# Cousins

Robert F. Young

The cemetery is not a large one. I had no trouble finding her grave.

I knew, of course, that by this time she would be dead.

Her mother’s grave and her father’s grave are close to hers. She had no brothers or sisters.

I took her to the stars with me. I tried to leave her behind, but I could not. But my fellow astronauts, Beaumont and Morris, did not know I had brought her with me. This was because I never let the memory of her show on my face.

The roses which I placed upon her grave have already begun to wither in the summer sun.

Again I read the bleak inscription on her headstone:Beth Hullman. Born: April 6, 1989. Died: May 4, 2021.

Hullman was her family name, so I know she never married.

But why did she die so young?

I would have married you, Beth. I wanted to. But if I had, they’d have scratched my name from the list.

Astronauts slated to edge the speed of light must be free from all earthly ties.

I had to make a choice. I chose the stars.

I learned to hate them, Beth. They turned blue and laughed at me while the Lorentz-FitzGerald contraction made a mockery of my life.

Old-young, I stand here by your grave. Would that I lay beside you.

\* \* \*

A wind comes out of nowhere and bends the sun-bleached grass. The maples along the narrow cemetery road whisper to each other in its breath. The new sun-celled roadster I bought with part of my back pay sits in the afternoon shade. There is another roadster parked just behind it. A sleek, red Ponse. I did not hear it drive in. A girl in a white summer dress steps out of it and walks toward me between the graves. She walks the way Beth walked, with a light, sure step. Her hair is dark brown and recalcitrant, the way Beth’s used to be, and she has combed it to her shoulders the way Beth once combed hers. Her face is full, like Beth’s, and her nose is Beth’s nose too, sweeping down with delicate grace from between dark birdwing brows.

I do not believe in ghosts, but I am shaken when she comes to a halt before me. She is staring at me as though my reality has upset her as much as hers has upset me. Then I see that her face, despite its strong resemblance to Beth’s is not quite the same. It is full, yes, but it lacks the little-girl aspect Beth’s had, and there is greater determination in the line of her rounded chin. Nor does it possess the “beauty mark” that adorned Beth’s left cheek. But the eyes!—they are the same: deep brown, with microscopic flecks of gold . . .

For a long while she does not speak. It is as though all the words she ever knew have fled from her mind. Then she leans forward and kisses me on the cheek and says, just the way Beth would have, “Welcome home.”

She does not need to tell me who she is. I know. But the knowledge came too late.

\* \* \*

Why didn’t you tell me, Beth? Why didn’t you say, “Jerry, youhave to marry me now.”

I’d have said to hell with the stars!

Children grow up and beget children—did you think of that, Beth? And they, in turn, grow up and beget more children. You told our son or our daughter who I was, Beth, so that in the far future there would be someone to welcome me home. But Beth, you forgot about your genes!

If you had told me you were going to have our child, then at least I would have been prepared. I would not have been caught like this, with all my defenses down.

But then, if you had told me, I wouldn’t have gone to the stars.

Why didn’t you say, “Jerry, youhave to marry me now.”

\* \* \*

“I’ve been driving by here every day,” my great granddaughter says. “I was sure that sooner or later you’d visit her grave.”

Why didn’t you come to White Sands? You wouldn’t have been permitted to talk to me, but you could have waved to me when we climbed down from the ship.This is what I want to say, but I stand like Prufrock in the sun and say instead, “I brought roses for her grave.”

She looks down at them. “I love roses. She must have, too.”

“She died so young. Why?”

She does not lift her eyes quite back to mine. Instead she rests them on the pocket of my shirt. “It became a melanoma. The ‘beauty mark’ on her cheek. When she found out, it was too late.”

It is some time before the shock fades away. By then she has lifted her eyes the rest of the way to mine. What a deep brown they are! How pied with flecks of gold!

“I guess you know who I am.”

I nod my head.

“She never told you she was going to have a baby, did she.”

“No, she never did.”

“My name is Robinette. Robinette Fields. But most people just call me Robin.”

“You—you live in town?”

“In a big, pretentious house. My father is the General Manager of Metrobank.”

“My grandson?”

“Yes. My grandmother—your daughter—is the Head Librarian of the McKinnseyville Library. Her husband died last year.”

