

At long last, the promised sixth and final story in the Starship Hopeful saga has docked at our space pad. I'll leave it and the other five up for a while. There aren't enough of the stories to fill out a book, and I won't be doing any more, so this is where they'll be spending the afterlife. Enjoy.

## HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU

by Donald Westlake

From the beginning of Time, man has been on the move, ever outward. First he spread over his own planet, then across the solar system, then outward to the Galaxies, all of them dotted, speckled, and measled with the colonies of Man.

Then, one day in the year eleven thousand four hundreds and six (11,406), an incredible discovery was made in the Master Imperial Computer back on Earth. Nearly 500 years before, a clerical error had erased from the computer's memory more than 1000 colonies, all in sector F.U.B.A.R. 3. For half a millenium, those colonies, young and struggling when last heard from, had had no contact with the rest of humanity. The Galaxy Patrol Interstellar Ship Hopeful, Captain Gregory Standforth commanding, was at once dispatched to re-establish contact with the Thousand Lost Colonies and return them to the bosom of mankind.

WHEN THE SKY FILLED with the roar of the descending ship, they all slithered into their holes to wait.

"You know," Captain Standforth said, unclenching his fingers from the controls as the ship shuddered its last and sagged onto the ground, "I think I'm beginning to get the hang of this landing business."

Groans answered him. Chipper young Lieutenant Billy Shelby, the person who normally dealt with landings – Captain Standforth was apt to take the term planetfall literally – managed a cheerful smile and even injected a little perkiness into his voice as he said, "*Much* better, sir. Why, this was quite smooth!"

Chief Engineer Hester Hanshaw, blunt in body, mind and mouth, gave Billy a look. "Not as smooth as *you*, you little toady."

Billy's handsome if not brilliant face clouded. He said, "What's a toady?"

Astrogator Pam Stokes, who had been lost in study of her ancestral slide rule, wondering if it had been damaged in the landing, looked up and said, "Thursday, I think. Back on Earth, that is."

In the baffled silence this created, Captain Standforth mused, "It's that tricky business of not turning the engines off until you actually touch down; *that's* the part I have the trouble with."

"If we've landed on the damn planet," Ensign Kybee Benson said, struggling out of the pod that had absorbed the brunt – though not all – of the impact, "let's take a look at it." A social engineer, an expert in comparative societies, Ensign Benson was responsible for studying each lost colony when it was found and describing its 500 years of unsung history. Being the only one aboard the Hopeful likelier to be interested in the *planet* than in the *landing*, he was the first to cross the command deck to the viewscreens, switch them on and look out at a rolling and nearly treeless savanna that looked much like the Rift Valley in Kenya in August, before the rains. Each screen showed the landscape from a different direction, all the views very similar, each with low tan hills far in the background. "Hmmm," said Ensign Benson.

The five other travelers in the Hopeful crowded around: Captain Standforth, tall and craggy; Pam, beautiful, brainy and blind to passion; Hester, the human fireplug; Billy, the idealist; and Councilman Morton Luthguster, portly as a plum pudding, representative of the Galactic Council, who harrumphed and said, "Fine farmland, I should think."

"Oh, should you?" Ensign Benson snarled. He despised his shipmates, each and every. *They* were here because they were misfits, home base delighted to be rid of them on this endless journey; but why was *he* here? Furious by nature, he said savagely, "We aren't here for real estate, Councilman. Where's the *colony*? Pam? You steered us here."

"This is definitely the nexus," Pam told him, the slide rule flashing in her slender fingers. "We are on the planet Matrix, fourth from the star Mohonk, gravity and air compatible with Earth---"

"It's a big planet," commented Ensign Benson.

"One point one nine three times the size of Earth," Pam agreed. "Earth density to one point---"

"It's a small colony," the ensign interrupted.

"Oh, it's *here*," Pam assured him, getting the idea. "This is the place. The coefficients are---"

Billy, peering at one of the viewscreens, said, "I see *something* out there. Little boxes or something."

Everyone peered at the same screen. Thirty yards away on the tundra were low, slender structures of some kind. "Then let's take a look," Ensign Benson said.

