

# FAREWELL TO YESTERDAY'S TOMORROW

ALEXEI  
PANSHIN

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Alexei and Cory Panshin**

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*For Ted White and Terry Carr*



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# Preface

The twelve science fiction and fantasy stories and the final essay that make up this book are printed here in the order in which they were originally written. They were first published between 1966 and 1975, a turbulent time in this country, and a time of great changes in my own life. These stories are both a product and a reflection of their time.

These stories have been a means for me of wrestling with the enigma of being alive. Over and over again, each in its own way, they ask the same childish question: What does it mean to be an adult human being?

So many questions that we ask when we are children are never answered. They are indefinitely postponed. This question—a child’s question—was mine. And it was never answered for me to my satisfaction.

What is it to be an adult human being?

It still seems to me to be as urgent a question as it ever was. In view of the desperation of the present human condition, a desperate question. If we human beings are to survive, we must know who we are and what we may become.

The question is deliberately posed in the form of science fiction. Science fiction is a means of stepping outside ourselves and our present condition in search of new perception. If we already knew how to be truly adult, if we already knew how to be truly human beings, we would not be in our present difficulties.

Is our personal future and the future of mankind limited and cloudy? The answer indicated by science fiction and by these stories is: only if we are unable to change ourselves.

If we could change ourselves, what might we not become?

So here these stories are, from “What’s Your Excuse?” to “Lady Sunshine and the Magoon of Beatus.” A record of change and a promise of possibility.

—Alexei Danshin  
ELEPHANT, PENNSYLVANIA



# What's Your Excuse?

**W**ooley's beard and manner were all that you would expect of any psychology instructor, particularly one who enjoys his work. He leaned back in his swivel chair, his feet on his desk, hands folded behind his neck, and looked at the graduate student who had been sharing his partition-board office for the past two weeks.

"I'm curious about you, Holland," he said. "By my conservative estimate, ninety-five percent of degree candidates in psychology are twitches. What's your problem?"

The room was only about eight feet wide. Holland's desk faced the back of the cubicle, Wooley's faced the door, and there was a narrow aisle between the two. Holland was a teaching assistant and was busy correcting a stack of papers. He looked warily up at Wooley, who had a certain reputation, and then returned his attention to his work.

"No," Wooley said expansively. "On the face of it, I would have said that you had a very low twitch rating."

Wooley's reputation was half for being a thoroughgoing son of a bitch, half for being fascinating in the classroom. He had a flamboyant, student-attracting personality that was great fun for those he didn't pick for victims.

Holland finished marking the paper and tossed it on the stack he had completed. Then he said, "What is a twitch rating?"

"Don't you know that neuroses and psychoses are old hat? They need a scientific replacement, and for that purpose I have devised the twitch rating. Radiation is measured in curies, noise is measured in decibels—now psychological problems are measured in twitches. I'd rate you about five. That's very low, particularly for a psych student."

Holland flipped his red pencil to the side and leaned back. "You mean you really think that psych students are more . . . disturbed . . . than . . ."

"They're twitches," Wooley corrected. "That's why they're psychology students. They're not twitchy *because* they're psych students. What they want is to learn excuses for the way they act. They don't want to change it or even, I think, understand it. They want to excuse it—you know, 'Mama was a boozer, Daddy was a flit, so how can I possibly help myself?' They learn all the reasons that there are for being twitchy and that makes them happy."

Holland cleared his throat and leaned forward to recover his pencil. Holland was a very serious fellow and not completely sure just how serious Wooley was, and that made him ill-at-ease.

"Isn't it possible that you are mistaking an itch for a twitch?" he asked. "Then if somebody scratches, you think he's crazy. But what if their reason isn't an excuse, what if there is a genuine cause and you just can't see it? If you want a crude example, is a concentration-camp inmate a paranoid if he thinks that people are against him?"

"No," Wooley said. "Not unless he's a graduate student in psychology. In that case I wouldn't make any bets."

"Well, what are you doing here?"

"I'm observing humanity, what else? Look, I'll give you an example of a genuine, make-no-mistake-about-it, ninety-five-rating, excuse-making twitch from right down the hall. Do you know Hector Leith?"

"No. I haven't been here long enough," Holland said. "I don't know everybody's name yet, and I haven't observed anybody twitching in the hall."

Wooley shook his head. "You'd better be careful. You've got the makings of a very sharp tongue there. Come along." He swung his feet to the floor and led the way out into the hall.

Holland hesitated for a moment and then shrugged and followed. The corridor ran between a double row of brown partition-board cubicles. On the walls of the corridor were photographs, a book-display rack, notices, and two plaques celebrating the accomplishments of the department's bowling and softball teams. One of the photographs was of the previous year's crop of graduate students. Wooley pointed at the shortest person in the picture.

