

Boys and Girls Together

Larry Niven

At first, the background voices sounded all alike, high-pitched and childish. A moment's attention and you could make out the difference. Boys at one of the big tables, more than a dozen. Girls all about them, at tables for two or four. They all looked the same age, ten or eleven years old, but you could separate them by voice or body language or clothing styles: these here were centuries old, these others were in their teens.

It was a rare restaurant that would host boys and girls together. McDonald's was ancient. Its earliest clientele had been parents with young children. There were a few in here even now, adult couples with children too small to have the Treatment yet. The parents were being very protective. They were never threatening, yet always intimidating.

Terry found Boris and went to his table. Boris was watching a live feed of the Pluto ship skimming past Jupiter. Terry said, "Sorry I'm late. There was an accident."

Boris—four feet nine, blond, his one-piece suit long out of style—jumped to his feet. "Are you hurt?"

Terry—four eleven, wearing a loose gray

swim suit, tightly coiled black hair and dark skin—said, "It wasn't that close. A cargo pod crashed short of Burbank Port. Came down in Van Nuys. They're still adding up the death rate. I *saw* it." Terry's shudder rippled through him. "Right into some old buildings."

Boris watched in awe and fright. "Are you all right? Want a relaxant?"

Terry said, "I'm going to do it. I'm going to grow up."

Boris laughed.

Heads turned all around the room, boys and girls together. Background conversation paused, then resumed. A tall girl, a dark-skinned stretched-out version of her companions, examined Terry. He didn't notice.

"I mean it," he said.

"Sorry, you caught me by surprise. Have you had enough of life?" Boris was still smiling.

"Two or three miles away, a cargo pod falls out of the sky. I could have been *under* it. Boris, I almost got killed *now*. There are so many ways to die. Do you think you're going to live forever, just because you don't grow old?"

"Yes," Boris said.

Was he kidding? “It could have hit McDon-ald’s.”

“It didn’t. Look, I take your point. My shot at being killed by a meteor in this century is about one in thirty thousand. Add up enough centuries and it becomes even odds. I like to walk the mountains; I could fall off a cliff. Be hit by lightning. Terry, you spend too much time underground for that, but any collapse could get you—”

“Could get anyone.”

“—and no roof lasts forever. But never mind that. Do you actually want to raise a little you?”

Terry hesitated.

“Or two or three or four? Maybe some of them girls? And,” his voice dropped, “*live* with a grown-up girl? Take turns taking care of a baby? Or is this just a way of not looking at the accident? You could take a brosia tab, you know, if it’s just a way to calm down.”

“Boris, why do people have children?”

Boris grimaced. “Why do people have sex? We don’t know, not in our guts. Asking doesn’t help. I’ve done that. Browsing the web doesn’t give you insight. For millions of years—billions—that was why live things made little copies of themselves, because they were hardwired to do that. Bacteria don’t have a choice. Ants, chameleons, rabbits—”

“Boris, it’s near a thousand years since the Freeze, and we still get children.”

“Mmm.”

“After I die, I want something left of me.”

“Write a book.”

“I’ve done six. Is that your point? My writing might get *better* if I grow up. Different viewpoint. Never mind; *my* point is they’ll still be forgotten. What’s in a book—it all goes obsolete when the facts change.”

“Write fantasy then. It’s already obsolete. Or build a bridge, or a park, or an arcology. *I’ve* done that. Terry, think about getting *old*. It’s not like it used to be. A huge part of medical practice was just for cancer, arthritis, brain deterioration, brittle bones, clogged arteries, all the things that go with just aging past the limit of your genetic program. Nobody treats that stuff any more! There aren’t enough adults to make it pay.”

“Hello?”

The tall, dark-haired girl behind Terry’s shoulder had become impossible to overlook. Boris must have been watching her all along.

Terry turned and said, “Hello. I’m Terry, that’s Boris. We were talking—”

“I’m Carla. I heard. Growing up. Do you have a girl to grow up with, Terry?”

“No, I just, I haven’t started looking. This just started. There was an accident.” Terry was flustered. “Have a chair?” How did you talk to a girl? Like another intelligent entity?

