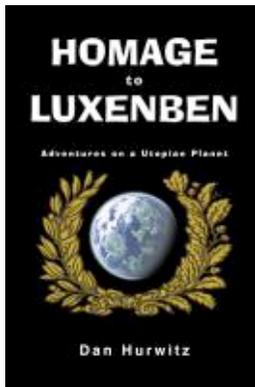


HOMAGE to **LUXENBEN**

Adventures on a Utopian Planet



Dan Hurwitz



The author has situated his novel on a foreign planet in order to portray a truly utopian society that enjoys a coherent set of political, economic, social, and religious institutions. The features of these institutions are woven into the often humorous adventures of David Stelzer, a Jewish businessman from earth, as he encounters his fellow inmates in Semiland—a section of the planet's zoological garden devoted to semi-intelligent specimens gathered from throughout the galaxy.

Homage to Luxenben

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HOMAGE TO LUXENBEN

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1. EN ROUTE

Just after I was escorted to my cabin, the executive officer paid his respects. Upon introducing himself—Brimley, I think it was—he let me know in advance that our meeting was to be a brief one. It was his task to take the spaceship out of orbit and he would soon be called to the bridge.

“Sorry to have you cooped up like this,” he apologized. “But it’s just for ten days.”

“Is that all it takes? Amazing.”

The exec smiled. “I’ve no doubt you’ll be impressed by a number of our accomplishments, Mr. Stelzer.”

“‘Luxenben,’ you call it, right? The lander crew said it’s utopian. How you’ve organized your society and everything.”

“Utopian? Really? Odd choice of words. Well, I suppose they were trying to emphasize the contrast in terms an Earthling would understand. We have no use for the term ourselves. But from your standpoint, utopian? Why not? You’ll be pleased to see how well things can be made to work.”

“Well, I suppose if you’re intelligent enough to put this spacecraft together, you’re...”

The exec was quick to correct my logic. “I can’t deny our intellectual superiority—it’s rather obvious, isn’t it? But the difference between the way the two planets are managed has very little to do with the difference in our level of intelligence. Humanity would be perfectly capable of putting together a utopian society on its own. It just has to muster the will to do so.”

“In theory, maybe. But it’ll never happen. Too much ignorance and corruption,” I acknowledged sadly.

“Believe me, we’re not a bunch of saints, either.”

“Compared to us I bet you are.”

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"I haven't the time to debate what constitutes saintly conduct, Mr. Stelzer, but my point remains that there is nothing inherent in either your intellectual or moral makeup that prevents you from creating your cherished Utopia."

I looked through the porthole at the blue, cloud-wrapped sphere below. "Then why is it swimming in misery?" I asked quietly.

The exec followed my gaze, then, in deference to my feelings, averted his eyes from the suffering planet left behind in our wake.

"I know there's no single answer," I continued hesitantly after a moment or two. "It's just that you've been studying us, apparently, and ..."

The exec cut me short. "Oh, but there is. The answer is we know what to believe. You don't."

Brimley had no time to elaborate. All he added was, "you'll see." Then reminding me of his duties on the bridge, he made note of my request for writing materials and left the cabin.

The knock on my cabin door, polite; the exchange of pleasantries, brief; the rearrangement of items on my fold-down desk, deliberate; the setting down of deliveries, obliging; the exit, efficient; and the resetting of the dead bolt from the passageway outside, regretful. Not the friendliest service imaginable, but perhaps the best one could hope for under the circumstances. I am, after all, a stowaway.

Well once again, it would appear, I am alone. But appearances in this case are deceptive, for now I have in my possession the wherewithal to summon as much company as I choose. There on the desk, an admirable fountain pen and a generous stock of lined, yellow paper; and here in the cabin, an equally generous, if indeed not excessive, allotment of solitude. The materials were provided at my request; the solitude was delivered on orders from Captain Mueller, an individual, I have learned, of set, but not unreasonable, disposition.

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And so, now much more content, I hunch over my desk and begin writing.

It is not as though the idea of starting a journal came to me out of the blue. There are, in fact, three largely empty journals, squirreled somewhere in the back of what had been my desk drawers, attesting to noble intentions arising a decade or so apart. Needless to add, the journals attest as well to my inconstancy in the matter—a failing I perennially excused on the grounds that I lacked the time. What with the whine of this child and that wife and a real estate man's never-ending series of evening seminars, Rotary lunches, Sunday home showings, and meetings with clients at odd hours, there was a measure of truth in that assertion. But only a measure. The truth is I was self-employed and my schedule was flexible enough, had I the motivation, to jot down the day's events. The real reason, I am afraid, is that once I began documenting how undramatic and predictable my life was, inertia took hold and the project was abandoned.

Don't misunderstand me. My life thus far has been on the whole a satisfied one, and that, God knows, should obviate complaint. From an autobiographical standpoint, however, there had been nothing more interesting than the all too common progression of four years of university, through months of searching for someone who adjudged a liberal arts major worthy of a living wage, and, ultimately, an embarrassed retreat into the family business—in my case, a real estate practice. Nothing, in other words, that would set my life apart from the majority of other Jewish second-generation, middle-income men in this land of opportunity. No inner revelations. No outer triumphs. Not even an affair original enough to comment upon. My family, acquaintances, environs, even our dog, being one and all uniformly unremarkable. In sum, there had been nothing in my life that posterity could not get along perfectly well without.

Until last night. It was as though I had spent a lifetime garnering some predestined quota of excitement and then witnessed its expenditure in one dazzling episode. Suddenly my world stopped and

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I was flung toward another. And now, each passing second widens the distance between the two.

For quite some time, I puzzled over the questions the exec had left behind. Was it all as simple as he made out? Did Luxenben's ethos act as some magic elixir and, if so, was it really possible to apply its wondrous power to save Earth's troubled multitudes? It seemed unlikely and yet who was I to doubt an officer of a ship that could scat across the width of the galaxy in ten days?

Ten days, I reminded myself, and then what? A continuation of my present incarceration? Deportation back to Earth on the very next flight? Or an opportunity to see for myself how well their vaunted system worked? Whatever my fate, there was precious little I could do about it now. Nothing would be gained by worrying. The day's excitement had left me weary and the cup of hot chocolate sent to my cabin before bed washed down whatever forebodings lingered. I settled comfortably onto my bunk's first-rate mattress and fell soundly to sleep.

