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THEODORE

Sturgeon

WINNER OF THE HUGO AND NEBULA AWARDS

**VENUS
PLUS X**

THEODORE STURGEON



VINTAGE BOOKS

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THEODORE STURGEON

VENUS PLUS X

Theodore Sturgeon was born on February 26, 1918, in Staten Island, New York, and died in Eugene, Oregon, May 8, 1985. He lived in New York City, upstate New York, and Los Angeles. He is the author of *More Than Human*, winner of the International Fantasy Award; *Venus Plus X*; *To Marry Medusa*, which was also published under the title *The Cosmic Rape*; *The Dreaming Jewels*; and numerous other books and stories. He won the Hugo and Nebula Awards for his short story "Slow Sculpture" and the World Fantasy Life Achievement Award.

Also by THEODORE STURGEON

The Dreaming Jewels

More Than Human

I, Libertine

To Marry Medusa

Some of Your Blood

Godbody

The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon:

Volume I: *The Ultimate Egoist*

Volume II: *Microcosmic God*

Volume III: *Killdozer!*

Volume IV: *Thunder and Roses*

Volume V: *The Perfect Host*

VENUS PLUS X

Utterly aside from the
subject matter
TO
GERTRUDE
and her Isaac

VENUS PLUS X

“**C**harlie Johns,” urgently cried Charlie Johns: “Charlie Johns, Charlie Johns!” for that was the absolute necessity—to know who Charlie Johns was, not to let go of that for a second, for anything, ever.

“I *am* Charlie Johns,” he said argumentatively, and plaintively, he said it again. No one argued, no one denied it. He lay in the warm dark with his knees drawn up and his arms crossed and his forehead pressed tight against his kneecaps. He saw dull flickering red, but that was inside his eyelids, and he was Charlie Johns.

C. Johns once stencilled on a foot-locker, written in speedball black-letter on a high-school diploma, typed on a paycheck. *Johns, Chas.* in the telephone book.

The name, all right. All right, fine, okay, but a man is more than a name. A man is twenty-seven years old, he sees the hairline just so in his morning mirror and likes a drop of Tabasco on his eggs (over light: whites firm, yolks runny). He was born with one malformed toe and a strabismus. He can cook a steak drive a car love a girl run a mimeograph go to the bathroom brush his teeth, including the permanent

bridge, left upper lateral incisor and bicuspid. He left the house in plenty of time but he is going to be late to work.

He opened his eyes and it wasn't dull flickering red at all, but grey—a cold sourceless silver, grey like snail trails on the lilac leaves—a springtime thing, that. Spring it was, oh that springtime thing; it was love last night, Laura, she—

When daylight saving time is new, the daylit evening is forever, and you can do so much. How he *begged* Laura for the chance to get her screens up; if Mom could have seen that, now! And down in Laura's stinking cellar, shuffling through the half-dark with the screens under his arm, he had walked into the cruel point of the dangling strap-hinge of a discarded shutter, torn a hole in his brown tweed pants, punched a red blood-bruise (with warp and woof stamped on it) on his thigh. And worth it, worth it, all that forever-evening, with a girl, a real girl (she could prove it) for all the long end of the evening; and all the way home love! of here and of now, and spring of course, and oh of course *love!* said the tree-frogs, the lilacs, the air, and the way sweat dried on him. (Good—this is good. Good to be a part of here and of now, and spring of course, and oh of course, love; but best of all, to remember, to know it all, Charlie.) Better than love just to remember home, the walk between high hedges, the two white lamps with the big black 61 painted on each (Mom had done that for the landlord; she was clever with her hands) only they were pretty weathered by now, yes the hands too. The foyer with the mottled brass wall-full of mailboxes and discreet pushbuttons for the tenants, and the grille of the house phone that had never worked since they moved here, and that massive brass plate solidly concealing the electric lock, which for years he had opened with a blow of his shoulder, never breaking stride . . . and get closer, closer, because it is so important to remember; nothing

remembered is important; it's remembering that matters; you can! you can!

