

ESCAPE FROM UTOPIA

Life in "Utopia" was beautiful, perfectly regulated to satisfy everyone's needs and desires—except one.

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DAVE STOOD AT ATTENTION before the judge's raised desk and waited as the judge punched his serial number on the keys of the recordmach. A few seconds later a small green light came on, and Dave knew his record plate at the Central Record Bureau was in position for interrogation.

Dave had seen his record once. On his eighth birthday, when he had graduated from the City Nursery, he had been taken to the Central Record Bureau and shown the thin brass plate perforated even then with an uncountable number of almost microscopic holes. In the complex coded arrangement of the holes had been and would be recorded every detail of his life; details remembered and forgotten, important and trivial, details which he himself would never know because they were classified as City secrets.

The judge pressed a series of interrogation buttons on the recordmach, and the machine hummed and whirred almost below hearing level. After about a minute a typed page dropped into a tray on the desk.

The judge read aloud from the page: "Citizen Dave Allen, Power Plant Technician: Subject of Appeal—Renewal of Mate." He paused and examined the paper silently for a moment, then went on:

"First free choice mating, 10 June 2012 to 9 June 2013—mate, Lura Sims—result, no issue. Second free choice mating, 10 June 2013 to 9 June 2014—mate, Lura Sims, renewed. Result, no issue." He looked significantly at Dave's white armband, the color of a non-producer, then continued: "Both allowable free-choice matings utilized. Number of points required for special renewal, three-thousand. Number of points in reserve of Citizen Dave Allen, seven hundred and thirty-four. Number of points in reserve of Citizen Lura Sims, five hundred and ten; combined total, eleven hundred and forty-four—less than half the required amount."

The judge put the paper down and clasped his hands over it. "You are aware of these facts. On what basis are you requesting renewal?"

Dave swallowed hard. It was difficult to think of words that could stand up against the cold authoritative figures. "My mate was very ill this past winter," he began. "She almost died."

"What about the first year?"

Dave remained silent. It was going badly. The

right thoughts, the right words, wouldn't come.

The judge's voice was severe. "Citizen Allen," he said, "it appears that the motivations of your appeal—I must speak strongly—are entirely personal preferences at divergence with City interest. Is this correct?"

Dave's eyes met the judge's stare for a moment and were forced down. The accusation was a serious one. As a first-order citizen and a member of the City Guard Reserve, his personal preferences and the City's interest must be synonymous. And yet—

"The conclusion is correct, Your Honor," he admitted stiffly.

The judge waited, hands clasped, giving him a chance, Dave realized, to withdraw his appeal. But the words wouldn't come.

Finally, the judge picked up his gavel and rapped twice on the block. "Citizen Allen," he said, "your appeal is hereby denied. On Monday, 10 June at 8:00 a.m. you will report as previously directed to the Bureau of Procreation for reassignment to a mate of City choice. In addition, for your disregard of City interest in making this appeal, you are fined two hundred points."

Dave heard the judge's voice as though it came through a poor teleset, distorted and far off. Two days. . . . That was all he had left with Lura.

"Your Honor," he heard himself say, "I should like to petition for a one-month extension of mating based on our combined point reserve." Even as he spoke he realized the request was a dangerous one after the first refusal; but reason and logic were no longer in control. He waited for the explosion.

For a few moments the judge stared at him as if not believing he had heard correctly. Then, it seemed to Dave, his eyes softened for an instant. "One month?" the judge asked. "A one-month extension, if granted, would cost one thousand points. Would you sacrifice that many for such a short time?"

"Yes, Your Honor," Dave said. Hope surged within him. One month was not long. But it was not two days. It was not the day after tomorrow.

The judge pressed a number of buttons on the recordmach, and a second typed page dropped into the tray. He read in silence for a minute.

"Citizen Allen," he said, "I have no choice but to deny your request for extension. You have already been allocated."

Dave shook his head slowly. "I don't

understand," he said.

"A two-thousand-point requisition for you was made and approved ten days ago." The judge's glance fell back to the paper. "You are quite fortunate," he said. "Your new mate has already produced six children."

There was hardly anyone on the surface level as Dave walked toward home from the electric-car station. Most people preferred the more brightly lighted underground arcades.

Dave walked slowly, forcing back again and again the picture of how life would be without Lura. He knew his unhappiness was disloyal, almost traitorous. Yet it surrounded him and suffocated him, and he needed the cool night air to breathe.

