didn't want to start. She'd rather just stayed home. But I talked to her and babied her and she finally started, shaking and shivering and flapping her fenders.

I eased her into gear and headed her out into the road.

"Now take it easy," I told her. "The state coppers have got themselves a speed trap set up somewhere

along this stretch and we don't want to take no chances."

Betsy took it slow and gentle down to the tavern and I parked her there and tucked the skunk under my arm and went into the place.

Charley was behind the bar and there were quite a lot of customers--Johnny Ashland and Skinny Patterson and Jack

O'Neill and half-a-dozen others.

I put the skunk on the bar and it started walking toward them, just like it was eager to make friends with them.

They took one look and they made foxholes under chairs and tables. Charley grabbed a bottle by the neck and backed into a corner.

"Asa," he yelled, "you take that thing out of here !"

"It's all right," I told him. "It's a friendly cuss."

"Friendly or not, get the hell out with it!"

"Get it out?" yelled all the customers.

I was plenty sore at them. Imagine being upset at a friendly skunk !

But I could see I was getting nowhere, so I picked it up and took it out to Betsy. I found a gunny sack and made a nest and told it to stay right there, that I'd be right back.

It took me longer than I had intended, for I had to tell my story and they asked a lot of questions and made a lot of jokes and they wouldn't let me buy, but kept them set up for me.

When I went out, I had some trouble spotting Betsy and then I had to set a course to reach her. It took a little time, but after tacking back and forth before the wind, I finally got close enough in passing to reach out and grab her.

I had trouble getting in because the door didn't work the way it should, and when I got ill, I couldn't find the key. When I found it, I dropped it on the floor, and when I reached down to get it, I fell flat upon the seat. It was so comfortable there that I decided it was foolish to get up. I'd just spend the night there.

While I was lying there, Betsy's engine started and I chuckled.

Betsy was disgusted and was going home without me. That's the kind of car she was. Just like a wife'd act.

She backed out and made a turn and headed for the road. At the road, she stopped and looked for other cars, then went out on the highway, heading straight for home.

I wasn't worried any. I knew I could trust Betsy. We'd been through a lot together and she was intelligent, although I couldn't remember she'd ever gone home all by herself before.

I lay there and thought about it and the wonder of it was, I told myself, that it hadn't happened long before.

A man is as close to no machine as he is to his car. A man gets to understand his car and his car gets to understand him and after a time a real affection must grow up between them. So it seemed absolutely natural to me that the day had to come when a car could be trusted just the way a horse or dog is, and that a good car should be as loyal and faithful as any dog or horse.

I lay there feeling happy and Betsy went head high down the road and turned in at the driveway.

But we had no more than stopped when there was a squeal of brakes and I heard a car door open and someone jump out on the gravel.

I tried to get up, but I was a bit slow about it and someone jerked the door open and reached in and grabbed me by the collar and hauled me out.

The man wore the uniform of a state trooper and there was another trooper just a little way away and the police car there with its red light flashing. I wondered why I had noticed it had been following us and then remembered I'd lying down.

"Who was driving that car?" barked the cop who holding me.

Before I could answer, the other cop looked inside Betsy and jumped back about a dozen feet.

"Slade !" he yelled. "There's a skunk in there !"

"Don't tell me", said Slade, "that the skunk was drivin

And the other one said, "At least the skunk is sober."

"You leave that skunk alone r' I told them. "He's a friend o mine. He isn't bothering no one."

I gave a jerk and Slade's hand slipped from my collar lunged for Betsy. My chest hit the seat and I grabbe steering post and tried to pull myself inside.

Betsy started up with a sudden roar and her wheels gravel that hit the police car like machine-gun fire. She lu forward and crashed through the picket fence, curving fi road. She smashed into the lilac thicket and went through

I was brushed off.

I lay there, all tangled up with the smashed-down lilac 1: and watched Betsy hit the road and keep on going. Sh done the best she could, I consoled myself. She had tried rescue me and it wasn't her fault that I had failed to hang her. Now she had to make a run for it herself. And she se to be doing pretty well. She sounded and went like she h engine off a battleship inside her.

The two state troopers jumped into their car and took pursuit and I settled down to figure out how to untangle r from the lilac thicket.

I finally managed it and went over to the front steps shack and sat down. I got to thinking about the fenc decided it wasn't worth repairing. I might just as well up: and use what was left of it for kindling.

And I wondered about Betsy and what might be happening to her, but I wasn't really worried. I was pretty sure she could take care of herself.

I was right about that, for in a little while the state troopers came back again and parked in the driveway. They saw me sitting on the steps and came over to me.

"Where's Betsy ?" I asked them.

"Betsy who ?" Slade asked.

"Betsy is the car," I said.

Slade swore. "Got away. Travelling without lights at a hundred miles an hour. It'll smash into something, sure as hell."

I shook my head at that. "Not Betsy. She knows all the roads for fifty miles around."

Slade thought I was being smart. He grabbed me and jerked me to my feet. "You got a lot to explain." He shoved me at the other trooper and the other trooper caught me. "Toss him in the back seat, Ernie, and let's get going."

Ernie didn't seem to be as sore as Slade. He said: "This way, Pop."

Once they got me in the car, they didn't want to talk with me.

Ernie rode in back with me and Slade drove. We hadn't gone a mile when I dozed off.

When I woke up, we were just pulling into the parking area in front of the state police barracks. I got out and tried to walk, but one ~ them got on each side of me and practically dragged me along.

We went into a sort of office with a desk, some chairs and a bench. A man sat behind the desk.