"That's Hector Leith," he said.

"I guess I have seen him around."

"How old would you say he is?"

Holland looked at the picture and tried to remember the person he'd seen briefly in the hall. "Not more than eighteen," he said finally.

"He's twenty-seven."

"You're kidding."

"No," Wooley said. "He's twenty-seven, he looks eighteen or less, and he is a genuine twitch."

The person in the photograph was only a few inches more than five feet tall, smooth-cheeked, fresh-faced, elfish-looking. He might possibly have passed for a junior high school student except for his air of tart awareness, and he certainly seemed out of place with the others in the picture. Wooley was there, too, with his beard.

Back in their shared office, Holland returned to his swivel chair while Wooley sat on the edge of his desk.

"Now," Wooley said, "he was drafted by the Army and tossed out after four weeks for emotional instability. I don't hold too much with the Army, but I'd still give him thirty twitch points for that. He started out as a teaching

assistant here, but he started twitching in front of the class and now he's a research assistant. You can give him another thirty points for that."

"So what's your diagnosis, Doctor?" Holland said.

Wooley shrugged. "I don't know. Manic-depressive, maybe. One day he'll overflow all over you, try to be friends—try to be buddies and ask you out for a beer. You can't imagine how funny that is between his trying to get into a bar in the first place and the fact that he can't stand beer. He'll tell you all his problems. The next day he won't talk to you at all, hide his little secrets away. And when he's unpleasant, which is more than half the time, he'll leave three-inch scars all over you. Give him fifteen points for that and the last twenty points for his excuses."

"All right. What are they?"

Wooley paused for effect. "He thinks—he says he's finally figured it out—that he's living at a slower rate than most people, and he really isn't grown up yet. He still has to get his physical and emotional growth. He's where everybody else his age was years ago."

"Why does he think that?"

Wooley smiled. "Well, he thinks he is growing. He thinks he's gaining height."

Holland said seriously, "You know, if it were so, it would really be something, wouldn't it? I can see why it would make somebody twitchy. To be that far out of step, not know why, and be incapable of doing what people expect of you would certainly be a burden. You'd be bound to think it was you and that would only make things worse."

"Perfect excuse, isn't it?" Wooley asked drily. "There's only one problem and that is it's just wishful thinking."

"Well, if he's growing . . ."

"He isn't growing. He just thinks he is. Come on and I'll show you."

He led the way down the hall to another cubicle that was similar to their own except that there was only one desk. The extra space was taken up by bookshelves. Wooley flipped on the light.

"Come on in," he said to Holland, and Holland stepped inside.

Wooley pointed to the wall at a point where a wood strip connected pieces of particle board. There were a few faint pencil ticks there, the top and the bottom marks being perhaps an inch and a half apart.

"There," Wooley said. "That's the growing he thinks he's done."

"Only he hasn't?"

"No," Wooley said, chuckling. "I've been moving the marks. I add them on the bottom and erase the top mark. He just keeps putting it back and thinking he's that much taller."

Holland said, "Pardon me. I have work to do." He turned quite deliberately and walked out, his distaste evident.

Wooley said after him, "It's a psychological experiment." But Holland didn't stop.

Wooley shrugged. Then he turned back to the pencil marks and counted them. He then picked a pencil off the desk, erased the topmost mark, and carefully added a mark at the bottom.

Then he tossed the pencil back onto the desk and turned away. Just before he got to the door, Hector Leith came around the corner and into the room. They almost bumped into one another, stopped, and then carefully stepped back.

Leith looked much like his picture: tiny, boyish-looking, incongruous in tie, jacket, and black overcoat. The briefcase he carried was the last touch that made him look like a youngster playing Daddy.

He gave Wooley a bitter look and said, "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for a book."

"Whatever it is, you can't borrow it. Get out of here. Don't think I don't know the trouble you've made for me around here, Wooley. Out."

"All right, all right," Wooley said. "I couldn't find it anyway."

He beat a retreat down the corridor, relieved that Leith hadn't walked in a minute earlier. When he reached his own office, Holland was piling papers on his desk.

"What's this?" Wooley asked.

"I'm not staying," Holland said. "I don't think we're going to work well together. They've got a desk I can use in the department office until they can find me another place."

"What's the matter with you?" Wooley asked. "Why should you leave?"

"What's the matter with you?" Holland asked. "They told me that nobody would stay in an office with you, and I can't stomach you, either. And I'd advise you not to pull any of your tricks on me."



Leith, somewhat strained, closed the door behind Wooley when he left. He wondered if he should have been less harsh. He knew that all it did was make him sound petulant, and that was something he was trying to break himself of, even with Wooley. But it was hard.