They watched the new creatures emerge from the giant silver ship. One, two, three, four, five, *six*. They watched, and absorbed, and studied. Then, for the

moment, they slid deeper into their holes, drawing the earth closed above them.

The slender structures were gravestones, made of metal. “Oh, dear,” said Pam. Ensign Benson looked around at the bare land. A slight breeze blew. “There were forty colonists,” he said. “There are thirty-seven graves.”

Captain Standforth, who had been scanning the sky – bird taxidermy was his one passion – said, “What’s that? You mean the colony never survived at all?”

“Look at the dates,” Ensign Benson told him, gesturing at the letters and numbers etched into the metal. “Not one person was born here, and none of the original colonists lasted more than four years after arrival.”

Hester said, “But they didn’t all die at once, so it wasn’t poisoned water or an attack from hostile creatures.”

Billy said, “Forty colonists and only thirty-seven graves? How come, do you suppose?”

“Well,” Ensign Benson said, being uncharacteristically patient with Billy, his natural animosity softened by the presence of all those headstones, “I suppose there wasn’t anybody around to bury the last one, and the other two could have died away from the colony. After five hundred years, you know, Billy, they’d all be gone by now, anyway.”

“I guess so,” Billy said, nodding but glancing surreptitiously toward the horizon.

Councilman Luthguster pointed at something beyond the cemetery, farther from the ship. “Is that some sort of ruin?”

It was. They approached it and found that it was at the crest of a low fold in the land, with more ruins on the slope down from them. Crumbled remnants of poured quasi-parquet flooring, stubby bits of pseudostone wall, the entire area scattered with artifacts of domesticity: pots, coat hangers, plastic picture frames. During 500 years of neglect, accumulated rust, wind and dirt had gnawed at the husk of the fledgling colony, working tirelessly to make it unexist, coming closer to that goal with every passing year.

At the bottom of the fold in the terrain, among coatless buttons and doorless handles, the crew found a sturdy metal footlocker half-buried in the earth; buried deeper on one side, indicating the direction of the prevailing wind. The locker’s catches were closed, but it wasn’t padlocked. Inside were sheets of paper that had all but rotted away, photos faded to a nearly uniform beige and what looked like a video tape, but not of a sort Ensign Benson had ever seen. Picking it up, removing the cassette from its metal box, he showed it to Hester, saying, “Any idea what this is?”

“If that’s a tape,” Hester commented, “it’s goddam old.”

“Hester,” the ensign said, “if it’s *anything* in this forsaken place, it’s goddam old.”

“Well, that’s true,” Hester admitted. She took the cassette from the ensign’s hands and studied it. “Tape seems all right,” she said, “but we don’t have anything to play this on.”

“Then it doesn’t matter if it’s all right or not,” the ensign pointed out.

“Well, I’m wondering,” she said, turning the cassette in her hands, “if I could adapt it. If you read this tape the same way our machine does, with a laser, with the same *kind* of laser, maybe I could rewind it or something, fix the machine to take it.” She turned. “Captain?”

Captain Standforth guiltily looked down from the skies. “Yes, Hester?”

“Want me to see if I can play this tape?”

“Excellent idea,” the captain told her.

For two days, while the rest of the crew roamed and searched the surrounding area, collecting basketfuls of detritus and trash, examining remnants and ruins, learning nothing, Hester struggled with the ancient tape. “It’s impossible,” she would announce at every meal, smudges of machine oil on cheeks and knuckles, the banked fires of frustration in her eyes. Sometimes it was impossible because the tape was not scanned in the way the machine knew how to scan; sometimes it was because the speed of the tape was unknown and unknowable; sometimes it was because of incompatibilities at the magnetic or the electronic or simply the physical level. And always, having announced the impossibility, Hester would grumble and sigh and shake her head and wade back in to try some more.