Near home, he automatically left the surface walk and took the down ramp to the first level arcade. It was late, and only a few people were standing in line before the rationmach. When his turn came, he inserted his eight-point ration card in the slot, and studied the listings. There was the usual Saturday night beef-potato powder at five points. He pressed the button under this listing, and a small rectangular package about four inches square and one inch thick dropped into the receptacle under the machine. He used another point for a package of five soybean crackers, started to remove his card, and then suddenly shoved it back into the slot. What sense had there been to this cutting of rations, this saving of a point or two per day to build up their reserve? What had it accomplished besides hunger? He punched the button under the chocolate flavoring Lura liked, and spent thus the last two points.

As he gathered up the packages, a memory returned, and he looked around to make certain no one was nearby. Then without bothering to read the listing, he slowly pressed one of the buttons. Instantly the machine buzzed harshly, and a light flashed on behind a translucent glass window, projecting the words: *You are attempting to over-requisition your ration allowance. This thoughtlessness is divergent with City interest.* For a few seconds Dave stood looking at the reprimand. Then he removed his card and the buzzing stopped and the light went out.

It had been a sentimental thing to do, he realized—sentimental because that was the way he had first met Lura. That time when he had

absentmindedly overpunched, there had been a long line behind him, and the angry stares and murmurs had made him feel self-conscious and ashamed.

But before he had taken more than a few steps away, the rationmach had buzzed again. When he turned, the young girl who had been directly in back of him in line was looking at him and smiling. This characteristic of the rebel in Lura had at the same time shocked and attracted him. He had carried her packages, walking slowly because he wanted the walk to last as long as possible.

After that they had managed to meet at the rationmach fairly often and walk together the little distance their paths were common. Two weeks after their first meeting he had asked her to go with him to the picturemach, and she had accepted. The picture was an epic about the Fifth War. He had already seen it three times, but it was the first time for Lura, and during the middle scenes where it showed the cities being destroyed, Lura had become frightened and pressed his arm. He had taken her hand, and later when the great depletions of uranium, oil, and people had forced the war to an end, she hadn't tried to remove her hand from his.

After the picture they had walked along the surface path through the Central Park. This was in May and because the night air was chilly he had put his City patrol jacket around her shoulders. Even then she had shivered a little, and as he was buttoning the jacket around her, suddenly he knew he wanted to mate with her. When he asked her she had started to cry and he had been afraid she didn't want him; but after a little while she stopped, and he found out she did.

Except for the fact that they had not produced, the two years had been wonderful. After the first year Lura had been frightened that Dave would not want to renew her; but he wanted her more than he did the blue armband of the producer.

During the second year they had saved and worked overtime in an attempt to acquire the extra points they would need for a special renewal. But a sudden August rain had caught Lura on one of her surface walks, and she had developed the cold which kept her in bed for four months. The time lost from her work and the cost of the special allowance rations had made hopeless any chance of their saving the required three-thousand points. Yet when their notices to report for mating reassignment had come ten days ago, they had half

convinced themselves that because of Lura's sickness, an appeal for renewal would be approved.

Now, the results of their hopes and rationalizations were summarized by a few hundred additional perforations in their record plates, all of which added up to the wrong answer.

Walking down the six levels of steps to their rooms, Dave wondered how he would tell Lura. She was pressing his Patrol jacket when he came in, and the eager light that was in her eyes when she looked up, faded and died. "Not even an extension?" she asked after a moment.

Dave shook his head.

She sat down on the bed and stared at the wall.

Dave put the package of chocolate flavor in her lap. She looked down at it and then at him and smiled although her eyes were wet. She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "Perhaps they'll find something at the reassignment examination," she said. "It happens that way sometimes. I haven't had a test for two weeks."

It was Lura's way of making it easy for him, Dave knew. By setting up this little far-fetched shred of hope, she was trying to save their last two days together—less than that now—this evening and tomorrow—that was all.

"Look at the time," Lura said suddenly. "I'd better start dinner before the meal power goes off."

Dave watched as she emptied the beef-potato powder into a pan, added water and salt, and stirred the mixture into a thick paste. While the pan was heating on the electric plate, she set two dishes on the table and opened the crackers beside them. She divided the chocolate flavoring equally in two cups and filled them with hot water.