The steps from the ground floor had old-fashioned nickel-plated nosings over carpet worn down to the backing, red fuzz at the edges. (Miss Mundorf taught first grade, Miss Willard taught second grade, Miss Hooper taught fifth. Remember *everything*.) He looked around him, where he lay remembering in the silver light; the soft walls were unlike metal and unlike fabric but rather like both, and it was very warm . . . he went on remembering with his eyes open: the flight from the second floor to the third had the nickel nosing too, but no carpeting, and the steps were all hollowed, oh, very slightly; mounting them, you could be thinking about anything, but that clack clack, as a change from the first flight's flap flap, put you right there, you knew where you were . . .

Charlie Johns screamed, "Oh God—*where am I?*"

He unfolded himself, rolled over on his stomach, drew up his knees, and then for a moment could move no more. His mouth was dry and hot inside as pillowslips creasing under Mom's iron; his muscles, leg and back, all soft and tight-tangled like the knitting basket Mom was going to clean out some day . . .

. . . love with Laura, spring, the lights with 61, the shoulder on the lock, up the stairs flap flap, clack clack and—surely he could remember the rest of the way, because he had gone in gone to bed gotten up left for work . . . hadn't he? Hadn't he?

Shakily he pressed himself up, knelt, weakly squatted. His head dropped forward and he rested, panting. He watched the brown fabric of his clothes as if it were a curtain, about to open upon unknown but certain horror.

And it did.

"The brown suit," he whispered. Because there on his thigh was the little rip (and under it the small hurtful bulge of the checkered bruise) to prove that he had not dressed for work this morning, had not even reached the top of the second flight. Instead, he was—here.

Because he could not stand just yet, he hunched around, fists and knees, blinking and turning his unsteady head. Once he stopped and touched his chin. It had no more stubble than it should have for a man coming home from a date he had shaved for.

He turned again and saw a tall oval finely scribed into the curved wall. It was the first feature he had been able to discover in this padded place. He gaped at it and it gave him Nothing.

He wondered what time it was. He lifted his arm and turned his head and got his ear to his watch. It was, thank God, still running. He looked at it. He looked at it for a long time without moving. He seemed not to be able to read it. At last he was able to understand that the numerals were the wrong way round, mirror-reversed; 2 was where 10 should be, 8 where four should be. The hands pointed to what should have been eleven minutes to eleven, but was, if this watch really were running backwards, eleven minutes past one. And it was running backwards. The sweep second-hand said so.

And do you know, Charlie, something under the terror and the wonderment said to him, do you know, all you want to do, even now, is remember? there was the terrible old battle-axe you got for Algebra 3 in high school, when you'd flunked Algebra 1 and had to take it over, and had gone through Algebra 2 and Geometry 1 on your belly, and flunked Geometry 2 and had to take it over—remember? and then for Algebra 3 you got this Miss Moran, and she was like IBM, with teeth. And then one day you asked her

about something that puzzled you a little and the way she answered, you had to ask more . . . and she opened a door for you that you never knew was there, and she herself became something . . . well, after that, you watched her and knew what the frozen mien, the sharp discipline, the sheer inhumanity of the woman was for. She was just waiting for someone to come and ask her questions about mathematics a little beyond, a little outside the book. And it was as if she had long ago despaired of finding anyone that would. Why it meant so much to her was that she loved mathematics in a way that made it a pity the word "love" had ever been used for anything else. And also that from minute to minute she never knew if some kid asking questions would be the last she'd ever know, or open a door for, because she was dying of cancer, which nobody ever even suspected until she just didn't show up one day.

Charlie Johns looked at the faint oval in the soft silver wall and wished Miss Moran could be here. He also wished Laura could be here. He could remember them both so clearly, yet they were so many years apart from each other (and how many, he thought, looking at his wrist watch, how many years from me?) He wished Mom could be here, and the Texas redhead. (She was the first time for him, the redhead; and how would she mix with Mom? For that matter, how would Laura mix with Miss Moran?)

He could not stop remembering; dared not, and did not want to stop. Because as long as he kept remembering, he knew he was Charlie Johns; and although he might be in a new place without knowing what time it was, he wasn't lost, no one is ever lost, as long as he knows who he is.

