

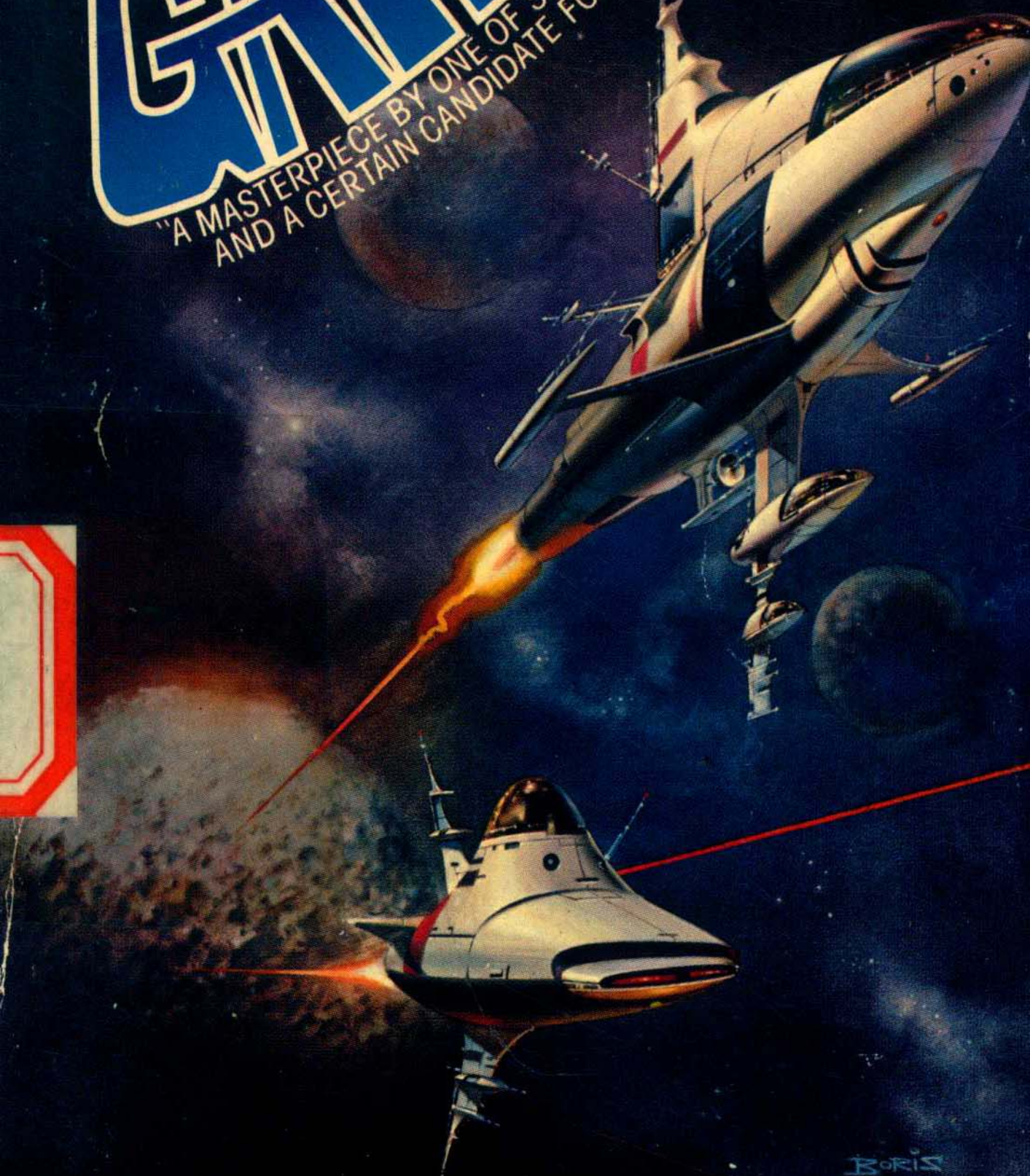


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FREDERIK POHL GATEWAY

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BORIS

GATEWAY

Frederik Pohl

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Published by Ballantine Books

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AGE OF THE PUSSYFOOT

My name is Robinette Broadhead, in spite of which I am male. My analyst (whom I call Sigfrid von Shrink, although that isn't his name; he hasn't got a name, being a machine) has a lot of electronic fun with this fact:

"Why do you care if some people think it's a girl's name, Bob?"

"I don't."

"Then why do you keep bringing it up?"

