Gateway

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Extract

1

My name is Robinette Broadhead, in spite of which I am male. My analyst (whom I call Sigfrid von Shrink, although that isn't his name; he hasn't got a name, being a machine) has a lot of electronic fun with this fact:

'Why do you care if some people think it's a girl's name, Bob?'

'I don't.'

'Then why do you keep bringing it up?'

He annoys me when he keeps bringing up what I keep bringing up. I look at the ceiling with its hanging mobiles and piñatas, then I look out the window. It isn't really a window. It's a moving holopic of surf coming in on Kaena Point; Sigfrid's programming is pretty eclectic. After a while I say, 'I can't help what my parents called me. I tried spelling it R-O-B-I-N-E-T, but then everybody pronounces it wrong.'

'You could change it to something else, you know.'

'If I changed it,' I say, and I am sure I am right in this, 'you would just tell me I was going to obsessive lengths to defend my inner dichotomies.'

'What I would tell you,' Sigfrid says, in his heavy mechanical attempt at humor, 'is that, please, you shouldn't use technical psychoanalytic terms. I'd appreciate it if you would just say what you feel.'

'What I feel,' I say, for the thousandth time, 'is happy. I got no problems. Why wouldn't I feel happy?'

We play these word games a lot, and I don't like them. I think there's something wrong with his program. He says, 'You tell me, Robbie. Why don't you feel happy?'

I don't say anything to that. He persists. 'I think you're worried.'

'Shit, Sigfrid,' I say, feeling a little disgust, 'you always say that. I'm not worried about anything.'

He tries wheedling. 'There's nothing wrong with saying how you feel.'

I look out the window again, angry because I can feel myself trembling and I don't know why. 'You're a pain in the ass, Sigfrid, you know that?'

He says something or other, but I am not listening. I am wondering why I waste my time coming here. If there was anybody ever who had every reason to be happy, I have to be him. I'm rich. I'm pretty good-looking. I am not too old, and anyway, I have Full Medical so I can be just about any age I want to be for the next fifty years or so. I live in New York City under the Big Bubble, where you can't afford to live unless you're really well fixed, and maybe some kind of celebrity besides. I have a summer apartment that overlooks the Tappan Sea and the Palisades Dam. And the girls go crazy over my three Out bangles. You don't see too many prospectors anywhere on Earth, not even in New York. They're all wild to have me tell them what it's really like out around the Orion Nebula or the Lesser Magellanic Cloud. (I've never been to either place, of course. The one really interesting place I've been to I don't like to talk about.)

'Or,' says Sigfrid, having waited the appropriate number of microseconds for a response to whatever it was he said last, 'if you really are happy, why do you come here for help?'

I hate it when he asks me the same questions I ask myself. I don't answer. I squirm around until I get comfortable again on the plastic foam mat, because I can tell that it's going to be a long, lousy session. If I knew why I needed help, why would I need help?

'Rob, you aren't very responsive today,' Sigfrid says through the little loudspeaker at the head of the mat. Sometimes he uses

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481  IRRAY (O)=IRRAY (P)                13,320
     ,C, I think you're worried.        13,325
482  XTERNALS :66AA3 IF ;5B             13,330
     GOTO **7Z3                         13,335
     XTERNALS @ 01R 1F @ 7              13,340
     GOTO **7Z4                         13,345
     ,S, Shit Sigfrid, you always       13,350
     say that,                          13,355
     XTERNALS¢9997AA1 IF ¢8             13,360
     GOTO **7Z4 IF ? GOTO               13,365
     **7Z10                             13,370
     ,S, I'm not worried about any-     13,375
     thing,                             13,380
483  IRRAY .SHIT. .ALWAYS.              13,385
     .WORRIED/NOT.                      13,390
484  ,C, Why don't you tell me          13,395
     about it?                          13,400
485  IRRAY (P)=IRRAY (Q) INITI-         13,405
     ATE COMFORT MODE                   13,410
     ,C, There's nothing wrong          13,415
     with saying how you                13,420
     feel.                              13,425
487  IRRAY (Q)=IRRAY (R) GOTO           13,430
     **1 GOTO **2 GOTO                  13,435
     **3                                13,440
489  ,S, You're a pain in the ass,      13,445
     Sigfrid, you know                  13,450
     that?                              13,455
     XTERNALS ¢11 IF ! GOTO             13,460
     **7Z10 IF **7Z10! GOTO             13,465
     **1 GOTO **2 GOTO **3              13,470
     IRRAY .PAIN.                       13,475
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a very lifelike dummy, sitting in an armchair, tapping a pencil and smiling quirkily at me from time to time. But I've told him that that makes me nervous. 'Why don't you just tell me what you're thinking?'

