# Three-Mile Syndrome

Robert F. Young

I am different each time we leave Earth. I despise the country of my birth. It is infested with hypocrisy—the hypocrisy of people who pretend to love their neighbors when in their hearts they know only greed and envy and frustration. Who hide their hatred behind lamblike masks. But I do not wonder why they—and millions of others who are equally abominable—were chosen to live, while those of us here in the stasis ship were condemned to die, because we are no less abominable than they. I hate in unison with the other patients, I am in harmony with them. But it is an apathetic hatred, for we have ceased to care. I hate the girl who administers to our needs, because she does not have eyes for me, and I hate the pilot for whom she has eyes, but my hatred is dulled by dispassion.

I said “leave Earth,” lending the impression that the stasis ship itself departs. This isn’t true. Earth leaves, and the ship remains where it was, while Earth makes her annual journey around the sun, and each time she makes her revolution, we wait for her return—not because we really care whether she does or not, but because we have nothing else to do; mere hours pass for us, one year for her. Time stasis is at work, not time travel, but here on board the ship, we pretend we are traveling in time because traveling is better than standing still, even when you have nowhere to go.

The girl (her name is June) who has eyes only for the pilot begins making her rounds of our ward with her medicine tray. She is a nurse and stewardess combined; neither she nor the pilot is condemned to die. When she comes to where I am brooding by my black window, she hands me a tiny paper cup that contains one of the magical capsules the researchers came up with during Earth’s most recent revolution. She is brown-haired and blue-eyed, and although she is far from being beautiful, her health makes her seem so. Each time I see her, she seems more beautiful than the time before. Apparently the purity of the air on board the ship has a salubrious effect upon her.

I swallow the capsule although I know it has no more therapeutic value than the water I wash it down with. She says that I barely touched my dinner and asks if I am hungry. I tell her no. She says she will bring me a cup of decaffeinated coffee so that I will have something, at least, in my stomach. I shrug. I doubt if I will even be able to gag it down.

The girl June says that when we rendezvous again, she is certain the researchers will have found a true cure during the year that will have passed for them. But I know better. The next rendezvous will merely be a repetition of all the previous ones, and all the year will have netted will be a new batch of worthless medication. I told the medmen last time they boarded the ship that they were wasting their time, and they said that I was wrong and that next time the researchers will have found what they are searching for. I said, “You people said that ten years ago, and you’re no closer to curing us now than you were then.” They said that a breakthrough was imminent, and that anyway, only ten days had passed for me. I said, “Hallelujah!” They said I didn’t seem to care one way or the other. I said, “I don’t,” and they said that indifference was part of the syndrome and that they would cure me whether I wanted to be cured or not. I said, “You look like you need to be cured yourselves. You look sick.”

\* \* \*

My black window isn’t all black; there are polliwogs of light in it. The polliwogs are the stars; the ship’s near lack of temporal motion has stretched them out of shape. I watch them often as I recline on my chair-couch, and sometimes they seem to wriggle in my gaze. Polliwogs in a black pond, wriggling. Wriggling and getting nowhere. They bring to mind the human race, which, frantically and for millennia, has been trying to wriggle from point A to point B, without realizing that point B is point A in disguise. I never liked the human race; now I hate it, too. It is ironic to know that while we lie here hating together, some of our noble compatriots on orbiting Earth have temporarily cast their own hatred aside and are working around the clock to find a cure for our loathsome disease, while only hours pass for us and a whole year for them.

The cure, the super antigen, the magic serum. We are, in effect, quarantined in time, although our disease is not contagious.MEASLES, MUMPS, CHICKEN POX, SCARLET FEVER—KEEP OUT! This dedication on the part of our compatriots to the task of saving out lives would be heartwarming if, through the ages, so many lives had not been wasted through neglect and through indifference. But whose neglect? I ask myself. What indifference? The neglect and indifference of other people? But why shouldn’t other people be neglectful and indifferent with regard to people who themselves are neglectful and indifferent? Why should one individual expect from another that which he will not bestow himself? It is human to be neglectful, to be indifferent. Neglect and indifference are part of the syndrome of human existence. I have neither the right nor the obligation to expect or to give help. If a man cannot stand on that truth, he deserves to die. I have gone full cycle and am arguing against myself, and I have failed to cast so much as a shadow of a doubt on the unselfishness of the people who are trying to save our lives.

