

## The Silver Splitter

Jessup knew Korg would be coming for him; so he waited at the last stop light in 'Vegas, at two in the morning, in the rain.

Five miles away, Susan and Harvey Patterson were 'jest truckin!,' in their new 4-Wheel Drive Blazer, on their way out of town past the bright Las Vegas strip. Susan had taken over the driving chores for a while after Harvey's stretch through the California desert into Las Vegas.

Harvey, the intelligent, baby-faced scion of a prestigious business family, had recently accepted a big new job in Houston with American Oil Corporation. He hadn't wanted to leave L.A., but Susan had prodded him relentlessly. She tossed her red hair recklessly more than one time, pouting, " Play too hard to get, Casanova, and I'll . . . and they'll find someone else."

So Harvey took the Executive Job on the Gulf of Mexico, and for all the right reasons, too: he owned an M.B.A. in Global Economics from Stanford University, he'd put in three boring years at National Business Machines in middle-level management, and the high-level Houston job would almost double his pay.

With everything there was to gain, however, he still felt strange misgivings. Pemble, the man who had interviewed him, had seemed stuffy, and ultra-conservative, and unhappy. Also, Harvey and Susan enjoyed the laid-back atmosphere of Southern California, they had both been born there, and the move meant they would have to leave their friends and family and the beaches--hot and crowded in the summer, restless and moody in the winter.

" Oh, well," thought Harvey philosophically, " nothing lasts forever." So they'd left their home, their belongings following behind them by moving van. Then, to prove the 'correctness' of their decision, they had stopped at the 'Wagon Wheel' Casino for dinner, and on the way out Susan had deposited twenty-five cents in a slot machine, winning \$500.00 by pulling a handle.

So it was with mixed feelings that the Pattersons encountered Jessup hitchhiking in the bright, early, headlight-lit rain.

" Hey, pull over and pick up that guy." Harvey said.

" Honey, it's late . . . "

" Common, he looks like your old man."

The old man got into their Chevy graciously. " Thanks, a lot, it's about time," Jessup wheezed tiredly as he sat down in their back seat, dripping water.

" Wet night." Harvey commented salubriously. " That it is." The visitor leaned back cautiously in his velour seat and seemed to notice everything in the car. Harvey took a liking to the aged gentleman immediately. " Going far?" " Not too far."

Their silver-maned guest seemed grateful. He removed his soaked hat, studiously unbuttoned his heavy leather coat, and settled in. Then he said the strangest thing. " How's your baby?"

Susan swiveled to face him. " We don't have children," she answered, curious.

The old man was tired but wide awake, and it seemed as if his question was a natural assumption, so Harvey, the ex-USC football captain, took confident control of the situation. " How's your mother?" He countered playfully. " Just fine." The whispering, steel-eyed stranger grinned confidently.

" Well, tell us when we get to your turnoff," Susan said as she shivered in a draft of cold air that leaked through the crack at the top of the window. " How did you end up in such a dreary spot?" she asked, closing it. " I split." He responded without elaboration.

Harvey liked the answer. The older man spoke smoothly and authoritatively, and Harvey almost began to feel like telling Jessup a secret. The old man seemed kindly, and grateful, and powerful.

But Susan wasn't so sure. " You sound like an interesting man, what do you do?" she asked, prying. Susan gazed through the wet windshield at the slowly moving highway and was reminded of childhood trips traveling across country with her parents. " Right now, just one thing--escape."

Harvey would have been surprised if Jessup could escape from anyone, or thing, but he played along for the sake of fun. " Who're you running from?" " From Korg." Jessup answered truthfully for once.

Susan paused before she spoke. The miles were ticking off endlessly, lost in silver light on falling water, and a white line that disappeared when you looked for it. " You mean like in a story. Are you a writer?"

Jessup looked at her appraisingly, then squinted his eyes and stared down the long highway before he answered. " That's right, a writer . . . for a science fiction magazine. Jessup Fine's my name." Jessup reached into the front seat and shook Harvey's hand. " And I'm in the middle of writing a segment for 'Other Worlds.'" Guess it's got me a little wrapped up."

" I've read that magazine," Harvey enthused, sure that he must have.

Through the rear-view mirror in the dim light it still wasn't hard for Susan to make out how very closely Jessup did resemble her departed father, rest his soul. " Well, what is it about, then?" She responded to his platinum crown and the voice of experience. " I'll tell you." Jessup looked carefully out both windows, then began to spin a tale.

" Once upon a time, there was a galaxy named Alteare, and the Beings of its many worlds were happy, and had climbed up to the pinnacle of achievement. The people of one world, Norirr, who were most advanced, ruled the rest of the universe with benevolence, and were like Gods. Culture flourished. There was nothing anyone wanted. Then Korg came."

Jessup seemed to look right through Susan into the future. She squirmed in her seat, her ruby hair falling out of her burette onto the back of it.

" Who's Korg?" Harvey asked. " Korg's the devil," Jessup said, " and I am the Last Splitter."

The windshield turned into a snowstorm.

Jessup looked old and dignified, but he was most definitely wierd, Susan thought. She was suddenly tired, so she speeded up for a last burst of miles before asking her husband to relieve her. She felt a sudden stomachache, and realized Jessup was staring at her. He leaned forward over the front seat, and breathed on her neck, and said " Next town."

