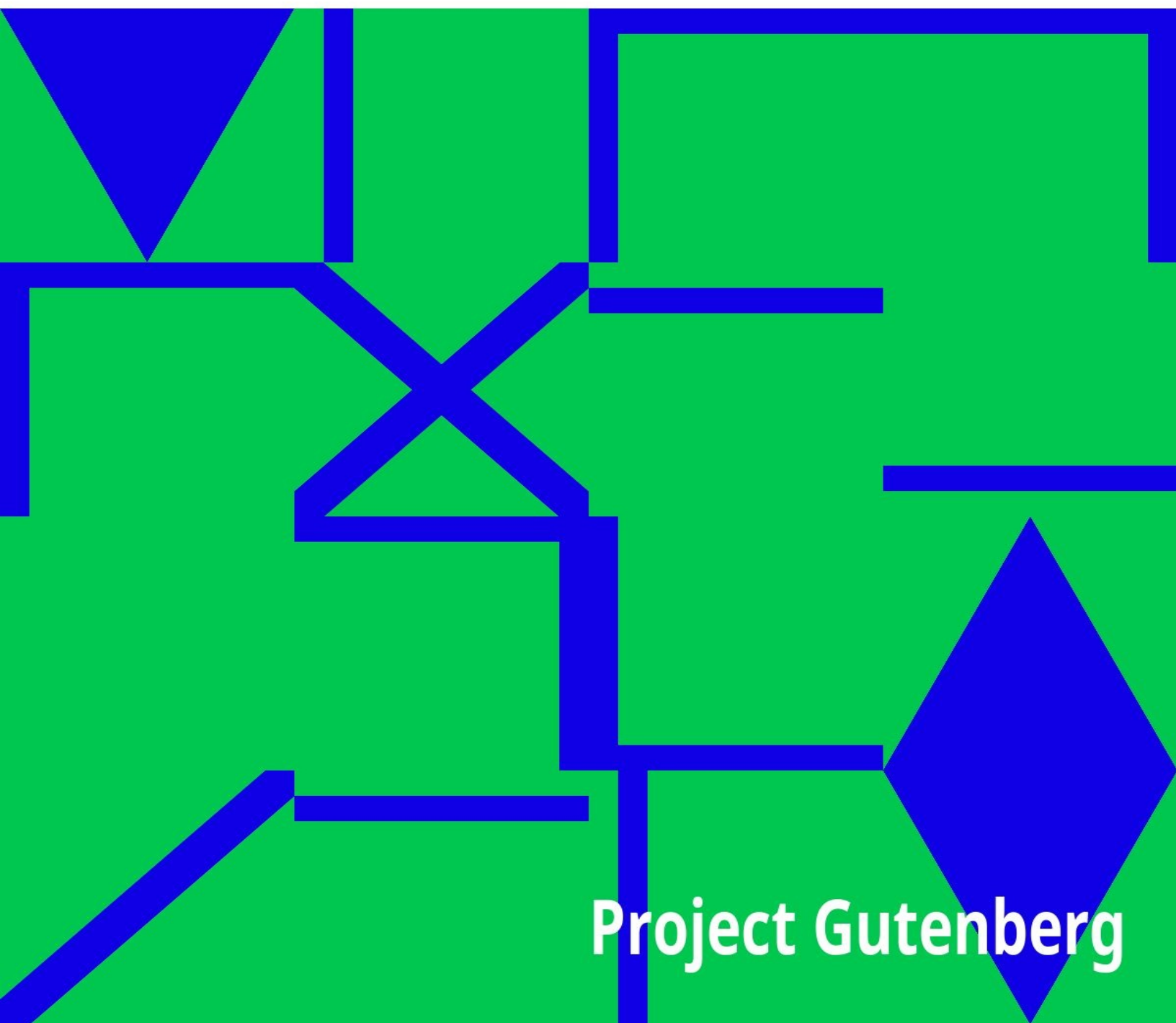


Stopover Planet

Robert E. Gilbert



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STOPOVER PLANET



By
Robert E. Gilbert

Early morning deliveries were part of the Honeychile Bakery Service. But on this particular morning the service was reversed!

AT 2:34 a.m., Patrolman Louis Whedbee left the Zip Cab station. With arch supports squeaking and night stick swinging, Whedbee walked east to the call box at the corner of Sullivan and Cherokee. The traffic signal suspended above the intersection blinked a cautionary amber. Not a car moved on the silent streets.