\* \* \*

“Drink it while it’s still warm.”

It is the girl June with my coffee. I take the cup from her and set it on the little table beside my chair-couch. “How do you feel?” she asks.

“I feel fine.”

“Any new abscesses?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” Her concern seems genuine, but I know it is not. She is pretending to be Florence Nightingale. “You don’t need to keep them secret from me.”

“You tend to your troubles and I’ll tend to mine.”

She looks at me, her head cocked slightly to one side. Then she turns and walks forward to the control room, where her real interest lies.

Directly across the aisle from me on one of the dual chair-couches supplied for the marrieds lie the Warricks. Once, no doubt, they were a handsome couple, but the abscesses that have appeared on their faces have lent them the aspect of a pair of lepers. Thus far, mine have appeared only on my stomach and chest, although there is a new one, I believe, beginning to manifest itself on the inner side of my left thigh. I do not bother to make a visual check, I do not even bother to reach beneath the covers and explore the area with my fingers. Another abscess is simply another hole in a ship that is already sinking into the sea.

At first the etiologists thought the abscesses were a new form of basal cell cancer, and bone marrow tests were not made. When an etiologist named Eustace Siddon insisted that the tests be made, abnormal cells were in the patients’ spicules. They were unlike any cells ever encountered before, and subsequently were discovered in the patients’ bloodstreams. The disease became known as Siddon’s disease, and new cases were diagnosed all over the world. Its cause remained a mystery, but a concerted effort on the part of pharmaceutical companies in the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union led to the development of a serum that, when administered soon enough, killed the cells and aborted the marrow’s ability to create more. A worldwide inoculation program was launched, but the serum wasn’t wholly successful because those who had been first afflicted with the disease were too far gone to be helped. Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union had discovered how to isolate pockets of time, and stasis ships were built in which to house the premature victims till a more effective serum could be developed. Such ships were leased to other nations so that the lives of their premature victims might be sustained by stasis also. I do not know how many stasis ships there are in space now. Ours may be the last one. Our ward is already half empty.

\* \* \*

Sometimes as I look through my black window at the polliwogs of stars, I make mental jumps to Earth Past. I was a successful businessman before the disease struck me. My company bought apartment complexes that the federal government, in its desperate attempt to lower the federal budget, had ceased subsidizing. We refurbished them and gave the renters the option of buying the apartments they were living in. In most cases they could not, since the prices we asked were commensurate with the cost of renovation—with, of course, a margin of profit added—and in such cases the apartments were bought by outsiders. A bald statement such as this implies inhumanity, but the implication is unjust because in most instances the renters would not have been able to pay the unsubsidized rent and would have had to leave whether I had come along or not. I merely took advantage of a situation for which I could not in any way be held responsible. If inhumanity was involved, it lies on the federal government’s doorstep, not mine.

However, I would be the last to say that noble principles have ever guided my conduct. The word that describes me, and others like me, best isopportunistic . Opportunism is the essence of a free enterprise system. If you do not have it, you will wind up working for someone who does, and walk the alleys and not the avenues of modern civilization. I have enough liquid assets to buy the stasis ship I am dying on, to buy all the others. But I cannot buy what I need the most: a cure for the disease that is killing me.

\* \* \*

The girl June brings us fruit juice, then says good night. I lie on my chair-couch and watch the polliwogs. I know that the girl June has gone to bed with the pilot. They are being paid day and night for their stay in space. They have already accrued payment for ten years, and yet they have spent but ten days away from Earth. All the pilot has to do is deactivate stasis when Earth comes into view and then activate it again after the medmen leave the ship, and all the girl June has to do is bring medicine and food (an androchef prepares the meals) to the sick and check to see whether or not they are dead yet.

She and the pilot do not even have to jettison the corpses. They simply let the dead bodies lie on the chair-couches till the medship comes. They are getting rich virtually overnight, almost without having to lift a finger. I resent this deeply. I am paying them out of my own pocket, for the Space Force, of which they are a part, is the taxpayers’ burden. People like them are barnacles. They cannot make it on their own.

There is a mortician assigned to the medship. Upon rendezvous, his helpers transfer the dead. He is getting rich, too.

\* \* \*

It is a long night. I do not sleep well. In the morning the girl June brings me toast and scrambled eggs and decaffeinated coffee. She glances at her wristwatch. “Earth will arrive before long. Iknow that this time they’ll have found a cure.”

