**It’s Such a Beautiful Day**

Isaac Asimov

On April 12, 2117, the field-modulator brake-valve in the Door belonging to Mrs. Richard Hanshaw depolarized for reasons unknown. As a result, Mrs. Hanshaw’s day was completely upset and her son, Richard, Jr., first developed his strange neurosis.

It was not the type of thing you would find listed as a neurosis in the usual textbooks and certainly young Richard behaved, in most respects, just as a well-brought-up twelve-year-old in prosperous circumstances ought to behave.

And yet from April 12 on, Richard Hanshaw, Jr., could only with regret ever persuade himself to go through a Door.

Of all this, on April 12, Mrs. Hanshaw had no premonition. She woke in the morning (an ordinary morning) as her mekkano slithered gently into her room, with a cup of coffee on a small tray.

Mrs. Hanshaw was planning a visit to New York in the afternoon and she had several things to do first that could not quite be trusted to a mekkano, so after one or two sips, she stepped out of bed.

The mekkano backed away, moving silently along the diamagnetic field that kept its oblong body half an inch above the floor, and moved back to the kitchen, where its simple computer was quite adequate to set the proper controls on the various kitchen appliances in order that an appropriate breakfast might be prepared.

Mrs. Hanshaw, having bestowed the usual sentimental glance upon the cubograph of her dead husband, passed through the stages of her morning ritual with a certain contentment. She could hear her son across the hall clattering through his, but she knew she need not interfere with him. The mekkano was well adjusted to see to it, as a matter of course, that he was showered, that he had on a change of clothing, and that he would eat a nourishing breakfast. The tergo-shower she had had installed the year before made the morning wash and dry so quick and pleasant that, really, she felt certain Dickie would wash even without supervision.

On a morning like this, when she was busy, it would certainly not be necessary for her to do more than deposit a casual peck on the boy’s cheek before he left. She heard the soft chime the mekkano sounded to indicate approaching school time and she floated down the force-lift to the lower floor (her hair-style for the day only sketchily designed, as yet) in order to perform that motherly duty.

She found Richard standing at the door, with his text-reels and pocket projector dangling by their strap and a frown on his face.

“Say, Mom,” he said, looking up, “I dialed the school’s co-ords but nothing happens.”

She said, almost automatically, “Nonsense, Dickie. I never heard of such a thing.”

“Well, you try.”

Mrs. Hanshaw tried a number of times. Strange, the school Door was always set for general reception. She tried other co-ordinates. Her friends’ Doors might not be set for reception, but there would be a signal at least, and then she could explain.

But nothing happened at all. The Door remained an inactive gray barrier despite all her manipulations. It was obvious that the Door was out of order -and only five months after its annual fall inspection by the company.

She was quite angry about it.

It would happen on a day when she had so much planned. She thought petulantly of the fact that a month earlier she had decided against installing a subsidiary Door on the ground that it was an unnecessary expense. How was she to know that Doors were getting to be so shoddy?

She stepped to the visiphone while the anger still burned in her and said to Richard, “You just go down the road, Dickie, and use the Williamsons’ Door.”

Ironically, in view of later developments, Richard balked. “Aw, gee, Mom, I’ll get dirty. Can’t I stay home till the Door is fixed?”

And, as ironically, Mrs. Hanshaw insisted. With her finger on the combination board of the phone, she said, “You won’t get dirty if you put flexies on your shoes, and don’t forget to brush yourself well before you go into their house.”

“But, golly—”

“No back-talk, Dickie. You’ve got to be in school. Just let me see you walk out of here. And quickly, or you’ll be late.”

The mekkano, an advanced model and very responsive, was already standing before Richard with flexies in one appendage.

Richard pulled the transparent plastic shields over his shoes and moved down the hall with visible reluctance. “I don’t even know how to work this thing, Mom.”

“You just push that button,” Mrs. Hanshaw called. “The red button. Where it says ‘For Emergency Use.’ And don’t dawdle. Do you want the mekkano to go along with you?”

“Gosh, no,” he called back, morosely, “what do you think I am? A baby? Gosh!” His muttering was cut off by a slam.

With flying fingers, Mrs. Hanshaw punched the appropriate combination on the phone board and thought of the things she intended saying to the company about this.

Joe Bloom, a reasonable young man, who had gone through technology school with added training in force-field mechanics, was at the Hanshaw residence in less than half an hour. He was really quite competent, though Mrs. Hanshaw regarded his youth with deep suspicion.

She opened the movable house-panel when he first signaled and her sight of him was as he stood there, brushing at himself vigorously to remove the dust of the open air. He took off his flexies and dropped them where he stood. Mrs. Hanshaw closed the house-panel against the flash of raw sunlight that had entered. She found herself irrationally hoping that the step-by-step trip from the public Door had been an unpleasant one. Or perhaps that the public Door itself had been out of order and the youth had had to lug his tools even farther than the necessary two hundred yards. She wanted the Company, or its representative at least, to suffer a bit. It would teach them what broken Doors meant.

But he seemed cheerful and unperturbed as he said, “Good morning, ma’am. I came to see about your Door.”