"What you got there ?" he asked.

"Damned if I know," said Slade, all burned up. "You won't believe it, Captain."

Ernie took me over to a chair and sat me down. "I'll get you some coffee, Pop. We want to talk with you. We have to get you

Sober."

I thought that was nice of him.

I drank a lot of coffee and I began to see a little better things were in straight lines instead of going round in circles things I could see, that is. It was different when I tried to thi~

Things that had seemed okay before now seemed mighty que~ like Betsy going home all by herself, for instance.

Finally they took me over to the desk and the captain ask me a lot of questions about who I was and how old I was a~ where I lived, until eventually we got around to what was, their minds.

I didn't hold back anything. I told them about the jets a the skunks and the talk I had with the colonel. I told them abe the dogs and the friendly skunk and how Betsy had got d gusted with me and gone home by herself.

"Tell me, Mr. Bayles," said the captain, "are you a mechanic?"

I know you told me you are a day labourer and work anything that you can get. But I wonder if you might not tinn around in your spare time, working on your car."

"Captain," I told him truthfully, "I wouldn't know whi end of a wrench to grab hold of."

"You never worked on Betsy, then ?"

"Just took good care of her."

"Has anyone else ever worked on her ?"

"I wouldn't let no one lay a hand on her."

"Then you can't explain how that car could possibly oper by itself?"

"No, sir. Betsy is a smart car, Captain"

"You're sure you weren't driving?"

"I wasn't driving. I was just taking it easy while Betsy tc me home."

The captain threw down his pencil in disgust. "I give up!"

He got up from the desk. "I'm going out and make so more coffee," he said to Slade. "You see what you can do.

"There's one thing," Ernie said to Slade as the captain l

"The skunk "

"What about the skunk ?"

"Skunks don't wave their tails," said Ernie. "Skunks don't purr."

"This skunk did," Slade said sarcastically. "This was a special skunk. This was a ring-tailed wonder of a skunk.

Besides, the skunk hasn't got a thing to do with it. He was just out for a ride."

"You boys haven't got a little nip ?" I asked. I was feeling mighty low.

"Sure," said Ernie. He went to a locker in one corner of the room and took out a bottle.

Through the windows, I could see that the east was beginning to brighten. Dawn wasn't far away.

The telephone rang. Slade picked it up.

Ernie motioned to me and I walked across to where he stood by the locker. He handed me the bottle.

"Take it easy, Pop," he advised me. "You don't want to hang one on again."

I took it easy. About a tumbler and a half, I'd reckon.

Slade hollered, "Hey!" at us.

"What's going on ?" asked Ernie.

He took the bottle from me, not by force exactly, but almost.

"A farmer found the car," said Slade. "It took a shot at his dog."

"It took a what--a shot at his dog ?" Ernie stuttered.

"That's what the fellow says. Went out to get in the cows.

Early. Going fishing and was anxious to get the morning chores done. Found what he thought was an abandoned car at the end of a lane."

"And the shot ?"

"I'm coming to that. Dog ran up barking. The car shot out a spark--a big spark. It knocked the dog over. He got up and ran.

Car shot out another spark. Caught him in the rump. Fellow says the pooch is blistered."

Slade headed for the door. "Come on, the both of you."

"We may need you, Pop," said Ernie.

We ran and piled into the car.

"Where is this farm ?" asked Eruie.

"Out west of the air base," said Slade.

The farmer was waiting for us at the barnyard gate. He jumped in when Slade stopped.

"The car's still there," he said. "I been watching. It hasn't come out."

"Any other way it could get out ?"

"Nope. Woods and fields is all. That lane is dead end."

Slade grunted in satisfaction. He drove down the road and ran the police car across the mouth of the lane, blocking it entirely.

"We walk from here," he said.

"Right around that bend," the farmer told us.

We walked around the bend and saw it was Betsy, all right.

"That's my car," I said.

"Let's scatter out a bit," said Slade. "It might start shooting at us."

He loosened the gun in his holster.

"Don't you go shooting up my car," I warned him, but he paid me no mind.

Like he said, we scattered out a bit, the four of us, and went toward the car. It seemed funny that we should be acting that way, as if Betsy was an enemy and we were stalking her.

She looked the same as ever, just an old beat-up jalopy that had a lot of sense and a lot of loyalty. And I kept thinking about how she always got me places and always got me back.

Then all at once she charged us. She was headed in the wrong direction and she was backing up, but she charged us just the same.

She gave a little leap and was running at full speed and going faster every second and I saw Slade pull his gun.

I jumped out, in the middle of the lane and waved my arms. I didn't trust that Slade. I was afraid that if I couldn't get Betsy stopped, he'd shoot her full of holes.

But Betsy didn't stop. She kept right on charging us and she was going faster than an old wreck like her had any right to go.

"Jump, you fool !" shouted Ernie. "She'll run over you !"

I jumped, but my heart wasn't in the jump. I thought that if things had come to the pass where Betsy'd run me down there wasn't too much left for me to go on living for.

I stubbed my toe and fell flat on my face, but even while I was falling, I saw Betsy leave the ground as if she was going to leap over me. I knew right away that I'd never been in any danger, that Betsy never had any intention of hitting me at all.

She sailed right up into the sky, with her wheels still spinning, as if she was backing up a long, steep hill that was invisible.

I twisted around and sat up and stared at her and she sure was a pretty sight. She was flying just like an airplane. I was downright proud of her.