3. NEUMAN

While sitting at the table talking to Samuels, I had been watching a pair of feet alternately appear and disappear through the basement windows set high in the opposite wall. Evidently somebody was going back and forth between the cheyder classroom above and his car in the alley behind the building. One could hear the noisy slams of the back door and the opening and closing of an automobile trunk lid.

“Who’s that?” I asked Samuels.

“Neuman. Who else wears sneakers. He teaches our cheyder.”

“What’s he doing out there?”

“Don’t ask me what that boy is doing anywhere. He makes me nervous. I don’t know what’s gotten into him lately.”

Once Neuman had gained his attention, the rabbi wanted to talk about nothing else. Originally, the boy had attended the *shul*’s school himself. There, unlike his fellow classmates, he did not seem to resent being cooped up in class between four and six in the afternoon four days a week—time normally spent in after-school play. Whereas they, at the age of thirteen, quit cheyder with the exultation of birds fluttering from an opened cage, Neuman stayed on. To what must have been the delight, not to mention the astonishment, of his elders, the pious lad absorbed his Talmudic instruction as though every word was directed to him personally. Instead of flying out of cheyder’s cage when he had the chance, Neuman fretted with the sand on its bottom, scrutinizing each granule for its contribution to his better understanding of God’s ultimate instruction and never noticing—or perhaps even caring—that the door was shutting behind him. He let his ear locks grow and took to wearing a white yarmulke everywhere, waiting for the day when a fine black beard would replace the pimples on his chin so that he could, at last, find a suitable place for himself within the pious circle of other black-beards.

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So it was that Neuman continued his studies at Brith Shalom after bar mitsve, and went on to work there as well in the position of Rabbi Samuels's unofficial assistant. I say "unofficial" for Samuels told me he could not remember ever having hired the boy. It seemed Neuman kept coming to Brith Shalom because he had nowhere else to go and, over time, took on the unenviable task of instilling a sense of Judaism in a handful of wriggling, disinterested pupils. Some of the congregation members liked the nineteen-year-old kid, others, it seemed, regarded him as the *shul's* idiot. All apparently thought him a little odd.

Samuels was clearly among those who were genuinely fond of the boy. "Anything you ask him to do, he does it. He's too good, that's his trouble. I tell him he should go become a rabbi himself, so he'll amount to something. But no, all he wants to do is *daven* and teach the kinderlach. But lately, I don't know anymore. This morning he looked at me like—I don't know—like he wanted to cry or something."

"Now he's running off without so much as a good-bye. Hear that?" Neuman had quit moving about and was now grinding away on the starter of his car.

Continuing over the noise, Samuel unconsciously lapsed from his role of employer to that of self-appointed guardian. "I tell him to wait. How can he afford a car on what we pay him? He can't afford a good meal for those bones of his; he should buy gasoline besides? Six feet tall and I tell him he looks like a scarecrow with a *talis*. Lunch for him is a candy bar and a book. He's always reading. Judaism he says is going to save the world. I tell him we can't save Brith Shalom, so how are we going to save the world?"

The timing of the utterance that came from outside was not, as it first seemed, a response to the rabbi's rhetorical question. It was instead Neuman's reaction to the problems he was having with his car. "Fuck it!"

"And for such a religious boy, he has a foul mouth sometimes," apologized the Rabbi. "It's the neighborhood."

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Listening to the starter grind down to a faint gurgle, I assured the rabbi that there was no immediate threat of the boy's wasting money on gasoline. A moment later, Neuman burst in upon us.

"That's your car, right? Neat. I figured it had to be. Nobody else around here could afford it."

"Thanks," I answered hesitatingly.

"Yeah, well, can I ask you a big favor? My goddamn car won't start. I really need a lift. I wouldn't ask if it weren't so important."

"Neuman, shvayg! Mr. Stelzer's a busy man," exhorted Samuels.

Intentionally or not, the good rabbi left me no option. "That's okay. I'd be glad to," I said. "I was just about ready to leave anyway."

"Ah, thanks. That's a relief. It's on account of my promising somebody."

Undoubted the "somebody" was a girl most probably in the neighborhood. It would be a short drive. Besides, it might be interesting talking to him—perhaps I would finally get some idea of what made youngsters of his generation tick. My own kids were of no help.

The rabbi and I exchanged condescending smiles as we bid good-bye.

Outside, Neuman remained agitated. "I gotta put some stuff in your trunk, okay?" he asked.

"You'll have to slide some signs out of the way," I answered doubtfully as I handed him the keys.

"No problem."

Things were not getting off to a propitious start, I decided as I watched Neuman pull out the for-sale signs from the trunk and deposit them roughly on the back seat carpeting with no regard for their mud caking. After emptying my car trunk, the boy ran back and began furiously transferring four noticeably heavy cartons from his car to mine. This accomplished, Neuman slapped the keys back into my hand, and, without another word, slid into the front passenger seat slamming the door behind him.

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I had done nothing during this interval but stare fixedly at the rear end of my car as it sank lower with each carton and wonder anew as to Neuman's destination—surely those cartons were not gifts to a young lady. My own passivity annoyed me as much as the boy's presumption. Why had I not challenged his dirtying the inside of my car? Worse, why had I somehow felt obliged to apologize for my failure to help him load the cartons citing recurring back problems as an excuse.

"Shit, it's my junk!" Neuman responded magnanimously. "But let's get going, okay?"

I took quiet satisfaction in the way my car started in contrast with the way his hadn't. "Where to, young man?" I asked.

"East Pershing," Neuman directed before adding apologetically, "Kinda out of your way, I guess."

As a matter of fact, it was. About six miles out of my way. Each way. No expressways ran in that direction, and the available thoroughfares were bound to be filled with rush hour traffic. The only consolation was that once we got through the downtown area, the traffic would be light—few vehicles would be heading towards the industrial area this late in the day. I could not imagine what "important" business Neuman had out there and I berated myself more for not having been more questioning before I agreed to chauffeur the kid. For a moment, I hesitated, but before I could protest, the boy peered down at my wristwatch and, with a woeful toss of his head, proclaimed, "Jeez! It's after six already."

"East Pershing? With all those boxes?" I grumbled as I pulled from the curb. "You said you needed a lift, not a package delivery service." I glanced sideways at the boy in hope of eliciting some modicum of guilt, but by this time he had turned to stare out the right window. All I could see was the back of his white yarmulke with its escaping clumps of hair piled over a skinny, freckled neck. Once again I was on the defensive.