“I’m glad someone did,” said Mrs. Hanshaw, ungraciously. “My day is quite ruined.”

“Sorry, ma’am. What seems to be the trouble?”

“It just won’t work. Nothing at all happens when you adjust co-ords,” said Mrs. Hanshaw. “There was no warning at all. I had to send my son out to the neighbors through that-that thing.”

She pointed to the entrance through which the repair man had come.

He smiled and spoke out of the conscious wisdom of his own specialized training in Doors. “That’s a door, too, ma’am. You don’t give that kind a capital letter when you write it. It’s a hand-door, sort of. It used to be the only kind once.”

“Well, at least it works. My boy’s had to go out in the dirt and germs.”

“It’s not bad outside today, ma’am,” he said, with the connoisseur-like air of one whose profession forced him into the open nearly every day. “Sometimes it is real unpleasant. But 1 guess you want I should fix this here Door, ma’am, so I’ll get on with it.”

He sat down on the floor, opened the large tool case he had brought in with him and in half a minute, by use of a point-demagnetizer, he had the control panel removed and a set of intricate vitals exposed.

He whistled to himself as he placed the fine electrodes of the field-analyzer on numerous points, studying the shifting needles on the dials. Mrs. Hanshaw watched him, arms folded.

Finally, he said, “Well, here’s something,” and with a deft twist, he disengaged the brake-valve.

He tapped it with a fingernail and said, “This here brake-valve is depolarized, ma’am. There’s your whole trouble.” He ran his finger along the little pigeonholes in his tool case and lifted out a duplicate of the object he had taken from the door mechanism. “These things just go all of a sudden. Can’t predict it.”

He put the control panel back and stood up. “It’ll work now, ma’am.”

He punched a reference combination, blanked it, then punched another. Each time, the dull gray of the Door gave way to a deep, velvety blackness. He said, “Will you sign here, ma’am? and put down your charge number, too, please? Thank you, ma’am.”

He punched a new combination, that of his home factory, and with a polite touch of finger to forehead, he stepped through the Door. As his body entered the blackness, it cut off sharply. Less and less of him was visible and the tip of his tool case was the last thing that showed. A second after he had passed through completely, the Door turned back to dull gray.

Half an hour later, when Mrs. Hanshaw had finally completed her interrupted preparations and was fuming over the misfortune of the morning, the phone buzzed annoyingly and her real troubles began.

Miss Elizabeth Robbins was distressed. Little Dick Hanshaw had always been a good pupil. She hated to report him like this. And yet, she told herself, his actions were certainly queer. And she would talk to his mother, not to the principal.

She slipped out to the phone during the morning study period, leaving a student in charge. She made her connection and found herself staring at Mrs. Hanshaw’s handsome and somewhat formidable head.

Miss Robbins quailed, but it was too late to turn back. She said, diffidently, “Mrs. Hanshaw, I’m Miss Robbins.” She ended on a rising note.

Mrs. Hanshaw looked blank, then said, “Richard’s teacher?” That, too, ended on a rising note.

“That’s right. I called you, Mrs. Hanshaw,” Miss Robbins plunged right into it, “to tell you that Dick was quite late to school this morning.”

“He was? But that couldn’t be. I saw him leave.”

Miss Robbins looked astonished. She said, “You mean you saw him use the Door?”

Mrs. Hanshaw said quickly, “Well, no. Our Door was temporarily out of order. I sent him to a neighbor and he used that Door.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“No, no, Mrs. Hanshaw. I wasn’t implying that at all. I meant are you sure he found the way to the neighbor? He might have got lost.”

“Ridiculous. We have the proper maps, and I’m sure Richard knows the location of every house in District A-3.” Then, with the quiet pride of one who knows what is her due, she added, “Not that he ever needs to know, of course. The co-ords are all that are necessary at any time.”

Miss Robbins, who came from a family that had always had to economize rigidly on the use of its Doors (the price of power being what it was) and who had therefore run errands on foot until quite an advanced age, resented the pride. She said, quite clearly, “Well, I’m afraid, Mrs. Hanshaw, that Dick did not use the neighbor’s Door. He was over an hour late to school and the condition of his flexies made it quite obvious that he tramped crosscountry. They were muddy.”

“Muddy?” Mrs. Hanshaw repeated the emphasis on the word. “What did he say? What was his excuse?”

Miss Robbins couldn’t help but feel a little glad at the discomfiture of the other woman. She said, “He wouldn’t talk about it. Frankly, Mrs. Hanshaw, he seems ill. That’s why I called you. Perhaps you might want to have a doctor look at him.”

“Is he running a temperature?” The mother’s voice went shrill.

“Oh, no. I don’t mean physically ill. It’s just his attitude and the look in his eyes.” She hesitated, then said with every attempt at delicacy, “I thought perhaps a routine checkup with a psychic probe—”

She didn’t finish. Mrs. Hanshaw, in a chilled voice and with what was as close to a snort as her breeding would permit, said, “Are you implying that Richard is neurotic?”

“Oh, no, Mrs. Hanshaw, but—”

“It certainly sounded so. The idea! He has always been perfectly healthy. I’ll take this up with him when he gets home. I’m sure there’s a perfectly normal explanation which he’ll give to me.”