Whedbee reached for the box. Then he swore softly and stepped off the curb. "Pardon me," he said, for he believed that a policeman should be courteous at all times, even when arresting a school zone speedster. This, however, was not a speedster. It seemed to be a huge man standing on top of a truck and cutting down the stop light. "What's going on here?" Whedbee asked.

HONEYCHILE BAKERY was advertised on the side of the truck. Instinctively, Whedbee jammed his whistle in his mouth when he realized that the man on the truck wore something like a suit of long underwear made of improbable black fur sprinkled with tiny red spots.

"What are you doing to the stop light?" Whedbee demanded.

The amber light quit blinking without the expected electrical display.

Sinuuous as beheaded snakes, the wires and cables supporting the traffic signal fell into the street. The unusual man pocketed his cutting tool—a long thin tube—and lowered the stop light to the truck. He looked at Whedbee. The corner street lamp reacted upon his eyes like a flashlight thrown on a tomcat in an alley. The eyes gleamed green.

Whedbee's whistle arced to the end of the chain and clanked against his metal buttons. A block away on Center Street, a heavy truck roared through the business section. The bell of a switch engine tolled near the freight depot, and a small dog barked suddenly at the obscured sky.

"I am promoting you to captain. You will replace Hanks, whom I am demoting," the figure on the truck announced.

"Chief Grindstaff?" Whedbee wondered.

The chief of police glared down at the patrolman. He hooked a bright metal globe to the stop light, lifted it in one hand, and jumped, landing lightly on the pavement. "Put this in the mobile unit," he said. "The truck, I evil."

"Huh? Sure, chief," Whedbee said. He tucked his night stick under his arm and prepared to accept a heavy load. Tensed muscles almost felled him when the signal proved to weigh not more than one pound.

Chief Grindstaff opened the doors in the rear of the truck, releasing a faint odor of stale bread. The truck was empty. Whedbee deposited the almost weightless burden. The chief looked him in the eye. "I am promoting you to captain," he repeated. "You will replace Hanks, whom I am demoting."

"Thanks, chief!" Whedbee exalted. "You know Hanks didn't treat me fair that time I—"

"Yes, I know all about that," the chief interposed. "Go bring the

postage box and place it in the truck."

"The which? Oh, you mean the mailbox!" Whedbee walked across the street to the square green box with the rounded metal top. Another of the globes had been attached to the mailbox, and the legs had been burned loose from the concrete sidewalk. Confidently, Whedbee lifted the light object, carried it to the truck, and deposited it inside.

"Bleachers there," said Chief Grindstaff.

"What you say, chief?"

"Stands there. No, stand there."

Patrolman Whedbee stood by the back of the truck. Chief Grindstaff placed a device like an atomizer under Whedbee's nose and released the spray.



MISS Betsy Tapp awoke after not more than one hour of fitful sleep. The door to the garage apartment shook under the tattoo of a heavy fist. Miss Tapp's heart thudded somewhere inside her thirty-eight-inch bosom. She lay rigid in darkness penetrated only by the glimmer of a distant street light.

The knocking ceased. Boards creaked on the platform outside the door. A face appeared at the window, a face in complete shadow except for two eyes that glowed with greenish light.

Miss Tapp, unaware of the disarray of her nightgown, sat upright. The alarm clock on the floor by the bed clacked in the stillness. The tap in the kitchen cubicle dripped. Timbers, contracting in the cool of early morning, popped faintly.

"I need to marry you," the face said. "I was wrong tonight. Forgive me."

"Fred?" Miss Tapp gasped in sudden joy.

"Open the portal," Fred said.

Wrenching metal curlers from her permanently waved hair, Miss Tapp bounded to the door. She released the catch and threw herself at the figure on the landing. Fred purred, "I want to marry you. I was wrong tonight. Forgive me."

"Oh, Fred," Miss Tapp sighed. "I knew you'd come back! You just had too much to drink! I forgive you, Fred! We'll—"

"Yes. Bring your rayon crepe with tall tucking."

"What, Fred?"

"Bring your garb, your clothing. Hurry."

Miss Tapp skillfully fought a blush. "Oh, Fred! I'm sorry. I'll be dressed in a minute!"