Carla (five nine, pale with black straight hair, in a paint suit that streamed colors like a close view of Jupiter) moved a chair into place, and sat. The chair dropped a little to put her eyes level with theirs, and theirs lifted. “I was thinking of growing up myself.”

Terry could feel himself shy back. He sensed Boris’s amusement. He asked, “How old are you, Carla?”

“Six hundred and ten.”

“You’re almost...you must have been one of the first.”

“After the media stopped counting, I might have been number ten thousand of the Forever Children. Or not.”

Forever Children? Terry had never heard the term. “Is that why you’re so tall? You keep growing even after the Treatment?”

“It isn’t fast, but yeah, we grow. In another few hundred years I’d be six feet tall. Hit me with puberty then, how tall would I be? Seven feet? Ten? So, how old are you, Terry?”

“Looking at a hundred.”

“Flinching from those zeroes?”

Terry shook his head.

Boris asked, “Do you have to buy furniture for adults?”

Carla smiled. “Clothes too.”

“In a few hundred years you’d have to have them hand made. But—excuse me—so what? Older people tend to be rich. Or you could learn to make your own chairs and clothes. There must be books on carpentry and tailoring. You might be eight feet tall in another thousand years, and so what? The idiot here is talking about quitting *now*.”

“It’s not quitting!” Terry snapped.

Carla said, “‘Course it’s not. It’s—Hello?” Someone was waving.

Big, burly bear of a man, waving a thick, muscular arm covered with black hair. Tall woman with heavy breasts, nursing a tiny human. Two older girls too small to have the Treatment yet. Five human beings at a table for eight.

Carla went over. The boys lifted eyebrows at each other, came to an agreement, and followed.

"Hanly. Wend. We overheard some of that," the man said. *Man*: he was well past puberty. He must have been an adult for decades, and the woman too. The hard plastic McDonald's seats were tiny beneath them. "We thought you might have questions."

"I asked my parents," Carla said primly. "A long time ago."

Boris said, "Wh—"

"How do you *feel*?" Terry blurted.

Hanly laughed, his voice deep and alien. "Good. I feel good."

"A little tired." Wend smiled. "Children go beyond hassle. They're a lifestyle." A giant; a woman, her hips gone wide. Watching her breast-feed the infant, Terry felt he was starving.

The older girl was looking at them suspiciously, pushing her head under her mother's arm.

Carla asked Wend, "Did you make a mistake?"

"Hell no. And we're holding civilization together. Don't laugh."

Terry shook his head. Boris said, "We learn this in school. If Malzberg and Quine had found some other way to keep people from dying, yeah, we'd all be up to our eyebrows in everybody else. Seven billion, they say. Instead we're all eleven years old forever, except the poor bastards who were already too old, and of course they're dead. But somebody's got to replace . . . Terry? Is that what you're thinking?"

Terry said, "People still die. The population's been dropping. Somebody's got to have children. I've been flinching. All this time, I didn't want to get old and die. Carla, you too?"

"Six times longer than you. But we're missing something big, aren't we? We all know it. We've all read about sex, right? Endlessly, if you read the classics. But it's just too simple to be only what all that hinting around is all about. Right, Hanly? Wend?"

The adults laughed and nodded.

"Muscles," Boris said. "What's it like to be that powerful?"

"I like that part," Hanly said. "Even so, my knees have started to creak, and I can't eat like I used to, or sleep—" He trailed off.

Terry asked, "Carla, are you rich?"

The pale girl jumped. "Why would you . . .? Sure. You live this long, you get rich or you get broke. If you get broke, you die."

"Good. I know what to do. Let's talk about it."

Boris was in McDonald's watching the news. Light danced above the orange plastic table, and he watched, entranced, as a ship like a pregnant spider made orbit around Pluto. A world of forty million was wealthy enough to afford that, and immortals would tolerate the fifteen-year voyage. Any hour now, the little parasite ship would detach and go down. . . .