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"After I drop you off, I'll call my wife and tell her I'll be a little late. It won't be the first time, I assure you." Surely, I thought, my conciliatory attitude would prompt some sort of apologetic explanation; even for Neuman there had to be a limit to surliness. But no. The turned head remained steadfastly silent. Until suddenly...

"A goddamned snowfall," Neuman pronounced bitterly.

"Snowfall?" It was about seventy degrees at the time.

"A snowfall of crap. Except that it never melts. Just sits there and stinks. Look at that sofa with its guts hanging out! And all that fuckin' broken glass. Like it was piled up by the wind. Shitdrifts," Neuman added solemnly, "that's what they are."

In contrast with the Brith Shalom's neighborhood, a near slum, the neighborhood we were now driving through was one of unquestioned authenticity. I automatically flicked the electric switches that locked the doors.

Neuman's accusation was immediate. "That's all you can do, isn't it? Worry about your own ass."

"No, that's not all I can do. What I can do when I'm not chauffeuring *chaverim* around to God knows where is keep the hell out."

"Just stay on the freeways, you mean."

"Right! And keep my eyes on the road,"

"But don't you ever wonder how in the hell people can live here?" Neuman slid down one metaphor and up another. "There's a war going on. Fifteen-year-olds carrying AK-47s. Crack houses. People getting mugged, stabbed, beat up, shot down, raped. Practically every other goddamn building's been torn down. The ones standing got their windows knocked out. It might as well be another world war or something. Jesus, why don't you rich bastards just drop the bomb and get it over with? Cut out this limited warfare shit."

"Look, Neuman. First of all, don't call me a bastard while I'm doing you a favor, okay? Second, anybody who lives here can get out

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if he really wants to. It takes responsibility. And third, don't blame me. I don't have anything to do with slum areas."

"But you're part of the system anyway."

"What system are you talking about?"

"The system that keeps a few of you guys in fancy homes and keeps everybody else breaking their balls trying to make a living."

"Oh, no. You're not going to get away with that. The system you're complaining about doesn't keep anybody anywhere. Just the opposite. It gives everybody the opportunity to work hard and make something of themselves. It did for me and it'll do the same for you if you give it a chance."

For the first time in our conversation, Neuman smiled. "That's a big 'if.'"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothin'. I don't know how you can stand it, Mr. Stelzer. Honest to God. I'm used to it, but you get R-and-R in the suburbs every night then it's back into this shitten' city the next morning. Then back to the suburbs again, then...hell, that'd drive me nuts."

"Don't worry about me, Neuman. I told you I don't deal down here, but even if I did, it's a business like everything else."

"It figures. Nobody gives a shit. What time you got?"

"Six-twenty, why?"

"Nothin'," he muttered.

I caught a glimpse of Neuman's sullen reflection in the side window. I had known a number of bleeding hearts in my time, but this kid was a moral hemophiliac.

The tall buildings in the financial district triggered a further expansion of Neuman's worldview. "Those guys sitting up there in their penthouse offices figuring out how to screw everybody. I guess they're not part of the damn system, either."

"Young man, I don't know anything about you, but Rabbi Samuels said you're basically a good kid, so I'll take his word for it.

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But when it comes to economics—this system you’ve got in your head—you don’t know what in the hell you’re talking about. One more stupid remark like that and you can get out and take your packages with you. I’m sure the next Bolshevik that comes along will be glad to take you the rest of the way. Okay? You got that?”

With that I snapped on the radio that was set, as usual, to a local news station. It responded with an account of an automobile accident on a viaduct leading into the downtown area. A minor fender bender had rapidly developed into a two-mile-long traffic jam that would take hours to clear.

“Jesus, I’m glad we’re not mixed up in that. I’d never make it in time.”

“In time for what? I know it’s none of my business, but would you mind telling me what’s going on in East Pershing that’s so important?”

Apparently, Neuman would mind, for he ignored my question and instead embarked on another of the city’s affront to his sensibilities. “Shittin’ pollution. Did you ever think about how we’re always having to drive someplace? To get born; to get buried; and every damn place in-between.”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“Gotta keep hearing those good old pistons throbbin’, right?” Neuman beat an appropriate rhythm on top of the dashboard.

“Yeah, sure.”

“I keep imagining this movie, you know, about how a bunch of Martians destroy Earth. See, they do it with this internal combustion engine by making us think we invented the thing. That way we’ll keep on makin’ them until it’s too late. I haven’t got it all figured out, but at the end—after everybody’s dropped dead from carbon monoxide, you know—you see this big, hairy Martian sonofabitch with a gas mask on groping his way through this automobile museum. He keeps on goin’ from room to room and the cars keep getting older and older. You wonder what he’s lookin’ for, you know, till he gets to this big glass

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case. Pow! He shatters it with one hand. Glass all over the damn place. Then he picks up something—you can't tell what the hell it is at first. And then at the very end, you see 'im trudging off through the haze and under one arm he's takin' back the two-cylinder job so they can plant it on the next planet they wanna take over."

Neuman gave me a few moments to appreciate his conception then asked, "Whatja think?"

"It'll go over big in the drive-ins," I said.

It grew darker and Neuman's interest in the cinematic arts was replaced by his concern with our slow progress through bumper-to-bumper traffic. His eye caught a clock face in the window of a pawnshop.

"Six-thirty-five already."

"Take it easy, son. We'll start moving once we get through this intersection."

We broke out of the congested district and were now moving more rapidly through the midtown area. Neuman cast about for another of society's indignities to condemn and quickly found one in the new complex of government buildings on the horizon to our right. "We're supposed to get some kind of goddamned help from a bunch of bureaucrats? They oughta put up a stone shaft in front instead of their fuckin' lions. How much of our taxes did they waste on that abortion?"

That I could not let go by. Not with what I paid last year. "Our taxes?" I questioned.

"You can let the bastards piss away your money if you want to; they're not gonna get mine. Every election some fat politician will get up there and say, 'As mayor of your bee-yoo-ti-full city...' Beautiful city, Jesus! Every time I hear that I expect the platform to melt under the sonofabitch's feet and see him drop into this huge belch of flame.

"You notice how it all looks the same?" Neuman went on. "They could build the Taj Mahal here and nobody'd notice. Whatever you look at—car lots, factory outlets, tire stores—it's all got the same

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fuckin' texture. Like..." Neuman paused a moment to summon poetic insight. "Like throw-up. The pieces are all different but the gunk between's the same."