Fred slowly stated, "I want to marry you. I was wrong tonight. Forgive me." He walked into the apartment and rapidly gathered and rolled together the dress and undergarments scattered on and about the chair. He stuffed the spike-heeled shoes into pockets of his black fur suit and lifted Miss Tapp in his arms.

"We're eloping!" Miss Tapp sighed as Fred carried her down the outside stairs. A *Honeychile Bakery* truck, with rear doors open, waited in the driveway. Fred tossed the roll of clothing and the slippers into the truck, and swiftly sprayed Miss Tapp.



AN unearthly glow permeated the bedroom and cast the black shadows of heavy furniture against the faded papered walls. Within the glow, two dots of green flickered. The Reverend Enos Shackelford dropped on creaking knees and bowed his grizzled head.

A voice said, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Arise and follow me."

"Lord," said Reverend Shackelford, "I have served thee faithfully all the days of my life. Remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. Remember also—"

"Yes. Well done, good and faithful servant. Arise and follow me."

Shackelford stood on tottering old legs. His nightshirt hung below his knees. Horrified shock blanched his lined face. "Blasphemer!" he cried. "False prophet! Get thee behind me, Satan!"

The glow danced and faded. A towering black shape pointed a bent rod. The rod hissed. The Reverend Shackelford staggered against a small table, dragging it with him to the floor. He lay still with one gnarled old hand on a large golden-edged book that had fallen from the table.



"YOU'RE fired," the man in the dream said over and over.

Calvin C. Kear rolled off the half-bed, struck the floor, and awoke. "First time I've fallen out of bed in years," he groaned. His shaking hand fumbled with the switch and succeeded in turning on the lamp.

Mrs. Calvin C. Kear sprawled on her back in the other bed and snored. "You and your fifteen-thousand-dollar house," Kear muttered. He combed his thinning hair with his fingers. "You and your sterling silver. You and your chosen pattern. Your service for eight. How far do you think fifty-four dollars a week will go with 12-gauge shells three and a quarter a box?"

Green eyes glittered beside the frilly dressing table. The man standing there said, "I'm not igniting you. I'm giving you a bonus for your fine work. Enough currency to pay the loan on this house. You'll be making two hundred per week. This fall, I'll take you hunting at my place in the country."

"Boss?" Kear mumbled. "I mean, Mr. Darmond?"

"Put on your clothing," the boss said. "I'll show you your new office. You may have a secretary, also. I'm not firing you. I'm giving you a bonus."

Kear sat gasping on the floor. "That's great, boss!" he exclaimed. "I thought I did an extra special job on the plastics mill design. It'll mean a lot to the company. We—"

"Yes. Dress quickly."

Kear threw off his pajamas and started stuffing arms and legs into his clothes. Mrs. Kear opened her eyes and squeaked like a dying rabbit.

The bent rod in the boss's hand hissed, and Mrs. Kear stopped squeaking.

With tie flapping, shirt unbuttoned, shoes unlaced, Kear followed the boss through the living room and down the flagstone walk to the street. The boss opened the doors of the *Honeychile Bakery* truck and said, "In here."

MRS. Jane Huprich dropped her mop. Her varicose legs trotted across the wet lobby of the Jordon Building, and her flabby fat arms reached for the tall man with bright eyes who stood near the elevators. "It's me, Mom," the man cried.

"Matt!" Mrs. Huprich cried. "Matt, baby!"

"I got a full pardon, Mom," Matt said, stroking her tangled white hair. "Right from the ruling state official. You won't have to scrub floors anymore! I'm going straight, Mom. I'm a good mechanic now. They learned me a lot in the enclosure. Come on. I got a used truck outside, I bought cheap."

Mrs. Huprich and son walked through the oddly twisted doors of the Jordon Building and into the gray twilight that awaited dawn. The *Honeychile Bakery* truck waited too.

GARY Abston peddled his bicycle against the flow of cars carrying day-shift workers through the half-light. He whirled into Walnut Street, twisted a fresh copy of the *Morning Herald* into a fiendishly clever knot, and hurled it in the general direction of a front porch that flashed past on his right. Never slowing, Gary threw the next paper entirely across the street. He chuckled as it cleared a picket fence. "Bang, bang!" he blurted. His red shirt, with a picture of a mounted cowboy on the back, ballooned in the early morning breeze.