It was a girl then . . . Why didn’tshe come to White Sands?

“You have another grandson, but he lives in California. He never married.”

“Do—do you have brothers? Sisters?”

She smiles the way Beth used to when she had something rueful to say, and for a moment I am again convinced she has risen from her grave. “No. I’m the last of the Fields. But I’m going to carry on as best a mere girl can. I’ve graduated from law school and I just passed my bar exam, and this fall I’m joining a law firm. There, now that I’ve filled you in, you can come home with me.”

I would rather plunge into a black hole. “I think it will be better if I just continue on my way.”

“You’ll do no such thing!”

“Robin, I can’t go home with you.”

“Yes, you can. And just where were you going anyway before you found out about your family tree?”

Nowhere. But I cannot tell her that. “Robin, I’m an, an anachronism—don’t you see?”

“No, I don’t see. Please get in your car and follow me.”

There is importunity in her eyes. There is another quality which I cannot put my finger on. “And what will you say when we come in the door? ‘Mom, Dad—guess who I brought home—Great-Grandfather Walsh!”

She touches my hand, and the forlorn castle, whose foundation has already been knocked awry, comes tumbling down to the ground. “No, I shall say, ‘Mom, Dad—this is Jerry.’ They’ll know who you are.”

I must have smiled, for she smiles back. Before we leave, I kneel down and rearrange the roses on Beth’s grave.

\* \* \*

McKinnseyville has grown, but very little. It acquired the aspect of an oasis when I was stationed at the nearby Space-Training Base. But it is an oasis no longer. It is only a small, dead town, baking in the hot summer sun.

The Fields live on the outskirts, where most of the newer houses are. Their porticoed house stands well apart from the others. A turnaround semi-circles its front lawn.

I lived with foster parents till I ran away at the age of sixteen. Compared to this house, their house was a shack. I have never known a house since then. Only barracks and bleak rooms.

And the cubbyhole I slept in in theStarSearch .

My granddaughter-in-law does not meet us at the front door. I stand in the big living room as she descends the spiral stairway in answer to Robinette’s call. There are many new things under the sun. My granddaughter-in-law is not one of them. I am willing to bet that this blond and slender woman in the flowing lime-green dress descending the stairs with the put-on airs of a queen once belonged to the PTA. I am willing to bet that she and her husband are members of the Country Club, that each winter they sojourn in the south and that he has his car and she hers. I am willing to bet that weekly aerobics in the high school gym are responsible for her svelte figure, and that were it not for cosmetology her hair would be the color of sand.

Her eyes are green.

“Mother, this isJerry ,” Robinette says. “I found him putting flowers on Great-Grandmother Hullman’s grave.”

She does not offer to shake my hand. Why should she?—I’m an utter stranger, even though she may have seen me on 3V. Instead, she says, “Fred will be extremely pleased. I must go tell ourau pair that we will have a guest for dinner.”

“My daughter,” I ask Robinette, after my granddaughter-in-law leaves the room. “Does she live here too?”

“No. She lives on the other side of town. I’ll call her and tell her that you’re here. But first let’s go back out and get your bags.”

“Robin, I can’t stay here.”

“Why can’t you?”

“You know why. Your mother and father are more than twenty years older than I am. I’ll be a constant embarrassment to them.”

“You won’t be an embarrassment to me. In fact,” she says, and there is a twinkle deep in her eyes, “you and I come awfully close to being the same age.”

“But that only makes it worse.”

“Does it really, Jerry?”

The twinkle I saw in her eyes is gone. I am frightened by the quality that has taken its place. Frightened—and made helpless. We go out and get my bags and carry them upstairs. The door of the bedroom across the hall from the guest room she chooses for me is open. The bed is covered with a pink counterpane. There is a pair of slippers lying on the thick rug. Attached to the wall above the escritoire is a yellow college pennant. I know whose room it is.

\* \* \*

My grandson is a tall, trim man whose brown hair is neatly edged with gray. His face is narrow, his nose somewhat pinched, his resolute mouth a thin, straight line. Beth’s genes seem to have skipped him altogether, and I can find no sign of mine.

He says, “Welcome back,” after we shake hands. I am thankful he did not add, “Grandpa.”