"Oh, for God's sake, Neuman. Enough's enough." I was tired of making allowances—for his youth, his alienation, his language, his sensitivity, his pimples, and whatever other afflictions life may have heaped upon him.

"Okay, forget the last bit."

"With pleasure." In spite of myself, I couldn't help smiling. "You've got a positive talent, Neuman. You ought to get a job with the Chamber of Commerce showing VIP's around."

"I'd like that. I'd take 'em straight to Brith Shalom."

"That's it? Only Brith Shalom?"

"That's the only place that's decent..." Neuman paused. "Here, anyway."

"Here, anyway? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Ah hell, never mind."

Whatever thoughts coursed through the boy's fervid imagination were evidently not to be shared, for he abruptly swiveled against the car door, turned his back on me, and said no more. This time music seemed the more appropriate diversion, so I inserted a disk and took satisfaction in the way Sibelius's Fifth purged the car of rhetoric.

The roadway now lay in more familiar territory. I knew there would be a small sign a mile or so ahead marking the entrance to Cleburne—a small, independently incorporated area that had managed to retain its original residential character despite the encroaching commercialization. Hopefully it would offer Neuman respite.

We passed the sign and suddenly large trees, rising confidently from broad lawns, arched up on both sides of the street creating a cathedral-like ceiling through which the piercing sun's setting rays

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appeared colored as if by stained glass. My angry young passenger took a *siddur* from his pocket and began muttering his evening prayer ritual. As unobtrusively as possible, I turned off the music and drove for a time listening only to the not unpleasant sound of Neuman's half-audible chant.

I wondered how the kid could function at all with such strong discontents about the world around him. Did he erupt like this routinely? Or were his outbursts somehow connected with the recent distraught behavior Samuels complained of? Now that he had stopped *davening* I tried to tone down our conversation.

"What does your father think of these ideas of yours?"

Neuman turned around to face me. "He's dead."

"I'm sorry."

"That's okay. It was a long time ago. When I was still in grade school."

"And your mother? What does she say?"

"We don't have a chance to talk much. She leaves for work just about the time I'm coming home from teaching cheyder. Being a nurse's aide wears her out. All she wants to do when she gets home is crap out and watch TV."

"But you get along well with Rabbi Samuels, I understand."

"Oh, yeah. He doesn't get shook up about anything," the boy agreed.

However little the boy had divulged of his personal life, it entitled him, it seemed, to pry into mine. I was probably as much a curiosity to him as he was to me. "You got kids, Mr. Stelzer?"

"Yeah, two. Younger than you. Boys nine and eleven."

"How are you raising 'em? Rabbi Samuels says you were born Jewish, but now you're an *apikores*. What do you tell your kids to believe in?"

"I don't tell them anything because they wouldn't listen to me anyway. They're not bad kids, but it's like you and your mother. By the time I get home, they've already eaten and they're involved in

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something or other. Weekends I'm busy with my clients and they're busy with soccer, or out with friends, or whatever. I don't know."

It then occurred to me that Neuman, rather than expressing an interest in my family life, may have instead been indirectly seeking help. If so, I was well prepared to offer it thanks to a conversation I had had long ago. After I spent two unhappy years adrift attempting to find some fit between my liberal arts education and the real world, I was forced to conclude that I should turn over the guidance of my life to someone better qualified, my Uncle Abe. He was an immigrant who, upon arriving in this country penniless and with only a smattering of English, had succeeded as a businessman and become a fountainhead of family wisdom. I jumped at the opportunity to pass on his advice and, in so doing, automatically lapsed into an imitation of his rich, eastern European delivery.

I turned to Neuman and said, "You want to hear what I'd like to tell my kids?"

"Yeah, okay," Neuman answered uncertainly. "So long as you don't slow down. Time's running out."

"Ever since you got into this car you've been complaining. About slums, crime, traffic, politicians—whatever came into your mind. Like those were the exceptions. We should be so lucky. The world's broken, Neuman, and nobody knows how to fix it. After six thousand years, don't you think somebody would have figured out a solution to the world's problems by now? I'll tell you a secret. There is no solution.

"Later tonight I'll turn on the TV and listen to the news. You know why they call it the 'tube?' Because as soon as you open it up, it pours despair from all over the world—a forty-two-inch-wide stream of gore in living color. A child's starving someplace and there's a cameraman sticking a lens in his ribs. Terrorism, earthquakes, on and on and on. That's the world in real time these days."

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“So what are you supposed to do about it? Just give up?” asked Neuman.

“That’s where my advice comes in. A few minutes ago, you pointed out those offices up there like there’s some kind of organized conspiracy going on inside. Believe me, there’s no organized anything. There’s no center. Nothing fits together. And the reason nothing fits together is that people can’t think straight. They buy into any cockamamie idea that’s fed to them. If I had anything to do with education, by the way, I’d make skepticism the main course. Grades one through college. You can’t have too much skepticism.”

“Apparently not,” said Neuman.

“You’re smiling. You have a right. Okay, now’s the time I really want you to listen.”

Neuman started to say something, but this was too important for me to relinquish the floor. “In a way, we’re not so different, you and me. Neither of us is happy with the way things are. So we get to the big question. What should we do about it?”

“I know. For you it’s God. For me, when I was your age, it was socialism. Young people have their illusions. It’s a phase they go through like chickenpox. I’m sorry, Neuman. God and Karl Marx are both dead. Sometimes I think Adam Smith is dead too, but that’s beside the point. The funerals were over a long time ago, so don’t waste your tears.

“People tell you to get involved, communicate, empathize. Don’t buy it, Neuman. You let the do-gooders run your life and they’ll tear you to pieces. You know what I’ve decided? For every medical researcher trying to lengthen my life, there are five public-relations types trying to grab a piece of it. I’m supposed to be in the PTA, attend neighborhood civic organization meetings, be a pal to some underprivileged kid, raise money for epilepsy, write my congressman, fight crime, save energy, and vote intelligently when twenty shyster lawyers I never heard of are running for an office I know nothing about. If I paid attention to one per cent of my ‘responsibilities,’ I

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wouldn't have time to go to the toilet. An aborigine, somewhere, lives maybe thirty years, but at least it's his own life. What good will a hundred years do me if they belong to somebody else?"

"So that's your advice? I should be like you?"

"You could do worse. But you want to improve the world, right? Here's how. Be good, very good, at something—something, that is, besides reading the Torah."

"That'll improve the world?"

"That's the *only* way, Neuman. When you exchange your skills with somebody who can profit by putting them to work, you both win. Win for you, win for guy who hires you. It goes on and on. You see what I mean?"