He looked then at the strip of wood marked with little pencil lines, and smiled with slightly malicious delight at what he saw. He picked up the pencil that Wooley had abandoned and replaced the tick that had been erased.

The top tick was on the level of his eyes now, perhaps even a little lower, and he wondered how long it would be before Wooley finally noticed.

He said, quite softly, "I'm growing up, Wooley. What's your excuse?"

# The Sons of Prometheus

## 1. THE COLLIGATIONS OF THE CONFRATERNITY

**Y**ou don't suddenly appear out of nowhere. The Colonists find that disconcerting. You arrive in a place from somewhere definite. Particularly on Zebulon.

Zebulon? Whatever you do, don't let them know where you come from. They (finger across the neck with an appropriate sound effect, *zit*) Ship people when they catch them. Remember the Sons of Prometheus—they being the ones who had gotten it in the neck. Of course they were from *Puteaux* and not nearly so bright as we.

It was nice of Nancy to remind Tansman of that and tell him to take care of himself, especially since it was her idea for him to go to Zebulon. It was nothing he would have thought of himself. Zebulon was not really the place for a chromoplastician with no experience in adventure, with no taste for do-gooding, with an active indifference to everything but the tidy definite sufficiency of chromoplasts.

Tansman arrived in North Hill, where he had been told he would be met by Rilke. A solid-wheeled, leather-sprung public coach was as concrete an arrival as he could manage. The rough ride over rougher roads had given him a stiff neck and a headache. He had tried to study local scripture, *The Colligations of the Confraternity*, but finally gave up, put the book back in his bag, and thereafter looked out the window or at his feet.

He was the only passenger. The talk of the megrim had been enough to empty the coach. He'd taken no notice of the rumors of plague when he bought his seat for North Hill, since he wasn't affected. But he was grateful. He didn't relate easily to other people, even Ship people. He had no idea what to say to a Colonist, people who died, people who killed.

It gave him the chance to study the *Colligations*, since that was what Zebulon killed and died for. If the subject came up, he wanted to be ready.

As they rattled through the rutted streets, Tansman looked through the coach window. There was little traffic—none to speak of. There was less

noise—stony quiet. Nobody to be seen. It was a strange queer place, this North Hill. Most of the adobe houses they passed were shut and shuttered.

Arriving, Tansman felt more tense than he had since that first moment when he had been set down here on Zebulon and put on his own. It was only the third time he had been on a planet, the third time in his life that he had left *Daudelin*, though he could million his light years. Once in practice for Trial when he was thirteen. Once for thirty nervous days on Trial when he turned fourteen. And now.

Here he was, a chromoplastician in a world ignorant of chromoplasts, an incognito prince amongst sharp-toothed paupers, an uneasy rider in a coach that was now, at last, coming to a stop in a dusty street under a lowering sky. And he was afraid. He wouldn't have admitted it, but he was afraid.

It was his own fault for letting himself be overridden by Nancy Poate. She was his cousin, one of the few people he knew, one of the few people he let himself know. She was older than he, determined and formidable.

"Phil," she had said, "did you or did you not tell me last week that you were finished with that silly set of experiments you've been locking yourself in with?"

He had told her about the experiments to make her go away. She didn't like to hear about them so he always started talking about chromoplasts when he wanted to be left alone.

"Yes," he said. "But they aren't silly. You shouldn't talk about my work that way."

"Then you need a vacation. This will be a vacation."

"Nancy, I'll grant that after Earth was destroyed we owed the Colonies more than we gave them, but this sneaking around doing paternal good works to people who just want to be left alone doesn't appeal to me."

Tansman didn't really care about the Colonies. They weren't real to him. They were distant and vaguely frightening and he didn't want to think about them. He would grant the premises that Nancy insisted upon—because Nancy was immediate and, in her way, even more frightening. But he would seize on any argument he could find and throw it back at her.

And none of it—the points he granted or the arguments he countered with—was real, none of it was thought through. It was all talk designed to keep the fearsome where it belonged, as far away as possible.

Since this argument seemed to be doing the job, he continued with it:

"You don't dare come out in the open, because you're afraid that they'll wring your necks, but you aren't willing to leave them alone. So what do you do? You prod and you poke, you try to establish trade routes and other silly business, and you hand out propaganda and how-to-do-it books, and that makes you feel good. Well, it wouldn't make me feel good, and I don't want any part of it."

Nancy, bluff and unstoppable, just nodded. Tansman would have had himself remodeled if he looked the way she did. He was convinced that she

didn't because her appearance helped her to overwhelm people and get her own way.

She said, "I knew I was right to pick on you, Phil. You won't be tempted to meddle. All you'll have to do is be there for two months keeping an eye on things."

"No," he said.