“How many of us are there left?”

“You’re ambulatory. Why don’t you count and see next time you go to the bathroom?”

“You know how many. Why don’t you tell me?”

“I haven’t made a recent count. Eat your breakfast now, like a good boy.”

I gag on the scrambled eggs. I cannot swallow the toast. I sip the decaffeinated coffee and watch the polliwogs.

\* \* \*

I have figured out why I resent the girl June so much. She wears her hair the same way my wife used to wear hers, and her eyes are the same shade of blue. She even walks the way my wife did.

I hated my wife. But I didn’t kill her.

She jumped from her bedroom window of her own free will.

Why did she jump?

I don’t know why.

Her suicide occurred the day before the series of nuclear plant disasters that had taken place in this country and in Russia, France, Israel, and the People’s Republic of China were reported on TV, so the date is well fixed in my memory. I had already implemented divorce proceedings on the grounds of constructive abandonment. She had not spoken to me for almost a year, and I had finally given up speaking to her. But we were still living together. We would sit like dummies at the meals we still shared. She slept in one bedroom and I slept in another. Fortunately, we had no children. I don’t think she ever wanted them after she miscarried. I know that after the silent treatment began, I no longer did.

She didn’t know what constructive abandonment was. She didn’t know that shutting yourself off from someone and not speaking to him constituted grounds for divorce. When she found out, she must have undergone a rude awakening.

But I don’t believe it was this that caused her to jump from her window.

I think that when she married me she wanted a father rather than a husband. But I think there was another, much deeper cause of our estrangement. She was the daughter of working people. Her father worked with his hands, so had her grandfather and so did her brothers and sisters. She, too, was working with her hands when I met her, and so was her mother. In a silk mill. So she thought, and her mother and her father and her brothers and her sisters thought, that it was fitting and proper for people to work with their hands, and that people who worked with their minds could not wholly be trusted. The peasant mentality. I think she mistrusted every dollar I ever made after I got my business going. In her mind, and in her mother’s and her father’s and brothers’ and her sisters’ minds, a husband should go daily to a factory, punch a clock, work for four hours, punch the clock for lunch, punch it again afterward, work for four hours more, punch the clock once more, and then go home. And if you could work overtime, so much the better. I told her that only fools worked in factories, and I think that this was the rift that eventually resulted in our estrangement.

\* \* \*

When I go to the bathroom, I look at the dead. But I do not count them. They are easy to distinguish because the girl June has tied tags to their toes. Soon I shall be too weak to walk that far. Then, each time I have to go, I shall have to summon the androrderly. It will bring me a bedpan or a urinal, and I shall no longer be able to leave my black window.

\* \* \*

My wife used to tell me when we were still speaking that I made my money robbing from the poor. I told her that this was how all businessmen made their money, that it was the way free enterprise worked. The poor, I told her, were born to be robbed. But it’s wrong to rob the old poor, she said, referring to those on Supplemental Social Security, many of whom lived in the apartment complexes that I bought and refurbished. The old poor are worthless burdens on the taxpayers’ backs, I said. Somebody should rob them. You’re talking about my grandmother and my grandfather, she said. Yes, I said, and your great-aunts and your great-uncles, too.

\* \* \*

“Look,” the girl June says, pausing by my chair-couch and pointing to my black window. “Earth’s coming back.”

Seen from stasis, Earth has the aspect of a pale polliwog, much larger than the others. I can see the moon, too. It is a silver polliwog and, like Earth, seems to be hurtling toward us. Abruptly their pace slows as the pilot deactivates stasis, and Earth reacquires her blue, familiar face, and I can see the man in the moon.

We will await the coming of the medmen. And the mortician.

\* \* \*

The girl June serves dinner. I did not touch my lunch, but I haven’t even a ghost of an appetite. “They should be here by now,” I tell her.

“They will be any minute.”

“Is their ship in the viewscreen?”

“No, but it will be any second. Eat your dinner.”

She has resurrected my wife again. As we grew richer and the imaginary partition bisecting the house acquired greater and greater thickness, she grew deeper and deeper into herself. I began spending more frequent weekends with my secretary. At the trial the D.A. tried to pass my secretary off as a sort offemme fatale , arguing that, unable to wait for the divorce to go through, I had killed my wife so I could marry her. On the witness stand I stated that I had had no intention of marrying my secretary; and she, when she took the stand, stated that I had been keeping company with her solely because I was estranged from my wife, and that marriage had been even further from her mind than it had been from mine. I was found Not Guilty.