Slade stood with his mouth open and his gun hanging at his side. He never even tried to fire it. He probably forgot that he even had a gun in his hand.

Betsy went up above the treeline and the sun made her sparkle and gleam--I'd polished her only the week before last--and I thought how swell it was she had learned to fly.

It was then I saw the jet and I tried to yell a warning for Betsy, but my mouth dried up like there was alum in it and the yell wouldn't come out.

It didn't take more than a second, probably, although it seemed to me' that days passed while Betsy hung there and the jet hung there and I knew they would crash.

Then there were pieces flying all over the sky and the jet was smoking and heading for a cornfield off to the left of us.

I sat there limp in the middle of the lane and watched the pieces that had been Betsy falling back to earth and ! felt sick.

It was an awful thing to see.

The pieces came down and you could hear them falling, thudding on the ground, but there was one piece that didn't fall as fast as the others. It just seemed to glide.

I watched, wondering why it glided while all the other pieces fell and I saw it was a fender and that it seemed to be rocking back and forth, as if it wanted to fall, too, only something held it back.

It glided down to the ground near the edge of the woods. It landed easy and rocked a little, then tipped over. And when it tipped over, it spilled something out of it. The thing got up and shook itself and trotted straight into the woods. It was the friendly skunk!

By this time, everyone was running. Ernie was running for the farmhouse to phone the base about the jet and Slade and the farmer were running toward the cornfield, where the jet had ploughed a path in the

corn wide enough to haul a barn through.

I got up and walked off the lane to where I had seen some pieces falling. I found a few of them--a headlight, the lens not even broken, and a wheel, all caved in and twisted, and the radiator ornament. I knew it was no use. No one could ever get

Betsy back together.

I stood there with the radiator ornament in my hand and thought of all the good times Betsy and I had had together--how she'd take me to the tavern and wait until I was ready to go home, and how we'd go fishing and eat a picnic lunch together, and how we'd go up north deer hunting in the fall.

While I was standing there, Slade and the farmer came down from the cornfield with the pilot walking between them. He was sort of rubber-legged and they were holding him up. He had a glassy look in his eyes and he was babbling a bit.

When they reached the lane, they let loose of him and he sat down heavily.

"When the hell", he asked them, "did they start making flying cars?"

They didn't answer him. Instead, Slade yelled at me, "Hey, Pop! You leave that wreckage alone. Don't touch none of it."

"I got a right to touch it," I told him. "It's my car."

"You leave it alone! There's something funny going on here.

That junk might tell us what it is if no one monkeys with it."

So I dropped the radiator ornament and went back to the lane.

The four of us sat down and waited. The pilot seemed to be all right. He had a cut above one eye and some blood had run down across his face, but that was all that was the matter with him. He asked for a cigarette and Slade gave him one and lit it.

Down at the end of the lane, we heard Ernie backing the police car out of the way. Pretty soon he came walking up to us.

"They'll be here right away."

He sat down with us. We didn't say anything about what had happened. I guess we were all afraid to talk.

In less than fifteen minutes, the air base descended on us.

First there was an ambulance and they loaded the pilot aboard and left in a lot of dust.

Behind the ambulance was a fire rig and behind the fire rig was a jeep with the colonel in it. Behind the colonel's jeep were other jeeps and three or four trucks, all loaded with men, and in less time that it takes to tell it, the place was swarming.

The colonel was red in the face and you could see he was upset. After all, why wouldn't he be? This was the first time a plane had ever collided in mid-air with a car.

The colonel came tramping up to Slade and he started hollering at Slade and Slade hollered right back at him and I wondered why they were sore at one another, but that wasn't it at all. That was just the way they talked when they got excited.

All around, there was a lot of running here and there and a lot more hollering, but it didn't last too long. Before the colonel got through yelling back and forth with Slade, the entire area was ringed in with men and the situation was in Air Force hands.

When the colonel finished talking with Slade, he walked over to me.

"So it was your car," he said. The way he said it, you'd thought it was my fault.

"Yes, it was," I told him, "and I'm going to sue you. It was a darn good car."

The colonel went on looking at me as if I had no right to live then suddenly seemed to recognize me.

"Say, wait a minute," he said. "Weren't you in to see me the other day?"

"I sure was. I told you about my skunks. It was one of them that was in Old Betsy."

"Hold up there, old-timer," said the colonel. "You lost

Let's hear that again."

"Old Betsy was the car," I explained, "and the skunk was her. When your jet crashed into it, he rode a fender down."

"You mean the skunk--the fender--the "

"It just sort of floated down," I finished telling him.

"Corporal," the colonel said to Slade, "have you further 1 for this man ?"

"Just drunkenness," said Slade. "Not worth mentioning."

"I'd like to take him back to the base with me."

"I'd appreciate it," Slade said in a quivery kind of voice

"Come on, then," said the colonel and I followed him to jeep.

We sat in the back seat and a soldier drove and he di> waste no time. The colonel and I didn't talk much. We2 hung on and hoped that we'd live through it. At least, that's way I felt.

Back at the base, the colonel sat down at his desk pointed at a chair for me to sit in. Then he leaned back studied me. I was sure glad I had done nothing wrong, for way he looked at me, I'd just have had to up and confess it iff

"You said some queer things back there," the colt started. "Now suppose you just rear back comfortable in ! chair and tell me all abot~t it, not leaving out a thing."

So I told him all about it and I went into a lot of detai explain my viewpoint and he didn't interrupt, but just listening. He was the best listener I ever ran across.

"Let's get a few points down," he said. "You say the car had never operated by itself before ?"