The connection broke abruptly, and Miss Robbins felt hurt and uncommonly foolish. After all she had only tried to help, to fulfill what she considered an obligation to her students.

She hurried back to the classroom with a glance at the metal face of the wall clock. The study period was drawing to an end. English Composition next.

But her mind wasn’t completely on English Composition. Automatically, she called the students to have them read selections from their literary

creations. And occasionally she punched one of those selections on tape and ran it through the small vocalizer to show the students how English should be read.

The vocalizer’s mechanical voice, as always, dripped perfection, but, again as always, lacked character. Sometimes, she wondered if it was wise to try to train the students into a speech that was divorced from individuality and geared only to a mass-average accent and intonation.

Today, however, she had no thought for that. It was Richard Hanshaw she watched. He sat quietly in his seat, quite obviously indifferent to his surroundings. He was lost deep in himself and just not the same boy he had been. It was obvious to her that he had had some unusual experience that morning and, really, she was right to call his mother, although perhaps she ought not to have made the remark about the probe. Still it was quite the thing these days. All sorts of people get probed. There wasn’t any disgrace attached to it. Or there shouldn’t be, anyway.

She called on Richard, finally. She had to call twice, before he responded and rose to his feet.

The general subject assigned had been: “If you had your choice of traveling on some ancient vehicle, which would you choose, and why?” Miss Robbins tried to use the topic every semester. It was a good one because it carried a sense of history with it. It forced the youngster to think about the manner of living of people in past ages.

She listened while Richard Hanshaw read in a low voice.

“If I had my choice of ancient vehicles,” he said, pronouncing the “h” in vehicles, “I would choose the stratoliner. It travels slow like all vehicles but it is clean. Because it travels in the stratosphere, it must be all enclosed so that you are not likely to catch disease. You can see the stars if it is night time almost as good as in a planetarium. If you look down you can see the Earth like a map or maybe see clouds—” He went on for several hundred more words.

She said brightly when he had finished reading, “It’s pronounced vee-ick-ulls, Richard. No 'h.' Accent on the first syllable. And you don’t say 'travels slow' or ’see good.' What do you say, class?”

There was a small chorus of responses and she went on, “That’s right. Now what is the difference between an adjective and an adverb? Who can tell me?”

And so it went. Lunch passed. Some pupils stayed to eat; some went home. Richard stayed. Miss Robbins noted that, as usually he didn’t.

The afternoon passed, too, and then there was the final bell and the usual upsurging hum as twenty-five boys and girls rattled their belongings together and took their leisurely place in line.

Miss Robbins clapped her hands together, “Quickly, children. Come, Zelda, take your place.”

“I dropped my tape-punch, Miss Robbins,” shrilled the girl, defensively.

“Well, pick it up, pick it up. Now children, be brisk, be brisk.”

She pushed the button that slid a section of the wall into a recess and revealed the gray blankness of a large Door. It was not the usual Door that the occasional student used in going home for lunch, but an advanced model that was one of the prides of this well-to-do private school.

In addition to its double width, it possessed a large and impressively gear-filled “automatic serial finder” which was capable of adjusting the door for a number of different co-ordinates at automatic intervals.

At the beginning of the semester, Miss Robbins always had to spend an afternoon with the mechanic, adjusting the device for the co-ordinates of the homes of the new class. But then, thank goodness, it rarely needed attention for the remainder of the term.

The class lined up alphabetically, first girls, then boys. The Door went velvety black and Hester Adams waved her hand and stepped through. “By-y-y—”

The “bye” was cut off in the middle, as it almost always was.

The Door went gray, then black again, and Theresa Cantrocchi went through. Gray, black, Zelda Charlowicz. Gray, black, Patricia Coombs. Gray, black, Sara May Evans.

The line grew smaller as the Door swallowed them one by one, depositing each in her home. Of course, an occasional mother forgot to leave the house Door on special reception at the appropriate time and then the school Door remained gray. Automatically, after a minute-long wait, the Door went on to the next combination in line and the pupil in question had to wait till it was all over, after which a phone call to the forgetful parent would set things right. This was always bad for the pupils involved, especially the sensitive ones who took seriously the implication that they were little thought of at home. Miss Robbins always tried to impress this on visiting parents, but it happened at least once every semester just the same.

The girls were all through now. John Abramowitz stepped through and then Edwin Byrne—

Of course, another trouble, and a more frequent one was the boy or girl who got into line out of place. They would do it despite the teacher’s sharpest watch, particularly at the beginning of the term when the proper order was less familiar to them.

When that happened, children would be popping into the wrong houses by the half-dozen and would have to be sent back. It always meant a mixup that took minutes to straighten out and parents were invariably irate.

Miss Robbins was suddenly aware that the line had stopped. She spoke sharply to the boy at the head of the line.

“Step through, Samuel. What are you waiting for?”

Samuel Jones raised a complacent countenance and said, “It’s not my combination, Miss Robbins.”

“Well, whose is it?” She looked impatiently down the line of five remaining boys. Who was out of place?