"Whoa!" Gary roared. He stopped, held the bicycle upright with one foot on the pavement. A tall, lanky, slightly bowlegged man with

squinting luminous green eyes stood on the sidewalk. Gary looked at the man. The newspapers fluttered to the parkway. The bicycle clattered in the street.

"Howdy, partner!" the tall man said. "The rustlers are headin' for the plateau! We'll take the short gash and head 'em off at the canyon!"

"Ramrod Jones?" Gary chirped.

"Here's the truck I haul Quizz-kid, the I.Q. Horse, in! Let's get after the rustlers!" Jones said.

"Gee, I've seen all your pictures, Ramrod," Gary said. "*Silver City Raiders, Rustlers of Silver City, Silver City Rustlers*—"

The great cowboy lifted the newsboy into the *Honeychile* truck.



PINK and rose clouds drifted through a brightening sky as the *Honeychile Bakery* truck careened along a narrow road badly in need of rock and grading. From the road, the truck rattled into a rutted track through dewy woods and skidded swaying to a stop at the side of a long, low, grassy hill.

The tall creature dressed in black, red-spotted fur stepped from the cab. An opening appeared in the hillside. Four machines—dull metal eggs balancing on single tractor treads—rolled silently through the opening. Jointed steel arms darted from recesses in the eggs. One machine opened the truck doors.

The creature walked up a ramp inside the hill and entered a shimmering metallic compartment.

"Greetings, Eo. I have returned."

Eo, who wore a suit of white fur, hummed, "None too soon, Za. We miscalculated dawn. What success?"

"An excellent group," Za said. He stretched and reclined on a transparent slab. "The servants are unloading the vehicle. I captured a young male, a mature male, an aged male, some sort of official or guardian male, a mature female, and an aged female."

"Let's view them," Eo said. "You can rest after we're away."

The tall creatures entered a second compartment furnished with a large table upon which the silent machines deposited inanimate bodies. "Extraordinary!" said Eo, staring at Miss Betsy Tapp. "These things have reached a peak of mammalian development!"

"Her correct garments are in this bundle," Za explained. "The servants are bringing the properties now. I secured a signaling device and a box used in an extremely primitive system of communication. Also, I brought the quaint muscle-powered vehicle ridden by the young male. The photographs should be sufficient for other details."

"Any difficulty?" Eo asked as the machines dumped Patrolman Whedbee on the table.

"The language was the greatest obstacle," Za said. "The same word has many different meanings, or many different words have the same meaning. Rather crude."

"Did you use bait, or force?"

"Bait," Za said. "It's much simpler. This is a completely selfish, egocentric breed. Most of them have one thing in mind which they want solely for themselves. Their sending power is weak, but that one selfish desire is powerful enough to be received. I merely dangled it

before their minds, and they were hooked." He tapped the foot of Calvin C. Kear. "I killed this one's female companion. She awoke and screamed. The males and females pair off and live together for years. Strange custom! Breeding seems to be only one reason for the mutual bondage."

Za pointed to Mrs. Jane Huprich. "The old female may be an exception to the selfishness. I couldn't decide whether she most wanted to be relieved of cleaning floors by primitive methods, or wanted her male offspring to be released from some structure where he had been secured for reasons I couldn't determine."

The machines deposited the Reverend Enos Shackelford and then lined up in a precise row. "This thing is dead!" Eo buzzed.

Za shook his head. "That was the only genuine exception. He confused me till I forgot his proper clothing, but some can be devised from the other samples. He seems to have been a witch-doctor. His mind was cluttered with myths and superstitions from an ancient text. I don't understand him, Eo, and wish I had time to study the phenomena. He was different from the others. He believed in something and considered himself lowly and humble. The minds of the others were in constant confusion. They believed, actually, in nothing. Somehow, he saw me, Eo. I was forced to kill him."

"No harm done," Eo decided. He faced the machines and said, "Destroy the vehicle, draw in the camouflage net, prepare for take-off." The machines rolled from the compartment, and the two creatures followed.

"Seal it," Eo said. "I'll plasticize them when we're in space. Fine work, Za. I can see the plaque now: 'Mounted by Eo, Collected by Za. Typical Street Corner on Planet *Earth*, Star *Sol*.' The directors will surely give the group a prominent place in the Galactic Museum of Natural History!"

"Yes," Za agreed, glancing back at the Reverend Enos Shackelford.
"This planet was a fortunate stopover."

The End

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