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**Childish Things**  
by Bud Sparhawk  
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Science Fiction

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“I think it is time to go,” the humaniform complex prompted itself gently as it floated above the warm green world. “We can't wait much longer.” The complex contemplated the planet's attributes in ultraviolet, visible, infrared, and radio bands, wondering with each frequency shift at the beauty revealed. Here was the place of a civilization's birth. Here was the cradle of science, philosophy, of literature, and art. Here was where a people had learned of their limits and possibilities, of their place in the universe. It was a lovely place, an empty place, the sweet cradle of knowledge.

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“We've confirmed that it's definitely an ordered set of signals, using the protocol that you requested,” the Lunar watch office reported from the Clarke Bank late in the evening, Greenwich time. “We're recording it on sixteen discrete frequencies, none of which have a common harmonic nor run afoul any of the absorption windows.”

“So you're saying that you definitely have a confirmed extraterrestrial signal,” Dr Hugh Banker asked dryly from his High Street office, near the “observatory” where no significant star had been seen optically for fifty years because of the luminescent pollution of greater London, and awaited the inevitable delay for the signal to bounce through the satellite links to the Lunar base.

“That's affirmative! Yes, yes, and yes! We have a guaranteed, gold plated, died in the wool, absolutely, positively certain...”

Banker sighed at the brash Lunarian's outburst. "Very well; I get the point. I will request that the Australians listen on their dish when the radio horizon comes around. Uh," he hesitated, "Is there any chance that this could be one of our own vagrant signals reflecting back on us? The Minister would hate to get everyone exercised about this over nothing."

"Believe me, Doctor Banker, this signal is like nothing we've ever seen. It is definitely an ordered, non-natural, SETI message!"

At that point the impact of what they were talking about finally hit Banker, making him quite forget his peckish mood from missing dinner. What would this mean, he wondered?

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"Come on, Billy. Let it go." The little boy pulled the soft bunny closer to his cheek as his mother tugged on its ears. The stuffed rabbit was really worn and stained, so much so she worried about its hygienic attributes despite her frequent cleaning. In some places, close where the clasping, grasping hands of a young child seeking comfort would clutch, the soft brown nap was worn down to the underlying fabric. At the bunny's bottom were a small tangle of threads that once had held a puffy tail in place, victim to Billy's early anatomical explorations.

The front legs were mashed into limp approximations of their original form. In his early years Billy had sucked and chewed on them as he lay with his arms about the bunny, waiting for sleep to arrive. Both of the soft rabbit's eyes had been removed by his father when his mother read an article about children choking after swallowing poorly attached items, such as eyes. Unfortunately the manufacturer had read a similar article and had ensured against liability by using D-435a, an adhesive that created a absolutely unbreakable bond with the fabric. In desperation his father had finally sliced small circles about the eyes, from which stuffing occasionally dribbled like foam tears.

The bunny was narrow and lacked substance in its mid section; the result of many nights of being held too tightly for assurance from the frightening and lonely dark. Most of the stuffing had migrated to either end which made him resemble a soft dumbbell rather than a proper bunny.

"Show him the little car," his father suggested. "I'm sure that he'll want that and let the bunny go." He was as embarrassed as his wife over the child's reluctance to give up the cheap rabbit they had gotten two christmases past. Despite the best educational toys they could find for young William, the boy persisted in clinging to this damned abused and disreputable toy rabbit. As far as he was concerned it was far beyond the time for the boy gave up this baby stuff and started to behave like a real boy, one who played with cars and things that made noises, not a kid that liked soft weak things like plush rabbits.

"Maybe we should wait a little longer," his wife replied. "Let's leave it for now. He'll give it up on his own, I'm sure. Just give him a little while longer."

Her husband placed an arm around her shoulders. "We have to do this now, for him." He gave her a little squeeze; "Don't worry, it's for the best. You'll see."

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The research team that had been assembled in such haste was now in their fifth year of analysis of the years long transmission from the stars. Most of the original crew of mathematicians and cryptologists had remained with the team throughout the project and formed a close and capable group. Patel Sudhamanada, the chief mathematician of the team placed his signature on the first page of the thick sheaf of papers that contained their final analysis and turned to his assistant, Jack Foster. "It is hard to imagine, isn't it, Jack: a complete physics, the final secrets of life, unlimited power, the answers to all of our questions finally answered: All ours for the taking. There is a wealth of information beyond anything we'd ever imagined laying in wait for us within the Message."