“It’s Dick Hanshaw’s, Miss Robbins.”

“Where is he?”

Another boy answered, with the rather repulsive tone of self-righteousness all children automatically assume in reporting the deviations of their friends to elders in authority, “He went through the fire door, Miss Robbins.”

“What?”

The schoolroom Door had passed on to another combination and Samuel Jones passed through. One by one, the rest followed.

Miss Robbins was alone in the classroom. She stepped to the fire door. It was a small affair, manually operated, and hidden behind a bend in the wall so that it would not break up the uniform structure of the room.

She opened it a crack. It was there as a means of escape from the building in case of fire, a device which was enforced by an anachronistic law that did not take into account the modern methods of automatic fire-fighting that all public buildings used. There was nothing outside, but the-outside The sunlight was harsh and a dusty wind was blowing.

Miss Robbins closed the door. She was glad she had called Mrs. Hanshaw. She had done her duty. More than ever, it was obvious that something was wrong with Richard. She suppressed the impulse to phone again.

Mrs. Hanshaw did not go to New York that day. She remained home in a mixture of anxiety and an irrational anger, the latter directed against the impudent Miss Robbins.

Some fifteen minutes before school’s end, her anxiety drove her to the Door. Last year she had had it equipped with an automatic device which activated it to the school’s co-ordinates at five of three and kept it so, barring manual adjustment, until Richard arrived.

Her eyes were fixed on the Door’s dismal gray (why couldn’t an inactive force-field be any other color, something more lively and cheerful?) and waited. Her hands felt cold as she squeezed them together.

The Door turned black at the precise second but nothing happened. The minutes passed and Richard was late. Then quite late. Then very late.

It was a quarter of four and she was distracted. Normally, she would have phoned the school, but she couldn’t, she couldn’t. Not after that teacher had deliberately cast doubts on Richard’s mental well-being. How could she?

Mrs. Hanshaw moved about restlessly, lighting a cigarette with fumbling fingers, then smudging it out. Could it be something quite normal? Could Richard be staying after school for some reason? Surely he would have told her in advance. A gleam of light struck her; he knew she was planning to go to New York and might not be back till late in the evening-

No, he would surely have told her. Why fool herself?

Her pride was breaking. She would have to call the school, or even (she

closed her eyes and teardrops squeezed through between the lashes) the police.

And when she opened her eyes, Richard stood before her, eyes on the ground and his whole bearing that of someone waiting for a blow to fall.

“Hello, Mom.”

Mrs. Hanshaw’s anxiety transmuted itself instantly (in a manner known only to mothers) into anger. “Where have you been, Richard?”

And then, before she could go further into the refrain concerning careless, unthinking sons and broken-hearted mothers, she took note of his appearance in greater detail, and gasped in utter horror.

She said, “You’ve been in the open.”

Her son looked down at his dusty shoes (minus flexies), at the dirt marks that streaked his lower arms and at the small, but definite tear in his shirt. He said, “Gosh, Mom, I just thought I’d—” and he faded out.

She said, “Was there anything wrong with the school Door?”

“No, Mom.”

“Do you realize I’ve been worried sick about you?” She waited vainly for an answer. “Well, I’ll talk to you afterward, young man. First, you’re taking a bath, and every stitch of your clothing is being thrown out. Mekkano!”

But the mekkano had already reacted properly to the phrase “taking a bath” and was off to the bathroom in its silent glide.

“You take your shoes off right here,” said Mrs. Hanshaw, “then march after mekkano.”

Richard did as he was told with a resignation that placed him beyond futile protest.

Mrs. Hanshaw picked up the soiled shoes between thumb and forefinger and dropped them down the disposal chute which hummed in faint dismay at the unexpected load. She dusted her hands carefully on a tissue which she allowed to float down the chute after the shoes.

She did not join Richard at dinner but let him eat in the worse-than-lack-of-company of the mekkano. This, she thought, would be an active sign of her displeasure and would do more than any amount of scolding or punishment to make him realize that he had done wrong. Richard, she frequently told herself, was a sensitive boy.

But she went up to see him at bedtime.

She smiled at him and spoke softly. She thought that would be the best way. After all, he had been punished already.

She said, “What happened today, Dickie-boy?” She had called him that when he was a baby and just the sound of the name softened her nearly to tears.

But he only looked away and his voice was stubborn and cold. “I just don’t like to go through those dam Doors, Mom.”

“But why ever not?”

He shuffled his hands over the filmy sheet (fresh, clean, antiseptic and, of course, disposable after each use) and said, “I just don’t like them.”

“But then how do you expect to go to school, Dickie?”

“I’ll get up early,” he mumbled.

“But there’s nothing wrong with Doors.”

“Don’t like 'em.” He never once looked up at her.

She said, despairingly, “Oh, well, you have a good sleep and tomorrow morning you’ll feel much better.”

She kissed him and left the room, automatically passing her hand through the photo-cell beam and in that manner dimming the room-lights.

But she had trouble sleeping herself that night. Why should Dickie dislike Doors so suddenly? They had never bothered him before. To be sure, the Door had broken down in the morning but that should make him appreciate them all the more.