"Not that I know of," I answered honestly. "It might have practiced while I wasn't looking, of course."

"And it never flew before ?"

I shook my head.

"And when it did both of these things, there was this skunk of yours aboard?"

"That's right."

"And you say this skunk glided down on a fender after the crash ?"

"The fender tipped over and the critter ran into the woods."

"Don't you think it's a little strange that the fender should glide down when all the other wreckage fell kerplunk ?"

I admitted that it did seem slightly strange.

"Now about this skunk. You say it purred ?"

"It purred real pretty."

"And waved its tail?"

"Just like a dog," I said.

The colonel pushed the pad away and leaned back in his chair. He crossed his arms and sort of hugged himself.

"As a matter of personal knowledge," he told me, "gained from years of boyhood trapping, I can tell you that no skunk purrs or ever wags its tail."

"I know what you're thinking," I said, indignant, "but I wasn't that drunk. I'd had a drink or two to while away the time I was waiting for the jet. But I saw the skunk real plain and

I knew he was a skunk and I can remember that he purred. He was a friendly cuss. He acted as if he liked me and he"

"Okay," the colonel said. "Okay."

We sat there looking at one another. All at once, he grinned.

"You know," he said, "I find quite suddenly that I need an aide."

"I ain't joining up," I replied stubbornly. "You couldn't get me within a quarter mile of one of them jets. Not if you roped and tied me."

"A civilian aide. Three hundred a month and keep."

"Colonel, I don't hanker none for the military life."

"And all the liquor you can drink."

"Where do I sign ?" I asked.

And that is how I got to be the colonel's aide.

I thought he was crazy and I still think so. He'd been a whole lot better off if he'd quit right there. But he had an idea by the tail and he was the kind of gambling fool who'd ride a hunch to death.

We got along just fine, although at times we had our differences. The first one was over that foolish

business about confining me to base. I raised quite a ruckus, but he made it stick.

"You'd go out and get slobbered up and gab your head off," he told me. "I want you to button up your lip and keep it buttoned up. Why else do you think I hired you ?"

It wasn't so bad. There wasn't a blessed thing to do. I never had to lift my hand to do a lick of work. The chow was fit to eat and I had a place to sleep and the colonel kept his word about all the liquor I could drink.

For several days, I saw nothing of him. Then one afternoon, I dropped around to pass the time of day. I hadn't more than go there when a sergeant came in with a bunch of papers in his hand. He seemed to be upset.

"Here's the report on that car, sir," he said.

The colonel took the papers and leafed through a few of them. "Sergeant, I can't make head nor tail of this."

"Some of it I can't, either, sir."

"Now this 9," said the colonel, pointing.

"That's a computer, sir."

"Cars don't have computers."

"Well, sir, that's what I said, too. But we found the place where it was attached to the engine block."

"Attached ? Welded ?"

"Well, not exactly welded. Like it was a part of the block.

Like it had been cast as a part of it. There was no sign of welding."

"You're sure it's a computer ?"

"Connally said it was, sir. He knows about computers. But it's not like any he's ever seen before. It works on a different principle than any he has seen, he says. But he says it makes a lot of sense, sir. The principle, that is. He says"

"Well, go on !" the colonel yelled.

"He says its capacity is at least a thousand times that of the best computer that we have. He says it might not be stretching your imagination too far to say that it's intelligent." "How do you mean--intelligent ?"

"Well, Connally says a rig like that might be capable of thinking for itself, sir."

"My God !" the colonel said.

He sat there for a minute, as if he might be thinking. Then he turned a page and pointed at something else.

"That's another part, sir," the sergeant said. "A drawing of the part. We don't know what it is." "Don't know !"

"We never saw anything like it, sir. We don't have any idea what it might be for. It was attached to the transmission, sir."

"And this ?"

"That's an analysis of the gasoline. Funny thing about that, sir. We found the tank, all twisted out of shape, but there was some gas still left in it. It hadn't "

"But why an analysis ?"

"Because it's not gasoline, sir. It is something else. It was gasoline, but it's been changed, sir." "Is that all, Sergeant ?"

The sergeant, I could see, was beginning to sweat a little.

"No, sir, there's more to it. It's all in that report. We got most all the wreckage, sir. Just bits here and there are missing. We are working now on reassembling it." "Reassembling "

"Maybe, sir, pasting it back together is a better way to put it."

"It will never run again ?"

"I don't think so, sir. It's pretty well smashed up. But if it could be put back together whole, it would be the best car that was ever made. The speedometer says 8~,000 miles, but it's in new-car condition. And there are alloys in it that we can't even guess at."

The sergeant paused. "If you'll permit me, sir, it's a very funny business."

"Yes, indeed," the colonel said. "Thank you, Sergeant. A very funny business."

The sergeant turned to leave.

"Just a minute," said the colonel.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm sorry about this, Sergeant, but you and the entire detail that was assigned to the car are restricted to the base. I don't want this leaking out. Tell your men, will you? I'll make it tough on anyone who talks."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said, saluting very polite, but looking like he could have slit the colonel's throat.

When the sergeant was gone, the colonel said to me: "Asa, if there's something that you should say now and you fail to say it and it comes out later and makes a fool of me, I'll wring your scrawny little neck."

"Cross my heart," I said.

He looked at me funny. "Do you know what that skunk was?"

I shook my head.

"It wasn't any skunk," he said. "I guess it's up to us to find out what it is."

"But it isn't here. It ran into the woods."

"It could be hunted down."

"Just you and me?"