"Phil," she said. "Don't be stuffy."

So now he was on Zebulon, not quite sure how he had been persuaded to come. He was a reluctant fire-bringer, muttering to himself about a man he had yet to meet named Hans Rilke who was a do-gooder with an undurable liver. They might call themselves "The Group," but Nancy Poate's people were low-visibility Sons of Prometheus.

It seemed appropriate that Rilke should have a liver complaint. That had been Prometheus' problem, too. He wondered if it were an occupational disease of meddlers, and he wished Nancy Poate had found a better way to occupy herself than coordinating the activities of do-gooders—including the replacement of their innards.

He took a deep breath and descended from the coach, satchel in hand. He was a tall, youngish man. Not young—he disowned his youth along with all other potential folly. He was a thin man, narrow of face and large of nose. If it had ever mattered, he might have had it altered, but the chromoplasts didn't care and if anyone else did, they had never bothered to tell him.

He was wearing a slouch hat, jacket, breeches and leggings that he had been assured were seasonable and stylish here. He felt like the sort of ass who dresses up for costume parties. He'd never worn a hat before in his life, and he kept reaching up to adjust the clumsy, uncomfortable thing.

The wind under the flat, cold, gray sky was chill and biting. It tugged at his silly hat as he stepped down from the coach, and slapped Tansman in the face with the most overwhelming, pungent, unpleasant odor he had ever smelled. It was an eye-burning, stomach-churning reek that drowned him in singed hair and charring flesh.

The driver of the coach could smell it, too. He didn't wait for Tansman. He gave a sharp whistle and his horses lurched forward. Raising dust, open coach door banging back and forth, the stage rattled to the right and around the corner and was gone between the mud-walled buildings, leaving only a dust-whorl memory.

And Tansman stood alone at the edge of the square of North Hill. Fifty yards distant across the square was built a great bonfire. There may have been a base of wood beneath, but the primary fuel was human bodies. Some of the bodies were clothed, the fire licking at the cloth, lines of flame running down arms and legs. Most of the bodies were naked, marked by great purple bruises like port-wine scars.

Three determined men in gloves and white cloth masks worked by the fire. One did his best to hold a maddened horse still. The other two worked as

a team to unload the cart. They grabbed arms and feet and heaved bodies like logs onto the fire. They were fast, silent and clumsy, impersonal and afraid.

One body, a female, was thrown so carelessly that it rolled down the pile and slapped at the feet of a fourth man, a white-suited, white-cowled, black-belted friar. He took no notice but continued his benediction, adding his single note of dignity to the crude and ugly disposal of the dead.

Tansman turned away. It was more than he could stand to watch. It was the closest he had ever been to death, that rarity on the Ship, and it was too close for his mind and stomach. He was not afraid. Before he left he had been given proofs against the accidents of Zebulon, including this hemorrhagic fever. He could have afforded a scientific curiosity. But one look at the burning pile of ephemeral human animals on the cobbles, one sickening whiff of their mortality, was too much.

He gagged and smothered his face in his hand. He gagged again, and ran. He ran down the street the coach had traveled into town, and he did not look back at a heavy rattle that pursued him like a nightmare of death. His bag banged heavily against his legs as he ran, and his breath came shortly.

Then he tripped and fell and lay panting in the dust. The rattle grew louder. A horse whickered. The thought flashed in his mind that he had been discovered. They knew him here on Zebulon. He had been brought to the place of death where they disposed of the true men they detected, and this was the death cart come for him.

He wanted to cry, *Not me! Not me!* He had never wanted to come. When would the nightmare end? Would he wake, safe in his own bed? He wanted to leap up and lock the door.

And then a wheel stopped by his head. He looked up at a gnarled little old man sitting on the seat of a flatbed wagon. The old man was dressed in brown leather, worn and soft, that might be seasonable but could never have been stylish. There was a gold-spot earring set in his right ear and a broad-bladed knife with a curved point at his belt. He had curly muttonchop whiskers and dirty brown hair, both shot with gray, and his last shave must have been half a week past. He was a monkey man.

"Mr. Tansman?" he said, grinning down as though he enjoyed the sight of Tansman lying on his face in the street.

Tansman said, "You aren't . . ." and then stopped, because it was clear that he wasn't. The pictures of Rilke that Nancy had shown him were nothing like this man. He had to be a Zebulonite, one of them, part of the nightmare.

"I'm from your uncle, come to fetch you to Delera. Hop in, boy, and let's be off. I've no mind to catch the megrim."

Tansman pushed himself to his knees and snatched up his fallen hat and bag. He stood and dropped them in the bed of the wagon and then began to brush the dust away.

"Ah, you are a dandy, aren't you? City people! Climb aboard, damn you. I'm not waiting."