

AMERICAN
Short Stories of Today

Edited by Esmor Jones

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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Introduction

There are fifteen short stories in this collection and, of course, they are all by American writers. To choose the stories for a book of this size is like picking a few apples from a tree groaning with fruit. However, you may get a taste for them!

Even so, the stories do come from quite a wide range of writers. Coast to coast, in fact, New York to Los Angeles! Though there are a couple of science fiction tales and one Western (both kinds of story much associated with America), I have found stories by young writers that tell us something about ordinary Americans and their lives. You will not find Dallas here but you will meet a lot of Americans coping with family life in farms, villages, towns and cities. There is sadness in some; there are smiles and laughter in others. I think you will see in all Americans, young and old, meeting life with toughness and, often, wisely. Authors and their characters come from all walks of life, too. A kid runs away from home; a farmer faces ruin; a baseball fanatic rescues the game he loves; a son watches his mother cope with hospital; an old man has a kind of love-hate relationship with his crusty old dog; a bore gets his come-uppance; children have rather too exciting a party; a small boy has to cope with knowing he accidentally shot and killed his older brother. It is about America, and America is different and immensely varied. But it is also about people, and they are much the same anywhere, aren't they?

ESMOR JONES

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ISAAC ASIMOV

Star Light

Isaac Asimov is a scientist who became a writer of science fiction. His reputation is world-wide and his output enormous. He is particularly well-known for stories about robots. 'Star Light' seems to have a computer as a major 'character'. However, as Asimov never tires of telling us, it is human beings and not machines that cause tragedy and disaster. This truth, Trent, the escaping criminal, learns too late!

Arthur Trent heard them quite clearly. The tense, angry words shot out of his receiver.

'Trent! You can't get away. We will intersect your orbit in two hours and if you try to resist we will blow you out of space.'

Trent smiled and said nothing. He had no weapons and no need to fight. In far less than two hours the ship would make its jump through hyperspace and they would never find him. He would have with him nearly a kilogram of Krillium, enough for the construction of the brain-paths of thousands of robots and worth some ten million credits on any world in the Galaxy – and no questions asked.

Old Brennmeier had planned the whole thing. He had planned it for thirty years and more. It had been his life's work.

'It's the getaway, young man,' he had said. 'That's why I need you. You can lift a ship off the ground and out into space. I can't.'

'Getting it into space is no good, Mr Brennmeier,' Trent said. 'We'll be caught in half a day.'

'Not,' said Brennmeier, craftily, 'if we make the Jump; not if we flash through and end up light-years away.'

hyperspace: space beyond. The 'Jump' will be the crossing over into another stellar system.

'It would take half a day to plot the Jump and even if we could take the time, the police would alert all stellar systems.'

'No, Trent, no.' The old man's hand fell on his, clutching it in trembling excitement. 'Not *all* stellar systems; only the dozen in our neighbourhood. The Galaxy is big and the colonists of the last fifty thousand years have lost touch with each other.'

He talked avidly, painting the picture. The Galaxy now was like the surface of man's original planet (Earth, they had called it) in prehistoric times. Man had been scattered over all the continents, but each group had known only the area immediately surrounding itself.

'If we make the Jump at random,' Brennmeier said, 'we would be anywhere, even fifty thousand light-years away, and there would be no more chance of finding us than a pebble in a meteor swarm.'

Trent shook his head. 'And we don't find ourselves, either. We wouldn't have the foggiest way of getting to an inhabited planet.'

Brennmeier's quick-moving eyes inspected the surroundings. No one was near him, but his voice sank to a whisper anyway. 'I've spent thirty years collecting data on every habitable planet in the Galaxy. I've searched all the old records. I've travelled thousands of light-years, farther than any space-pilot. And the location of every habitable planet is now in the memory store of the best computer in the world.'

Trent lifted his eyebrows politely.

Brennmeier said, 'I design computers and I have the best. I've also plotted the exact location of every luminous star in the Galaxy, every star of spectral class of F, B, A, and O, and put that into the memory store. Once we've made the Jump the computer will scan the heavens spectroscopically and compare the results with the map of the Galaxy it contains. Once it finds the proper match, and sooner or later it will, the ship is located in space and it is then automatically guided through a second Jump to the neighbourhood of the nearest inhabited planet.'

'Sounds too complicated.'

'It can't miss. All these years I've worked on it and it can't miss. I'll have ten years left yet to be a millionaire. But you're young; you'll be a millionaire much longer.'

'When you Jump at random, you can end inside a star.'