The next town was 116 miles farther down the road.

" So, what's a Splitter?" Harvey asked Jessup, while both of them looked at his wife. Harvey wondered what to think about her sudden mood, and didn't notice the change to first person. " A Splitter is an Altearean, one who goes through time, both ways."

" Both ways?" Susan thought maybe if she helped, the stupid story would end soon.

Jessup leaned back satisfied, savoring his old-sounding words: " Going forward's easy, the time ain't been made yet. But it took time . . . , " Jessup laughed in a high cackle, " . . . to figure out how to go back."

No one spoke, and in the moist, stuffy stillness Jessup looked from Susan to Harvey slowly, daring anyone to ask. " There's only one way," he finally volunteered. You conceive yourself, your inner self, into an embryo in the womb of a suitable female, at an exact moment . . . "

Susan choked silently as Jessup continued.

" . . . At that moment you can divide, become the father, and go backwards to his time, and split again."

Harvey and Susan froze as if they were on a ladder. Harvey finally spoke: " But that could take years, to get anywhere." " Years are mere moments, besides, it's the only game in town." " What happened to the rest of the Alteareans?" Harvey asked. " Korg wasted us." " Can he go through time, too?" " Anytime he wants." " Then why can't you?" Susan asked a logical question, turning to face him. " WHO DO YOU THINK I AM, GOD?!" Jessup exploded, spitting the words onto the back of Susan's shoulders.

She swerved dangerously in the road. Harvey could only watch as she finally regained control of the car and he quickly turned around to tell their suddenly obnoxious senior to shut up, or get out, but Jessup looked back at him with such a sorry, paternal expression, Harvey couldn't speak. " I'm sorry, I guess I'm too . . . emotionally involved. I always get this way," Jessup explained.

" Would you please try to calm down!" Susan looked over at her usually strong husband for help, but he just stared into space. " Yes, calm down, please," Harvey finally said, not looking at the man. " How far did you say you're going?" Susan asked forcefully. " We're almost there."

Jessup laughed softly, then leaned over the front seat again and squealed, " Now that we've split, I've won. I can rule again! And Korg, the eternal slaughterer, will die! Stop here!" Jessup commanded, and Susan, without thinking, jammed on the brakes and screeched to a stop by the side of the shiny and deserted highway. Jessup coughed, " Wait!" and disappeared into the desert.

Susan and Harvey sat lost in the humid silence, until Susan said, " He's way too strange, we're going," and started to drive away. " No!" Harvey reached over and turned off the key, shaking as he spoke. " We're not leaving an old man to die in the middle of the desert!"

Susan couldn't believe him, but before she could argue a low rumble started, and got louder, and suddenly a bright light shining down from high in the air swept over the car and filled it and the desert with fire and electricity. Then the light disappeared. " Oh God." Susan looked at Harvey wide-eyed. He gaped back vacantly for a moment, then, slowly waking up, he fumbled with the keys, and tried to put them back in the ignition. But before the car started, they heard the back door open and slam shut. " Let's go," Jessup squeaked triumphantly.

Susan pulled back onto the highway and said, " I don't know who you are, mister, but you're getting out at the next exit." " Would you leave an old, old man to freeze, in the middle of the desert?" Jessup rasped, looking at Harvey; then he laughed, he laughed and coughed. " You heard my wife!" Harvey warned him, too late.

Their visitor didn't answer. Laughing and sneezing, the coughing becoming deeper and more frequent, the old man sounded as if he was about to choke to death. Harvey peered at Jessup in the dimness of their back seat. He sounded like he was about to die. " Turn on the light." Harvey reached to help Jessup as Susan turned on the dome light and looked back to see someone she knew.

" Dad!" she screamed, looking back at the highway too late. The last thing she

remembered was the image of a silver face, like the man in the moon on a starless, icy night.

The lights of the hospital waiting room were green and yellow.

Harvey, his arm in a sling and face bandaged, paced back and forth in front of the Emergency Room doors, then sat down and picked up a magazine and pretended to read it. Suddenly, the Head Nurse appeared at the double doors. He walked up and stood in front of her, waiting anxiously.

The nurse smiled at him. " Good news, your wife will be all right." Harvey felt light headed, and the nurse guided him to a seat. " And the old man?" he whispered cautiously. " Your father-in-law? Isn't he with you? He checked out an hour ago, looking very chipper. But I've saved the best news for last. Are you ready?"

" What news?" After all they'd been through, Harvey was unprepared for a surprise. " Well, it's your wife." The nurse felt like she was telling someone about love for the first time. " Sometimes it's possible for a woman to be pregnant and not know it." She leaned forward in the vinyl hospital chair and smiled capably, while Harvey stared at her in shock. " Wha...what!?! " He gasped.

" Your wife has given birth, you're a father!"

Harvey's head hurt, and he felt like it was disconnected from his body. The scary science fiction story had turned into a real nightmare. " Is it a boy, or a girl?" he asked her, wondering as he spoke if it would make any difference.

The head nurse told him in the tone of one who proclaims the conquest of a universe: " Better yet, Mr. Patterson, it's both, a boy and a girl. It's twins."

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