'I'm not thinking about anything, particularly.'

'Let your mind roam. Say whatever comes into it, Bob.'

'I'm remembering—' I say, and stop.

'Remembering what, Rob?'

'Gateway?'

'That sounds more like a question than a statement.'

'Maybe it is. I can't help that. That's what I'm remembering: Gateway.'

I have every reason to remember Gateway. That's how I got the money and the bangles, and other things. I think back to the day I left Gateway. That was, let's see, Day 31 of Orbit 22, which means, counting back, just about sixteen years and a couple of months since I left there. I was thirty minutes out of the hospital and couldn't wait to collect my pay, catch my ship, and blow.

Sigfrid says politely, 'Please say what you're thinking out loud, Robbie.'

'I'm thinking about Shikitei Bakin,' I say.

'Yes, you've mentioned him. I remember. What about him?'

I don't answer. Old, legless Shicky Bakin had the room next to mine, but I don't want to discuss it with Sigfrid. I wriggle around on my circular mat, thinking about Shicky and trying to cry.

'You seem upset, Bob.'

I don't answer to that, either. Shicky was almost the only person I said good-bye to on Gateway. That was funny. There was a big difference in our status. I was a prospector, and Shicky was a garbageman. They paid him enough money to cover his life-support tax because he did odd jobs, and even on Gateway they have to have somebody to clean up the garbage. But sooner or later he would be too old and too sick to be any more use at all. Then, if he was lucky, they would push him out into space and he would die. If he wasn't lucky, they'd probably send him

back to a planet. He would die there, too, before very long; but first he would have the experience of living for a few weeks or so as a helpless cripple.

Anyway, he was my neighbor. Every morning he would get up and painstakingly vacuum every square inch around his cell. It would be dirty, because there was so much trash floating around Gateway all the time, despite the attempts to clean it up. When he had it perfectly clean, even around the roots of the little shrublets he planted and shaped, he would take a handful of pebbles, bottle caps, bits of torn paper – the same trash he'd just vacuumed up, half the time – and painstakingly arrange it on the place he had just cleaned. Funny! I never could see the difference, but Klara said . . . Klara said she could.

'Bob, what were you thinking about just then?' Sigfrid asks.

I roll up into a fetal ball and mumble something.

'I couldn't understand what you just said, Robbie.'

I don't say anything. I wonder what became of Shicky. I suppose he died. Suddenly I feel very sad about Shicky dying, such a very long way from Nagoya, and I wish again that I could cry. But I can't. I squirm and wriggle. I flail against the foam mat until the restraining straps squeak. Nothing helps. The pain and shame won't come out. I feel rather pleased with myself that I am trying so hard to let the feelings out, but I have to admit I am not being successful, and the dreary interview goes on.

Sigfrid says, 'Bob, you're taking a long time to answer. Do you think you're holding something back?'

I say virtuously, 'What kind of a question is that? If I am, how would I know?' I pause to survey the inside of my brain, looking in all the corners for padlocks that I can open for Sigfrid. I don't see any. I say judiciously, 'I don't think that's it, exactly. I don't *feel* as if I were blocking. It's more as if there were so many things I wanted to say that I couldn't decide which.'

'Take any one, Rob. Say the first thing that comes into your mind.'