"Why just you and me when there are two thousand men right on this base?" "But"

"You mean they wouldn't take too kindly to hunting down a skunk?"

"Something like that, Colonel. They might go out, but they wouldn't hunt. They'd try not to find it."

"They'd hunt if there was five thousand dollars waiting for the man who brought the right one in."

I looked at him as if he'd gone off his rocker.

"Believe me," said the colonel, "it would be worth it. Every penny of it."

I told you he was crazy.

I didn't go out with the skunk hunters. I knew just how little chance there was of ever finding it. It could have gotten clear out of the county by that time or found a place to hole up where one would never find it.

And, anyhow, I didn't need five thousand. I was drawing down good pay and drinking regular.

The next day, I dropped in to see the colonel. The medical officer was having words with him.

"You got to call it off!" the sawbones shouted.

"I can't call it off," the colonel yelled. "I have to have that animal."

"You ever see a man who tried to catch a skunk barehanded?"

"No, I never have."

"I got eleven of them now," the sawbones said. "I won't have any more of it."

"Captain," said the colonel, "you may have a lot more than eleven before this is all over."

"You mean you won't call it off, sir?"

"No, I won't."

"Then I'll have it stopped."

"Captain!" said the colonel and his voice was deadly.

"You're insane," the sawbones said. "No court martial in the land"

"Captain."

But the captain did not answer. He turned straight around and left.

The colonel looked at me. "It's sometimes tough," he said.

I knew that someone had better find that skunk or the colonel's name was mud.

"What I don't understand", I said, "is why you want that skunk. He's just a skunk that purrs."

The colonel sat down at his desk and put his head between his hands.

"My God," he moaned, "how stupid can men get?"

"Pretty stupid," I told him, "but I still don't understand"

"Look," the colonel said, "someone jiggered up that car of yours. You say you didn't do it. You say no

one else could have done it. The boys who are working on it say there's stuff in it that's not been even thought of." "If you think that skunk "

The colonel raised his fist and smacked it on the desk.

"Not a skunk! Something that looks like a skunk! Something that knows more about machines than you or I or any human being will ever get to know !"

"But it hasn't got no hands. How could it do what you think ?"

He never got to answer. The door burst in and two of the saddest sacks outside the guardhouse stumbled in. They didn't bother to salute.

"Colonel, sir," one of them said, heaving hard. "Colonel, sir, we got one. We didn't even have to catch it. We whistled at it and it followed us."

The skunk walked in behind them, waving its tail and purring. It walked right over to me and rubbed against my legs.

When I reached down and picked it up, it purred so loud I was afraid it would go ahead and explode.

"That the one ?" the colonel asked me.

"He's the one," I said.

The colonel grabbed the phone. "Get me Washington.

General Sanders. At the Pentagon."

He waved his hand at us. "Get out of here?"

"But, Colonel, sir, the money "

"You'll get it. Now get out of here."

He looked exactly like you might imagine a man might look right after he's been told he's not going to be shot at dawn.

We turned around and got out of there.

At the door, four of the toughest-looking hombres this side of Texas were waiting, with rifles in their hands.

"Don't pay no attention to us, Mac," one of them said to me. "We're just your bodyguards."

They were my bodyguards, all right. They went every place I went. And the skunk went with me, too. That, of course, was why they stuck around. They didn't care a rap about me. It was the skunk that was getting the bodyguarding.

And that skunk stuck closer to me than paper to the wall. He followed at my heels and walked between my feet, but mostly he wanted me to carry him or to let him perch on my shoulder. And he purred all the blessed time. Either he figured I was the only true friend he had or he thought I was a soft touch.

Life got a little complicated. The skunk slept with me and the four guards stayed in the room. The skunk and one of the guards went to the latrine with me while the others kept close. I had no privacy at all. I said it wasn't decent. I said it was unconstitutional. It didn't make no difference. There was nothing I could do. There were, it turned out, twelve of them guards and they worked in eight-hour shifts.

For a couple of days, I didn't see the colonel and I thought it was funny how he couldn't rest until he'd found the skunk and then paid no attention to it.

I did a lot of thinking about what the colonel had said about the skunk not being a skunk at all, but something that only looked like a skunk and how it might know more, some ways, than we did. And the more I lived with it, the more I began to believe that he might be right. Although it still seemed impossible that any critter without hands could know much about machinery in the first place, let alone do anything about it.

Then I got to remembering how me and Betsy had understood each other and I carried that a little further, imagining how a man and machine might get to know one another so well, they could even talk together and how the man, even if he didn't have hands, might help the machine to improve itself.

And while it sounds somewhat far-fetched just telling it, thinking of it in the secrecy of one's mind made it sound all right and it gave a sort of warm feeling to imagine that one could get to be downright personal friendly with machines.

When you come to think of it, it's not so far-fetched, either.

Perhaps, I told myself, when I had gone into the tavern and had left the skunk bedded down in Betsy, the skunk might have looked her over and felt sorry for such a heap of junk, like you or I would feel sorry for a homeless cat or an injured dog. And maybe the skunk had set out, right then and there, to fix her up as best he could, probably cannibalizing some metal here and there, from places where it would not be missed, to grow the computer and the other extra pieces on her.

Probably he couldn't understand, for the life of him, why they'd been left off to start with. Maybe, to him, a machine was no machine at all without those pieces on it. More than likely, he thought Betsy was just a botched-up job.