Everyone else rooted for her, of course, partly wanting Hester to succeed simply because she was their shipmate and they wanted their shipmate to succeed, but also because they wanted to know what had happened to the Matrix colony and assumed the tape would tell them. That is, everybody but Ensign Benson assumed that. As the struggle to read the tape grew more and more prolonged, he came to believe it would turn out – if they ever did crack it – to be no damn use at all. Instead of the Rosetta tape, instead of the answer to the mystery of the colony’s failure, it would prove to be, in Ensign Benson’s private, unstated opinion, nothing more than some silly piece of entertainment, songs and dances perhaps, some piece of forgettable 500-year-old fluff brought along by the colonists to distract themselves during the long nights of their settlement’s youth. In a brand-new colony, after all, there *is* no downtown.

On the third day, Hester didn’t appear for lunch, she was so engrossed in the complexities of her impossible task. It was midafternoon when she emerged from the ship, looking as disgruntled as ever but with some sort of firm line of satisfaction in her jaw. She marched out across the dusty tan landscape toward Ensign Benson, who had been studying the grave markers yet again, hoping to find some inscription he hadn’t noticed before, some clue that had eluded him up till then. Reaching him, she stopped and put her stubby hands on her broad hips. “It’s there if you want it,” she announced.

He straightened, one hand to his aching back. “Hester? The tape?”

“That’s what I’ve been working on, isn’t it?”

“You found a way to play it!”

“I *invented* a way to play it,” Hester corrected, “and it wasn’t easy.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t.” Then, unable to keep his doubts to himself any longer, he

said, "What's on it? A sports roundup? A wet T-shirt contest?"

"Some gloomy-looking fellow sitting g at a table," she told him. "That's all I know. I'm sick of that damn thing, Kybee. You want to watch it, watch it."

"I want to watch it," he agreed.

"It's in there, in my workroom next to the engine room," she told him. "Just push the green button. It's not the cleanest picture you've ever seen, but you can make it out."

Doubtful, he said, "You don't want to operate it yourself?"

"I don't want to be anywhere *near* it," Hester told him. "Not for a while. Go ahead, take a look."

They were nearly ready. They slithered and groped toward the surface, moving unfamiliar parts, tiny clods of dirt dropping down past their shuuz. Shooz. Shoez. Shoes.

A terrible picture, with green horizontal lines of interference and a pink glow around every object. A raspy, furry buzz obscured the sound track. Ensign Benson leaned forward, squinted and listened.

"I am Hafter Kass," said the frowning, bulky, steep-shouldered, despairing man seated at the black plastic table, elbows and forearms on the table before him, fingers nervously twining. Behind him was a blank wall with a closed door in it. "I am the real Hafter Kass," the man said, leaning forward, staring intensely at the camera. Then rage broke through. "Do you hear me? The *real* Hafter Kass! Goddam it, the *real* one!"

"I believe you," Ensign Benson murmured. "Honest, I do."

As though reassured, Hafter Kass subsided into his chair. He was about 40, wearing a rough plaid old-fashioned tunic. He lifted a shaking hand to rub his mouth, then said, "Whoever you are, if anybody ever sees this, get off Matrix. Get off *now*! Before---"

He stopped and looked quickly over his shoulder, then back at the camera. "Have to get hold of myself," he said.

"Good idea," agreed Ensign Benson.

"We arrived three years ago," Kass went on, "and almost immediately lost contact with the mother ship. That's the worst of it, knowing there won't be any help, ever. Not *ever*. Stuck here, doomed here---"

Again, Kass visibly brought himself under control. "They didn't come out right away," he said. "The---the *things*. But then they-- No, wait, I'm not making any sense."

"True," Ensign Benson said.

"About two weeks after we landed," Kass said, voice trembling, "they appeared. Creatures that looked exactly like us. Like specific *ones* of us." He gestured toward the door behind him. Out there, hundreds of Hafter Kassses.

Hundreds of Magla Damerons. Hundreds of---” He ran both hands through thinning hair. “Their clothing is exactly like ours, they look exactly like us, they have some kind of low-level telepathy, so they have our memories, our gestures, our expressions. Stee Venking, our zoographer – well, amateur zoographer – anyway, he says these creatures developed this as a defense against predators. *Become* the predator and it can’t eat you without being a cannibal.”