He annoys me when he keeps bringing up what I keep bringing up. I look at the ceiling with its hanging mobiles and piñatas, then I look out the window. It isn't really a window. It's a moving holopic of surf coming in on Kaena Point; Sigfrid's programming is pretty eclectic. After a while I say, "I can't help what my parents called me. I tried

spelling it R-O-B-I-N-E-T, but then everybody pronounces it wrong."

"You could change it to something else, you know."

"If I changed it," I say, and I am sure I am right in this, "you would just tell me I was going to obsessive lengths to defend my inner dichotomies."

"What I would tell you," Sigfrid says, in his heavy mechanical attempt at humor, "is that, please, you shouldn't use technical psychoanalytic terms. I'd appreciate it if you would just say what you feel."

"What I feel," I say, for the thousandth time, "is happy. I got no problems. Why wouldn't I feel happy?"

We play these word games a lot, and I don't like them. I think there's something wrong with his program. He says, "You tell me, Robbie. Why don't you feel happy?"

I don't say anything to that. He persists. "I think you're worried."

"Shit, Sigfrid," I say, feeling a little disgust, "you always say that. I'm not worried about anything."

He tries wheedling. "There's nothing wrong with saying how you feel."

I look out the window again, angry because I can feel myself trembling and I don't know why. "You're a pain in the ass, Sigfrid, you know that?"

He says something or other, but I am not listening. I am wondering why I waste my time coming here. If there was anybody ever who had every reason to be happy, I have to be him. I'm rich. I'm pretty good-looking. I am not too old, and anyway, I have Full Medical so I can be just about any age I want to be for the next fifty years or so. I live in New York City under the Big Bubble, where you can't afford to live unless you're really well fixed, and maybe some kind of celebrity besides. I have a summer apartment that overlooks the Tappan Sea and the Palisades Dam. And the girls go crazy over my three Out bangles. You don't see too many prospectors anywhere on Earth, not even in New York. They're all wild to have me tell them what it's really like out around the Orion Nebula or the

| | | |
|-----|--------------------------------|--------|
| 481 | IRRAY (O)=IRRAY (P) | 13,320 |
| | ,C, I think you're worried. | 13,325 |
| 482 | XTERNALS ;66AA3 IF ;5B | 13,330 |
| | GOTO **7Z3 | 13,335 |
| | XTERNALS @ 01R IF @ 7 | 13,340 |
| | GOTO **7Z4 | 13,345 |
| | ,S, Shit, Sigfrid, you always | 13,350 |
| | say that. | 13,355 |
| | XTERNALS ¢99997AA! IF ¢8 | 13,360 |
| | GOTO **7Z4 IF ? GOTO | 13,365 |
| | **7Z10 | 13,370 |
| | ,S, I'm not worried about any- | 13,375 |
| | thing. | 13,380 |
| 483 | IRRAY .SHIT. .ALWAYS. | 13,385 |
| | .WORRIED/NOT. | 13,390 |
| 484 | ,C, Why don't you tell me | 13,395 |
| | about it? | 13,400 |
| 485 | IRRAY (P)=IRRAY (Q) INITI- | 13,405 |
| | ATE COMFORT MODE | 13,410 |
| | ,C, There's nothing wrong | 13,415 |
| | with saying how you | 13,420 |
| | feel. | 13,425 |
| 487 | IRRAY (Q)=IRRAY (R) GOTO | 13,430 |
| | **1 GOTO **2 GOTO | 13,435 |
| | **3 | 13,440 |
| 489 | ,S, You're a pain in the ass, | 13,445 |
| | Sigfrid, you know | 13,450 |
| | that? | 13,455 |
| | XTERNALS ¢1! IF ! GOTO | 13,460 |
| | **7Z10 IF **7Z10! GOTO | 13,465 |
| | **1 GOTO **2 GOTO **3 | 13,470 |
| | IRRAY .PAIN. | 13,475 |

Lesser Magellanic Cloud. (I've never been to either place, of course. The one really interesting place I've been to I don't like to talk about.)

"Or," says Sigfrid, having waited the appropriate number of microseconds for a response to whatever it was he said last, "if you really are happy, why do you come here for help?"

I hate it when he asks me the same questions I ask myself. I don't answer. I squirm around until I get comfortable again on the plastic foam mat, because I can tell that it's going to be a long, lousy session. If I knew why I needed help, why would I need help?