Now, that's dumb, it seems to me. How do I know which is

the first thing, when they're all boiling around in there together? My father? My mother? Sylvia? Klara? Poor Shicky, trying to balance himself in flight without any legs, flapping around like a barn swallow chasing bugs as he scoops the cobwebby scraps out of Gateway's air?

I reach down into my mind for places where I know it hurts, because it has hurt there before. The way I felt when I was seven years old, parading up and down the Rock Park walk in front of the other kids, begging for someone to pay attention to me? The way it was when we were out of realspace and knew that we were trapped, with the ghost star coming up out of nothingness below us like the smile of a Cheshire cat? Oh, I have a hundred memories like those, and they all hurt. That is, they can. They are pain. They are clearly labeled PAINFUL in the index to my memory. I know where to find them, and I know what it feels like to let them surface.

But they will not hurt unless I let them out.

'I'm waiting, Bob,' Sigfrid says.

'I'm thinking,' I say. As I lie there it comes to my mind that I'll be late for my guitar lesson. That reminds me of something, and I look at the fingers of my left hand, checking to see that the fingernails have not grown too long, wishing the calluses were harder and thicker. I have not learned to play the guitar very well, but most people are not that critical and it gives me pleasure. Only you have to keep practicing and remembering. Let's see, I think, how do you make that transition from the D-maj to the C-7th again?

'Bob,' Sigfrid says, 'this has not been a very productive session. There are only about ten or fifteen minutes left. Why don't you just say the first thing that comes into your mind . . . *now*.'

I reject the first thing and say the second. 'The first thing that comes into my mind is the way my mother was crying when my father was killed.'

'I don't think that was actually the first thing, Bob. Let me make a guess. Was the first thing something about Klara?'

My chest fills, tingling. My breath catches. All of a sudden there's Klara rising up before me, sixteen years earlier and not yet an hour older . . . I say, 'As a matter of fact, Sigfrid, I think what I want to talk about is my mother.' I allow myself a polite, deprecatory chuckle.

Sigfrid doesn't ever sigh in resignation, but he can be silent in a way that sounds about the same.

'You see,' I go on, carefully outlining all the relevant issues, 'she wanted to get married again after my father died. Not right away. I don't mean that she was glad about his death, or anything like that. No, she loved him, all right. But still, I see now, she was a healthy young woman – well, fairly young. Let's see, I suppose she was about thirty-three. And if it hadn't been for me I'm sure she would have remarried. I have feelings of guilt about that. I kept her from doing it. I went to her and said, "Ma, you don't need another man. I'll be the man in the family. I'll take care of you." Only I couldn't, of course. I was only about five years old.'

'I think you were nine, Robbie.'

'Was I? Let me think. Gee, Sigfrid, I guess you're right—' And then I try to swallow a big drop of spit that has somehow instantly formed in my throat and I gag and cough.

'Say it, Rob!' Sigfrid says insistently. 'What do you want to say?'

'God damn you, Sigfrid!'

'Go ahead, Rob. Say it.'

'Say what? Christ, Sigfrid! You're driving me right up the wall! This shit isn't doing either one of us any good!'

'Say what's bothering you, Bob, please.'

'Shut your fucking tin mouth!' All that carefully covered pain is pushing its way out and I can't stand it, can't deal with it.

'I suggest, Bob, that you try—'

I surge against the straps, kicking chunks out of the foam matting, roaring, 'Shut up, you! I don't want to hear. I can't cope with this, don't you understand me? I can't! Can't cope, can't cope!'

Sigfrid waits patiently for me to stop weeping, which happens rather suddenly. And then, before he can say anything, I say wearily, 'Oh, hell, Sigfrid, this whole thing isn't getting us anywhere. I think we should call it off. There must be other people who need your services more than I do.'

'As to that, Rob,' he says, 'I am quite competent to meet all the demands on my time.'

I am drying my tears on the paper towels he has left beside the mat and don't answer.