Foster snorted. "Perhaps, but at what cost to us? You can bet that, somewhere, somehow there's going to be a payback for whoever sent this." The deciphered revelations of the index that had been degarbled from the initial wideband recordings to the multiplexed message had been astounding. Now that the team had finally pried loose the contents of the "cover letter" the wonders that awaited them within the directory, their next target, were finally revealed. "If our interpretation of the index is right the Message will eliminate years, maybe centuries of tedious scientific development. Nobody's going to give that away for nothing!"

Patel considered Foster's statement for a moment before replying. Jack had been the eternal pessimist, joking when they ran into seemingly insurmountable problems that "some things are not man's to know." Perhaps he hadn't been joking after all? "What payback could there possibly be?" he responded, "The message is a scientific bonanza of information. There's no demand for this download, no fees to pay, nobody threatening to cut us off from the source if we don't meet our bill like your American networks. No Jack, accept it for what it is; free information from the stars. When the UN sees this package," he patted the stack of papers lovingly, "we'll have all the funding we need to get the directory decoded. Then we'll be able to finally get at the real information inside the rest of the Message."

Jack heard Patel's hard emphasis on the word "Message". Even within the team it was attaining a special status. He shook his head, he still couldn't get it out of his head that there had to be something they would have to give up for this knowledge, even though he could hardly conceal his own eagerness to discover the new revelations that awaited them

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Father was adamant. "I know it's hard, Freddy. But the new job will be a great chance for us to move to a new area, find new friends, and start a new life. Come on, you're young enough to be flexible. In no time you'll have a whole raft of new friends, just as good as the ones you're leaving."

Although he heard his father's words and understood what he thought he was saying, Freddy could not accept that his parents were actually going to destroy his life like this. Without any consultation at all they were going to move the family clear across the country to live in some place where he knew absolutely nobody! It had been hard enough going to the new middle school and having to adapt to a new environment. But that had been made easier because all of his old friends were with him. Well, most of them anyhow. Jim and Sammy wouldn't be coming to the middle school until next year, although, now that the school year was nearly done that didn't seem to matter much: For some reason he couldn't define Jim and Sammy weren't as close friends as they had been.

Then there was Gwendolyn, the love of his life, the most beautiful girl in the world. All year he had admired her from his seat in the second row of the math class they both shared. She sat four seats ahead on the next row, where he could watch her as the dull teacher droned on and on about the dumbest things, as if anybody had a problem understanding Algebra I. For months he had watched her as she came in and wiggled into her seat, tossed her hair, and glanced around. He always made sure that he was looking elsewhere least she catch him observing her and embarrass them both. Only on the rarest of occasions would he dare to speak to her; a mumbled "mornin'," or shy "hello".

But in the last week she had smiled at him, twice, during class. And she had even made a smart remark as she and her friends walked by him and his friends in the hall. Could it be that she was actually acknowledging his existence?

But any future relationship with Gwendolyn was going to be dashed by this sudden change of plans for his future. How could his parents do this to him? How could they be so cruel?

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The stars faded to black as the engines smoothly cut in and the ship started its transition phase. An hour later the universe returned and strange new constellations shone through the view ports. "See if you can find the navigation points," Captain Alice Ching said quietly. This first trip out of the solar system was a risk for all of the crew. Only if they could find three of the Cepheid variables did they have any chance of figuring out where they had come out.

The star drive they had built using the plans in the Message, as the transmission from the stars had come to be known, lacked any underlying principles. It was a pure engineering discipline, untouched by theory. As such they had no way of calibrating the effects of the controls save trial and error. They had used the nominal settings on every control, oriented the ship toward Alpha Centauri and goosed the power until it phased.

"We found three that match those in the database," Thigby said from the navigational console. "Triangulation says we came, Holy Mother of God, two hundred light years!" There was a moment of stunned silence as the implications hit them. When news of this got back to Earth the planets would be forgotten: Who would want to continue to struggle to coax desiccated Mars and the other solar family to

life when the bounty of the endless stars were there for the taking?