"Rob, you aren't very responsive today," Sigfrid says through the little loudspeaker at the head of the mat. Sometimes he uses a very lifelike dummy, sitting in an armchair, tapping a pencil and smiling quirkily at me from time to time. But I've told him that that makes me nervous. "Why don't you just tell me what you're thinking?"

"I'm not thinking about anything, particularly."

"Let your mind roam. Say whatever comes into it, Bob."

"I'm remembering—" I say, and stop.

"Remembering what, Rob?"

"Gateway?"

"That sounds more like a question than a statement."

"Maybe it is. I can't help that. That's what I'm remembering: Gateway."

I have every reason to remember Gateway. That's how I got the money and the bangles, and other things. I think back to the day I left Gateway. That was, let's see, Day 31 of Orbit 22, which means, counting back, just about sixteen years and a couple of months since I left there. I was thirty minutes out of the hospital and couldn't wait to collect my pay, catch my ship, and blow.

Sigfrid says politely, "Please say what you're thinking out loud, Robbie."

"I'm thinking about Shikitei Bakin," I say.

"Yes, you've mentioned him. I remember. What about him?"

I don't answer. Old, legless Shicky Bakin had the room next to mine, but I don't want to discuss it with Sigfrid. I wriggle around on my circular mat, thinking about Shicky and trying to cry.

"You seem upset, Bob."

I don't answer to that, either. Shicky was almost the only person I said good-bye to on Gateway. That was funny. There was a big difference in our status. I was a prospector, and Shicky was a garbageman. They paid him enough money to cover his life-support tax because he did odd jobs, and even on Gateway they have to have somebody to clean up the garbage. But sooner or later he would be too old and too sick to be any more use at all. Then, if he was lucky, they would push him out into space and he would die. If he wasn't lucky, they'd probably send him back to a planet. He would die there, too, before very long; but first he would have the experience of living for a few weeks or so as a helpless cripple.

Anyway, he was my neighbor. Every morning he would get up and painstakingly vacuum every square inch around his cell. It would be dirty, because there was so much trash floating around Gateway all the time, despite the attempts to clean it up. When he had it perfectly clean, even around the roots of the little shrublets he planted and shaped, he would take a handful of pebbles, bottle caps, bits of torn paper—the same trash he'd just vacuumed up, half the time—and painstakingly arrange it on the place he had just cleaned. Funny! I never could see the difference, but Klara said . . . Klara said she could.

"Bob, what were you thinking about just then?" Sigfrid asks.

I roll up into a fetal ball and mumble something.

"I couldn't understand what you just said, Robbie."

I don't say anything. I wonder what became of Shicky. I suppose he died. Suddenly I feel very sad about Shicky dying, such a very long way from Nagoya, and I wish again that I could cry. But I can't.

I squirm and wriggle. I flail against the foam mat until the restraining straps squeak. Nothing helps. The pain and shame won't come out. I feel rather pleased with myself that I am trying so hard to let the feelings out, but I have to admit I am not being successful, and the dreary interview goes on.

Sigfrid says, "Bob, you're taking a long time to answer. Do you think you're holding something back?"

I say virtuously, "What kind of a question is that? If I am, how would I know?" I pause to survey the inside of my brain, looking in all the corners for padlocks that I can open for Sigfrid. I don't see any. I say judiciously, "I don't think that's it, exactly. I don't *feel* as if I were blocking. It's more as if there were so many things I wanted to say that I couldn't decide which."

"Take any one, Rob. Say the first thing that comes into your mind."

Now, that's dumb, it seems to me. How do I know which is the first thing, when they're all boiling around in there together? My father? My mother? Sylvia? Klara? Poor Shicky, trying to balance himself in flight without any legs, flapping around like a barn swallow chasing bugs as he scoops the cobwebby scraps out of Gateway's air?

I reach down into my mind for places where I know it hurts, because it has hurt there before. The way I felt when I was seven years old, parading up and down the Rock Park walk in front of the other kids, begging for someone to pay attention to me? The way it was when we were out of realspace and knew that we were trapped, with the ghost star coming up out of nothingness below us like the smile of a Cheshire cat? Oh, I have a hundred memories like those, and they all hurt. That is, they can. They are pain. They are clearly labeled PAINFUL in the index to my memory. I know where to find them, and I know what it feels like to let them surface.

But they will not hurt unless I let them out.

"I'm waiting, Bob," Sigfrid says.