'Not one chance in a hundred trillion, Trent. We might also land

so far from any luminous star that the computer can't find anything to match up against its programme. We might find we've jumped only a light-year or two and the police are still on our trail. The chances of that are smaller still. If you want to worry, worry that you might die of a heart attack at the moment of take-off. The chances for that are much higher.'

'You might, Mr Brennmeier. You're older.'

The old man shrugged. 'I don't count. The computer will do everything automatically.'

Trent nodded and remembered that. One midnight, when the ship was ready and Brennmeier arrived with the Krillium in a briefcase (he had no difficulty, for he was a greatly trusted man) Trent took the briefcase with one hand while his other moved quickly and surely.

A knife was still the best, just as quick as a molecular depolariser, just as fatal, and much more quiet. Trent left the knife there with the body, complete with fingerprints. What was the difference? They wouldn't get him.

Deep in space now, with the police-cruisers in pursuit, he felt the gathering tension that always preceded a Jump. No physiologist could explain it, but every space-wise pilot knew what it felt like.

There was a momentary inside-out feeling as his ship and himself for one moment of non-space and non-time, became non-matter and non-energy, then reassembled itself instantaneously in another part of the Galaxy.

Trent smiled. He was still alive. No star was too close and there were thousands that were close enough. The sky was alive with stars and the pattern was so different that he knew the Jump had gone far. Some of those stars had to be spectral class F and better. The computer would have a nice, rich pattern to match against its memory. It shouldn't take long.

He leaned back in comfort and watched the bright pattern of starlight move as the ship rotated slowly. A bright star came into view, a really bright one. It didn't seem more than a couple of light-years away and his pilot's sense told him it was a hot one; good and hot. The computer would use that as its base and match the pattern centred about it. Once again, he thought: It shouldn't take long.

But it did. The minutes passed. Then an hour. And still the computer clicked busily and its lights flashed.

Trent frowned. Why didn't it find the pattern? The pattern had to be there. Brennmeier had showed him his long years of work. He *couldn't* have left out a star or recorded it in the wrong place.

Surely stars were born and died and moved through space while in being, but these changes were slow, slow. In a million years, the patterns that Brennmeier had recorded couldn't –

A sudden panic clutched at Trent. No! It *couldn't* be. The chances for it were even smaller than Jumping into a star's interior.

He waited for the bright star to come into view again, and, with trembling hands, brought it into telescopic focus. He put in all the magnification he could, and around the bright speck of light was the tell-tale fog of turbulent gases caught, as it were, in mid-flight.

It was a nova!

From dim obscurity, the star had raised itself to bright luminosity – perhaps only a month ago. It had graduated from a special class low enough to be ignored by the computer, to one that would be most certainly taken into account.

But the nova that existed in space didn't exist in the computer's memory store because Brennmeier had not put it there. It had not existed when Brennmeier was collecting his data – at least not as a luminous star.

'Don't count on it,' shrieked Trent. 'Ignore it.'

But he was shouting at automatic machinery that would match the nova-centred pattern against the Galactic pattern and find it nowhere and continue, nevertheless, to match and match and match for as long as its energy supply held out.

The air supply would run out much sooner. Trent's life would ebb away much sooner.

Helplessly, Trent slumped in his chair, watching the mocking pattern of star light and beginning the long and agonised wait for death.

– If he had only kept the knife.

nova: a new star. In fact, probably an old star suddenly bursting into brilliant life. Astronomers are familiar with this happening in the universe.

GINA BERRIAULT

The Stone Boy

Arnold and Eugie live with their parents on a farm in rural New York State, not far from the small town of Corinth. The farm is just above the Hudson River Valley in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains, among lakes. This is the setting for tragedy. The story is told from Arnold's point of view; he is only nine. How can the grown-ups understand?

Was Arnold really a 'Stone Boy'?

Arnold drew his overalls and ravelling grey sweater over his naked body. In the other narrow bed his brother Eugene went on sleeping, undisturbed by the alarm clock's rusty ring. Arnold, watching his brother sleeping, felt a peculiar dismay; he was nine, six years younger than Eugie, and in their waking hours it was he who was subordinate. To dispel emphatically his uneasy advantage over his sleeping brother, he threw himself on the hump of Eugie's body.

'Get up! Get up!' he cried.

Arnold felt his brother twist away and saw the blankets lifted in a great wing, and, all in an instant he was lying on his back under the covers with only his face showing, like a baby, and Eugie was sprawled on top of him.

'Whassa matter with you?' asked Eugie in sleepy anger, his face hanging close.

