

We were invited to contribute to the Tor 50th Anniversary Twilight Zone anthology that was being edited by Carol Serling, Rod's widow, and we came up with what we both feel is our strongest story, "Benchwarmer." It also sold to Spain and Italy, and won us our second Ictineu Award for Best Story Translated into Catalan.

—MIKE

Benchwarmer

BY MIKE RESNICK & LEZLI ROBYN

He'd been sitting on the sidelines, warming the bench, waiting, for almost seventy years. The winds of Time chilled him to the bone, and all he had to keep him warm were his memories, which got a little older and a little colder each day.

He wasn't an imposing figure. There were days he looked like Humpty Dumpty before the fall, and days he looked more like a Teddy Bear. It didn't make any difference to him. He had never seen a mirror, nor did he care to.

He could have chosen any name he wanted, but he stuck with Mr. Paloobi, for reasons only one other person would understand. It didn't have much dignity to it, but then, dignity was not his stock in trade.

He envied his companions. Not their grace, their easy athletic ability, or their infectious laughter, because those traits were unimportant to him. No, what he envied was the fact that sooner or later they were all called back into action, they all returned to what he

thought of as The Game. He wanted desperately to leave the bench, but he didn't know the ground rules. He couldn't even discern that there were any.

He'd been given two brief chances, but he didn't last any longer than a sore-armed pitcher on the mound, a lame thoroughbred in the Derby, or a tennis player with no racket. He had tried his best, had given it his all, but he hadn't been up to the job, and indeed had to face that fact that there was only one job that he was truly suited for—and that job had ended sixty-eight years, four months, and seventeen days ago.

It happened on the last day that he was called forth from the limbo where he was born, where he existed now until he was needed again. It was a day filled with the same promise as the day before, the same exciting horizon to be approached, the same challenges, and the same goals. But there was one thing that was not the same.

On that day the Boy outgrew him, and nothing was ever the same again.

Even after all of those years, he was still unable to remember that day without feeling a keen sense of loss, and the thought that he'd never be complete again. Day after day, year after year, he sat on the sidelines and watched as his companions came and went. And while he kept the bench warm for the others, he waited for his chance to do what he was born to do.

All he wanted was to be needed again.

Mr. Paloobi could hear the contented rumble of Lionel's purr long before he ambled out of the mist and made his way to the bench.

Looking more like a four-hundred-pound tabby cat than a true lion, Lionel nevertheless appeared quite impressive as he bounded onto the bench, the seat automatically changing shape to accommodate the gentle beast that now lay curled up on its surface.

Mr. Paloobi turned to look at him expectantly as the big cat nestled his head in amongst his forepaws and curled his tail around his body, softly purring a lullaby to himself.

Sensing his gaze, Lionel opened one lazy eye. "My boy is sleeping after our safari in Darkest Africa."

“Africa?” said Mr. Paloobi. “I thought he lived just outside of Wichita.”

“He does,” confirmed Lionel. “But his imagination doesn’t. We tracked zebras down Maple Street, made a kill at the corner of 3rd and Main, and barely avoided a stampede of mad elephants on wheels over on Elm Street. There were spear-carrying natives, whose witch doctors had made their spears appear like briefcases (though we knew better), and as we passed a brick hut with a huge screen we saw hundreds of disguised hyenas laughing as they came out. Oh, yes, it was quite a safari. You have no idea how many scrapes we got into, how many hairsbreadth escapes.”

“And you enjoyed every minute of it.”

Lionel’s eyes softened perceptively, glowing amber. “And I enjoyed every minute of our time together. I’ll miss him—until my next charge comes along.” He sighed contentedly, settling his head back down onto his forepaws again. “I could sleep for a couple of months. That boy wore me out!”

“Try sitting on the same hardwood bench for decades and then complain to me,” replied Mr. Paloobi bitterly.