"I'm thinking," I say. As I lie there it comes to my mind that I'll be late for my guitar lesson. That reminds

me of something, and I look at the fingers of my left hand, checking to see that the fingernails have not grown too long, wishing the calluses were harder and thicker. I have not learned to play the guitar very well, but most people are not that critical and it gives me pleasure. Only you have to keep practicing and remembering. Let's see, I think, how do you make that transition from the D-maj to the C-7th again?

"Bob," Sigfrid says, "this has not been a very productive session. There are only about ten or fifteen minutes left. Why don't you just say the first thing that comes into your mind . . . *now*."

I reject the first thing and say the second. "The first thing that comes into my mind is the way my mother was crying when my father was killed."

"I don't think that was actually the first thing, Bob. Let me make a guess. Was the first thing something about Klara?"

My chest fills, tingling. My breath catches. All of a sudden there's Klara rising up before me, sixteen years earlier and not yet an hour older. . . . I say, "As a matter of fact, Sigfrid, I think what I want to talk about is my mother." I allow myself a polite, deprecatory chuckle.

Sigfrid doesn't ever sigh in resignation, but he can be silent in a way that sounds about the same.

"You see," I go on, carefully outlining all the relevant issues, "she wanted to get married again after my father died. Not right away. I don't mean that she was glad about his death, or anything like that. No, she loved him, all right. But still, I see now, she was a healthy young woman—well, fairly young. Let's see, I suppose she was about thirty-three. And if it hadn't been for me I'm sure she would have remarried. I have feelings of guilt about that. I kept her from doing it. I went to her and said, 'Ma, you don't need another man. I'll be the man in the family. I'll take care of you.' Only I couldn't, of course. I was only about five years old."

"I think you were nine, Robbie."

"Was I? Let me think. Gee, Sigfrid, I guess you're

right—" And then I try to swallow a big drop of spit that has somehow instantly formed in my throat and I gag and cough.

"Say it, Rob!" Sigfrid says insistently. "What do you want to say?"

"God damn you, Sigfrid!"

"Go ahead, Rob. Say it."

"Say what? Christ, Sigfrid! You're driving me right up the wall! This shit isn't doing either one of us any good!"

"Say what's bothering you, Bob, please."

"Shut your fucking tin mouth!" All that carefully covered pain is pushing its way out and I can't stand it, can't deal with it.

"I suggest, Bob, that you try—"

I surge against the straps, kicking chunks out of the foam matting, roaring, "Shut up, you! I don't want to hear. I can't cope with this, don't you understand me? I can't! Can't cope, can't cope!"

Sigfrid waits patiently for me to stop weeping, which happens rather suddenly. And then, before he can say anything, I say wearily, "Oh, hell, Sigfrid, this whole thing isn't getting us anywhere. I think we should call it off. There must be other people who need your services more than I do."

"As to that, Rob," he says, "I am quite competent to meet all the demands on my time."

I am drying my tears on the paper towels he has left beside the mat and don't answer.

"There is still excess capacity, in fact," he goes on. "But you must be the judge of whether we continue with these sessions or not."

"Have you got anything to drink in the recovery room?" I ask him.

"Not in the sense you mean, no. There is what I am told is a very pleasant bar on the top floor of this building."

"Well," I say, "I just wonder what I'm doing here."

And, fifteen minutes later, having confirmed my appointment for the next week, I am drinking a cup of tea in Sigfrid's recovery cubicle. I listen to hear

if his next patient has started screaming yet, but I can't hear anything.

So I wash my face, adjust my scarf, and slick down the little cowlick in my hair. I go up to the bar for a quick one. The headwaiter, who is human, knows me, and gives me a seat looking south toward the Lower Bay rim of the bubble. He looks toward a tall, copper-skinned girl with green eyes sitting by herself, but I shake my head. I drink one short drink, admire the legs on the copper-skinned girl and, thinking mostly about where I am going to go for dinner, keep my appointment for my guitar lesson.

2

All my life I wanted to be a prospector, as far back as I can remember. I couldn't have been more than six when my father and mother took me to a fair in Cheyenne. Hot dogs and popped soya, colored-paper hydrogen balloons, a circus with dogs and horses, wheels of fortune, games, rides. And there was a pressure tent with opaque sides, a dollar to get in, and inside somebody had arranged a display of imports from the Heechee tunnels on Venus. Prayer fans and fire pearls, real Heechee-metal mirrors that you could buy for twenty-five dollars apiece. Pa said they weren't real, but to me they were real. We couldn't afford twenty-five dollars apiece, though. And when you came right down to it, I didn't really need a mirror. Freckled face, buck teeth, hair I brushed straight back and tied. They had just found Gateway.