

PENGUIN BOOKS

AMERICAN SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

AMERICAN
Short Stories of Today

Edited by Esmor Jones



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PEARSON

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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

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.

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'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.

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Trent frowned. Why didn't it find the pattern? The pattern had to be there. Brennmeyer 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 Brennmeyer 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 Brennmeyer had not put it there. It had not existed when Brennmeyer 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.