Kass gestured helplessly, looking around, then back at the cameras. “At first, we didn’t realize the horror of it. But then we found out what it means. You never know if you’re talking to a human being like yourself or one of *them*. You’re alone. Every one of us is alone, surrounded by thousands of . . . whatever they are.” He shook his head. “Well, we know what they are. If you kill one, it reverts to its real shape, a kind of fat eight-foot-long worm.”

“Ugh,” said Ensign Benson.

“There will never be a child born in this colony,” Kass went on. “How could any of us, any of us human beings, go to bed with-- Never knowing if-- That’s a part of the creatures’ defense mechanism, too. They make the predators die out, cease to reproduce.”

A chill ran through Ensign Benson at that; a life without even the possibility of sex? Couldn’t you just go along with what you saw, if what you saw was built the way, uh . . .

But then he frowned, thinking it through. What you saw might be shaped any way at all, but if you knew the odds were hundreds to one that the person in bed with you was really an eight-foot-long worm, even the horniest human being would begin to lose enthusiasm. Bad news.

Hafter Kass was going on, saying, “Is it any wonder most of us chose suicide?”

“No,” Ensign Benson told him. An odd, uncomfortable feeling had crept over him, a warmth he rarely experienced. Could it be sympathy? He watched the long-gone Hafter Kass with suspiciously moist eyes.

“That’s the only way, finally, we can tell *us* from *them*,” Kass went on. “When they die, they revert to their real shape. At first, we tried shooting them – each of us shooting his own imitations, because those were the only ones anybody could be sure of – but there’s just too many of them, an entire *species*. They never fight back, never try to shoot *us*, but it doesn’t matter. Violence isn’t part of their nature, because it doesn’t matter. They’ve found the ultimate defensive weapon.”

Again, Kass rubbed a shaking hand across his mouth. “One of the worst things,” he said, “is that after one of us dies, they still go on with the imitation. Your husband, your wife . . . You *know* they’re dead, but there they are, walking around. And again. And again. Hundreds of them. Smiling at you, calling you by the pet name that only the two of you knew.”

The door behind Kass opened, and a cluster of people, a dozen or more, came in, looking concerned, saying, “*There* you are, Hafter,” or “Why are you hiding in *here*. Hafter?”

Kass didn’t even turn as the people gathered around him. His expression bleak, he faced the camera. Beneath the friendly cries of the newcomers – two of them, Ensign Benson realized with a sudden shiver, identical Hafter Kasses – beneath their

voices but clear and passionate, Kass said to the camera, “Get *away* from here. This is hell. This is the worst you can imagine. I may even be the last human alive here, there’s no way to know. I’m surrounded by people, and I’ve been in solitary confinement for three years.”

“Oh, Hafter,” one of the others cried, happy and careless, “you’re taping! Can I tape, too? Shall I sing?”

“No,” Hafter said. Rising, he moved the table, shoving the others out of his way as though they were dummies on rollers – none objected – and darkness descended as he approached the camera. There was a click, and the recording ended.

“Oh, boy,” Ensign Benson said. “Not good.” Decisively, he got to his feet, left Hester’s workroom, hurried through the ship to the exit and went down the ramp, looking around for the rest of the crew.

The nearest was Pam, walking diagonally away toward the ruined colony. “Pam!” Ensign Benson called, and when she turned, he waved to her to stop, to wait for him. “We’ve got to get into the ship!” he cried, trotting up to her.

She frowned as he approached. “Kybee? What’s wrong?”

“I’ll tell you later. Just get into the ship; I’ll go after the others.” And he hurried past her toward the ruins. But when he looked back after a few half-running paces, she was still standing there, frowning at him. “For God’s sake, Pam!” he yelled. “Get going!”

“Kybee?” Pam said. “What’s wrong?” But her voice came from behind him.

When Pam saw the strange woman beyond Kybee, she couldn’t understand who it might be. A survivor from the colony, for 500 years? One of the three without graves? But that was impossible. This attractive-looking woman was young, was certainly no more---

Was herself.

Dread touched Pam. All at once, she was not an astrogator, not a scientist, not a rational, civilized person, but a primitive creature feeling a sudden surge of the most basic fear. She stared, not understanding, and the woman stared back at her with an expression of horror. “Kybee!” they cried together. “What’s happening?”