"No. What in the hell has that got to do with improving the world?"

"You're not listening. With each win-win trade society notches up step-by-step. Everybody ends up better off."

"Boy, that's inspiring as all hell. What about doing something really important? Like building schools in Africa. Being your brother's keeper. All that kind of crap?"

"It sounds very nice but, if you ask me, Africans would be better off if we got out of their hair and let them build their own damn schools. But that's beside the point. What I'm saying is that you can't do your best and worry about the other guy at the same time. What's more, whether he admits it or not, he's not so worried about you either. Oh, once a week, maybe, when he's safely institutionalized in some church, he may fantasize that he loves you, but the minute he walks out the door, he knows better. That's the real world. Like I said, you want to do good? Mind your own business."

"And by business you mean making money. Money. That's one thing you do believe in, right?"

"Enough, yeah. Not too much. Too much money can be a pain in the ass. Next thing you know it owns you."

"What's enough?"

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“Enough so you don’t have to worry about it. I said the world is a mess, but it’s an uneven mess. So there’s no law against making yourself comfortable. When you’re older you can save the world if you still feel like it. I’ve no objection. Fine, now you’re laughing. But let me ask you something. Who gets more credit? Over here is a Salvation Army worker filling soup bowls all his life—a wonderful, warmhearted guy. Over there is a millionaire who’s been a SOB for seventy years and all of a sudden donates a wing to the art museum. Think about it, Neuman. Who gets the bronze plaque with the fancy bust and who gets cursed for the lousy soup? What I’m telling you is, there’s no hurry. *Tsoris* is here to stay. It’s part of the scenery. You like orphans? Wonderful! They won’t run away. Ten years from now, fifty even, they’ll still be around—as many as you want and then some. You like cancer? Fine! It’ll be there too. The slums, the poor, the starvation—they’ll all wait. The important thing is that meanwhile you haven’t lived so bad. Like I said, you’re comfortable. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I get the picture. Like I said before. I should be like you.”

“Do whatever the hell you want, Neuman. I know how it sounds. I’m callous. I’ve been an insensitive, cynical old bastard. I know all the names, but now I’ve got a little to give away and I sleep okay at night. Remember that.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Neuman gave a bemused shrug as he shifted about, impatiently trying to make out the time displayed on the left side of the dashboard. I determined to have one last shot before the boy’s attention drifted away altogether.

“Look here, Neuman. Have you ever sat down and asked yourself what you’re going to do with your life? One thing I can guarantee, you won’t be spending it teaching cheyder at Brith Shalom. You got a total of how many kids?”

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"Twenty if they all show up. But they never do. I'm lucky if it's twelve."

"Twelve? What kind of Hebrew school is that? Besides, how much longer do you think the *shul* will stay open? Like it's got a ten-million dollar endowment or something. The truth is, it could close any day now. And Rabbi Samuels is not a young man. You probably don't like to think about it, but you have to take that into consideration too.

"So I want you to think about what you're going to do with your life. With all your *mishugas*, I can tell you're not a dumb kid. You've got imagination. Lots of ideas. They're all wet, but most kids, including my own by the way, don't think, period. With some good education, the right attitude, and a good mouth washing you could have a real future: a doctor, a lawyer, a scientist, anything you want. You're young, but nobody's young forever. You have to start now."

"Great advice, Mr. Stelzer. But you don't have to worry about me. I'm way ahead of you."

Has 'way ahead of you' something to do with driving all the way out to East Pershing at night with four heavy boxes?"

Neuman paused for a moment, then said "Maybe, kinda," and with that closed our conversation.

Once the artery crossed the Pershing River Bridge, the suburban landscape changed dramatically. Looking out over the flats toward the smokestacks before us, I feared they too would remind Neuman of the wickedness of the world and excite another round of invective. But now he had other thoughts on his mind.

"You see that road comin' in from the right. That's it!" he cried excitedly.

My own reaction to the unlighted turnoff was less enthusiastic. Neuman's "road" was a rutted strip of asphalt set on top of an abandoned railroad embankment rising six feet or so above the weeded flood plain below. After we lurched a few hundred yards

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down this desolate stretch and I assumed things could get no worse, patches of dense fog began to roll over the roadbed making the driving all the more uncertain. I kept assuming that some sort of building would emerge from the fog, but none appeared. The only changes in our circumstances that I could detect were the worsening smell of acrid smoke emanating from the factories in the vicinity and the dying sounds of traffic from the highway we had left.

"You said you had to get to an appointment? Who's going to come all the way out here?" I asked.

"It's only a little farther," said Neuman.

"Only a little farther and we'll roll off the end of this damned embankment," I muttered, gripping the wheel.

"No we won't. I've been down here before." However reassuring Neuman meant his comment to be, it did nothing to quiet my misgivings. On the contrary, his familiarity with this god-forsaken place only heightened my concern. Who could the boy be meeting at a place like this and at this hour of the evening? None of the possibilities made sense. Surely this wasn't a recreational outing; the Pershing was infamous for its pollution. A love interest? As unlikely as that scenario seemed, it could not be summarily dismissed given the bizarre behavior of men under its influence. Anything was possible, I supposed, but what a wretched place for a rendezvous.

More sinister alternatives rushed into my head. Was Neuman delivering stolen goods to a fence? Possibly, but if the affair were really that nefarious, why would he have involved me so openly? Unless he was so desperate he had no choice. The crime world, I gathered, had little patience with excuses. Samuels, as naive as he was, had noticed a change in the boy's behavior. That sounded like drugs, and an addict might be driven to any extremes. I could readily imagine the boy as some sort of low level runner. But if those boxes were actually filled with drugs, they would be worth millions. Who in his right mind would trust an impoverished yeshiva *bocher* and his jalopy with that kind of money? On the other hand, maybe Neuman

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was picked as a mule precisely because he seemed so unlikely a trafficker.

Neuman's next directive turned misgivings into something akin to alarm. At a crossing just ahead, I was instructed to leave the relative security of the raised asphalt roadway and follow an unevenly graveled drive that led across the shrouded bottomland toward the river. I can't say why I didn't simply refuse. Perhaps it was the boy's sense of urgency; perhaps I still had hope there was some innocent explanation for all of this. As it had all evening, my indecision worked in Neuman's favor. Submissively, I drove down the ramp and bumped towards the river, grimacing each time I heard the rasp of burred stalks dragging along the side of the car.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Six-fifty-five."