'There is still excess capacity, in fact,' he goes on. 'But you must be the judge of whether we continue with these sessions or not.'

'Have you got anything to drink in the recovery room?' I ask him.

'Not in the sense you mean, no. There is what I am told is a very pleasant bar on the top floor of this building.'

'Well,' I say, 'I just wonder what I'm doing here.'

And, fifteen minutes later, having confirmed my appointment for the next week, I am drinking a cup of tea in Sigfrid's recovery cubicle. I listen to hear if his next patient has started screaming yet, but I can't hear anything.

So I wash my face, adjust my scarf, and slick down the little cowlick in my hair. I go up to the bar for a quick one. The headwaiter, who is human, knows me, and gives me a seat looking south toward the Lower Bay rim of the bubble. He looks toward a tall, copper-skinned girl with green eyes sitting by herself, but I shake my head. I drink one short drink, admire the legs on the copper-skinned girl and, thinking mostly about where I am going to go for dinner, keep my appointment for my guitar lesson.

2

All my life I wanted to be a prospector, as far back as I can remember. I couldn't have been more than six when my father and mother took me to a fair in Cheyenne. Hot dogs and popped soya, colored-paper hydrogen balloons, a circus with dogs and horses, wheels of fortune, games, rides. And there was a pressure tent with opaque sides, a dollar to get in, and inside somebody had arranged a display of imports from the Heechee tunnels on Venus. Prayer fans and fire pearls, real Heechee-metal mirrors that you could buy for twenty-five dollars apiece. Pa said they weren't real, but to me they were real. We couldn't afford twenty-five dollars apiece, though. And when you came right down to it, I didn't really need a mirror. Freckled face, buck teeth, hair I brushed straight back and tied. They had just found Gateway. I heard my father talking about it going home that night in the airbus, when I guess they thought I was asleep, and the wistful hunger in his voice kept me awake.

If it hadn't been for my mother and me he might have found a way to go. But he never got the chance. He was dead a year later. All I inherited from him was his job, as soon as I was big enough to hold it.

I don't know if you've ever worked in the food mines, but you've probably heard about them. There isn't any great joy there. I started, half-time and half-pay, at twelve. By the time I was sixteen I had my father's rating: charge driller – good pay, hard work.

But what can you do with the pay? It isn't enough for Full Medical. It isn't enough even to get you out of the mines, only enough to be a sort of local success story. You work six hours on

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and ten hours off. Eight hours' sleep and you're on again, with your clothes stinking of shale all the time. You can't smoke, except in sealed rooms. The oil fog settles everywhere. The girls are as smelly and slick and frazzled as you are.

So we all did the same things, we worked and chased each other's women and played the lottery. And we drank a lot, the cheap, powerful liquor that was made not ten miles away. Sometimes it was labeled Scotch and sometimes vodka or bourbon, but it all came off the same slime-still columns. I was no different from any of the others . . . except that, one time, I won the lottery. And that was my ticket out.

Before that happened I just lived.

My mother was a miner, too. After my father was killed in the shaft fire she brought me up, with the help of the company crèche. We got along all right until I had my psychotic episode. I was twenty-six at the time. I had some trouble with my girl, and then for a while I just couldn't get out of bed in the morning. So they put me away. I was out of circulation for most of a year, and when they let me out of the shrink tank my mother had died.

Face it: that was my fault. I don't mean I planned it, I mean she would have lived if she hadn't had me to worry about. There wasn't enough money to pay the medical expenses for both of us. I needed psychotherapy. She needed a new lung. She didn't get it, so she died.

I hated living on in the same apartment after she was dead, but it was either that or go into bachelor quarters. I didn't like the idea of living in such close proximity to a lot of men. Of course I could have gotten married. I didn't – Sylvia, the girl I'd had the trouble with, was long gone by that time – but it wasn't because I had anything against the idea of marriage. Maybe you might think I did, considering my psychiatric history, and also considering that I'd lived with my mother as long as she was alive. But it isn't true. I liked girls very much. I would have been very happy to marry one and raise a child.