'Get up,' Arnold repeated. 'You said you'd pick peas with me.'

Stupidly, Eugie gazed around the room as if to see if morning had come into it yet. Arnold began to laugh derisively, making soft, snorting noises, and was thrown off the bed. He got up from the floor and went down the stairs, the laughter continuing, like hic-cups, against his will. But when he opened the staircase door and

entered the parlour, he hunched up his shoulders and was quiet because his parents slept in the bedroom downstairs.

Arnold lifted his .22-caliber rifle from the rack on the kitchen wall. It was an old lever-action Winchester that his father had given him because nobody else used it any more. On their way down to the garden he and Eugie would go by the lake, and if there were any ducks on it he'd take a shot at them. Standing on the stool before the cupboard, he searched on the top shelf in the confusion of medicines and ointments for man and beast and found a small yellow box of .22 cartridges. Then he sat down on the stool and began to load his gun.

It was cold in the kitchen so early, but later in the day, when his mother canned the peas, the heat from the wood stove would be almost unbearable. Yesterday she had finished preserving the huckleberries that the family had picked along the mountain, and before that she had canned all the cherries his father had brought from the warehouse in Corinth. Sometimes, on these summer days, Arnold would deliberately come out from the shade where he was playing and make himself as uncomfortable as his mother was in the kitchen by standing in the sun until the sweat ran down his body.

Eugie came clomping down the stairs and into the kitchen, his head drooping with sleepiness. From his perch on the stool Arnold watched Eugie slip on his green knit cap. Eugie didn't really need a cap; he hadn't had a haircut in a long time and his brown curls grew thick and matted, close around his ears and down his neck, tapering there to a small whorl. Eugie passed his left hand through his hair before he set his cap down with his right. The very way he slipped his cap on was an announcement of his status; almost everything he did was a reminder that he was eldest — first he, then Nora, then Arnold — and called attention to how tall he was (almost as tall as his father), how long his legs were, how small he was in the hips, and what a neat dip above his buttocks his thick-soled logger's boots gave him. Arnold never tired of watching Eugie offer silent praise unto himself. He wondered, as he sat enthralled, if when he got to be Eugie's age he would still be undersized and his hair still straight.

Eugie eyed the gun. 'Don't you know this ain't duck-season?' he asked gruffly, as if he were the sheriff.

parlour: sitting room.

'No, I don't know,' Arnold said with a snigger.

Eugie picked up the tin washtub for the peas, unbolted the door with his free hand and kicked it open. Then, lifting the tub to his head, he went clomping down the back steps. Arnold followed, closing the door behind him.

The sky was faintly grey, almost white. The mountains behind the farm made the sun climb a long way to show itself. Several miles to the south, where the range opened up, hung an orange mist, but the valley in which the farm lay was still cold and colourless.

Eugie opened the gate to the yard and the boys passed between the barn and the row of chicken houses, their feet stirring up the carpet of brown feathers dropped by the moulting chickens. They paused before going down the slope to the lake. A fluky morning wind ran among the shocks of wheat that covered the slope. It sent a shimmer northward across the lake gently moving the rushes that formed an island in the centre. Killdeer, their white markings flashing, skimmed the water, crying their shrill, sweet cry. And there at the south end of the lake were four wild ducks, swimming out from the willows into open water.

Arnold followed Eugie down the slope, stealing, as his brother did, from one shock of wheat to another. Eugie paused before climbing through the wire fence that divided the wheatfield from the marshy pasture around the lake. They were screened from the ducks by the willows along the lake's edge.

'If you hit your duck, you want me to go in after it?' Eugie said.

'If you want,' Arnold said.

Eugie lowered his eyelids, leaving slits of mocking blue. 'You'd drown 'fore you got to it, them legs of yours are so puny,' he said.

He shoved the tub under the fence and, pressing down the centre wire, climbed through into the pasture.

Arnold pressed down the bottom wire, thrust a leg through and leaned forward to bring the other leg after. His rifle caught on the wire and he jerked at it. The air was rocked by the sound of the shot. Feeling foolish, he lifted his face, baring it to an expected shower of derision from his brother. But Eugie did not turn around. Instead, from his crouching position, he fell to his knees and then pitched forward onto his face. The ducks rose up crying from the

Killdeer: a large, North American species of Ring Plover.

lake, cleared the mountain background and beat away northward across the pale sky.

Arnold squatted beside his brother. Eugie seemed to be climbing the earth, as if the earth ran up and down, and when he found he couldn't scale it he lay still.