During the meal Lura asked him, "What's showing at the picturemach tonight, Dave?"

Dave thought for a moment, "*Escape from the Primitives*, I think. We've seen it only once. Would you like to go?"

"I don't think so," Lura said. "They scare me the way they torture and eat people." She shuddered. "Let's stay home."

When the meal was over and everything put away, Lura turned on the musicmach and sat down on the bed. Dave sat down beside her and pulled her head over against his chest. They were sitting that way listening to the music, when the door buzzer sounded. Lura uttered a little drawn-out "Oh, no!" and whispered, "If it's Helen again, I'll die."

The woman who came in when Dave opened the door was about thirty, large-boned and bosomy. She wore the maroon uniform of the City Mothers' Guild.

"Hello, Helen," Dave said. "Come in."

"I can stay only a minute," Helen said. "But I heard the music and thought I'd stop in and ask how everything was."

"Our renewal was refused," Dave said.

"I'm sorry," Helen said. "But of course the City knows best. I've seen cases just like yours where after re-mating with City choices, both the man and the woman produced admirably." She smoothed her skirt. "As a matter of fact, both my second and fourth mates had never produced until they were assigned to me."

Dave stared at her blue arm band with the six gold stars and said nothing. Then suddenly, like a cold surface wind in December, the judge's words swept over him—*your new mate has produced six children*. For a moment his thoughts ran together and blurred. When they cleared, Helen was watching him and smiling.

"I must go now," she said. "I'm sure everything will work out fine. You'll see."

When Helen had gone, Lura came up to Dave and looked at him anxiously. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing really," Dave said.

"There is," Lura insisted. "You're absolutely white."

Dave rubbed his forehead and eyes. "I think—I'm pretty sure I've been assigned to Helen."

Lura stared at him with her mouth open. "Oh, no, Dave—not her! You—" She tried to say something more but the words seemed to choke her, and she shook her head hopelessly.

Dave put his arms around her. "I shouldn't have told you," he said.

For a minute Lura kept her face buried against his shoulder. Then she wiped her eyes. "Let's go out, Dave," she said. "Let's take a surface walk and watch stars. I love to watch stars."

"It's pretty cool tonight," Dave said.

"I won't mind if you won't. We can take turns wearing your jacket."

In the moonlight, the flat expanse of the surface level was broken only by the dark shapes of the guard domes, now sealed and untended. Dave and Lura walked along the radial path which led to the Belt Park circling the City. Most of the way they

walked in silence, holding hands. Once, Lura asked, “Dave, do you ever wonder who your father and mother are?”

“Of course not,” Dave said. “That’s a City secret.”

“I wonder about mine sometimes,” Lura said. “It would be nice to have something the City couldn’t change.”

Dave shook his head wonderingly. Even after two years, Lura’s ideas sometimes startled him.

In the park there were fewer lights than there had been along the radial path. The belt path itself was bordered on both sides by chest-high hedges, and here and there was a tree with a bench under it. Along the outside hedge a rim of red lights on stanchions indicated the City’s edge; and from there the ground sloped steeply downward for about fifty feet before it leveled off again into the rough plain which extended into the distance.

As Dave and Lura walked, they passed an occasional couple, usually very young; and now and then a member of the City Guard Reserve on patrol, a duty which Dave himself performed two nights a week. Since the primitives had been driven away, the patrol had little function, but it still continued in token form. In six years Dave had not seen a primitive.

After about an hour, Dave noticed Lura’s steps were beginning to drag a little. “Maybe we should rest and then start back,” he said.

“I suppose so,” Lura said.

They sat down on one of the benches. “Dave”—Lura said, hesitated, then went on—“what would happen if we should go to one of the other cities?”

Dave was astounded. “You mean run away?”

Lura nodded.

“They’d just send us back. And we’d probably be fined so many points we’d have a negative reserve for ten years!”

“I don’t mean one of the Alliance Cities,” Lura said. “If we could get to one of the coast cities, they wouldn’t send us back.”

“*Great power plant!*” Dave exclaimed. “That’s a crazy idea, Lura. Most of the coast cities are dead anyway, and even if we did know where there was a live one, we’d have to pass through the mountains where the primitives are. You’ve seen the pictures. You know what would happen if they caught you.”