"Hey, we made it. Turn around here. It gets too sandy farther on." All of a sudden Neuman was positively cheerful. "Sorry to take you out of your way like this, Mr. Stelzer. I didn't figure on the fuckin' traffic making it take so long."

We were directly facing the river—no more than a hundred feet from it. Ahead, just to the right, the flood plain gave way to the beginning of an earthen levee that rose to a height of at least twenty feet, protecting, I guessed, the industrial sites upstream. Through the windshield I searched up and down the stretches of littered bank for some sign of human activity, but saw nothing through the lingering fog but an empty, ramshackle dock. Ramshackle, but, I noted with a start, serviceable. At last I had a solid, if depressing, clue. The criminals Neuman was planning to meet would show up in a motorboat.

In the few moments it took to conduct my survey, Neuman had stepped out of the car, taking my keys with him. In quick succession, he emptied the trunk, set the boxes to one side, restored my signs to their original location, slammed the trunk lid, and handed me back the keys.

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"Thanks again, Mr. Stelzer. Like I told you, I wouldn't have asked if it wasn't important."

"What's so important?" I demanded.

"Listen, I really appreciated the ride. I don't know why I had to bend your ear like that. Just excited, I guess. I'll think over what you said, really. Well...so long."

Neuman waved good-bye and trudged off down the bank in the general direction of the dock taking one of his boxes and all of his secrets with him. The little "lift" from Brith Shalom was over, and I was free to return to the comforts of my hearth. But no sooner had I reinserted the keys than I found myself suffering Rabbi Samuel's accusations as we mourned over a photo of the boy's dead body in tomorrow's newspaper. "David! How could you leave a kid like that alone on the river? You said yourself it was dark. Nobody around. So he pretended to be cheerful. So what? Would a nineteen-year-old come out and say, 'Don't leave me alone. I'm scared?' Of course not! You could at least have waited to see what kind of person comes down the river to meet a boy in the middle of the night. So you'd miss dinner once in your life. You, the only person in the world he could turn to, and you deserted him? He was like a son to me. You knew that, David!"

I had enough trouble with my back without a fat rabbi sitting on it. All right, I would make him happier with two dead bodies in the newspaper. I got out of the car, and confronted the kid when he returned for the next carton.

"Neuman, I can't drive off like this. What in the hell's going on? I'm not trying to interfere in your affairs, but I've got to know you're going to be okay."

The boy laughed. "I'm going to be great! Really great! I told ya. I'm getting my act together. Getting started in life. Just like you said."

I grasped for any argument I could think of. "Look, if you're expecting me to keep this secret, you better tell me why. Otherwise the

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first thing I'm going to do is call Rabbi Samuels and tell him about the monkey business games you got yourself into."

"Tell him. I don't care."

"Tell him what? I've got to have a reason."

Neuman laughed. "Tell him he pays me so rotten, I had to start moonlighting as a stevedore."

Could Samuels be mixed up in this too? I wondered. Anything to save his precious *shul*. "What if I call the police? Do you think they're going to be so patient? How would your mother like to be called from the police station?"

"I'm not in any trouble, Mr. Stelzer, honest. I'd tell you if I could, but I promised. Your lights are still on, you know that? Go on home before your battery dies. It's a helluva long walk back."

Neuman laughed again as he started across the sandy soil with his second carton.

Never mind my getting back. How was he going to get back? I hadn't even thought of that before. The motorboat was not only going to take the packages, it was going to make off with their delivery boy as well. A fine start the kid had chosen for himself. "You don't have to be ashamed with me, Neuman," I said as he approached to pick up the third of his packages. "I've seen all kinds of things in my time. If you need money, medical attention, whatever it is, maybe I can help."

"I don't need anything, Mr. Stelzer. Except being left alone."

With that response—a challenge, was the way I took it—matters came to a head. One way or another, the boy had to be confronted. I stomped on the remaining carton with my right foot, positioning myself, come what may, to protect it. "I'm not kidding about the police, you know," I yelled into the darkness.

"Fine with me," Neuman yelled back. "I just hate to see you looking foolish, that's all. Your headlights are still on, you know that."

With that reminder, I instinctively turned toward the car, and, in so doing, swiveled my foot across the top of the carton. The carelessly sealed panels burst under the pressure and I suddenly realized that

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the solution to Neuman's mysterious behavior was within arm's reach. With the boy out of sight, I removed my foot, pushed apart the lids, and thrust my hand inside. Books! Nothing but books. What kind of books do you smuggle to a crook in a motorboat? Pornography? Bomb-making instructions? By now I could see Neuman approaching but I no longer cared. I grabbed one of the volumes and held it in the headlight beam.

"The Flowering of the Hasidic Movement," I read aloud.

"Good choice. But I can't let you keep it. Sorry." Neuman gently took the book from my hands and returned it to its carton, which he then carted off as he had the others.

The image I had of a high-speed motorboat filled with crooks was replaced by that of a slow-moving houseboat occupied by a secret society of black-bearded, black-suited, Hasidic Jews. My fears were lessened, to be sure, but my curiosity was stronger than ever. And I was not altogether relieved. Neuman could suffer a worse fate, I supposed, than being inducted into some ultra-orthodox Jewish cult, but the prospect was hardly a felicitous one as far as I was concerned. Well, at least I would see to it that the boy was not carried off without an argument from me.

I turned off the headlights, leaned against the car, and folded my arms. "I think I'll stay awhile," I said to the boy, who was now collecting driftwood for a fire.

"That's not a good idea." Neuman stopped and looked at me.

"Why not?"

"I can't tell you. Like I said, I promised."

"Promised whom? Is this some kind of cabala business you're mixed up in?"

Neuman shrugged and then went back to picking driftwood without saying a word.

"I know you mean well, Neuman. You're a good kid. I told you so in the car. But this is craziness like I've never seen before."

"You better get going, Mr. Stelzer. I mean it. I'll be okay, really."

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"Tell me why I 'better get going' and maybe I will. I keep asking 'why,' Neuman, and you won't answer."

"I told you, I promised."

"Look, put your boxes back in the car, and let's get the hell out of here," I argued. "I'll buy you dinner and we can talk it over. I don't know what it is, but something here smells to high heaven."

"There's nothing wrong. Honest to God. Please go." The boy was practically pleading. "Trust me. I know it looks funny, but I know what I'm doing."

"So you told me. I'm staying."

Neuman paused reflectively for several moments before saying, "Suit yourself."