He stared from one to the other. “Which--- Which---“

“Kybee, it’s me! It’s Pam!” But it was the other one who said that.

Pam hurried toward Kybee, crying, “Don’t listen to her! She’s---She’s-- I don’t know what she is!”

“The ship,” Kybee muttered, dazed. “Save the ship.”

“Yes,” Pam said, reaching for his arm, her terror deepening when he pulled away. “We’ll go into the ship,” she said. “We’ll figure out---“

But he was backing away, staring from her to the impostor, his eyes terrified. “How do I--- How can I-- You don’t get inside the ship!” And he turned and ran.

The Billys and the Hesters and the Ensign Bensons were building sheds and lean-tos. The Councilman Luthgusters were sorting through the food supplies Kybee had pushed out of the ship the day before so that the real crew members wouldn't starve to death. The Pams were cooking on the makeshift stoves the Hesters had constructed. Most of the Captain Standforths had quit banging on the Hopeful's door and yelling on the monitor cameras and had wandered off across the landscape, presumably in search of birds suitable for taxidermy.

In a horrible way, it was fascinating to see how the creatures worked it. The fear and disbelief and repugnance that were the natural reaction of the real crew members were perfectly mirrored in all the imitations. Then, as time went by without any change in the situation, with no further events, no escalation of threat, as horror became dulled, that, too, was echoed, the real and the fakes all calming together, getting used to this madness together.

If he were out there with the rest of them, would he behave any differently from the headshaking wide-eyed Ensign Bensons he watched on the viewscreens? No, he would not.

It was two days since Kybee had run back into the ship and sealed the entrance behind him, and he had not yet slept. What was he going to do? What were any of them going to do? They were doomed here, just like the original colonists. He couldn't fly the ship alone, and even if he could, what about the others? He couldn't just abandon them here, in this hell on Earth. Or hell on Matrix. "In this case," Kybee muttered to himself, watching the mobs on the viewscreens, "hell really *is* other people."

It was strange how circumstances changed attitudes. Kybee had always felt impatient loathing toward his shipmates, knowing himself to be the only truly sharp – and sharp-edged – person on the ship. He had thought it miserably unfair that he should be assigned to this team of losers on this mission into oblivion; what did *he* have in common with *them*?

It was only now, in this extremity, that he found himself drawing parallels, that he saw his own social prickliness as much of a liability as Hester's bluntness or Pam's unworldliness or the councilman's pomposity. Damn it, somehow, damn it, in the course of their voyage, damn it, they had become a team, damn it, a unit, while his back was turned, damn it, some kind of stupid tribe. His shipmates were in trouble out there, damn it, and he was the only one in the universe who could help.

Except, of course, that he couldn't. What was there to do? Forty colonists had spent four years trying to solve this problem, without success. How could he hope to do anything but keep the interior of the ship free of impostors by banning *everything*?

There's something comforting about despair. When Kybee realized that there truly was no way out, that they were all stuck on Matrix for the rest of their lives, himself inside the ship and the rest of the crew outside amid the crowds of ersatz, A kind of peace descended on him. There's nothing to be done; doom is at hand; no point struggling. Yawning, easy at last in his mind, warmed by the hopelessness of their situation, Kybee left the viewscreens and went to bed.



It was dark. He was suddenly wide awake. Sitting up, he spoke into the black room. “It *isn't* the same. The colonists had to live here, somehow, live with those creatures forever. All *I* have to do is find the right five people and get them on the ship. That’s all.”

It was light. Kybee drank nearcoffee and brooded at the viewscreens. More of them were out there today. A couple of thousand by now. Food would become a problem soon. And as for finding the right Pam, the right Billy . . .

No. It was still impossible.

Nevertheless, the comfort of despair had been wrested from him. He had no choice. The task might be impossible, but he was going to have to try it, anyway. “The tape,” he told himself. “I’ll watch it again. I’ll watch it a hundred times if I have to. Maybe there’s a clue in it, maybe there’s something. . .” He sighed and finished his nearcoffee and went off to watch again the final testament of Hafter Kass.