“Try wearing this goddamned costume day in and day out,” retorted a fairy princess who suddenly appeared before them in a burst of pink glitter. “Then you’d have something to really complain about. This corset is *killing* me.” Her golden curls bounced, as if to emphasize her point. “A pox on the girl who designed me! Who in their right mind decides that princesses should wear such constrictive dresses?”

“So take it off, Sugarblossom,” said Mr. Paloobi.

“It doesn’t *come* off,” said Sugarblossom. “You know that. And the worst part is the smell.”

“The smell?”

“She heard they used whalebone stays, so it smells exactly like a dead fish.”

Mr. Paloobi chuckled. “I’m sorry. But welcome back anyway. You were with your current charge longer than usual.”

“Oh, yes, I was! And what a charming young lady she’ll grow up to be,” she said proudly, beaming at him, her smile more brilliant than the sequined dress, crystal tiara, and glitter-covered shoes combined. “It turned out my girl needed a substitute mother even more than she

needed someone to play make-believe with.” Her smile became wistful, her eyes getting a faraway look to them as she continued. “She lost her mother recently, and she was grieving. Her mother always used to let her dress up in her old fancy clothes, and so did I. I also took over the role as her confidant until she could adjust to the changes in her life.” She, paused, twirling her skirt around softly, absentmindedly, with her hands. “Every child is a wonder, but this one was something special. She won’t remember me when she’s older, of course, but I truly believe I was able to help her.”

“I don’t help ‘em,” said Lionel. “I just play with ‘em.” He opened his mouth to roar; it came out as a squeak.

The bench adjusted to accommodate Sugarblossom as she sat down.

“Why does it supply *you* with pillows?” Mr. Paloobi asked, trying unsuccessfully to hide his exasperation.

“Because a princess needs her comfort,” she replied with a smile. “Besides, *this* princess needs her rest. There is always a little girl somewhere in the world, with a teacup set or a fairy costume, that wants to play make-believe.” She smoothed out the sumptuous velvet pillows with delicate little hands. “I think I deserve a little luxury in my down time.”

He didn’t reply. Only the soft rumble of the slumbering cat broke the silence.

After awhile Sugarblossom looked at him, the sparkles in her eyes softening. “I’m sorry. That was inconsiderate of me. How can I complain, when...?” She let the words hang in the air.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” answered Mr. Paloobi. “If I’m to have my innings in the Game only once, at least I cherish every second I spent with the boy who called me forth.”

“But it was so long ago,” she said sympathetically.

Mr. Paloobi’s hand reached up to his shirt pocket and felt the little object it contained, and his mind raced back across the decades to the day he was born.

As the Boy painstakingly placed the pewter pieces on the ornate chessboard his father had bought back from his last trip abroad, he wished that *someone* would teach him how to play the game. But his parents always seemed to be absent, even when they were there, and

it was obvious that he was going to have to teach himself—and he had no idea how to go about it. It wasn't chess itself that appealed to him anyway. The satisfying thing was to sit across the board from a parent, a sibling, a friend, even a stranger, and not feel so terribly, achingly *lonely*.

When he'd finally finished setting it up on the rickety little card table he had dragged from the spare room, he placed a chair on either side of it and sat down.

And then it hit him: he had no idea if he'd put the pieces on the right squares, and he *still* had no one to play it with. He closed his eyes as tears of frustration began to form. *I'm a big boy now*, he told himself, as little balled-up hands angrily dashed across his eyes, scattering his tears. *Big boys aren't supposed to cry*.

But he couldn't help it. He just wished for someone, *anyone*, to acknowledge he was there.

"It's just a game," said a friendly voice. "It can't be *that* hard to play."

The Boy stopped crying, startled. He gingerly opened one eye, then both. He couldn't see anyone, blurry eyes or not. He sighed and closed them again.

"Surely if we put our heads together we can figure this thing out," the voice continued.

The Boy started again. This time the voice had sounded as if it came from the other side of the table. Someone else *was* in the room! He opened his eyes just in time to see a figure coalescing across the table from him.