Dinner is a solemn affair. He sits at one end of the table, my granddaughter-in-law at the other. Robinette and I sit facing each other across the middle. Theau pair is a squat, middle-aged woman with a blowzy face. She serves us the five courses of which the meal is comprised.

This is the way the rich eat. But I doubt that my grandson is as rich as he puts on. Probably, I am far richer than he. The enormous price I paid for my car hardly took a bite out of my back pay. But I do not feel rich, sitting there at the table. I feel like a country bumpkin. My suit coat is too full, it hangs upon me. My necktie, I am sure, is improperly tied. My hands, so deft in manipulating shipboard controls, have become big, truck-driver hands that fumble with forks and spoons.

Robinette makes mention of the planet Beaumont, Morris, and I found. My grandson changes the subject and begins talking about the economy. As usual, it is in bad shape.

The planet we found is a small sister of the big Jovian world that had lured us across space, and is as dead as the Moon. There are two other planets in the system, both gas giants the size of Neptune; and although there are satellites galore not a single one of them is hospitable to life, so I do not blame my grandson for changing the subject.

Nor do I blame him for again changing the subject when Robinette mentions that Beaumont and Morris and I were each awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, a fact he must already have been aware of, since the media gave it considerably play. The sad truth is that we were awarded the medals only because the people at NASA thought they had to do something to make our long journey seem worthwhile, when they knew as well as we did that they would have done far better if they had just dumped the taxpayers’ dollars down the drain.

During our absence, as though to add ironic overtones to our failure, astrophysicists conquered the curvature of space and paved the way to the discovery of threeinhabitable planets.

No. I do not blame my grandson for brushing aside our dubious fame and going on to something else (this time, the summer drought), when out of common courtesy he could at least have said a word or two about what his grandfather hadtried to do. I do not blame him at all. Nevertheless, his total lack of interest serves to make something painfully clear:

He does not like me.

And when my daughter fails to put in an appearance, something else becomes painfully clear:

She does not like me either.

\* \* \*

Robinette is furious. I can see the fury in her deep brown eyes, but it is evident only to me. Later on in the evening when we go for a ride in her Ponse, she says, “You remind them of a bit of family history they’ve tried to forget. I would have warned you, but none of them ever let on the way they felt, and anyway, who would ever dream in this day and age that even three middle-class snobs would care one way or another whether or not they’d sprung from legitimate stock.”

“I would have married her if I’d known she was pregnant.”

“You don’t have to apologize to me. I’m glad you didn’t marry her. If you had, you wouldn’t be here.”

She has turned off the headlights and is driving by the light of the full moon. We have the country road all to ourselves. She turns down a wooded road that leads to the lake and parks on a bluff that overlooks the beach. She says, “When theStarSearch returned, I sat in front of the 3V screen for hours so I’d be certain to see you climb down from the ship. I’d read all about you in books. The books I read said that but little time would pass for you, and that when you returned to Earth you’d be but little older than when you’d left. I didn’t quite believe them, although I wanted to, and I half expected to see three old men climb down from the ship. And—and then I saw you.”

“Why didn’t you come to White Sands?”

“Because I was afraid you really would be old.”

“When I saw you, I thought you were Beth.”

“I am Beth, in a way.”

Far out upon the lake the lights of fishing boats dance upon the water. The goddess Diana looks down upon us from the mountains of the moon. We can hear the lake take in and breathe out its breath.

Robinette says, “I cut your picture out of an old magazine when I was only sixteen. I still carry it in my purse.”

I almost dare to kiss her cheek.

“I think we’d better go now, don’t you,” she says. “I think we’d better go before it’s too late,” and she backs down to the country road, and Diana looks down upon us with her omniscient eyes as we return the way we came.

\* \* \*

The next day I go to see my daughter.

I do not even know her name.

She sits behind a big, bleak desk, her gray hair pulled back into a bun. I study her lined face for some sign of Beth. I do so in vain.

I cannot even find a vestige of myself.

She looks up at me with her faded blue eyes. “Yes?”

“You must know who I am.”

She says nothing. I see then that her eyes are filled with hate. I wanted to ask her about Beth, but now I no longer dare. I am the father she never saw, who ran away and left her mother to die.