With Neuman's help I made a seat out of three of the cartons and took up my post facing the river. Then I watched as he started a fire and began dancing slowly around it gently snapping his fingers above his head and dragging one foot and then the other across the sand. My presence no longer mattered now that mysticism ruled. A more fulfilled stevedore you've never seen.

As time wore on—forty-five minutes had passed since Neuman started prancing around—the explanation for the boy's inexplicable behavior finally dawned upon me. I could have kicked myself for not having thought of it sooner. How many mystery novels had I read in which the solution, when finally disclosed, turned out to be the patently obvious one? So obvious that everyone overlooked it.

The reason for Neuman's nutty behavior was that he was nuts. No tautology this. I had been racking my brains for an explanation that didn't exist; the simple fact was that the boy was enacting some sort of fantasy that had nothing whatsoever to do with reality. And I had been gullible enough to follow along. All one had to do to confirm my conclusion was to look at the despondency that now clouded the boy's countenance as he sat by the dying coals of his fire, his back to the river.

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Earlier Neuman had asked me the time every five minutes or so, but for the last quarter hour he not only maintained his own stony silence, but stonewalled any attempts on my part to break it.

Unable to converse with Neuman directly, I imagined what it would be like conversing about him with his psychiatrist. "Why four big cartons and the Pershing River?" I heard myself asking.

"Why not four big cartons and the Pershing River?" would be his response. "The human brain can disintegrate in many different ways. Sometimes it's like an explosion. Images go flying in all directions; it's anybody's guess which ones land back in the brain right side up. Trying to understand it is a waste of time."

So much for professional help. I returned to my own resources and the problem at hand. How could I get Neuman and his cases of books back into the car and on our way home?

"Maybe you had the day wrong..." I began quietly. "We could come back tomorrow and..."

"Jesus, I hope it's not you who's ruining things," he interrupted.

"Could be. I'm sorry. So let's go back. You'll get your car fixed and maybe in a few days..."

"Ssh..."

"No, not ssh, Neuman. It's getting late. We've got to settle this. I'm tired..."

"Shut up, damn it. It's settled!"

"No, its..."

"They're here!" Neuman screamed.

Startled, I jumped up and, as deliberately as I could, looked up and down the river looking for any evidence to support Neuman's hallucinations. Seeing nothing, I sank back on the cartons. The boy had duped me again. Meanwhile, Neuman acceded to a new and more frightening stage. Playing out his fantasies to the end, he grabbed the one carton I was not using as a seat and bolted toward whatever he imagined lay behind us. Well, let him run around in the sand chasing ghosts. Between the carton and the soft sand, he would soon tire out,

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admit defeat, and make my job of pushing him into the car that much easier. All I had to do was stay put and await my opportunity.

“Don’t get lost,” I shouted at the boy, who had turned toward the levee and was now racing up its side. But no sooner had I uttered those words than I felt a new wave of fear. Once Neuman disappeared down the other side of the embankment, his speech had broken into two voices. Terrified at the psychological implications and cursing myself for not having acted sooner, I shot up and stumbled into the darkness guided by the sounds of his babbling. My downcast eyes searched the ground for a stout stick as I panted and jogged my way clumsily up the levee. One way or another, I had to force him into the car.

The slope was steeper than it looked from below and the sand had turned to mud making the climb all the more difficult. I was within a few yards of the top and still hadn’t found a stick. Barehanded and breathless, I knew I would be no match for a half-crazed boy of nineteen, but I had to try nonetheless. A few more feet and I reached the crest.

4. THE PLS STARBOUND

Neuman was not talking to himself. “Fine,” he finished saying. “I’ll throw them on.”

My hair bristled and my heart pounded at the sight. The space capsule with whom he was conversing was floating idly a couple of feet above the mud flat. It was silver-hulled, spheroid shaped, and surrounded by a toroid of blue gas plasma that kept emitting faint sounds of electrical cracking. The fact that it was so compact—no more than fifteen feet in diameter surely—gave it a nimble look that somehow made the number of stubby, vaguely lethal-looking protuberances that prickled from its alloy skin all the more menacing.

If I retained any composure at all, it was only because I was shocked into insensitivity. And even when my mind did attempt to restart, it did so haltingly—one incoherent thought after another tumbling forward.

How could I demonstrate that I mean it no harm? Thank God I hadn’t found that stick I was looking for. Idiot! That thing’s going to worry about an out-of-shape, middle-aged real estate man with a stick in his hand? One little spritz out of one of those nozzles and forget it. Why would they want to kill me, anyway? Why wouldn’t they? Isn’t that what aliens are supposed to do? That’s why Neuman tried to get me to leave. To save my life. I should have guessed it from the start. The kid really was from another planet.

If Neuman was happily reuniting with his brethren, he gave no indication of it. Instead, he was all business. As soon as he hoisted one book-filled box into the bay door that opened from the ship’s side, he methodically jogged back for the next.

Neuman’s cool-headedness gave me encouragement. Once my nerves had quieted, I began to think more rationally. Apparently, what I was witnessing amounted to nothing more than an interplanetary

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transfer of Judaic lore. Granted I was more than a little surprised to discover that interest in the God of the Hebrews extended into the cosmos, but this too, no doubt, had a commonplace explanation. For all I knew, the lost tribes of Israel strayed farther than anyone had imagined. Far-fetched? No more so than the prospect of a space capsule hovering above the bank of the Pershing River. In any case, the details did not concern me. The essential ingredient in this extraordinary situation from my point of view was that there was nothing to fear. All I need do was concentrate on taking in this intoxicating draught of science-fiction fun that would immeasurably enrich my life forever. And, afterwards, with his mission behind him, Neuman was bound to be more communicative on our drive back and I would learn the whole story. My heart began to pound at a more acceptable rate and I felt confident enough to venture toward the craft to inspect it more closely. I may not have remained so calm had I known that the alien's procurement list was longer than I originally supposed.

The space capsule shifted its attention from Neuman to me. "Sorry to have kept you two waiting," it apologized, "but we assure you it wasn't our fault. We arrived at our entry point into your atmosphere exactly on schedule but your abominable smog was the worst we've ever encountered. We practically had to crawl our way in."

"That's all right," I said magnanimously. "Uh...your air. Back on your own planet I mean. Isn't it worse?"

"Whatever gave you that idea?" The capsule was incredulous.

"Your intergalactic spaceship..." I began.

"Intragalactic. But thanks all the same," it corrected.