Dickie was behaving so unreasonably.

Unreasonably? That reminded her of Miss Robbins and her diagnosis and Mrs. Hanshaw’s soft jaw set in the darkness and privacy of her bedroom. Nonsense! The boy was upset and a night’s sleep was all the therapy he needed.

But the next morning when she arose, her son was not in the house. The mekkano could not speak but it could answer questions with gestures of its appendages equivalent to a yes or no, and it did not take Mrs. Hanshaw more than half a minute to ascertain that the boy had arisen thirty minutes earlier than usual, skimped his shower, and darted out of the house.

But not by way of the Door.

Out the other way-through the door. Small “d.”

Mrs. Hanshaw’s visiphone signaled genteelly at 3:10 p.m. that day. Mrs. Hanshaw guessed the caller and having activated the receiver, saw that she had guessed correctly. A quick glance in the mirror to see that she was properly calm after a day of abstracted concern and worry and then she keyed in her own transmission.

“Yes, Miss Robbins,” she said coldly.

Richard’s teacher was a bit breathless. She said, “Mrs. Hanshaw, Richard has deliberately left through the fire door although I told him to use the regular Door. I do not know where he went.” Mrs. Hanshaw said, carefully, “He left to come home.” Miss Robbins looked dismayed. “Do you approve of this?” Pale-faced, Mrs. Hanshaw set about putting the teacher in her place. “I don’t think it is up to you to criticize. If my son does not choose to use the Door, it is his affair and mine. I don’t think there is any school ruling that would force him to use the Door, is there?” Her bearing quite plainly intimated that if there were she would see to it that it was changed.

Miss Robbins flushed and had time for one quick remark before contact was broken. She said, “I’d have him probed. I really would.”

Mrs. Hanshaw remained standing before the quartzinium plate, staring blindly at its blank face. Her sense of family placed her for a few moments quite firmly on Richard’s side. Why did he have to use the Door if he chose not to? And then she settled down to wait and pride battled the gnawing anxiety that something after all was wrong with Richard.

He came home with a look of defiance on his face, but his mother, with a strenuous effort at self-control, met him as though nothing were out of the ordinary.

For weeks, she followed that policy. It’s nothing, she told herself. It’s a vagary. He’ll grow out of it.

It grew into an almost normal state of affairs. Then, too, every once in a while, perhaps three days in a row, she would come down to breakfast to find Richard waiting sullenly at the Door, then using it when school time came. She always refrained from commenting on the matter.

Always, when he did that, and especially when he followed it up by arriving home via the Door, her heart grew warm and she thought, “Well, it’s over.” But always with the passing of one day, two or three, he would return like an addict to his drug and drift silently out by the door-small “d”-before she woke.

And each time she thought despairingly of psychiatrists and probes, and each time the vision of Miss Robbins’ low-bred satisfaction at (possibly) learning of it, stopped her, although she was scarcely aware that that was the true motive.

Meanwhile, she lived with it and made the best of it. The mekkano was instructed to wait at the door-small “d”-with a Tergo kit and a change of clothing. Richard washed and changed without resistance. His underthings, socks and flexies were disposable in any case, and Mrs. Hanshaw bore uncomplainingly the expense of daily disposal of shirts. Trousers she finally allowed to go a week before disposal on condition of rigorous nightly cleansing.

One day she suggested that Richard accompany her on a trip to New York. It was more a vague desire to keep him in sight than part of any purposeful plan. He did not object. He was even happy. He stepped right through the Door, unconcerned. He didn’t hesitate. He even lacked the look of resentment he wore on those mornings he used the Door to go to school.

Mrs. Hanshaw rejoiced. This could be a way of weaning him back into Door usage, and she racked her ingenuity for excuses to make trips with Richard. She even raised her power bill to quite unheard-of heights by suggesting, and going through with, a trip to Canton for the day in order to witness a Chinese festival.

That was on a Sunday, and the next morning Richard marched directly to

the hole in the wall he always used. Mrs. Hanshaw, having wakened particularly early, witnessed that. For once, badgered past endurance, she called after him plaintively, “Why not the Door, Dickie?”

He said, briefly, “It’s all right for Canton,” and stepped out of the house.

So that plan ended in failure. And then, one day, Richard came home soaking wet. The mekkano hovered above him uncertainly and Mrs. Hanshaw, just returned from a four-hour visit with her sister in Iowa, cried, “Richard Hanshaw!”

He said, hang-dog fashion, “It started raining. All of a sudden, it started raining.”

For a moment, the word didn’t register with her. Her own school days and her studies of geography were twenty years in the past. And then she remembered and caught the vision of water pouring recklessly and endlessly down from the sky-a mad cascade of water with no tap to turn off, no button to push, no contact to break.

She said, “And you stayed out in it?”

He said, “Well, gee, Mom, I came home fast as I could. I didn’t know it was going to rain.”

Mrs. Hanshaw had nothing to say. She was appalled and the sensation filled her too full for words to find a place.

Two days later, Richard found himself with a running nose, and a dry, scratchy throat. Mrs. Hanshaw had to admit that the vims of disease had found a lodging in her house, as though it were a miserable hovel of the Iron Age.