Whimpering with effort, he got to his feet. He was so weak and muzzy-headed that he could only stand by bracing his feet wide apart; he could only walk by flailing his arms to keep his balance. He aimed for the faint oval line on

the wall because it was the only thing here to aim for, but when he tried to go forward he progressed diagonally side-wise; it was like the time (he remembered) at the fun house at Coney Island, where they get you in a room and close it up and unbeknownst to you they tilt it a little to one side, you with no outside reference; and only green mirrors to see yourself in. They used to have to hose it out five, six times a day. He felt the same way now; but he had an advantage; he knew who he was, and in addition he knew he was sick. As he stumbled on the soft curved part where the floor became wall, and sank on one knee on the resilient silver, he croaked, "I'm not myself just now, that's all." Then he heard his own words properly and leapt to his feet: "Yes I am!" he shouted, "I am!"

He tottered forward, and since there was nothing to hold on the oval—it was only a thin line, taller than he was—he pushed against it.

It opened.

There was someone waiting outside, smiling, dressed in such a way that Charlie gasped and said, "Oh, I beg your pardon . . ." and then pitched forward on his face.

Herb Raile lives out in Homewood, where he has a hundred and fifty feet on Begonia Drive, and two hundred and thirty feet back to where Smitty Smith's begins its two-hundred-and-thirty-foot run to its one-hundred-fifty-foot frontage on Calla Drive. Herb Raile's house is a split-level,

Smith's a rancher. Herb's neighbors to the right and left have splits.

Herb wheels into the drive and honks and puts his head out. "Surprise!"

Jeanette is mowing the lawn with a power mower and with all that racket, the car horn makes her jump immoderately. She puts her foot on the grounding-plate and holds it down until the mower stops, and then runs laughing to the car.

"Daddy, Daddy!"

"Daddy, daddy, dadeeee!" Davy is five, Karen three.

"Oh honey, why are you *home*!"

"Closed the Arcadia account, and the great man says, Herb, he says, go on home to your kids. You look cool." Jeanette is in shorts and a T-shirt.

"I was a good boy, I was a good boy," Davy shrills, poking in Herb's side pocket.

"I was a good boy too," shrieks Karen.

Herb laughs and scoops her up. "Oh, what a man you'll grow up to be!"

"Shush, Herb, you'll get her all mixed up. Did you remember the cake?"

Herb puts down the three-year-old and turns to the car. "Cake *mix*. Much better when you bake it yourself." Stilling her moan, he adds, "I'll do it, I'll do it. I can slam up a better cake than you any old day. Butter, toilet paper."

"Cheese?"

"Damn. I got talking to Louie." He takes the parcel and goes in to change. While he is gone, Davy puts his foot where Jeanette put her foot when she stopped the mower. The cylinder head is still hot. Davy is barefoot. When Herb comes out again Jeanette is saying, "Shh. Shh. Be a man."

Herb is wearing shorts and a T-shirt.

It wasn't maidenly modesty that made Charlie Johns keel over like that. Anything could have done it—a flashlight in the face, the sudden apparition of steps going down. And anyway, he'd thought it was a woman dressed like that. He hadn't been able to think of anyone else but women since he found himself in that tank—Laura, Mom, Miss Moran, the Texas redhead. He could see why a flash glance at this character would make anyone think so. Not that he could really see anything at the moment; he was lying flat on his back on something resilient but not so soft as the tank—rather like those wheel tables they have in hospitals. And someone was gently working on a cut high on his forehead, while a cool wet cloth smelling remotely like witch hazel lay blissfully across the rest of his forehead and his eyes. But whoever it was was talking to him, and though he couldn't understand a word, he didn't think it was a woman's voice. It was no *basso profundo*, but it wasn't a woman's voice. Oh brother, what a get-up. Imagine a sort of short bathrobe, deep scarlet, belted, but opening sharply away above and below. Above it was cut back behind the arms, and back of the neck a stiff collar stood up higher than the top of the head; it was shaped like the back of an upholstered chair and was darn near as big. Below the belt the garment cut back and down just as sharply to come together in a swallow-tail like a formal coat. In front, under the belt, was a short silky arrangement something like what the Scot wears in front of his kilt and calls a sporran. Very soft-looking slipper-socks, the same color as the robe, and with sharp-cut, floppy points front and back, came up to about mid-calf.