**Kid Brother**

Isaac Asimov

It was a great shock to me when our application for a second child was refused. We had really expected to get the license.

I’m a respectable citizen; pillar of the community; all that kind of stuff. I was a little old, maybe.

Josie-my wife-may have been past her best childbearing years. So what? We know other people worse off than us, older, trashy in character, who-Well, never mind.

We had one son, Charlie, and we really wanted another child. Boy or girl, it didn’t matter. Of course, if there was something wrong with Charlie, if he developed some illness, maybe then we could license a second child. Or maybe not. And if we did get the license, they would probably take care of Charlie as a defective. You know what I mean; I don’t have to say it.

The trouble was we were late getting started, and that was Josie’s fault. She had irregular periods and you never knew when to get her, if you know what I mean. And we couldn’t get any medical help, either. How could we? The clinics said if we couldn’t have children without help, that was great for the world. It’s patriotic, or something, to be childless.

But we fooled them and had a child after all. Charlie.

When Charlie was eight months old, we started applying for a second child. We wanted them pretty close in age. Was that so much to ask? Even if we were getting a little old for it? What kind of a world do we live in, anyway. No matter how much the population drops, they say it has to drop further, and if life gets easier and people live longer, it has to drop still further.

They won’t be satisfied till they wipe out humanity alto-

Well, look! I’ll tell this just the way I want to. If you want the story, officer, you’ll have to take it my way. What can you do to me? I really don’t much care if I live or die. Would you in my position?

—Look, it’s no use arguing. I’ll tell it my way, or I’ll shut up and you can do your worst. You understand?

—Well then, okay.

As it turned out, we didn’t have to worry about Charlie being sickly, or anything like that. He grew like a bear, or one of those other animals that used to hang around in the woods and places like that in the old days. He came of good stock. You could see that. So why couldn’t we have had another child?

That’s what I want to know.

Intelligent? You bet. Strong. Knew what he wanted. Ideal boy. When I think of it, I could—I could—Oh, well.

You should have seen him with the other kids as he was growing up. A natural leader. Always had his way. Always had the other children in the neighborhood doing what he wanted. He knew what he wanted and what he wanted was always right. That was the thing.

Josie didn’t like it, though. She said he was spoiled. In fact, she said I spoiled him. I don’t know what she was talking about. I was the making of him.

He was two years ahead of his age in strength and in brains. I could see that. And if the other children got out of line, sometimes he would have to show them who was boss.

Josie thought he was getting to be a bully. She said he had no friends; all the children were afraid of him.

So what! A leader doesn’t want friends. He wants people to respect him, and if they get out of line, they better fear him. Charlie was coming along all right. Sure, the other children stayed away mostly. That was their parents’ fault; and they’re just a bunch of milksops. Once they get one child, and know they won’t have any more, they start hovering over him or her like they were the family jewels, and rare jewels, too. You smother them if you do that. They become useless-worthless.

There was this guy Stevenson down the block. He had two girls, both pitiful things, giggling and empty-headed. How did he come to get two, I ask you? He knew somebody, maybe. A little money passed from hand to hand. Why not, he’s got more money than he admits, too. Naturally. That accounts for it.

You’d think with two, he could afford to risk one, but no-

—That’s all right. I’ll get to the point, when I get to the point. If you push, you’ll get nothing and we’ll let it go straight to the court. See if I care.

These other parents, they didn’t want their babies hurt. Don’t play with the Janowitz boy, they would say. I never heard them say so but I’m sure that’s what they said. Well, who needed them? I was planning for Charlie to go to college eventually, so he could take courses in microelectronics or in spatial dynamics, or that kind of stuff. And economics and business, too, so he would know how to get money and power out of his know-how. That’s the way I saw it. I wanted him on top of the heap.

But Josie kept talking about Charlie not having friends and Charlie growing up alone, and like that. All the time. It was like living in an echo chamber. And then, one day, she came to me and said, “Why don’t we get Charlie a kid brother?”