It was over that that her stubbornness and pride broke and she admitted to herself that, after all, Richard had to have psychiatric help.

Mrs. Hanshaw chose a psychiatrist with care. Her first impulse was to find one at a distance. For a whik, she considered stepping directly into the San Francisco Medical Center and choosing one at random.

And then it occurred to her that by doing that she would become merely an anonymous consultant. She would have no way of obtaining any greater consideration for herself than would be forthcoming to any public-Door user of the city slums. Now if she remained in her own community, her word would carry weight—

She consulted the district map. It was one of that excellent series prepared by Doors, Inc., and distributed free of charge to their clients. Mrs. Hanshaw couldn’t quite suppress that little thrill of civic pride as she unfolded the map. It wasn’t a fine-print directory of Door co-ordinates only. It was an actual map, with each house carefully located.

And why not? District A-3 was a name of moment in the world, a badge of aristocracy. It was the first community on the planet to have been established on a completely Doored basis. The first, the largest, the wealthiest, the best-known. It needed no factories, no stores. It didn’t even need roads.

Each house was a little secluded castle, the Door of which had entry anywhere the world over where other Doors existed.

Carefully, she followed down the keyed listing of the five thousand families of District A-3. She knew it included several psychiatrists. The learned professions were well represented in A-3.

Doctor Hamilton Sloane was the second name she arrived at and her finger lingered upon the map. His office was scarcely two miles from the Hanshaw residence. She liked his name. The fact that he lived in A-3 was evidence of worth. And he was a neighbor, practically a neighbor. He would understand that it was a matter of urgency-and confidential.

Firmly, she put in a call to his office to make an appointment.

Doctor Hamilton Sloane was a comparatively young man, not quite forty. He was of good family and he had indeed heard of Mrs. Hanshaw.

He listened to her quietly and then said, “And this all began with the Door breakdown.”

“That’s right, Doctor.”

“Does he show any fear of the Doors?”

“Of course not. What an idea!” She was plainly startled.

“It’s possible, Mrs. Hanshaw, it’s possible. After all, when you stop to think of how a Door works it is rather a frightening thing, really. You step into a Door, and for an instant your atoms are converted into field-energies, transmitted to another part of space and reconverted into matter. For that instant you’re not alive.”

“I’m sure no one thinks of such things.”

“But your son may. He witnessed the breakdown of the Door. He may be saying to himself, 'What if the Door breaks down just as I’m half-way through?'”

“But that’s nonsense. He still uses the Door. He’s even been to Canton with me; Canton, China. And as I told you, he uses it for school about once or twice a week.”

“Freely? Cheerfully?”

“Well,” said Mrs. Hanshaw, reluctantly, “he does seem a bit put out by it. But really, Doctor, there isn’t much use talking about it, is there? If you would do a quick probe, see where the trouble was,” and she finished on a bright note, “why, that would be all. I’m sure it’s quite a minor thing.”

Dr. Sloane signed. He detested the word “probe” and there was scarcely any word he heard oftener.

“Mrs. Hanshaw,” he said patiently, “there is no such thing as a quick probe. Now I know the mag-strips are full of it and it’s a rage in some circles, but it’s much overrated.”

“Are you serious?”

“Quite. The probe is very complicated and the theory is that it traces mental circuits. You see, the cells of the brains are interconnected in a large

variety of ways.~ Some of those interconnected paths are more used than others. They represent habits of thought, both conscious and unconscious. Theory has it that these paths in any given brain can be used to diagnose mental ills early and with certainty.”

“Well, then?”

“But subjection to the probe is quite a fearful thing, especially to a child. It’s a traumatic experience. It takes over an hour. And even then, the results must be sent to the Central Psychoanalytical Bureau for analysis, and that could take weeks. And on top of all that, Mrs. Hanshaw, there are many psychiatrists who think the theory of probe-analyses to be most uncertain.”

Mrs. Hanshaw compressed her lips. “You mean nothing can be done.”

Dr. Sloane smiled. “Not at all. There were psychiatrists for centuries before there were probes. I suggest that you let me talk to the boy.”

“Talk to him? Is that all?”

“I’ll come to you for background information when necessary, but the essential thing, I think, is to talk to the boy.”

“Really, Dr. Sloane, I doubt if he’ll discuss the matter with you. He won’t talk to me about it and I’m his mother.”

“That often happens,” the psychiatrist assured her. “A child will sometimes talk more readily to a stranger. In any case, I cannot take the case otherwise.”

Mrs. Hanshaw rose, not at all pleased. “When can you come, Doctor?”

“What about this coming Saturday? The boy won’t be in school. Will you be busy?”

“We will be ready.”

She made a dignified exit. Dr. Sloane accompanied her through the small reception room to his office Door and waited while she punched the coordinates of her house. He watched her pass through. She became a half-woman, a quarter-woman, an isolated elbow and foot, a nothing.

It was frightening.

Did a Door ever break down during passage, leaving half a body here and half there? He had never heard of such a case, but he imagined it could happen.

He returned to his desk and looked up the time of his next appointment. It was obvious to him that Mrs. Hanshaw was annoyed and disappointed at not having arranged for a psychic probe treatment.