The guards began calling the skunk Stinky and that was a libel because he never stunk a bit, but was one of the bestmannered, most even-tempered animals that I have ever been acquainted with. I told them it wasn't right, but they just laughed at me, and before long the whole base knew about the name and everywhere we went they'd yell "Hi, Stinky" at us.

He didn't seem to mind, so I began to think of him as Stinky, too.

I got it figured out to my own satisfaction that maybe Stinky could have fixed up Betsy and even why he fixed up Betsy. But the one thing I couldn't figure out was where he'd come from to start with. I thought on it a lot and came up with no answers except some foolish ones that were too much for even me to swallow.

I went over to see the colonel a couple of times, but the sergeants and the lieutenants threw me out before I could get to see him. So I got sore about it and decided not to go there any more until he sent for me.

One day he did send for me, and when I got there the place was crowded with a lot of brass. The colonel was talking to an old grey-haired, eagle-beaked gent who had a fierce look about him and a rat-trap jaw and was wearing stars.

"General," said the colonel, "may I introduce Stinky's special friend?"

The general shook hands with me. Stinky, who was riding on my shoulder, purred at him.

The general took a good look at Stinky.

"Colonel," he said, "I hope to God you're right. Because if you aren't and this business ever leaks, the Air Force goose is cooked. The Army and the Navy would never let us live it down and what Congress would do to us would be a crimson shame."

The colonel gulped a little. "Sir, I'm sure I'm right."

"I don't know why I let myself get talked into this," the general said. "It's the most hare-brained scheme I have ever heard of."

He had another squint at Stinky.

"He looks like a common skunk to me," the general said.

The colonel introduced me to a bunch of other colonels and a batch of majors, but he didn't bother with the captains if there were any there and I shook hands with them and Stinky purred at them and everything was cosy.

One of the colonels picked up Stinky, but he kicked up quite a fuss trying to get back to me.

just had to sit in a certain place to earn it, why, it was all right.

Stinky didn't pay any attention to any of the stuff. He settled down in my lap and went to sleep, or at least he seemed to go to sleep. He took it easy, for a fact. Once in a while, he opened an eye or twitched an ear, but that was all he did.

I hadn't thought much about it at first, but after I'd sat there for an hour or so, I began to get an idea of why they wanted me and Stinky in the plane. They figured, I told myself, that if they put Stinky in the ship, he might feel sorry for it, too, and do the same kind of job on it as he had done on Betsy. But if that was what they thought, they sure were getting fooled, for Stinky didn't do a thing except curl up and go to sleep.

We sat there for several hours and finally they told us that we could get out.

And that is how Operation Stinky got off to a start. That is what they called all that foolishness. It does beat hell, the kind of names the Air Force can think up.

It went on like that for several days. Me and Stinky would go out in the morning and sit in a plane for

several hours, then take a break for noon, then go back for a few hours more.

Stinky didn't seem to mind. He'd just as soon be there as anywhere. All he'd do would be curl up in my lap and in five minutes he'd be dozing.

As the days went on, the general and the colonel and all the technicians who cluttered up the hangar got more and more excited. They didn't say a word, but you could see they were aching to bust out, only they held it back. And I couldn't understand that, for as far as I could see, there was nothing whatsoever happening.

Apparently their work didn't end when Stinky and I left.

Evening after evening, lights burned in the hangar and a gang was working there and they had guards around three deep.

One day they pulled out the jet we had been sitting in and hauled in another and we sat in that and it was just the same as it had been before. Nothing really happened. And yet the air inside that hangar was so filled with tension and excitement, you could fairly light a fire with it.

It sure beat me what was going on.

Gradually the same sort of tension spread throughout the entire base and there were some funny goings-on. You never saw an outfit that was faster on its toes. A construction gang moved in and started to put up buildings and as soon as one of them was completed, machinery was installed. More and more people kept arriving until the base began to look like an anthill with a hotfoot.

On one of the walks I took, with the guards trailing along beside me, I found out something else that made my eyes bug.

They were installing a twelve-foot woven fence, topped with barbed wire, all around the area.

And inside the fence, there were so many guards, they almost walked on one another.

I was a little scared when I got back from the walk, because from what I saw, this thing I'd been pitchforked into was bigger and more important than I had ever dreamed. Up until then, I'd figured it was just a matter of the colonel having his neck stuck out so far he could never pull it back. All along, I had been feeling sorry for him because that general looked like the kind of gent who would stand for just so much tomfoolery before he lowered the boom.

It was about this time that they began to dig a big pit out in the centre of one of the runways. I went over one day to watch it and it didn't make no sense at all. Here they had a nice, smooth runway they'd spent a lot of money to construct and now they were digging it up to make what looked like a swimming pool. I asked around about it, but the people that I talked to either didn't know or they weren't talking.

Me and Stinky kept on sitting in the planes. We were on our sixth one now. And there wasn't any change. I sat, bored stiff, while Stinky took it easy.

One evening the colonel sent a sergeant over to say he'd like to see me.

I went in and sat down and put Stinky on the desk. He lay down on top of it and looked from one to the other of us.

"Asa," said the colonel, "I think we got it made."

"You mean you been getting stuff?"

"We've got enough we actually understand to give us unquestioned air superiority. We're a good ten years, if not a hundred, depending on how much we can use, ahead of the rest of them. They'll never catch us now." "But all Stinky did was sleep !"

"All he did", the colonel said, "was to redesign each ship. In some instances, there were principles involved that don't make a bit of sense, but I'll bet they will later. And in other cases, what he did was so simple and so basic that we're wondering why we never thought of it ourselves."