Kybee was slapping Hesters. His hand had begun to sting as he left reddened cheek after reddened cheek in his wake, but he persisted. “Kybee!” the Hesters cried, blinking, putting their hands up to their slapped faces. “What are you doing?” they cried, or, “What was that for?” or, “What’s the big idea?”

He didn’t answer, not a one of the stinking worms. He’d left the ship, sealing the entrance behind him, carrying the only electronic key that would work with the combination he’d just created, and now he was moving among the crowd, slapping and slapping.

What a mob there was, more than ever, and how they liked to mill around. Kybee shoved Billys and Ensign Bensons out of his way, seeking out the Hesters, slapping them, slapping them, and at *last*, one of the Hesters yelled, “What the hell was *that* for?” and slugged him back.

Seated at the viewscreens, Hester watched Kybee rove through the crowd, tweaking councilmen’s noses. “The bastard’s enjoying himself,” she told the air, watching Luthguster after Luthguster recoil, fat hands flailing the air, piggy eyes filling with tears, noses reddening.

Her own cheek still stung from that hefty wallop the bastard had given *her*. Having now watched that poor doomed fellow, Hafter Kass, on the tape, and having had Kybee point out to her that Kass described the worms as nonviolent, she could understand that violence was the only way to find the real wolf when surrounded by sheep in wolf’s clothing, but that still didn’t excuse him for hitting so *hard*. It’s because he was enjoying it, that’s all.

Still, being rescued from the legion of look-alikes was worth it, no matter what the cost. It had been really frightening down there for a while, not knowing who anybody was, surrounded by piss-poor imitations of herself – why couldn't Kybee simply have noticed that the fake Hesters were dumpier and uglier than the original? – and never knowing if the ship would up and leave, abandoning her to an entire population of Captain Standforths and Councilman Luthgusters and second-rate Hesters for the rest of her life.

(The true long-range horror hadn't occurred to her while she was out there and probably hadn't yet occurred to the rest of the Earthlings still trapped out there, but now that she'd seen Hafter Kass's description of life on Matrix, she knew just how horrible it would have been and how lucky she was *not* to be nonviolent.)

Outside, Kybee moved off the edge of one viewscreen's range and was picked up by another, tweaking Luthgusters left and right. All reacted in the same roly-poly fashion, pained and astonished, waving arms and legs, and Kybee kept moving. And then one Luthguster, after Kybee turned his back, yanked off a shoe, ran up behind him and whammed him over the head with the heel.

"Now," said Hester, smiling, "why didn't *I* think of that?"

Out there, Luthguster kept swinging the shoe, shouting in rage, letting out all the mad emotions created by their mad situation, while the surrounding throng backed away, like cattle slightly disturbed at their feeding. Kybee went down under the rain of blows, huddling to the ground, and the councilman started kicking the fallen social engineer with his shod foot. Kybee rolled away, tumbling a nearby Billy and a Hester like ninepins, and Councilman Luthguster pursued him, hopping on one foot, that massive belly, like Falstaff's *flacon* of sack, blooming over the ground. Kybee managed to scramble to his feet and come running toward the ship, Luthguster and his furious paunch bounding along in his wake.

"There you go, Kybee," Hester said, nodding. "That's the way to bring him home."

The ship's entryway controls were at her fingertips. Across the viewscreens came Kybee at a dead run, bowling a path through the shoals of Pams and pseudo ensigns, the councilman following, bobbing like an escaped grapefruit. Up the ramp came Kybee, heelmarks on his forehead and cheeks, eyes wild, voice echoing from the intercom, "Hester! Open up! Open up!"

Her fingers hovered on the controls. Luthguster came panting up the ramp, looking now more like a lobster than a grapefruit, and gave Kybee just one more whop. *Then* Hester opened up.

It was breasts he tweaked on Pam. In the first place, he simply couldn't bring himself to behave harshly toward that beautiful face or harm that beautiful nose. And in the second place, when would he ever again get the opportunity to cop a feel in a noble cause?