Why, for God’s sake? Why should a thing like the probe, an obvious piece of quackery in his own opinion, get such a hold on the general public? It must be part of this general trend toward machines. Anything man can do, machines can do better. Machines! More machines! Machines for anything and everything! O temporal O mores!

Oh, hell!

His resentment of the probe was beginning to bother him. Was it a fear

of technological unemployment, a basic insecurity on his part, a mecha-nophobia, if that was the word- He made a mental note to discuss this with his own analyst.

Dr. Sloane had to feel his way. The boy wasn’t a patient who had come to him, more or less anxious to talk, more or less anxious to be helped.

Under the circumstances it would have been best to keep his first meeting with Richard short and noncommittal. It would have been sufficient merely to establish himself as something less than a total stranger. The next time he would be someone Richard had seen before. The time after he would be an acquaintance, and after that a friend of the family.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Hanshaw was not likely to accept a long-drawn-out process. She would go searching for a probe and, of course, she would find it.

And harm the boy. He was certain of that.

It was for that reason he felt he must sacrifice a little of the proper caution and risk a small crisis.

An uncomfortable ten minutes had passed when he decided he must try. Mrs. Hanshaw was smiling in a rather rigid way, eyeing him narrowly, as though she expected verbal magic from him. Richard wriggled in his seat, unresponsive to Dr. Sloane’s tentative comments, overcome with boredom and unable not to show it.

Dr. Sloane said, with casual suddenness, “Would you like to take a walk with me, Richard?”

The boy’s eyes widened and he stopped wriggling. He looked directly at Dr. Sloane. “A walk, sir?”

“I mean, outside.”

“Do you go—outside?”

“Sometimes. When I feel like it.”

Richard was on his feet, holding down a squirming eagerness. “I didn’t think anyone did.”

“I do. And I like company.”

The boy sat down, uncertainly. “Mom?—”

Mrs. Hanshaw had stiffened in her seat, her compressed lips radiating horror, but she managed to say, “Why certainly, Dickie. But watch yourself.”

And she managed a quick and baleful glare at Dr. Sloane.

In one respect, Dr. Sloane had lied. He did not go outside “sometimes.” He hadn’t been in the open since early college days. True, he had been athletically inclined (still was to some extent) but in his time the indoor ultra-violet chambers, swimming pools and tennis courts had flourished. For those with the price, they were much more satisfactory than the outdoor equivalents, open to the elements as they were, could possibly be. There was no occasion to go outside.

So there was a crawling sensation about his skin when he felt wind touch it, and he put down his flexied shoes on bare grass with a gingerly movement.

“Hey, look at that.” Richard was quite different now, laughing, his reserve broken down.

Dr. Sloane had time only to catch a flash of blue that ended in a tree. Leaves rustled and he lost it.

“What was it?”

“A bird,” said Richard. “A blue kind of bird.”

Dr. Sloane looked about him in amazement. The Hanshaw residence was on a rise of ground, and he could see for miles. The area was only lightly wooded and between clumps of trees, grass gleamed brightly in the sunlight.

Colors set in deeper green made red and yellow patterns. They were flowers. From the books he had viewed in the course of his lifetime and from the old video shows, he had learned enough so that all this had an eerie sort of familiarity.

And yet the grass was so trim, the flowers so patterned. Dimly, he realized he had been expecting something wilder. He said, “Who takes care of all this?”

Richard shrugged. “I dunno. Maybe the mekkanos do it.”

“Mekkanos?”

“There’s loads of them around. Sometimes they got a sort of atomic knife they hold near the ground. It cuts the grass. And they’re always fooling around with the flowers and things. There’s one of them over there.”

It was a small object, half a mile away. Its metal skin cast back highlights as it moved slowly over the gleaming meadow, engaged in some sort of activity that Dr. Sloane could not identify.

Dr. Sloane was astonished. Here it was a perverse sort of estheticism, a kind of conspicuous consumption—

“What’s that?” he asked suddenly.

Richard looked. He said, “That’s a house. Belongs to the Froehlichs. Coordinates, A-3, 23, 461. That little pointy building over there is the public Door.”

Dr. Sloane was staring at the house. Was that what it looked like from the outside? Somehow he had imagined something much more cubic, and taller.

“Come along,” shouted Richard, running ahead.

Dr. Sloane followed more sedately. “Do you know all the houses about here?”

“Just about.”

“Where is A-23, 26, 475?” It was his own house, of course.

Richard looked about. “Let’s see. Oh, sure, I know where it is-you see that water there?”

“Water?” Dr. Sloane made out a line of silver curving across the green.

“Sure. Real water. Just sort of running over rocks and things. It keeps

running all the time. You can get across it if you step on the rocks. It’s called a river.”

More like a creek, thought Dr. Sloane. He had studied geography, of course, but what passed for the subject these days was really economic and cultural geography. Physical geography was almost an extinct science except among specialists. Still, he knew what rivers and creeks were, in a theoretical sort of way.

Richard was still talking. “Well, just past the river, over that hill with the big clump of trees and down the other side a way is A-23, 26, 475. It’s a light green house with a white roof.”