After the trial, the abscesses began to appear.

\* \* \*

The girl June makes the rounds with her medicine tray. The medship still hasn’t arrived. She is cheerful, as always. “Now don’t you people worry,” she says as she dispenses the capsules. “It’ll be here any second. And I know that this time they’ve found a cure.”

Later on, when she makes the rounds with fruit juice, I ask if there have been any radio messages from Earth explaining the delay. She shakes her head. “There’s a slight communications problem.”

“You mean the radio doesn’t work?”

“We’re not certain whether it’s the radio or not, but when we transmit, we get no answer. But I’m sure that the medship will be here any minute.”

I can hear the questions the other patients put to her as she continues down the aisle. “They’ve given up on us,” a woman says. It is evident from the flat tone of her voice that hope left her long ago.

I lie back in my chair-couch wondering if they really have given up, and I conclude that there must be another reason why the medship hasn’t arrived, because even if they have given up, the medmen would still come round with more capsules and more lies.

\* \* \*

I watch the stars between brief bouts of sleep. It is hard to believe that once they were polliwogs in a big black pool. I like them less than I did the polliwogs. The polliwogs at least were companionable. The stars leave me cold.

I do not care whether the medship comes or not.

\* \* \*

It is clear by now that it isn’t going to come. It is morning, and breakfast has been served, and the girl June is making the rounds with her medicine tray. When she finishes she goes into the control room, and a moment later the pilot steps into the ward. He is a tall, spare man who hasn’t yet seen thirty. The health that radiates from him disgusts me.

He raises his hands for the attention he already has. “The medship, as you know, has yet to appear,” he says, “and we are unable to contact Earth. I’m certain that there’s nothing seriously wrong, but we can’t find out what the score is unless we go down and see. There’ll be no discomfort during atmosphere reentry, and after we land there’ll be no need for any of you to leave the ship. Now don’t you people worry—everything’ll turn out just fine!”

He steps back into the control room. The girl June reappears and tells us to lie back on our chair-couches. The stars shift in my black window, and the ship descends to Earth.

\* \* \*

The pilot and the girl June go outside. We have landed in a large field. Through my window, which is no longer black but green and blue, I can see the serrated shoulders of a distant city. Nearby, several cows are grazing. Our landing was silent and did not startle them.

The pilot did not close the locks, and I can smell Earth air. It is refreshingly different from the sterile air in the ship. The sun has just risen. The season is spring.

I sit up on my chair-couch. The other patients who are still living sit up on theirs. We wait for the girl June and the pilot to reenter the ship. The sun climbs higher into the sky. The girl June and the pilot do not reappear.

I lower my feet to the deck and stand up. I find that I can walk with no difficulty at all. I walk through the control room and through the open locks and step outside. I see the girl June and the pilot almost at once. They are lying on the ground. Their faces are cyanotic. I bend down and feel their carotid arteries. They are dead.

There is a highway not far away. There are no cars on it. There is no sign of human life anywhere. A flock of birds wings by overhead.

The other patients have filed out of the ship. I see the Warricks. The abscesses have begun to fade away.

I undo my hospital gown and look at my chest and stomach. My own abscesses have also begun to fade away.

The air seems to shimmer with a light of its own. Each lungful I breathe in invigorates me.

Suddenly I know that the city is dead. That most of the people on Earth are dead. And I know why.

“Siddon’s disease” was the self-aborted attempt of the human race to adapt to the nuclear age. Had it not been for the serum, they would have succeeded, as the animals did.

No bombs were ever dropped. None needed to be.

Those of us who really were ill were made so first because we adapted too soon, and second, because we were poisoned by the uncontaminated air of the stasis ships.

We have inherited the Earth.

\* \* \*

The other patients have also guessed the truth. They are in a state of shock and do not know what to do. I put some of them to work burying the bodies of the girl June and the pilot, and the bodies on board the ship. There is a farmhouse beyond the field. It will do for the time being. I tell the rest of the patients to start transferring the usable contents of the ship to my new demesne. I know at last who I really am. I have fallen from heaven twice. I did a good job on the world the first time. This time I will do an even better one.