"Kybee! Stop that!" Pam after Pam threw up protective arms, and when he reached for the second breast, back-pedaled in horror and shame. Exactly like Pam, of course, but not good enough. On he went.

If this doesn't work, he told himself, clutching breast after breast, I'll just have to escalate. The thought was not untinged with a kind of anticipation.

"Kybee! Stop that! What's got into you?"

"It's what's getting into *you*, baby," Kybee leered, and lunged for the other breast, and this Pam slapped feebly at his lupine fingers.

Slapped? Was that meaningful? To be certain, Kybee aimed for target number three.

"I'm sorry I gave you a bloody nose, Kybee," Pam said.

"Dad's all wry," Kybee told her, tilting his head back, holding many blobs of absorbent cottonique to his nose while Hester held an ice pack to the back of his neck. Councilman Luthguster stood off to one side, looking, Kybee knew, pleased with this turn of events.

"Now that I know there was nothing personal in it," Pam went on, "I'm not upset any more."

Kybee rolled his eyes. Some problems remain insoluble, no matter what.

"I think it's stopped bleeding," Hester said, stepping back, giving him a critical look.

Kybee lowered the bloody rags from his nose, straightened, breathed experimentally and said, "OK. Back into the fray."

"Gee whiz!" said *all* the Billys.

"Kybee? Did I have a fly on my nose?" asked all the captains.

"The problem is," Kybee said, back in the ship, in serious conclave with Hester, Pam and the councilman on the control deck, "the real Billy and the real captain are *also* nonviolent."

Pam said, "Kybee, we can't just leave them there."

Hester said, "There has to be a way."

"Glad to hear that," Kybee told her. "What's the way?"

"Beats me," Hester said.

The councilman brooded at the viewscreens, where the walking, milling simulacra still included hundreds of himself. "Ghastly out there," he said. "To see myself in the mirror in the morning and, of course, on election posters, that's good enough for me."

Kybee also looked at the viewscreens. "I used to think sometimes," he said, "I'd be really content in a world where everybody was exactly like me. Well, half like me and half like Pam. Well, like Pam, but with modifications."

Blinking without comprehension, Pam said, "Kybee? What can you mean?"

“But now,” Kybee went on, ignoring her for one of the few times since they’d shipped out together, “I’m going to have to find a new dream. When I’m shaving in---“

He stopped. He frowned at the viewscreens. “Could they?”

The others all sensed the change in him. Hester said, “Kybee, do you have something?”

“I don’t know.” Kybee turned toward the others, his manner intent but distracted, as though he were already outside, doing whatever it was. He said, “When we came aboard, they put a lot of sports equipment on, didn’t they? Bats and balls and rackets and all that?”

“Cluttering up my storage space,” Hester grumped.

Kybee nodded at her. “Still there, eh? Hester, get me a ball. A tennis ball or something.”

“Hey, Billy! Catch! Hey, Billy! Toss it back!”

“Hey, Billy! Catch! Hey, Billy! Toss it back!”

“Hey, Billy! Catch! Hey, Billy! Toss it back!”

“Hey, Billy! Catch!”

And finally, out of a sea of lefties, one Billy caught it right-handed. Beaming, holding it up, this Billy called, “Want me to throw it back?”

“No, Billy,” Kybee said. “*You* come along with me.”

“Mirror image,” Kybee explained to the others. “There was just a chance, when they did their imitations, they wouldn’t *match* us, they’d *mirror* us. Do what they see us doing, which isn’t exactly like doing what we do.”

“Gee,” Billy said, smiling at everybody, delighted and relieved to be back in the ship, “I don’t know how you *think* of things all the time, Kybee.”

Kybee looked at him. “Variety is good,” he said. “I’d be unhappy if everybody was the same as me. I’ll have to keep reminding myself of that.” He tossed the yellow tennis ball into the air and caught it. “And now,” he said, “to bring in the captain.”

“Oops. Sorry, Kybee,” said all the captains.

“And now the problem is,” Kybee told the others back in the ship, “the captain can’t catch a ball thrown at him. And even if he could, he isn’t sure if he’s right- or left-handed.”