It wasn't his father, he was certain of that, but he looked kind of tall and burly—just like his Dad. And yet, he had sounded so affectionate. *The man must look cuddly*, the Boy reasoned. He rubbed his eyes again to clear them, and sure enough, he was right: a nondescript, but definitely cuddly, teddy bear of a man sat across from him, a gentle smile on his face. He was dressed like Dad, but that was where the resemblance stopped. He had fuzzy ears, warm brown hair and even warmer eyes, the least threatening adult the Boy had ever seen.

Speechless, but remembering his manners, the Boy extended his tiny hand across the table, trustingly, to greet his new guest. A huge furry paw of a hand encompassed his before pulling back to pick up one of the chess pieces. The stranger studied it for a minute, clearly

curious, then looked up at the Boy. "So, shall we learn how to play chess together?" he asked.

"But you're a grown-up," the Boy replied somewhat petulantly. "Grown-up's *know* how to play chess."

"Well, then, of course I do, too," replied the gentle giant. Without preamble, he started moving all the pieces into their proper positions on the board while the Boy watched him, marveling at how such a huge man found it possible to balance on such a small chair.

All of a sudden, the chair collapsed beneath the man, sending him sprawling. The Boy broke into a fit of giggles. When he finally got control of himself, he looked up, somewhat sheepishly, to see that the man was looking sheepish himself.

"Obviously the chair didn't like me," stated the man.

"Nope," the Boy agreed, and they shared a smile.

Suddenly the Boy's aunt walked in, carrying a tray laden with food and depositing it on the toy chest beside the table. "Your parents have gone out for dinner," she said. "I'll be in again at eight, to make sure that you've put yourself to bed." She walked towards the door, and then paused in the doorway, turning to glance quickly at the chess set, and then down at the Boy again. "There's an extra dessert on the tray," she added with what she thought was a kindly smile. Then she was gone.

The Boy immediately looked across to the table to see a bear of a man leaning over to look at the contents of the tray with evident curiosity.

"She didn't even say hello to you!" the Boy exclaimed, indignant.

The man shrugged unconcernedly. "What difference does it make? *You're* talking to me, and that's all that matters."

The Boy looked at him for a long time before responding. "Well, as long as you're my friend, I'll never ignore you," he said with conviction. "I know what it's like to be invisible to other people."

Again they shared an understanding smile, and feeling happier than he had in a long time, the Boy hopped off his chair and scooted across to the toy chest to see what extra sweet had been put on his tray. He uncovered the first plate to discover meatloaf and veggies. Screwing up his face in distaste at all the green confronting him, he

uncovered the second plate to reveal chocolate pudding and a slice of hot apple pie.

He was about to dig in when a slight movement caught his eye. He looked over at his new friend, who was delicately sniffing the chocolate pudding with interest, and he realized that the gentle giant didn't have a meal of his own. The Boy was torn. He *wanted* to share his meal—he'd never had anyone he could share with before—but he was rarely given chocolate pudding as dessert, and it was his favorite.

And then it dawned on him. Bears, even ones that were half-man, wouldn't like chocolate; they'd like sweet foods like honey—or apple pie. "If you are going to be my friend," he stated with youthful certainty, "then friends share *everything*—even meals." And he handed over the apple pie, feeling quite pleased with himself.

They ate in companionable silence for a few minutes as the Boy mulled over what they were going to do after dinner. He'd never had a friend before; he didn't know quite where to start.

"Do friends play chess together?" came the muffled question from across the table, as the bear-man attempted to talk and eat at the same time.

"Yes, they do. Friends play *lots* of games. And they share food—except for chocolate—and they tell magical stories to each other and pretend to be warriors." He used his knife to mimic a swordfight, fatally spearing the meatloaf. "They also talk about *everything*, and..." He paused, not knowing how to say it.

"And they are always there when you need them."

"Yes!" the Boy exclaimed. He understood!

The huge man smiled. "Well, now that that's settled, why don't we play a game of chess?"