“Oh, sure,” I said. “You’re past menopause so what do we do? Call in the stork? Look under cabbage leaves?”

I could have divorced her, you know. Married a young chick. After all, I wasn’t past menopause. But I was-loyal. Fat lot of good that did me. Besides, if I had divorced her, she would mostly have kept

Charlie, so what good would that have done me?

So I just made that comment about the stork.

She said, “I’m not talking about a biological child. I’m saying we can get a robot to be Charlie’s brother.”

I never expected to hear anything like that, you can bet. I’m not a robot-type guy. My parents never had one. I never had one. As far as I’m concerned, every robot means one less human, and we’re just watching the world being turned over to them. Just one more way of wiping out humanity, if you ask me.

So I said to Josie, “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Really,” said Josie, all very earnest. “It’s a new model. It’s just designed to be friendly and pals for children. Nothing fancy, so they aren’t expensive, and they do fill a need. With more and more people having only one child, there is a real value in supplying that one child with siblings.”

“That may be true of other children. Not Charlie,” I said.

“Yes, Charlie, especially. He’s never going to find out how to deal with people this way. He’s growing up alone, really alone. He won’t come to understand the give and take of life.”

“He’s not going to give. He’s a taker. He’ll take power and he’ll take position, and he’ll tell people what to do. And he’ll have children of his own and maybe even three.”

You may be too young to feel this yet, officer, but if you have only one child, you’ll eventually discover you’ll still have a chance at another one when your child has a child. I had high hopes for Charlie. Before I died, I was sure I would see another child, maybe even two or three. They might be Charlie’s but as far as our lives would overlap, I was going to make them mine, too.

But all Josie could think about was a robot. Life became another kind of echo chamber. She priced them out. She figured out the down payment. She looked into the possibility of renting one for a year on a kind of approval. She was willing to use her own nest egg that her folks had left her to pay for it, and things like that. And you know how it is, in the end you have to keep peace in the family.

I gave in. I said, “Okay, but you go pick one out and you better make it a rental. And you pay for it.”

I figured, who knows. The robot would probably be a pain in the neck and wouldn’t work out, and we’d return him.

They walked him into the house, didn’t even crate him. I should say “it” but Josie insisted on saying “he” and “him” so he would seem more like a kid brother to Charlie, and I got into the habit.

He was a “sibling-robot"; that’s what they called him. He had a registration number, but I never memorized it. What for? We just called him “Kid. ” That was good enough.

—Yes, I know that this sort of robot is getting popular. I don’t know what’s happening to human beings that they stand for such things.

And we stood for it, too. Or at least, I did. Josie was fascinated. The one we got was a pretty good one, I have to admit. He looked almost human, he smiled a lot, and he had a nice voice. He looked maybe fifteen, a small-sized fifteen, which wasn’t too bad because Charlie was a large-sized ten.

Kid was a little taller than Charlie and, of course, heavier. You know, there were titanium bones or whatever inside him and a nuclear unit, guaranteed for ten years before replacement, and that’s pretty heavy.

He had a good vocabulary, too, and he was very polite. Josie was just delighted. She said, “I can use him in the house. He can help out.”

I said, “No, you don’t. You got him for Charlie, and that means he’s Charlie’s. Don’t you go taking him away.”

I was thinking if Josie got him, and made him into a slavey, she’d never let go of him. Charlie, on the other hand, might not like him or might get tired after a little while, and then we could get rid of him.

Charlie fooled me, though. He liked Kid fine.

But you know, it made sense after a while. Kid was designed to be a kid brother, so he was just right for Charlie. He let Charlie take the lead, like an older brother should. He had those three Laws. I can’t quote them, but you know what they are. There was no way he could hurt Charlie, and he had to do whatever Charlie said, so after a while I began to think it was a good deal.