“It is?” Dr. Sloane was genuinely astonished. He hadn’t known it was green.

Some small animal disturbed the grass in its anxiety to avoid the oncoming feet. Richard looked after it and shrugged. “You can’t catch them. I tried.”

A butterfly flitted past, a wavering bit of yellow. Dr. Sloane’s eyes followed it.

There was a low hum that lay over the fields, interspersed with an occasional harsh, calling sound, a rattle, a twittering, a chatter that rose, then fell. As his ear accustomed itself to listening, Dr. Sloane heard a thousand sounds, and none were man-made.

A shadow fell upon the scene, advancing toward him, covering him. It was suddenly cooler and he looked upward, startled.

Richard said, “It’s just a cloud. It’ll go away in a minute-looka these flowers. They’re the kind that smell.”

They were several hundred yards from the Hanshaw residence. The cloud passed and the sun shone once more. Dr. Sloane looked back and was appalled at the distance they had covered. If they moved out of sight of the house and if Richard ran off, would he be able to find his way back?

He pushed the thought away impatiently and looked out toward the line of water (nearer now) and past it to where his own house must be. He thought wonderingly: Light green?

He said, “You must be quite an explorer.”

Richard said, with a shy pride, “When I go to school and come back, I always try to use a different route and see new things.”

“But you don’t go outside every morning, do you? Sometimes you use the Doors, I imagine.”

“Oh, sure.”

“Why is that, Richard?” Somehow, Dr. Sloane felt there might be significance in that point.

But Richard quashed him. With his eyebrows up and a look of astonishment on his face, he said, “Well, gosh, some mornings it rains and I have to use the Door. I hate that, but what can you do? About two-weeks ago, I got

caught in the rain and I—” he looked about him automatically, and his voice sank to a whisper “—caught a cold, and wasn’t Mom upset, though.”

Dr. Sloane sighed. “Shall we go back now?”

There was a quick disappointment on Richard’s face. “Aw, what for?”

“You remind me that your mother must be waiting for us.”

“I guess so.” The boy turned reluctantly.

They walked slowly back. Richard was saying, chattily, “I wrote a composition at school once about how if I could go on some ancient vehicle” (he pronounced it with exaggerated care) “I’d go in a stratoliner and look at stars and clouds and things. Oh, boy, I was sure nuts.”

“You’d pick something else now?”

“You bet. I’d go in an aut'm'bile, real slow. Then I’d see everything there was.”

Mrs. Hanshaw seemed troubled, uncertain. “You don’t think it’s abnormal, then, Doctor?”

“Unusual, perhaps, but not abnormal. He likes the outside.”

“But how can he? It’s so dirty, so unpleasant.”

“That’s a matter of individual taste. A hundred years ago our ancestors were all outside most of the time. Even today, I dare say there are a million Africans who have never seen a Door.”

“But Richard’s always been taught to behave himself the way a decent person in District A-3 is supposed to behave,” said Mrs. Hanshaw, fiercely. “Not like an African or-or an ancestor.”

“That may be part of the trouble, Mrs. Hanshaw. He feels this urge to go outside and yet he feels it to be wrong. He’s ashamed to talk about it to you or to his teacher. It forces him into sullen retreat and it could eventually be dangerous.”

“Then how can we persuade him to stop?”

Dr. Sloane said, “Don’t try. Channel the activity instead. The day your Door broke down, he was forced outside, found he liked it, and that set a pattern. He used the trip to school and back as an excuse to repeat that first exciting experience. Now suppose you agree to let him out of the house for two hours on Saturdays and Sundays. Suppose he gets it through his head that after all he can go outside without necessarily having to go anywhere in the process. Don’t you think he’ll be willing to use the Door to go to school and back thereafter? And don’t you think that will stop the trouble he’s now having with his teacher and probably with his fellow-pupils?”

“But then will matters remain so? Must they? Won’t he ever be normal again?”

Dr. Sloane rose to his feet. “Mrs. Hanshaw, he’s as normal as need be right now. Right now, he’s tasting the joys of the forbidden. If you cooperate with him, show that you don’t disapprove, it will lose some of its attraction right there. Then, as he grows older, he will become more aware of the expectations and demands of society. He will learn to conform. After all, there is a little of the rebel in all of us, but it generally dies down as we grow old and tired. Unless, that is, it is unreasonably suppressed and allowed to build up pressure. Don’t do that. Richard will be all right.”

He walked to the Door.

Mrs. Hanshaw said, “And you don’t think a probe will be necessary, Doctor?”

He turned and said vehemently, “No, definitely not! There is nothing about the boy that requires it. Understand? Nothing.”

His fingers hesitated an inch from the combination board and the expression on his face grew lowering.

“What’s the matter, Dr. Sloane?” asked Mrs. Hanshaw.

But he didn’t hear her because he was thinking of the Door and the psychic probe and all the rising, choking tide of machinery. There is a little of the rebel in all of us, he thought.

So he said in a soft voice, as his hand fell away from the board and his feet turned away from the Door, “You know, it’s such a beautiful day that I think I’ll walk.”