

THE GREEN CHILDREN

#3

by Stanley Lieber

Peter considered life to be a waste of good resources. He didn't much care for the so-called pleasures that were on offer at virtually every... well, he just didn't care about pleasure.

His brother was, shall we say, not cut from the same cloth. Peter marveled at Tommy's inexhaustible capacity for spinning out, blowing a gasket, tripping over his own Reeboks in his never-ending quest for sensation. Clichés were appropriate for this guy who was not, himself, appropriate.

For one thing, there was his body. Tommy had one. His arms and legs were skinny, his belly pooched out. Instead of an eyepatch his entire face was wrapped in a wide plastic strip that supposedly enhanced his percept instrument, though Peter had never ascertained its precise mechanism. If Peter had thought Tommy was smug, the plastic strip removed all doubt.

It wasn't all bad. Tommy gave him life. Whenever Peter felt like giving up, here was Tommy saying something stupid, here was Tommy with an interesting new book, here was Tommy hatching a lucrative scheme involving other people's money, or the Internet.

Here was Peter, falling in love with his captor.

He wondered what Tommy thought about when he was alone.

Or so Tommy assumed Peter would have thought.

Who knew what went on in that silly pirate's head? His brother certainly was an odd duck.

No matter, he got the job done.

Tommy removed his penis from Peter's still-working mouth and zipped up his black leather jeans. Wiped his hand off on his shirt. "Get out of here, man," was all he would say, dismissing his sibling back to whatever hole he crawled into, off, elsewhere in the silo, whenever he wasn't needed. "Too much teeth."

Peter fucked off to his hole.

Now, where was he...

Head cleared, Tommy resumed his stream of consciousness. Re-attached drivetrain to wheels without downshifting, slipping the helmet of his mind back into place. He sat back in his seat and waited for the road to appear before him.

His visor went to work.

Working...

Headlights punching only a small hole in the darkness, Tommy could see the road in front of him as a more or less focused corridor of generative nonsense. Like third-party ads, receding. The visor made it, made him. The perfect apprehension of details no one would notice in broad daylight, even while standing perfectly still. He reckoned it was no wonder he got tired so quickly.

Tommy shifted.

Scanning for marks. A girl he knew had let him go through her purse, just like it was nothing. He took whatever looked interesting and she didn't complain. Peter just stared. Focused. Tommy wondered what else he could get away with.

At lunch, the other kids were starting to avoid him. Or was he avoiding them? Peter would probably say something like, the glass was half full of whatever you wanted, and half full of whatever it really was. Whatever that was supposed to mean.

One, two, three, four, nobody in the cafeteria was carrying. Tommy switched back to ambient and performed a mundane visible light inspection of the space. Pretty soon now it would be time for class.

Working...

Bear would sit and listen to them eating. For hours he'd track their conversations, the stupid things they thought about and allowed to escape from their lips. The stupidity was the only reliable indicator he'd tuned into the right channel. It gave him time to think. (The act of correcting in itself was a sign of life.)

They were like ants.

Hm.

Delicious.

It was a coffee shop appropriately dubbed "The Filling Station," for within its confines libations were dispensed from thick rubber hoses by attendants clothed in striped coveralls and wool caps. The booths were intended to resemble old style "bench" car seats, each customer being dutifully strapped across the waist by a webbed belt, fastened on the other side into an archaic looking, locking mechanism. Peter accommodated a mouthful of steaming coffee from an attendant as Tommy continued with his tirade, already in progress.

"The problem is, nobody here understands *lying*."

He paused so the attendant could squeegee his visor.

"You and I, we lie all the time. And this is good. But, so many of our contemporaries get hung up on the supposed truth or untruth of a given claim, I fear that they are in danger of sacrificing the five human senses -- literally, the visceral experience of the yarn -- in favor of some wildly overestimated, supposed *understanding* of the claim's specific, actual flaws and deficiencies."

Peter nodded, uncritically.

"What I'm advocating instead is a return to the deployment of artifice in human relations. Traditional, face-to-face bullshitting, both parties partaking voluntarily in the error. Tear away this modern skein of earnestness! Speak-a the English! Say *anything!* Smash the policy of truth!

The Filling Station sounded a loud *ding* as a new customer entered from the street.

"I know exactly what you mean," Peter said.

It was not enough.

"Say what you will," said Tommy, "I still think it was fucking stupid for William to just go home and tell his Mom that we went to see the Doctor."

Peter knew he was right.

"Our insurance will cover it anyway," said Tommy.

"I hope," he added.

Bear liked his coffee shop. He had regular customers. The gimmick was okay, but that wasn't what kept them showing up, day after day. His customers craved his honesty, and to a lesser extent, his excellent coffee. The costumes they could take or leave.

Penguin sidled up to Bear's cash register, receipt in hand.

"Say, Bear, it seems I've been charged for three mugs of chocolate, when in reality I've only been given one."

Bear studied the receipt, then looked slowly up at Penguin, his snout forming the tip of a blunt spear as his eyes drew so narrow that Penguin assumed he had fallen asleep.

"Yoo hoo, Bearrrrrr..." Penguin said.

"We'll call it even," Bear said, stuffing the receipt into his cash register. Penguin didn't complain. They never complained.

"I'll have another mug of chocolate," Penguin said, and climbed back onto his bar stool at the far end of the counter.

Bear wiped the sweat from his forehead with the shop rag he kept tucked into the back of his coveralls.

The door dinged as another customer made their way into the shop from the street.