The library has no aisles of books I can hide among. There are only naked cabinets of microfilms. And the door by which in I came.

I find my way back to it, and walk out.

\* \* \*

I drive down the street where Beth used to live. Her house and several others on the block are gone. In their place stands a Senior Citizens’ Center. On its dried-out front lawn old people are playing croquet.

I drive out to the Space-Training Base. I find rusted fences, rotted barracks, and crumbling concrete structures. I liken myself to an archaeologist who has come upon the ruins of Rome.

\* \* \*

I am introduced to the goings-on of the upper middle class. Robinette and I play tennis and badminton and golf. We go swimming in her father’s in-ground pool. She introduces me to her friends. We go out almost every night. We sit sometimes in quiet cafés, looking at each other over our drinks. Often we do not say a word. What words are there to say?

One night when we are sitting in yellow candlelight a young man about my age walks in from the bar, slaps Robinette on the shoulder, says, “Hi, Rob,” and pulls up a chair and sits down. “I stopped by your house, and they said you’d gone somewhere with your great-grandfather and that maybe you’d be here. You were supposed to write—remember?”

He gives me a funny look. “Jerry,” Robinette says, a touch of color in her cheeks, “this is Bud Downs. We went to college together. Bud, this is Lieutenant Commander Jerry Walsh. You must have heard about him, or seen him on 3V. He’s been to the stars.”

Bud’s face lights up. He has the handsome, blunt features of a born jock. “Oh. Sure. But I didn’t know he was related to you, Rob. Hi, Grandpop!”

He puts his hand on Robinette’s knee. She brushes it off. He blinks at her. “Hey, how come? Grandpop here, he won’t say a word—will you, Grandpop?”

There is anguish in Robinette’s eyes. “Please go away, Bud.”

“What?”

“I said, ‘Please go away.’ ”

He stares at her. Then he stares at me. He gapes. Then he swings furious eyes back to Robinette and says, “You incestuous bitch!”

I am upon him then. The table tips over and the glasses catapult to the floor. The candles become transient falling stars. He is bigger than I, but if he were twice as big, he still wouldn’t stand a chance. Robinette seizes my arm before I can lash out at him again. We are the cynosure of stares. The bartender hurries into the room. Bud shakes his fist at me and leaves. After I pay the bartender for the damage done, Robinette and I leave too.

We go for a long ride in her Ponse. The night wind is cool upon our faces. After a long while she says, “I never dreamed he’d come to see me.”

“It got to me when he put his hand on your knee.”

“I’m sorry.”

She finds the narrow road that leads to the lake and parks on the bluff in the same place we parked before. There is no moon tonight, no Diana with omniscient eyes—only the stars, and the lights of fishing boats far out on the water.

Robinette says, “There was never anybody else but you.”

I touch her hand.

“It’s unfair. We’re no closer than second cousins.”

This time I dare to kiss her cheek. At once, she is in my arms. The stars I learned to hate look down at us with self-satisfied eyes as we get a blanket out of the trunk and walk down a winding path to the beach.

\* \* \*

In the days that follow we continued to play tennis and badminton and golf, and to swim in her father’s underground pool. We continue to go out almost every night. In the middle of the night when the house is dark and silent, she comes to my bed or I go to hers.

Sunday mornings we go to church with my grandson and my granddaughter-in-law. They are Methodists. I was a Methodist too, before I left for the stars. The church is brand new, but the song it sings is as old as the hills. I sit beside Robinette in the Fields’s pew. My grandson likes to exhibit me, for although it is true he does not like me, I am still an asset to his prestige. My first apostasy is a family secret. The second he knows not of.

\* \* \*

“Saying, ‘I have hid my feelings,

fearing they should do me wrong.’

Saying, ‘Dost thou love me, cousin?

Weeping, I have loved thee long.’

“Whenever I say those lines, Jerry,” Robinette breathes into my ear, “I know it’s all right for me to be in your bed.”

\* \* \*

I have my own bit of Tennyson. The words run often through my mind—

She is coming, my own, my sweet,

Were it ever so airy a tread,

My heart would hear her and beat,

Were it earth in an earthy bed;

My dust would hear her and beat,

Had I lain for a century dead;

Would start and tremble under

her feet,

And blossom in purple and red.