'Eugie?'

Then Arnold saw it, under the tendril of hair at the nape of the neck – a slow rising of bright blood. It had an obnoxious movement, like that of a parasite.

'Hey, Eugie,' he said again. He was feeling the same discomfort he had felt when he had watched Eugie sleeping; his brother didn't know that he was lying face down in the pasture.

Again he said, 'Hey, Eugie,' an anxious nudge in his voice. But Eugie was as still as the morning about them.

Arnold set his rifle on the ground and stood up. He picked up the tub and, dragging it behind him, walked along by the willows to the garden fence and climbed through. He went down on his knees among the tangled vines. The pods were cold with the night, but his hands were strange to him, and not until some time had passed did he realize that the pods were numbing his fingers. He picked from the top of the vine first, then lifted the vine to look underneath for pods and then moved on to the next.

It was a warmth on his back, like a large hand laid firmly there, that made him raise his head. Way up the slope the grey farmhouse was struck by the sun. While his head had been bent the land had grown bright around him.

When he got up his legs were so stiff that he had to go down on his knees again to ease the pain. Then, walking sideways, he dragged the tub, half full of peas, up the slope.

The kitchen was warm now; a fire was roaring in the stove with a closed-up, rushing sound. His mother was spooning eggs from a pot of boiling water and putting them into a bowl. Her short brown hair was uncombed and fell forward across her eyes as she bent her head. Nora was lifting a frying pan full of trout from the stove, holding the handle with a dish towel. His father had just come in from bringing the cows from the north pasture to the barn, and was sitting on the stool unbuttoning his red plaid Mackinaw.

'Did you boys fill the tub?' his mother asked.

'They ought of by now,' his father said. 'They went out of the house an hour ago. Eugie woke me up comin' down-stairs. I heard you shootin' – did you get a duck?'

'No,' Arnold said. They would want to know why Eugie wasn't coming in for breakfast, he thought. 'Eugie's dead,' he told them.

They stared at him. The pitch cracked in the stove.

'You kids playin' a joke?' his father asked.

'Where's Eugene?' his mother asked scoldingly. She wanted, Arnold knew, to see his eyes, and when he had glanced at her she put the bowl and spoon down on the stove and walked past him. His father stood up and went out the door after her. Nora followed them with little skipping steps, as if afraid to be left alone.

Arnold went into the barn, down along the foddering passage past the cows waiting to be milked, and climbed into the loft. After a few minutes he heard a terrifying sound coming toward the house. His parents and Nora were returning from the willows, and sounds sharp as knives were rising from his mother's breast and carrying over the sloping fields. In a short while he heard his father go down the back steps, slam the car door and drive away.

Arnold lay still as a fugitive, listening to the cows eating close by. If his parents never called him, he thought, he would stay up in the loft forever, out of the way. In the night he would sneak down for a drink of water from the faucet over the trough and for whatever food they left for him by the barn.

The rattle of his father's car as it turned down the lane recalled him to the present. He heard voices of his Uncle Andy and Aunt Alice as they and his father went past the barn to the lake. He could feel the morning growing heavier with sun. Someone, probably Nora, had let the chickens out of their coops and they were cackling in the yard.

After a while another car turned down the road off the highway. The car drew to a stop and he heard the voices of strange men. The men also went past the barn and down to the lake. The undertakers, whom his father must have phoned from Uncle Andy's house, had

ought of: spoken English; in talking more formally, it would be 'ought to have'. So, later in the story, we find *we'd of* ('we would have') and *I'd of* ('I would have').

faucet: tap.

arrived from Corinth. Then he heard everybody come back and heard the car turn around and leave.

'Arnold!' It was his father calling from the yard.

He climbed down the ladder and went out into the sun, picking wisps of hay from his overalls.

Corinth, nine miles away, was the county seat. Arnold sat in the front seat of the old Ford between his father, who was driving, and Uncle Andy; no one spoke. Uncle Andy was his mother's brother, and he had been fond of Eugie because Eugie had resembled him. Andy had taken Eugie hunting and had given him a knife and a lot of things, and now Andy, his eyes narrowed, sat tall and stiff beside Arnold.

Arnold's father parked the car before the courthouse. It was a two-storey brick building with a lamp on each side of the bottom step. They went up the wide stone steps, Arnold and his father going first, and entered the darkly panelled hallway. The shirt-sleeved man in the sheriff's office said that the sheriff was at Carlson's Parlour examining the Curwing boy.