But not in the mines.

I didn't want to leave a son of mine the way my father had left me.

Charge drilling is bitchy hard work. Now they use steam torches with Heechee heating coils and the shale just politely splits away, like carving cubes of wax. But then we drilled and blasted. You'd go down into the shaft on the high-speed drop at the start of your shift. The shaft wall was slimy and stinking ten inches from your shoulder, moving at sixty kilometers an hour relative to you; I've seen miners with a few drinks in them stagger and stretch out a hand to support themselves and pull back a stump. Then you pile out of the bucket and slip and stumble on the duckboards for a kilometer or more till you come to the working face. You drill your shaft. You set your charges. Then you back out into a cul-de-sac while they blast, hoping you figured it right and the whole reeking, oily mass doesn't come down on you. (If you're buried alive you can live up to a week in the loose shale. People have. When they don't get rescued until after the third day they're usually never any good for anything anymore.) Then, if everything has gone all right, you dodge the handling loaders as they come creeping in on their tracks, on your way to the next face.

The masks, they say, take out most of the hydrocarbons and the rock dust. They don't take out the stink. I'm not sure they take out all the hydrocarbons, either. My mother is not the only miner I knew who needed a new lung – nor the only one who couldn't pay for one, either.

And then, when your shift is over, where is there to go?

You go to a bar. You go to a dorm-room with a girl. You go to a rec-room to play cards. You watch TV.

You don't go outdoors very much. There's no reason. There are a couple of little parks, carefully tended, planted, replanted; Rock Park even has hedges and a lawn. I bet you never saw a lawn that had to be washed, scrubbed (with detergent!), and air-dried every week, or it would die. So we mostly leave the parks to the kids.

Apart from the parks, there is only the surface of Wyoming, and as far as you can see it looks like the surface of the Moon. Nothing green anywhere. Nothing alive. No birds, no squirrels, no pets. A few sludgy, squidgy creeks that for some reason are always bright ochre-red under the oil. They tell us that we're lucky at that, because our part of Wyoming was shaft-mined. In Colorado, where they strip-mined, things were even worse.

I always found that hard to believe, and still do, but I've never gone to look.

And apart from everything else, there's the smell and sight and sound of the work. The sunsets orangey-brown through the haze. The constant smell. All day and all night there's the roar of the extractor furnaces, heating and grinding the marlstone to get the kerogen out of it, and the rumble of the long-line conveyors, dragging the spent shale away to pile it somewhere.

See, you have to heat the rock to extract the oil. When you heat it it expands, like popcorn. So there's no place to put it. You can't squeeze it back into the shaft you've taken it out of; there's too much of it. If you dig out a mountain of shale and extract the oil, the popped shale that's left is enough to make two mountains. So that's what you do. You build new mountains.

And the runoff heat from the extractors warms the culture sheds, and the oil grows its slime as it trickles through the shed, and the slime-skimmers scoop it off and dry it and press it . . . and we eat it, or some of it, for breakfast the next morning.

Funny. In the old days oil used to bubble right out of the ground! And all people thought to do with it was stick it in their automobiles and burn it up.

All the TV shows have morale-builder commercials telling us how important our work is, how the whole world depends on us for food. It's all true. They don't have to keep reminding us. If we didn't do what we do there would be hunger in Texas and kwashiorkor among the babies in Oregon. We all know that. We contribute five *trillion* calories a day to the world's diet, half the protein ration for about a fifth of the global population. It all

comes out of the yeasts and bacteria we grow off the Wyoming shale oil, along with parts of Utah and Colorado. The world needs that food. But so far it has cost us most of Wyoming, half of Appalachia, a big chunk of the Athabasca tar sands region . . . and what are we going to do with all those people when the last drop of hydrocarbon is converted to yeast?

It's not my problem, but I still think of it.

It stopped being my problem when I won the lottery, the day after Christmas, the year I turned twenty-six.