"Colonel, what is Stinky ?"

"I don't know," he said.

"You got an idea, though."

"Sure, an idea. But that's all it is. It embarrasses me even to think of it."

"I don't embarrass easy."

"Okay, then--Stinky is like nothing on Earth. My guess is that he's from some other solar system. I think he crossed space to us. How or why, I have no notion. His ship might have been wrecked and he

got into a lifeboat and made it here." "But if there was a lifeboat "

"We've combed every foot of ground for miles around."

"And no lifeboat ?"

"No lifeboat," said the colonel.

Getting that idea down took a little doing, but I did it. Then I got to wondering about something else.

"Colonel," I said, "you claim Stinky fixed up the ships, made them even better. Now how could he have done that with no hands and just sleeping and never touching a thing?"

"You tell me," said the colonel. "I've heard a bunch of guesses. The only one that makes any kind of sense--and cockeyed sense at that--is telekinesis."

I sat there and admired that word. "What's it mean, Colonel?" I wanted to use it on the boys at the tavern, if I ever got back there, and I wanted to get it right.

"Moving things by the power of thought," he said.

"But there wasn't nothing moved," I objected. "All the improvements in Betsy and the planes came from right inside them, not stuff moved in."

"That could be done by telekinesis, too."

I shook my head, thoughtful-like. "Ain't the way I see it."

"Go ahead," he sighed. "Let's hear your theory. No reason you should be an exception."

"I think Stinky's got a kind of mental green thumb for machines," I said. "Like some people got green thumbs for plants, only he's got "

The colonel took a long, hard frown at me. Then he nodded very slowly. "I see what you mean. Those new parts weren't moved in or around. They were grown."

"Something like that. Maybe he can make a machine come kind of alive and improve itself, grow parts that'll make it a better and happier and more efficient machine."

"Sounds silly when you say it," the colonel said, "but it makes a lot more sense than any of the other ideas. Man's been working with machines--real machines, that is--only a century or two. Make that ten thousand or a million years and it might not seem so silly."

We sat in silence while the twilight crept into the room and I think the both of us must have been thinking the same thing.

Thinking of the black night that lay out beyond Earth and of how Stinky must have crossed it. And wondering, too, about what kind of world he came from and why he might have left it and what happened to him out in the long dark that forced him to look for asylum on Earth.

Thinking, too, I guess, about the ironic circumstance that had cast him on a planet where his nearest counterpart was a little animal that no one cared to have much to do with.

"What I can't understand", the colonel said, "is why he does it. Why does he do it for us ?"

"He doesn't do it for us," I answered. "He does it for the planes. He feels sorry for them."

The door burst open and the general came tramping in. He was triumphant. Dusk had crept into the room and I don't think he saw me.

"We got an okay?" he gloated. "The ship will be in tomorrow. The Pentagon agrees !"

"General," said the colonel, "we're pushing this too hard."

It's time for us to begin to lay some sort of grounds for basic understanding. We've grabbed what we can grab the quickest.

We've exploited this little cuss right up to the hilt. We have a lot of data "

"Not all we need!" the general bellowed. "What we have been doing has been just sort of practice. We have no data on the A-ship. That is where we need it."

"What we need as well is an understanding of this creature.

An understanding of how he does it. If we could talk to him "

"Talk !" the general shouted.

"Yes, talk !" the colonel shouted back. "He keeps purring all the time. That may be his means of communication. The men who found him simply whistled and he came. That was communication. If we had a little patience "

"We have no time for patience, Colonel."

"General, we can't simply wring him dry. He's done a lot for us. Let's give the little guy a break. He's the one who has had the patience--waiting for us to communicate with him, hoping that someday we'll recognize him for what he is !"

They were yelling at one another and the colonel must have forgotten I was there. It was embarrassing. I held out my arms to Stinky and he jumped into them. I tiptoed across the room and went out as quietly as I could.

That night, I lay in bed with Stinky curled up on the covers at my feet. The four guards sat in the room, quiet as watchful mice.

I thought about what the colonel had said to the general and my heart went out to Stinky. I thought how awful it would be if a man suddenly was dumped into a world of skunks who didn't care a rap about him except that he could dig the deepest and slickest burrows that skunks had ever seen and that he could dig them quick. And there were so many burrows to be dug that not one of the skunks would take the time to understand this man, to try to talk with him or to help him out.

I lay there feeling sorry and wishing there was something I could do. Then Stinky came walking up the covers and crawled in under them with me and I put out my hand and held him tight against me while he purred softly at me. And that is how we went to sleep.

The next afternoon, the A-ship arrived. The last of three that had been built, it was still experimental. It was a monster and we stood far back behind a line of guards and watched it come mashing down, settling base-first into the water-filled rocket pit they'd dug out on the runway. Finally it was down and it stood there, a bleak, squat thing that somehow touched one with awe just to look at it.

The crew came down the ladder and the launch went out to get them. They were a bunch of cocky youngsters and you could sense the pride in them.

Next morning, we went out to the ship. I rode in the launch with the general and the colonel, and while the boat bobbed against the ladder, they had another difference of opinion.

"I still think it's too risky, General," said the colonel. "It's all right to fool around with jets, but an atomic ship is a different matter. If Stinky goes fooling with that pile "

The general said, tight-lipped: "We have to take the chance."

The colonel shrugged and went up the ladder. The general motioned to me and I went up with Stinky perched on my shoulder. The general followed.

Whereas Stinky and I before this had been in a ship alone, this time a picked crew of technicians came aboard as well.