"Your intragalactic spaceship..." I began again.

The space capsule again interrupted this time with a clucking sound of disapproval. "One faux pas after another, Mr. Hedgewick. If you had done your homework, you'd know the ship itself is in orbit waiting for us to dock. This is only one of its three landers. But go

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ahead with whatever it is you had to say. Make it brief. We can't stay here forever, you know."

Mr. Hedgewick? I had no idea where that came from. Nevertheless I decided to sidestep the name confusion until after completing the point I had begun with such difficulty. "Every scientific advance we've made here on Earth has brought with it more pollution. So when I look at what you're riding around in and extrapolate the..."

"What did you expect us to show up in? A bathtub? Why is it you invitees are so skeptical of the material we send you? I don't know how we could have made it any clearer. Nothing on Luxenben is the same as on Earth, so there's nothing that can be extrapolated. In short, we have no pollution."

Looking up at what had appeared to me as the craft's array of armaments, I relegated my concerns about pollution to a more worrisome thought. "How about your wars then?"

The spacecraft apparently followed my gaze. Those aren't weapons, Mr. Hedgewick. They're sensors."

"But with all your technology...the destruction you could..."

"No, we couldn't. We've no armies. Better yet, we've no generals. See here, Hedgewick, our information packet covered every one of these questions. If you had even glanced at the statistics you would have found that we've solved your stupid problems. We have no widespread hunger, no slums, no organized crime, no social unrest. It may be hard for you to believe, but we have achieved a society that's...what do you call it here?"

"Utopian?"

"Exactly," said the space capsule.

On the one hand, I could not help being skeptical of such a wild claim. On the other hand, it was hard to argue with an object that embodied a state of technology so advanced that any other miracle emanating from the same source seemed feasible. Confused by these

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conflicting thoughts, I said nothing. I didn't have to. My questions had obviously touched a sore spot.

"I don't know what it is about you invitees," the space capsule went on. "This isn't the first time these ridiculous questions have popped up at the last minute. I guess the more miserable a planet is, the more difficulty its inhabitants have imagining something incomparably better. Either that or sick societies like yours become so riddled with lies that nobody trusts the truth even when it stares them in the face. We would have thought you'd all be so anxious to leave, you'd just rush on board the minute we opened the hatch. Funny, isn't it?" The question was obviously meant to be rhetorical for the space capsule hurried on in what was now a plaintive tone.

"We've even had cases in which one or the other of the invitees gets cold feet and doesn't show at all. What do they expect us to do? Go scurrying around at the last minute kidnapping replacements?"

"Sometimes no matter what we do, it doesn't seem to be enough. You've seen our packet: all sorts of literature, travel videos, transcripts of conversations with ordinary Luxanders. We guarantee top-notch accommodations and promise to bring you back in a year if you're not completely satisfied. I ask you, Hedgewick, what more could anyone want?"

Just when the capsule's complaints came to an end and I had an opportunity to clear up my identity, Neuman reentered the scene. Having loaded his last carton, he gave me a reassuring glance as he strode to my side. "Let me handle this," he seemed to be saying. "I'll explain everything." And since the boy's relationship with the capsule was obviously closer than mine, it did seem wiser to leave things in his hands. Before he could speak, however, the capsule raised another issue.

"See here, Mr. Neuman. All these cartons aren't yours are they?"

"Yes, sir, I'm afraid they are," the boy answered anxiously.

"You must know that they weigh nearly twice as much as you're allowed."

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"Yes, sir. It's just that they're all so important. I ditched everything I could but..."

"Did it occur to you that our lifting out of here might also be of some importance? By the time we load Mr. Hedgewick's luggage..."

Suddenly the question of my identity took on greater urgency. Who, in fact, was I? I scarcely knew myself anymore. Obviously, this superior thing was better informed than I was. If it said my name was Hedgewick, who was I to argue? If there was ever a compelling reason for one of my fast, real estate decisions, this was it.

"I didn't bring any," I blurted out.

Neuman swung around to stare at me. I could not tell if he was more astonished or amused.

"Good thinking. Believe me, there isn't anything you could take along that you won't find on Luxenben. And of better quality, naturally. Something our Mr. Neuman will find out for himself very shortly. But no matter. Thanks to you, we've disposed of his overweight problem and we can get out of this place.

"All right. I'm Boatswain Fletcher and on deck with me is First Mate Slocum. We've exhibited rather bad manners by staying on board, I'm afraid, but your atmosphere makes for such noxious breathing that we much prefer to delay our personal greeting until after you've come aboard. And since you two must have had plenty of time to introduce yourselves to one another, there's no reason to stand on ceremony on that account either. Besides I would imagine that you're due for a bit of clean air yourselves.

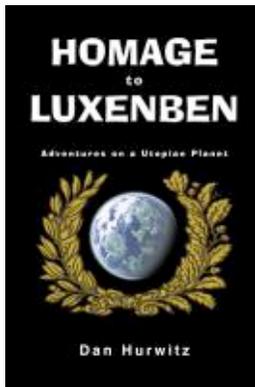
"So let me welcome you aboard. A hatch has been opened for you, gentlemen. Do please step inside."

With that Neuman bounded eagerly ahead, but just before reaching the lander, he thought better of his impetuosity and stepped aside. Paying due deference to my new space-traveler persona, the boy bowed his head, and, with an exaggerated wave of his right arm, encouraged me to board first.

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Having experienced so many shocking events that afternoon, I found the foreign appearance of the lander crew to be almost anticlimactic. The two gentlemen wasted little time on a round of perfunctory handshaking before returning to their duties. All conversation ceased until the mother ship was in view.

“There she is, gentlemen. Isn’t she beautiful? And now you can read her name on the side of the hull, ‘PLS Starbound.’ The ‘PLS,’ of course, stands for the ‘Planet of Luxenben’s Ship.’ And the trademark, you see alongside, is that of our employer, Space Ventures, Inc. Great outfit and the biggest of its kind on Luxenben. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve uncorked a bottle of cold champagne for us when we dock.”



The author has situated his novel on a foreign planet in order to portray a truly utopian society that enjoys a coherent set of political, economic, social, and religious institutions. The features of these institutions are woven into the often humorous adventures of David Stelzer, a Jewish businessman from earth, as he encounters his fellow inmates in Semiland—a section of the planet's zoological garden devoted to semi-intelligent specimens gathered from throughout the galaxy.

Homage to Luxenben

Adventures on a Utopian Planet

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