“I know,” Lura said. “But you wouldn’t let them, would you, Dave? You have your patrol knife. I’d close my eyes and if you did it quickly, it

wouldn’t hurt too much.”

Dave shuddered and put his arm around Lura’s shoulders. “It’s a crazy idea,” he repeated. “If the City knew what you were thinking, they’d send you to the Analysis Bureau.”

“I guess so,” Lura said.

In silence they walked back along the belt path. Dave felt he needed analysis himself. All he could think of was that Monday night it would be Helen instead of Lura.

“We could never make it,” he said suddenly although Lura had said nothing. “At the most it might possibly give us a few more days together.”

“I know,” Lura said.

They were approaching the radial path now. Dave’s steps slackened, then stopped. He looked out over the outside hedge. “Would you want to?” he asked gently.

Lura turned and searched his face. Then she nodded.

“Sure?”

“Oh, yes!”

For a brief moment Dave’s fingers gripped her arms. Then looking around to see that no one was near, he took her hand and started forcing sideways through the hedge. The branches were thick and tore at their clothes and skin, but they pushed through to the other side. Then together they eased their way down the long steep slope, and set off across the plain in the direction of the mountains.

Excerpts from the Diary of Dr. Thomas Howell:

July 20, 2014—Quite an interesting day. This morning, while I was trout fishing over in Pearson’s stream, Rover, who had been poking around in the woods, suddenly began barking loud enough to scare every fish within five miles. I went over to investigate, and found him growling at a couple of the scarest, hungriest, wildest-looking kids I’ve ever seen.

The girl wasn’t over nineteen and the boy perhaps a year or two older. When he first saw me, he brought a knife he was holding up to the girl’s throat; but when he noticed I was alone he held the knife pointed in front of him and waited. I called Rover off and asked, “Do you speak English?”

They looked startled and after a moment the boy nodded but didn’t say anything.

“Are you hungry?” I asked. They both nodded this time.

I unwrapped one of Martha’s cheese sandwiches

and held it out to them. The boy's eyes widened and his knife dropped a little, but he wouldn't come any closer; and when the girl put out her hand, he pulled her back. I tossed the sandwich to her, and she caught it, tore it in two, and gave him half. They finished it in a few seconds.

"Your girl seems to be very ill. I'm a doctor. I'll try to help her if you come with me."

The boy hesitated, and kept looking first at me and then at the girl. Then he suddenly put his arm around her, and still holding his knife in the other hand, he followed me.

Back in the village, they seemed surprised at the houses.

"Is this a coast city?" the boy asked. It was the first time he had spoken. There was a peculiar, mechanical inflection in his speech.

"No, the coast is a good three hundred miles from here. And New Sierra isn't really a city."

Martha was sitting on the porch shelling peas for dinner when we got there. Being a doctor's wife she has seen people in some pretty sorry states; yet even so, the kids' appearance seemed to shock her. She helped me get them into bed and then went down for some food while I made an examination. I found they were both suffering from exposure, malnutrition, and extreme exhaustion. I am fairly sure the boy will be all right, but I'm quite worried about the girl.

July 21, 2014—The youngsters slept the clock around today. Martha thought we should wake them for supper but I told her the sleep will do them more good.

July 22, 2014—The boy awoke about ten this morning. He wouldn't leave the room while the girl was still sleeping, so Martha brought breakfast up to him. We talked a little and I gathered they ran away from one of the plains cities. As the closest is more than five hundred miles it is amazing how they came this far. They must have kept going on sheer willpower.

His name is Dave and hers is Lura. When I asked him if they were married he didn't seem to understand the word. He said they were mates but their term had expired.

Late in the afternoon the girl awoke, and after she had eaten I made another examination. She was still very weak, but had improved surprisingly. Unless there is a reaction later, I think she may be all right in time.

July 25, 2014—Both Dave and Lura have

shown considerable physical improvement, but their mental attitude is proving quite a problem. Even after five days, they seem to have a strange sort of wariness about everything. Dave carries his knife in his belt constantly, and he won't allow Lura out of his sight for more than a few moments.

I thought they might be strong enough by now to handle something more substantial than soup and cereal, so Martha charcoal-broiled two fine steaks. But when she brought them up hot and dripping, Lura gave a little cry and turned her head away; and Dave looked at me with an expression that wasn't too far from just plain horror. I guessed what the trouble might be, but Martha who is quite proud of her cooking, ran downstairs in tears. Later when I explained that the kids had never seen meat that hadn't been dried, pulverized, and vitiated in every possible manner, she felt a little better. The problem was finally resolved when Martha double-ground the steaks and made hamburgers.