I mean, when they played games Charlie always won. He was supposed to. And the Kid never got mad. He couldn’t. He was made to lose. And sometimes Charlie kicked the Kid around, the way children do, you know. A child gets mad about something, he takes it out on some other child. Children always do that. Naturally, that gets the parents of the other child mad and I had to tell Charlie now and then not to do that and that sort of cramps him. It squeezes him in. He can’t express himself.

Well, he could with the Kid. And why not? You can’t hurt the Kid. He’s made out of plastic and metal and who knows what else. For all he looked nearly like a human being, he wasn’t alive; he couldn’t feel pain.

In fact, I felt the best thing the Kid did was to be something on which Charlie could bleed off his excess energy so that it wouldn’t accumulate in him and fester. And the Kid never minded. They’d play judo and the Kid would be thrown, and even stamped on, but he would just get up and say, “That was good, Charlie. Let’s try it again. ” Listen, you could throw him off the top of a building and he wouldn’t be hurt.

He was always polite to us. He called me Dad. He called Josie Mom. He asked after our health. He would help Josie out of her chair when she wanted to stand up. That sort of stuff.

He was designed that way. He had to act affectionate. It was all automatic. He was programmed for it. It didn’t mean a thing, but Josie liked it. Listen, I’ve always been busy, hard-working. I have this plant I had to help run, interlocking machinery to oversee. One thing goes wrong and the whole shebang ties itself up. I have no time to bring flowers and go mucking around pulling out her chairs or something.

We’d been married nearly twenty years and how long does that sort of thing keep up anyway?

And Charlie-Well, he stood up to his mother the way any decent boy should. And I figured the

Kid helped there. When Charlie made himself boss over the Kid one minute, he wasn’t going to run around saying, “Mommie, Mommie,” the next minute. He was not a mamma’s boy, and he didn’t let Josie run him, and I was proud of him for that. He was going to be a man. Of course, he listened to what I said to him. A boy’s got to listen to his father.

So maybe it was good that the Kid was designed to be a sort of mamma’s boy. It gave Josie the feeling that there was one of those nerds about the house and it bothered her less that Charlie always thought for himself.

Of course you could count on Josie to do her best to spoil it. She was forever worrying about her pet nerd being hurt. She was always coming out with, “Now, Charlie, why don’t you be nicer to your kid brother?”

It was ridiculous. I could never get it through her head that the Kid wasn’t hurt; that he was designed to be a loser; that it was all good for Charlie.

Of course, Charlie never listened to her. He played with the Kid the way he wanted to.

—Do you mind if I rest a little. I don’t really like talking about all this. Just let me rest a while.

—Okay, I’m better now. I can go on.

After the year was up, I felt that it was enough. We could return the Kid to U.S. Robots. After all, he had served his purpose.

But Josie was against that. Dead set against that.

I said, “But we’d have to buy him outright now.”

And she said, she would pay the down payment, so I went along with her.

One of the things she said was that we couldn’t take away Charlie’s brother. Charlie would be lonely.

And I did think, well, maybe she’s right. I tell you it’s deadly when you start thinking your wife might be right. It leads you into nothing but trouble.

Charlie did ease up on the Kid a little as he grew older. He got to be just as tall as the Kid, for one thing, so maybe he didn’t think he had to knock him around as much.

Also, he became interested in things besides rough and tumble. Basketball, for instance; he played one-on-one with the Kid and Charlie was good. He always outmaneuvered the Kid and hardly ever missed a basket. Well, maybe the Kid let himself be outmaneuvered and maybe he didn’t ever block a basket-shot efficiently, but how do you account for getting the ball into the basket? The Kid couldn’t fake that, could he ?

In the second year, the Kid sort of became a member of the family. He didn’t eat with us or anything like that, because he didn’t eat. And he didn’t sleep either, so he just stood in the corner of

Charlie’s bedroom at night.