Andy went off to get the sheriff while Arnold and his father waited on a bench in the corridor. Arnold felt his father watching him, and he lifted his eyes with painful casualness to the announcement, on the opposite wall, of the Corinth County Annual Rodeo, and then to the clock with its loudly clucking pendulum. After he had come down from the loft his father and Uncle Andy had stood in the yard with him and asked him to tell them everything, and he had explained to them how the gun had caught on the wire. But when they had asked him why he hadn't run back to the house to tell his parents, he had had no answer – all he could say was that he had gone down into the garden to pick the peas. His father had stared at him in a pale, puzzled way, and it was then that he had felt his father and the others set their cold, turbulent silence against him. Arnold shifted on the bench, his only feeling a small one of compunction imposed by his father's eyes.

county seat: the centre for local government.

sheriff: in the USA, the head of the local police force.

Carlson's Parlour: the room in an undertaker's or funeral director's premises where a body is laid out and looked after before the funeral. Mr Carlson is the undertaker.

Rodeo: A farmers' show where horse-riding and cattle-handling skills are the attraction.

At a quarter past nine Andy and the sheriff came in. They all went into the sheriff's private office, and Arnold was sent forward to sit in the chair by the sheriff's desk; his father and Andy sat down on the bench against the wall.

The sheriff lumped down into his swivel chair and swung toward Arnold. He was an old man with white hair like wheat stubble. His restless green eyes made him seem not to be in his office but to be hurrying and bobbing around somewhere else.

'What did you say your name was?' the sheriff asked.

'Arnold,' he replied; but he could not remember telling the sheriff his name before.

'Curwing?'

'Yes.'

'What were you doing with a .22, Arnold?'

'It's mine,' he said.

'Okay. What were you going to shoot?'

'Some ducks,' he replied.

'Out of season?'

He nodded.

'That's bad,' said the sheriff. 'Were you and your brother good friends?'

What did he mean - good friends? Eugie was his brother. That was different from a friend, Arnold thought. A best friend was your own age, but Eugie was almost a man. Eugie had a way of looking at him slyly and mockingly and yet confidentially, that had summed up how they both felt about being brothers. Arnold had wanted to be with Eugie more than with anybody else but he couldn't say they had been good friends.

'Did they ever quarrel?' the sheriff asked his father.

'Not that I know,' his father replied. 'It seemed to me that Arnold cared a lot for Eugie.'

'Did you?' the sheriff asked Arnold.

If it seemed so to his father, then it was so. Arnold nodded.

'Were you mad at him this morning?'

'No.'

'How did you happen to shoot him?'

'We was crawlin' through the fence.'

'Yes?'

'An' the gun got caught on the wire.'

'Seems the hammer must of caught,' his father put in.

'All right, that's what happened,' said the sheriff. 'But what I want you to tell me is this. Why didn't you go back to the house and tell your father right away? Why did you go and pick peas for an hour?'

Arnold gazed over his shoulder at his father, expecting his father to have an answer for this also. But his father's eyes, larger and even lighter blue than usual, were fixed upon him curiously. Arnold picked at a callus in his right palm. It seemed odd now that he had not run back to the house and wakened his father, but he could not remember why he had not. They were all waiting for him to answer.

'I came down to pick peas,' he said.

'Didn't you think,' asked the sheriff, stepping carefully from word to word, 'that it was more important for you to go tell your parents what had happened?'

'The sun was gonna come up,' Arnold said.

'What's that got to do with it?'

'It's better to pick peas while they're cool.'

The sheriff swung away from him, laid both hands flat on his desk. 'Well, all I can say is,' he said across to Arnold's father and Uncle Andy, 'he's either a moron or he's so reasonable that he's way ahead of us.' He gave a challenging snort. 'It's come to my notice that the most reasonable guys are mean ones. They don't feel nothing.'

For a moment the three men sat still. Then the sheriff lifted his hand like a man taking an oath. 'Take him home,' he said.

Andy uncrossed his legs. 'You don't want him?'

'Not now,' replied the sheriff. 'Maybe in a few years.'

Arnold's father stood up. He held his hat against his chest. 'The gun ain't his no more,' he said wanly.

Arnold went first through the hallway, hearing behind him the heels of his father and Uncle Andy striking the floor boards. He went down the steps ahead of them and climbed into the back seat of the car. Andy paused as he was getting into the front seat and gazed back at Arnold, and Arnold saw that his uncle's eyes had absorbed the knowingness from the sheriff's eyes. Andy and his father and the sheriff had discovered what made him go down into the garden. It was because he was cruel, the sheriff had said, and

gonna: going to.