We wear our masks by day, but sometimes they fall off and bare our faces. Robinette’s friends begin giving us curious looks, and when we walk into cocktail lounges the buzz of voices momentarily ceases. Bartenders leer at us whenever we stand at bars.

Robinette tells me again and again that we are the same thing as second cousins. And she is right. But she cannot see the middle class because she is inside it.

My grandson is not a fool. Yet he is one of the last to tumble. And I do not think he would have tumbled even then if my granddaughter-in-law had not whispered hearsay into his ear.

He tiptoes down the hall one night to my room. I hear him coming. But Robinette and I are not fools either, and in the naked radiance of his flashlight he finds me all alone in my bed. She does not come to me till afterward, when he is snug in his.

At breakfast we sit like innocent children, our masks in perfect place. But the seed has been planted, and even without nutrition will grow into a horrendous tree.

\* \* \*

Robinette finds me packing my bags. “Jerry, please don’t go.”

“What are the lines? ‘I could not love thee, dear, so much, Lov’d I not honour more.’ ”

“But you’re not going off to war!”

“No. I’m just retreating from the field.”

“I won’t let you.”

“Everybody knows about us, Robin.”

“So what if they do? We’re not the first cousins who ever fell in love!”

“You know as well as I do that they see us in a somewhat different light.”

“If you’re going to go, I’m going with you.”

I sit down on the bed.

“Look,” Robinette says, “next month after I become part of the law firm we’ll be living in the city, and no one will ever guess we’re related.”

“They’ll find out.”

“Even if they do, it won’t matter. People living in the city don’t give a damn about such things.”

“About this they will.”

“Then let’s just thumb our noses at them, Jerry. There’s no law that says we can’t be lovers.”

No. Not yet. “I was only thinking of what it’ll do to you.”

“What do you think it’ll do to me if you run away?”

I am weak. I do not get up and finish packing my things. I go on sitting on the bed.

\* \* \*

My daughter writes me a vicious little note and leaves it in the mailbox in an envelope addressed to me:

You ruined my mother and left her to die. Now you’re ruining my granddaughter. May God bring the wrath of Heaven down upon you, you incestuous dirty old man!

\* \* \*

Two centuries ago I would have been tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail. And Robinette would have been thrown into the streets.

But nothing, really, has changed.

\* \* \*

We do not go to bars anymore. We avoid all public places. We steer clear of her friends. We go for long drives in the country. I no longer dare to go to her bed, but she still dares to come to mine.

\* \* \*

You could say, how was I to know, and how was she? You could say that the blame for our apostasy should be laid upon the lap of space. You could say, well what would you have done if you were she or I? You could say that time has caught us in a trap. You could say that when all is said and done, what difference will it make? You could say a hundred, a thousand such things, but your words would be like dead leaves falling from a tree, and the people walking down the road, the people who pay false homage to a god they made and who drink coffee, wine, and tea, whose mores form halos around their heads, would pay them no more heed.

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The building is old. It is one of the oldest buildings in the city. It has Gothic overtones. I look up to see if there are gargoyles staring down at me from the eaves, but I see only the lowering sky.

Robinette has parked her car at the curb and I have parked mine just behind it. She gets out and comes back to where I am sitting behind the wheel and leans over the door and kisses me. “Wish me luck.”

“I thought it was all set.”

“It is, but I haven’t signed the contract yet, and being lawyers, they might have changed their minds.”

“And miss out on having someone as beautiful as you in their firm? Never!”

She smiles and I mark down the memory of her face. “You can come in and wait in the outer office.”

“No. I’ll wait here.”

“As soon as I come back we’ll go looking for our apartment.”

Trim in an azure suit, unforgettable, she clicks across the walk and ascends the granite steps. I watch the door devour her. I watch the people walking by on the street, but I do not see them. I start up the car and join the traffic flow. I leave the top down, even though I know that at last it is going to rain.

Saying, “Dost thou love me, cousin?

Weeping, I have loved thee long.”

\* \* \*

I leave the city far behind. Toward evening it begins to rain. I can hear the raindrops pattering upon my grave, but I do not hear her airy tread, and I know that by now she, too must be dead.