"That sounds like a great idea, Mr..." The Boy halted, realizing he didn't know the man's name. He considered the man's bear-like features with interest. "You know, you're kind of roly-poly, and you kind of look like Winnie the Pooh..." his voice trailed off, and he bit his bottom lip in concentration. Suddenly he clapped his hands together enthusiastically. "I know! I'll call you Mr. Paloobi!"

Mr. Paloobi looked *chuffed*—there was no other word for it. His chest puffed out proudly as he repeated the name to himself,

and then he beamed at the Boy. “Thank you,” he replied. “I always *wanted* a name.”

Mr. Paloobi was prodded back to the here and now—well, the here and *somewhere*—by a huge paw landing heavily on his arm. He turned his head to find himself looking directly into Lionel’s eyes.

“I don’t appreciate being awakened between safaris,” the cat stated with a silky purr.

“Why tell *me*?”

“Your sighs are too loud.”

“My sighs?”

“Like this,” said Lionel, giving him an overblown demonstration. “It’s been seventy years. Get over it.”

Mr. Paloobi looked back down the timestream. “You don’t get over something like that,” he said wistfully.

He spent half an hour explaining the rudiments of chess to the Boy. But when the Boy started getting frustrated at being unable to remember all the different types of moves and suggested they give up, Mr. Paloobi changed his approach and performed a pantomime with the chess pieces instead.

As he moved the pieces across the board with gentle furry hands, Mr. Paloobi told a tale of twin sisters married to kings who were at war with each other. “Both queens, each in love with her husband, devise a plan to infiltrate the enemy castle in order to get close enough to kill the enemy king,” he stated in a conspiratorial tone. “It is a journey fraught with danger for them both, but their identical appearance gives them great range of movement in the enemy camp.” He demonstrated by moving a queen around in all directions on the board. “Along the way there are male pawns to fight,” he continued, picking up one pawn and pouncing it diagonally across one square onto an enemy pawn, eliciting a giggle from the Boy when the defeated pawn went flying. “Female pawns also try to sneak across enemy lines and supplant them as queen.” He made a show of another pawn creeping forward one square, all the while whistling innocently. “And even if the queen or her supporters

get past the enemy watchtowers undetected,” he continued, showing those pieces performing horizontal and vertical sweeps of the board, “what kingdom doesn’t have a nosy clergyman or two trying to edge their way into the thick of things?” And he demonstrated by diagonally sliding a bishop into a position of power on the board.

Mr. Paloobi paused, making sure he still had the Boy’s rapt attention. “Now, even when the enemy draws closer, the king tries to stay one step ahead of them at all times. But he’s so heavily-protected that he can only move so far,” he continued, a furry hand demonstrating that a king could only move one square in any direction at any time. “If all his defenses fail, he has to rely on his knights and their valiant steeds to protect him, for they are well versed in tactics.” He picked up a knight, making him prance one square over and then gallop two more in another direction, until he was in a better position to protect the king. “But will the queen get to the king before he flees to safety—or will she die in the attempt?”

The Boy waited for an answer, and when none was forthcoming he lifted his eyes from the chess board for the first time since the story started. “Don’t stop now,” he pleaded. “How does the story end?”

Mr. Paloobi grinned at him. “Well, to find out, you’re going to have to play the game, aren’t you?”

“Bright kid,” said Lionel.

“A special kid,” agreed the October Hare. He’d been christened the March Hare by his creator, but since he couldn’t hold the calendar back, he had become the April Hare and then the May Hare, and now, in his eighth month of existence, he was the October Hare.

“Welcome back,” said Sugarblossom.

“Thank you,” said the October Hare. “But I can’t stay long.” He glanced at his wrist. “I’m late.”

“You don’t even have a watch,” said Lionel in bored tones.

“It doesn’t matter,” said the October Hare. “I’m always late. It’s part of my nature.” He made as much of a face as a white rabbit *can* make. “One of the things I’m always late for is dinner, and it’s always gone. I wish my little girl read something, anything, beside *Alice in Wonderland* when she created me.” He turned to Mr. Paloobi. “I wish, oh, I don’t know, that she played chess like yours did.”