The prize was two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Enough to live like a king for a year. Enough to marry and keep a family on, provided we both worked and didn't live too high.

Or enough for a one-way ticket to Gateway.

I took the lottery ticket down to the travel office and turned it in for passage. They were glad to see me; they didn't do much of a business there, especially in that kind of commodity. I had about ten thousand dollars left over in change, give or take a little. I didn't count it. I bought drinks for my whole shift as far as it would go. With the fifty people in my shift, and all the friends and casual drop-ins who leeched on the party, it went about twenty-four hours.

Then I staggered through a Wyoming blizzard back to the travel office. Five months later, I was circling in toward the asteroid, staring out the portholes at the Brazilian cruiser that was challenging us, on my way to being a prospector at last.

3

Sigfrid never closes off a subject. He never says, 'Well, Bob, I guess we've talked enough about that.' But sometimes when I've been lying there on the mat for a long time, not responding much, making jokes or humming through my nose, after a while he'll say:

'I think we might go back to a different area, Bob. There was something you said some time ago that we might follow up. Can you remember that time, the last time you—'

'The last time I talked to Klara, right?'

'Yes, Bob.'

'Sigfrid, I always know what you're going to say.'

'Doesn't matter if you do, Bob. What about it? Do you want to talk about how you felt that time?'

'Why not?' I clean the nail of my right middle finger by drawing it between my two lower front teeth. I inspect it and say, 'I realize that was an important time. Maybe it was the worst moment of my life, about. Even worse than when Sylvia ditched me, or when I found out my mother died.'

'Are you saying you'd rather talk about one of those things, Rob?'

'Not at all. You say talk about Klara, we'll talk about Klara.'

And I settle myself on the foam mat and think for a while. I've been very interested in transcendental insight, and sometimes when I set a problem to my mind and just start saying my mantra over and over I come out of it with the problem solved: Sell the fish-farm stock in Baja and buy plumbing supplies on the commodities exchange. That was one, and it really paid out Or: Take Rachel to Merida for waterskiing on the Bay of Campeche.

That got her into my bed the first time, when I'd tried everything else.

And then Sigfrid says, 'You're not responding, Rob.'

'I'm thinking about what you said.'

'Please don't think about it, Rob. Just talk. Tell me what you're feeling about Klara right now.'

I try to think it out honestly. Sigfrid won't let me get into TI for it, so I look inside my mind for suppressed feelings.

'Well, not much,' I say. Not much on the surface, anyway.

'Do you remember the feeling at the time, Bob?'

'Of course I do.'

'Try to feel what you felt then, Bob.'

'All right.' Obediently I reconstruct the situation in my mind. There I am, talking to Klara on the radio. Dane is shouting something in the lander. We're all frightened out of our wits. Down underneath us the blue mist is opening up, and I see the dim skeletal star for the first time. The Three-ship – no, it was a Five . . . Anyway, it stinks of vomit and perspiration. My body aches.

I can remember it exactly, although I would be lying if I said I was letting myself feel it.

I say lightly, half chuckling, 'Sigfrid, there's an intensity of pain and guilt and misery there that I just can't handle.' Sometimes I try that with him, saying a kind of painful truth in the tone you might use to ask the waiter at a cocktail party to bring you another rum punch. I do that when I want to divert his attack. I don't think it works. Sigfrid has a lot of Heechee circuits in him. He's a lot better than the machines at the Institute were, when I had my episode. He continuously monitors all my physical parameters: skin conductivity and pulse and beta-wave activity and so on. He gets readings from the restraining straps that hold me on the mat, to show how violently I fling myself around. He meters the volume of my voice and spectrum-scans the print for overtones. And he also understands what the words mean. Sigfrid is extremely smart, considering how stupid he is.

It is very hard, sometimes, to fool him. I get to the end of a session absolutely limp, with the feeling that if I had stayed with him for one more minute I would have found myself falling right down into that pain and it would have destroyed me.

Or cured me. Perhaps they are the same thing.