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“I know you hate to give her up, Jerry,” his wife said as they looked at the little red convertible in the driveway. He'd just finished giving her a final clean and polish, bringing her faded paint job back to a shallow memory of her former glory. He'd know when he bought her, fresh out of college and flush with money and testosterone, that the paint would fade with time, but what did that matter—the brilliant red color was excitement, danger, and drew him like a moth to flame. She'd given him thousands of miles of enjoyment: Weekends driving through the autumn mountains where colors blazed in a billion shades; long trips to the ocean for surf and swimming; brief journeys up to the slopes for skiing and warm evenings around the bar; and, of course, the daily drives to handle life's essentials.

But that was before Christa and he were married. That was before he got the job with Provincial Aerospace, the nice house in the suburbs, and the small child on the way. Now the trips to the stores and the errands they had to run required more than the small trunk in the back. And Christa's swelling belly made getting into the low seats increasingly difficult. Clearly the little red car wasn't suitable, or even appropriate for him any longer.

“Well,” he replied as he wiped an imagined speck of dust from her bonnet, “It's time we got something larger. I can't see three of us in this one.”

Christa placed an arm around his waist and held him close. “I wish we could afford to keep this one, just the same. I know it means a lot to you.”

Means a lot? Well, not really. It was just that he and the car had come so far together, done so much. After all, the car was the first really big item he had even owned in his life. The very first thing that he paid for entirely with his own money; money he had earned himself. Sure, it was just an assembly of metal and plastic, wires and pipes, fabric and foam, but it was also a symbol of where he had been at a specific point in his life. At one time he and the car had been one, and now that time was past. Now he had moved beyond that symbol and was ready to embrace another. There would be some sadness in letting her go, but the time and circumstance were right. He'd be able to handle it.

A horn beeped down the street as another car approached, a young boy hanging out the window. “Here comes the new owner,” Christa said and gave him one last hug before letting go and going back into the house. “Try not to cry too hard,” she laughed as she closed the door.

Jerry looked at the scrawny kid walking up the driveway, remembering how he had felt when his father had given him his first car. He probably had the same silly smile on his face, the same strain to stay calm and cool, despite the hammering of his heart and the butterflies of excitement in his stomach. He gave the car one last pat on the roof and then turned to the boy. “She's all yours now, kid. Take care of her.”

The Lector looked at the planet beneath his feet and smiled. It was a pretty nice place, and in a good neighborhood: Most of the nearby stars were remarkably stable and the cometary haloes were respectably small. With any luck the planet should evade any serious mishap for quite a few millennia, at least. "Do you think that we should recommend it?" he asked absently, anxious to get back to watch the Transmission.

"My vote is to let the place develop on its own. I certainly don't have any interest in handling this one," the Intercessor spoke impatiently, glancing at the time. He too wanted to return from this useless foray. "As a matter of fact, I question our entire planetary policy. As much as the few remaining traditionalists might like the idea, living on a planet, with all of its attendant problems and risks is just too damned much trouble. I say we stop the entire program and concentrate on really important things, such as the matter of further research into the Message's references to its own sources!"

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The Lector raised an eyebrow at the pensive governor, expecting the usual argument. "I agree," the Governor replied amiably. "A few years ago this might have been a promising place for development. But Philip is right; we haven't the time or the inclination to develop places like this any longer. Mark the rest of the damn planets off our list and move on to the next item. I want to get back to the extra-galactic colony as soon as possible to see the initiation of our Transmission."

"We will most assuredly have enough time for that," the Lector advised. The wave front of the Message would be so tenuous by the time it exited the Galaxy that it would not be detectable by any means. In response humanity had decided to rebroadcast the Message, adding in their own developments and discoveries, so that it would reach all within the local group. "None of us want to miss it."

"You all know that the power for the Transmission will completely wipe out my development budget for the next century at least," moaned Philip IX, regretting the waste of the suns that would be sacrificed.

"Then we are all agreed?" the Lector asked, turning the subject back to the planetary item on the agenda. There were only a few weak rebuttals from some of the more recalcitrant members, indicating that the Lector's decision was a mere formality to ratify a choice that all had made independently. "So be it," the Lector said; humanity's search and development of planetary resources would cease.

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"Don't worry" the shiva technical murmured in its soft purr as it lowered old Hugh into the rig and attached the crown to his head. "The anesthetics will block any pain that you might feel. You will remain conscious; after all, I'll need your cooperation to guide me through the process."