There was plenty of room and it was the only way they could study what Stinky might be doing. And I imagined that, with an A-ship, they'd want to keep close check.

I sat down in the pilot's chair and Stinky settled himself in my lap. The colonel stayed with us for a while, but after a time he left and we were alone.

I was nervous. What the colonel had said made good sense to me. But the day wore on and nothing happened and I began to feel that perhaps the colonel had been wrong.

It went on for four days like that and I settled into routine. I wasn't nervous any longer. We could depend on Stinky~ I told myself. He wouldn't do anything to harm us.

By the way the technicians were behaving and the grin the general wore, I knew that Stinky must be performing up to expectations.

On the fifth day, as we were going out, the colonel said:

"This should wind it up." I was glad to hear it.

We were almost ready to knock off for noon when it happened. I can't tell you exactly how it was, for it was a bit confusing. It was almost as if someone had shouted, although no one had. I half rose out of the chair, then sat back again.

And someone shouted once more.

I knew that something was about to happen. I could feel it in my bones. I knew I had to get out of the A-ship and get out fast. It was fear--unreasoning fear. And over and above the fear, I knew I could not leave. It was my job to stay. I had to stick it out. I grabbed the chair arms and hung on and tried my best to stay.

Then the panic hit me and there was nothing I could do.

There was no way to fight it. I leaped out of the chair, dumping Stinky from my lap. I reached the door and fought it open, then turned back.

"Stinky !" I shouted.

I started across the room to reach him, but half-way across the panic hit me again and I turned and bolted in blind flight.

I went clattering down the catwalk and from below me came the sound of running and the yells of frightened men. I knew then that I had been right, that I had not been cowardly altogether--there was something wrong.

Men were pouring out of the port of the big A-ship when I got there and scrambling down the ladder. The launch was coming out to pick them up. One man fell off the ladder into the water and began to swim.

Out on the field, ambulances and fire rigs were racing toward the water pit and the siren atop the operations building was wailing like a stepped-on tomcat.

I looked at the faces around me. They were set and white and

I knew that all the men were just as scared as I was and somehow, instead of getting scarer, I got a lot of comfort from it.

They went on tumbling down the ladder and more men fell in the drink, and I have no doubt at all that if someone had held a stopwatch on them, there'd have been swimming records falling.

I got in line to wait my turn and I thought again of Stinky and stepped out of line and started back to save him. But half-way up the catwalk, my courage ran plumb out and I was, too scared to go on. The funny thing about it was that I didn't have the least idea what there was to scare me.

I went down the ladder among the last of them and piled into the launch, which was loaded so heavily that it barely crept back to solid ground.

The medical officer was running around and shouting to get the swimmers into decontamination and men were running everywhere and shouting and the fire rigs stood there racing their motors while the siren went on shrieking.

"Get back!" someone was shouting. "Run! Everybody back!"

So, of course, we ran like a flock of spooked sheep.

Then a wordless yell went up and we turned around. The atomic ship was rising slowly from the pit. Beneath it, the water seethed and boiled. The ship rose steadily, gracefully, without a single shudder or shake. It went straight up into the sky, up and out of sight.

Suddenly I realized that I was standing in dead silence. No one was stirring. No one was making any noise. Everybody just stood and stared into the sky. The siren had shut off.

I felt someone tap me on the shoulder. It was the general.

"Stinky ?" he asked.

"He wouldn't come," I answered, feeling low. "I was too scared to go and get him."

The general wheeled and headed off across the field. For no reason I can think of, I turned and followed him. He broke into a run and I loped along beside him.

We stormed into operations and went piling up the stairs to the tracking room.

The general bellowed: "You got a fix on it ?"

"Yes, sir, we're tracking it right now."

"Good," the general said, breathing heavily. "Fine. We'll have to run it down. Tell me where it's headed."

"Straight out, sir. It still is heading out."

"How far ?"

"About five thousand miles, sir."

"But it can't do that !" the general roared. "It can't navigate in space !"

He turned around and bumped into me.

"Get out of my way !" He went thumping down the stairs.

I followed him down, but outside the building I went another way. I passed administration and there

was the colonel standing outside. I wasn't going to stop, but he called to me. I went over.

"He made it," said the colonel.

"I tried to take him off," I said, "but he wouldn't come."

"Of course not. What do you think it was that drove us from the ship?"

I thought back and there was only one answer. "Stinky?"

"Sure. It wasn't only machines, Asa, though he did wait till he got hold of something like the A-ship that he could make go out into space. But he had to get us off it first, so he threw us off."

I did some thinking about that, too. "Then he was kind of like a skunk."

"How do you mean?" asked the colonel, squinting at me.

"I never did get used to calling him Stinky. Never seemed right somehow, him not having a smell and still having that name. But he did have a smell--a mental one, I guess you'd say---enough to drive us right out of the ship."

The colonel nodded. "All the same, I'm glad he made it." He stared up at the sky. "So am I," I said.

Although I was a little sore at Stinky as well. He could have said good-bye at least to me. I was the best friend he had on

Earth and driving me out along with the other men seemed plain rude.

But now I'm not so sure.

I still don't know which end of a wrench to take hold of, but I have a new car now--bought it with the money I earned at the air base--and it can run all by itself. On quiet country roads, that is. It gets jittery in traffic. It's not half as good as Betsy.

I could fix that, all right. I found out when the car rose right over a fallen tree in the road. With what rubbed off on me from being with Stinky all the time, I could make it fly. But I won't. I ain't aiming to get treated the way Stinky was.