Sonorously, Councilman Luthguster said, “He’s ambidextrous, you mean.” (He loved to say long words he could wrap his tongue around.)

“That’s what I mean,” Kybee agreed. “He’s equally inept with either hand.”

He looked at the viewscreens. Out there, in the lengthening shadows of afternoon, the false crew members milled and trailed along, all except the Captain Standforths. One by one, they were moving toward the ship, looking up at the monitor cameras, waving and gesturing. Their thin reedy voices began to be heard on the open intercom: “Kybee? Billy? How about me out here? Hester? Hi, don’t forget about me! Hello?”

Pam stood beside Kybee, looking at the viewscreens. “Kybee? How can we save him?”

“I wish I knew,” Kybee said.

They turned the intercom off that night, but in the morning the captains were still there, crowding around the ship, more of them than ever. The numbers of the other faux crewpersons in the background seemed not to have increased by much, as though it were harder to create imitations once the original was gone, but the Captain Standforths had doubled overnight.

“More and more of them,” Kybee said grimly. “How are we ever going to sift through that mob?”

“O Captain, my captain,” Pam said, and sighed.

“The captain of his soul,” Hester said, and sighed.

“A captain courageous,” the councilman said, but didn’t sigh.

“And a right good captain, too,” Billy said, and brushed away a tear.

“Gimme a break,” Kybee said and went away to his own room to think.

“Kybee? Pam? Anyone at all?”

It was late afternoon. Captain Standforth felt lonely, sad, tired, worried and confused as he stood with all these bumbling fellows outside the Hopeful. Who were all these awkward people, anyway? “Why don’t you be off about your business?” he told a few nearby louts. “Go find your own ships.”

“This *is* my ship!” one of them announced, poking himself in the eye in his agitation.

“My ship!” cried dozens of others.

“Oh, really!” snapped the captain and raised his plaintive face to the monitor camera high on the Hopeful’s side. If only he’d caught that ball yesterday, things would be so different now. But he’d never been any good at sports. Back at the Academy---

“Captain. Listen up.”

It was Kybee’s voice, amplified over the speakers. The captain – and all these oafs around him – alertly listened up. Many of them even said, “Yes, Kybee?”

“Bad news, captain,” Kybee’s voice said.

Oh, dear, the captain thought. If *only* I’d caught that ball.

“There’s no way to tell which of you is real,” Kybee’s voice went on. “We can’t stay here forever. We have to leave. But if some other ship stumbled onto

this place and found you, we could be vaporized for mutiny.”

Ah, thought the captain, so they can't leave. No one wants to be vaporized.

“Tomorrow morning,” Kybee's voice continued, “before we leave, we're coming out to shoot all the captains. We're sorry, Captain, but you can understand. That's the only way we'll be safe.”

The captain gaped at the ship, astounded and appalled. *Shoot him?* He looked around, and all the other captains were also astounded and appalled. Shoot them *all* ?

And yet, of course, Kybee wouldn't want to risk being vaporized by the authorities. It did make an awful kind of sense.

“Oh, dear,” Captain Standforth said. So did most of the others.

Morning. Kybee and Hester went out onto the ramp, armed with heavy laser guns, and looked around at a world crawling with thousands and thousands of Pams, councilmen, Billys, Hesters and Ensign Bensons, many, many more than ever before. But not one Captain Standforth.

“By golly, Kybee,” Hester said, “you were right.”

“Of course I was,” Kybee said, though he hadn't, in fact, been at all certain it would work. “Tell them that everybody who looks like the captain is going to get shot, then everybody who *can* look like somebody else *will*.” He pointed his laser gun at a nearby councilman, the largest available target: “Where's the captain?”

A hundred imitations pointed. “Betrayed!” wailed the voice of Captain Standforth from the shed in which he'd taken cover.

It took quite a while to convince the captain he wasn't going to be shot, but even then, he was too nervous to handle the take-off, so Billy did, to everybody's relief.

“That was fun,” said a Billy, watching the great silver ship soar upward.

“Oh, I don't know,” a Hester said. “Let's get out of these damn shoes.”  
Shoez. Shooz. Shuuz. Ssshhuuuuu. . .