Hugh glanced at the multilimbed assembly that reared over him: The Surgical Hospital Invasive Virtual Assembler, shiva for short, was an automated surgeon that would disassemble his brain and free the

mind it enclosed. It was yet another wonder derived from the contents of the Message.

In a few weeks his mind would be in one of the nearly immortal bodies floating in open space. There his consciousness would be joined with the others who had renounced their human form. The structures had been produced in great numbers after their possibility was defined by the Message: Bodies that were internally fueled, virtually indestructible, and highly mobile, capable of existing unprotected even in deep space, carrying their thousands of souls whither they wished. Within the bodies' community he knew he would share mental space with Marlene and others of his extended family who had gone before, rejoining the warm surrounding companionship that defined humanity. The pod to which their body belonged would be departing the solar region soon and he did not relish remaining behind, captive to the charity of others.

Hugh took a longing look about him as the technical adjusted the restrictive harness encasing his skull. He steeled himself to what was about to happen: If Marlene and the others had willingly gone through this then he could do so as well. He tried to shift his body's weight away from his bad hip, leaning heavily to his right. If it wasn't for the fused vertebrae in his back, the result of several operations years before, he could be sitting upright instead of having to tilt to one side or another. Still, that operation hadn't been nearly as bad as the ones on his knees and shoulders that attempted to ease the pain from the gradual deterioration of his cartilage that left bone rubbing on rough edged bone. For the last eight years he'd had to limp along with a damn cane all of the time and couldn't even bend over to tie his own shoes. Well, it could be worse. When he was younger he thought that he would be long dead before he reached this age, and feared that outcome. Now, closer to the end, he found that he didn't fear death so much: After all, he'd seen the transformation of humanity from the first arrival of the Message to this final disposition, the departure of the last natural man in all of England, if not Europe and maybe Africa as well.

Oh, he'd seen his share of sadness and grief, but no more than the normal ration given to most; the loss of family and friends, giving up the house where he and Marlene had lived for so long after it had decayed beyond recovery, and, after a few hundred years of stubbornly resisting, finally leaving the empty community where he had worked for the warmer and only slightly more populated one of the nursing home. With increasing speed then he had surrendered control of his decaying body to the sad restorative attempts of the increasingly automated medical community until continued procrastination was futile. He'd been approaching this transformation point asymptotically for a long time. Now, with the departure imminent, it was high time there was a break in the plot line. "I think that I'm ready now," he said, regretting the loss of his mortal shell despite its failures and problems.

Yes, I believe that you are" the technical responded in a sympathetic voice, although Hugh knew that it was incapable of really understanding anything human. "Close your eyes and relax for a moment."

There was a whirl of machinery as he felt the delicate sting of a needles piercing his scalp. "I'm ready to start," the technical purred as Hugh's scalp tingled for a moment before all feeling stopped. Only the whine of the shiva's saw told him that the technical was removing the top of his head. He never felt the

long probes going into his brain. "Think of something blue," the technical murmured softly. "Good, now something sweet," the instructions went on until they lost relevance and Hugh forgot his body.

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It was the last stop of their pilgrimage before leaving. The planet rotated in space, a faded gem set in a diamond speckled universe. Here and there on her surface were patches of bare soil where nothing grew, scant evidence of a growing civilization's impact on nature's bounty. In places the mantle had been removed to allow the underlying magma to escape, a one-time source of energy for an impoverished planet. Vegetation was extending from the temperate and tropic regions into the abandoned cities and towns, slowly regaining its rightful places. The ravages of civilization's transgressions were fading as the planetary complex of interlocking systems returned to a balance of sorts.

The humaniform complex that had once been Billy, Jerry, Freddy, and Hugh, and innumerable others, finished their multi-frequency contemplation of the small green globe that had once been someone's home. With equal measures of homesickness, regret, and shame it recognized the similarities to Earth, its own mistreated blue marble of a world. This tiny green world was where the creators of their original Message had started. Here was where their benefactors had reached their own limits before deciding that it was time to move on, grow up, and mature into their possibilities. "Must we really abandon something we love so much?" it sadly inquired of itself, thinking of the many lovely worlds it had known.

Yes, other portions of the humaniform resonated as it turned away to face the larger universe that awaited, there comes a time when we must put childish things behind us, and wondered why the image of a soft bunny flitted momentarily through their mind.