July 27, 2014—Lura is walking now and spends a good deal of time in the sun. Martha has been trying to interest her in sewing and knitting but without much success. It is difficult to hold her attention for long.

Dave is much the same way. During the afternoon I tried to have another talk with him and it was an uphill struggle. But from what I did learn of their regimented existence, I can understand more clearly their difficulty in making an adjustment to our ways. It is something more than fear alone, although this seems to be a strong factor. Back in their city we have the reputation of being extremely savage and cannibalistic. I suppose my beard didn't help their peace of mind when they first saw me.

From what Dave says it seems that except for some intercity trade, the plains cities practice isolationism to an almost fanatic degree. Another interesting thing was their power and fuel. Although their sun engines provide enough power for the city needs, they have like ourselves, exhausted their petroleum fuel supply. Consequently, none of the planes and ground vehicles they've salvaged from the war can be operated.

July 30, 2014—Martha thought it would be nice if we took Dave and Lura to Charlie Wilson and Betty Turner's wedding today. It turned out to be quite an experience for the kids. I have never seen anything like the amazed expressions on their faces

when Reverend Bowen came to the part of the marriage vows: “—as long as ye both shall live.”

After the ceremony they asked a hundred questions, such as how many points did a person need to mate for such a long time. I tried to explain as best I could about love and marriage—both words were strange to them—but for the first time I felt we had established some communion of feeling and thought. When I told them they could be married just as the Wilsons had been, whenever they wanted, they seemed incredulous; and Lura asked, “Could we—right now?”

Martha began to protest something about preparations and such, but I went over to Reverend Bowen and spoke to him for a minute, and he asked the audience to be seated again.

He went through the ceremony very slowly, saying all the words clearly and with strong emotional emphasis. When he came to “as long as ye both shall live,” Lura started to cry and Reverend Bowen had to wait until she stopped. And then when he told Dave he could kiss the bride, Dave didn’t know what he meant. Betty and Charlie Wilson gave another little demonstration and the kids caught on pretty well this time. Later, during the double wedding reception, I found them practicing on the back porch.

August 2, 2014—Dave went out without his knife today—and Lura ate a small piece of liver and was quite proud and happy when we praised her for it. Since the wedding they are entirely different kids—clear-eyed, animated, and interested in practically everything around them. They average about five hundred questions a day.

August 15, 2014—Lura came with me today on my check-up visit to the Smiths’ new baby. I let her take the reins for awhile and she was as happy as a kid.

She was absolutely astounded when she learned that Mrs. Smith was allowed to keep her baby. And

then when it came time to leave I practically had to drag her away. I told her the way she is becoming stronger it might not be too long before she was having a baby herself. After that she seemed lost in the clouds the rest of the way home.

August 21, 2014—I took Dave down to the generator station at Buttermilk Falls and introduced him to Larry Jones. They got along fine and spoke in technical language I couldn’t understand. Pretty soon they were taking apart the auxiliary generator which hasn’t run since it broke down last October. Larry says Dave seems to be a whiz at mechanical things, and he wouldn’t be surprised if they had the generator running again before long.

September 3, 2014—The oatmeal tasted strange this morning and when I told Martha, she said, “Oh, I must have given you Dave’s or Lura’s by mistake.” I asked what difference that would make and she wouldn’t say at first, but she finally admitted she’d been spiking their food with wheat germ.

September 12, 2014—Dave told me today that Larry and some of the other fellows were going to help him clear some land and build a house over near Eagle Ridge. They ought to get a good start on construction of the house this fall and finish it up sometime in early spring.

October 28, 2014—It’s been getting pretty nippy out lately, but it’s going to be a warm winter for Dave. I picked him up at the generator station as usual, and when we got home Martha and Lura were in the living-room talking and knitting the way they sometimes do before dinner. Dave took one look at what Lura was working on and let out a whoop you could have heard a half-mile down the road. Then he ran over and kissed her.

I’ve been sure for almost a week now, but I can’t understand how Dave found out from her knitting. As far as I can tell, it looks like nothing more than a blue band.