But he watched the holoviews with us, and Josie would always explain things to him so that he got to know more and to seem more human. She took him shopping with her and wherever else she went, if Charlie didn’t need him. The Kid was always helpful, I suppose, and I guess he carried things for her and was always polite and attentive and that sort of thing.

And I’ll tell you, Josie was more easygoing, with the Kid around. More good-humored, more good-natured, less whining. It made for a more pleasant homelife, and I figured, well, the Kid is teaching Charlie to be more and more dominant, and he’s teaching Josie to smile more, so maybe it was a good thing it was there.

Then it happened.

—Listen, can you let me have something wet?

—Yeah, with alcohol. Just a little, just a little. Come on, what are you worrying about the rules for? I’ve got to get through this somehow.

Then it happened. One out of a million-or out of a billion. Microfusion units aren’t supposed to give trouble. You can read about it anywhere. They’re all fail-safe, no matter what. Except mine wasn’t. I don’t know why. Nobody knows why. At the start, no one even knew it was the microfusion. They’ve told me since that it was, and that I qualify for full restoration of the house and furniture.

Fat lot of good that would do me.

—Look, you’re treating me as though I were a homicidal maniac, but why me? Why aren’t you getting after the microfusion people for murder? Find out who made that unit, or who goofed up installing it.

Don’t you people know what real crimes are? There’s this thing, this microfusion-it doesn’t explode, it doesn’t make a noise, it just gets hotter and hotter and after a while the house is on fire. How come people can get away manufacturing

—Yes, I’ll get on with it. I’ll get on with it.

I was away that day. That one day in a whole year I was away. I run everything from my home, or from wherever I am with my family. I don’t have to go anywhere, the computers do it all. It’s not like your job, officer.

But the big boss wanted to see me in person. There’s no sense to it; everything could have been done closed-circuit. He has some sort of idea, though, that he wants to check all his section heads every once in a while in person. He seems to think that you can’t really judge a person unless you see him in three dimensions and smell him and feel him. It’s just superstition left over from the Dark Age-which I wish would come back, before computers and robots, and when you could have all the children you wanted.

That was the day when the microfusion went.

I got the word right away. You always get the word. Wherever you are, even on the Moon or in a space settlement, bad news gets to you in seconds. Good news you might miss out on, but bad news never.

I was rushing back while the house was still burning. When I got there, the house was a total wreck, but Josie was out on the lawn, looking a complete mess, but alive. She had been out on the lawn when it happened, they told me.

When she saw the house become all in flame, and Charlie was inside, she rushed in at once, and I could see she must have brought him out because there he was lying to one side with people bending over him. It looked bad. I couldn’t see him. I didn’t dare go over there to see him. I had to find out from Josie first.

I could hardly speak. “How bad is he?” I asked Josie, and I didn’t recognize my own voice. I think my mind was beginning to go.

She was saying, “I couldn’t save them both. I couldn’t save them both.”

Why should she want to save them both? I thought. I said, “Stop worrying about the Kid. He’s just a device. There’s insurance and compassion money and we can buy another Kid. “I think I tried to say all that, but I don’t know if I managed. Maybe I just made hoarse, choking sounds. I don’t know.

I don’t know if she heard me, or if she even knew I was there. She just kept whispering, “I had to make a choice,” over and over.

So I had to go where Charlie was lying and I cleared my throat and I managed to say, “How’s my boy? How badly is he hurt?”

And one of them said, “Maybe he can be fixed up,” then he looked up at me and said, “Your boy?”

I saw the Kid lying there, with one arm distorted and out of action. He was smiling as if nothing had happened, and he was saying, “Hello, Dad. Mom pulled me out of the fire. Where’s Charlie?”

Josie had made her choice and she had saved the Kid.

I don’t know what happened after that. I remember nothing. You people say I killed her; that you couldn’t pull me off before I strangled her.

Maybe. I don’t know. I don’t remember. All I know is-she’s the killer. She killed-she killed-Char

She killed my boy and she saved a piece—

A piece of—

Titanium.