Two adults came in with a boy. The boy stumbled a bit and looked around him with wide, delighted eyes. Their child, it might be. Boris stared at the pale woman because she was so tall.

They saw him. Knew him. It was Carla, and the bearded man must be what Terry had become. Two people Boris hadn't thought of in twelve years.

Boris pocketed his phone. He said, "You did it."

They sat down. Chairs adjusted, not quite enough. Terry was near six feet now, and Carla must be six four or five.

"Webley, this is Boris," Terry said. "Old friend." The boy smiled. "Boris, how are you?"

"Hello, Webley. I haven't changed much. Talk to me."

"Hello, Boris," Webley said.

Terry said, "Well. We grew up. But also, we found a study group."

"We're going to rebuild the old styles of medicine," Carla said. "When we get old, there'll be surgeries and diet supplements and all that. Crutches. Alloplasty. Everything the old timers had, everything we need to take care of us."

Boris studied them. Terry was big and brawny and plainly dressed, his beard and hair a black powder explosion. Carla was in a paint suit, a streaming view of a bonfire, looking a bit old fashioned. She'd gained nearly a foot in height, but expanded outward at chest and hips and belly. Boris asked, "Carrying a passenger?"

"Yeah. There's plenty of childbirth medicine. We don't need to worry about that."

"So your research is all for aging."

“Called ger-i-atrics.” She smiled.

“Gonna train some surgeons too? You’d better train yourselves. You might not get a lot of volunteers. Cutting up live people, adults didn’t have a problem doing that, maybe because there were wars. Today—”

“It’s a point,” Carla said.

“These studies you’re founding. You think they’ll keep up with you as you get older?”

They looked at each other. Carla said, “There’s no such thing as perpetual motion.”

“Well, there might be. The older I get, the better the medical profession will be at treating . . . well, us. Children. If lightning strikes when I’m ten thousand, there’s a cure.” Boris wondered why he was trying to taunt these sudden strangers. They’d made their choice. They were lost.

He stood up abruptly. “I’ll get us drinks. Webley, what do you drink?”

Carla said, “Boris.”

Back turned, he said, “Yeah?”

She said, “The ones who aren’t afraid to die,

they’re the ones who breed. We never had that before. Think evolution.”

Terry said, “When you’re ten thousand years old, look around you. The population might be down to a million, but it’ll be stable. Most of the boys and girls around you will be descended from *us*, from the ones who made babies. They’ll get tired of being kids and turn adult with hardly a second thought. It’ll be in their genes.”

Boris laughed.

“Milk for Webley,” Terry said. “Cappuccinos for us.”

“Done.” ■

Larry Niven is the author of Ringworld, the coauthor of The Mote in God’s Eye and Lucifer’s Hammer, the editor of the Man-Kzin War series, and has written or coauthored over 50 books. He is a five-time winner of the Hugo Award, along with a Nebula and numerous others.

IN TIMES TO COME

It feels like we’ve barely begun, but here we are, wrapping up the year already. Ain’t that always the way in life, though? The trick, I find, is to end with as much gusto as you started with. Case in point: our next issue.

Our lead story is a sequel to reader-favorite (and reader-favorite cover!), “Aleyara’s Decent” (May/June 2023) by Christopher L. Bennett. The world has expanded for Aleyara and her friends, but that doesn’t mean it’s *done* expanding, as you’ll see in “Aleyara’s Flight.”

Then the fact article for the issue is the next to tie classic SF novels to current research from Kelly Lagor, in “Warm Ponds II: BIOS and LUCA.”

We also have something(s) seasonal in “The Dancing Bear” by Stanley and Joyce Schmidt, and “The Under-appreciation of Danny White” by David Ebenbach; “Pirates of Pan,” a tale from James Dick that proves the truth of the old Ben Franklin adage that if we don’t hang together, we’ll surely hang alone, even (maybe especially!) in the depths of space; some tough familial dynamics in an even tougher environment, in Kate Maruyama’s “Faith”; a look at just how close we could be to solving some dire problems if we truly wanted to be, in Lance Robinson’s “One Step Away,” and much, much more, from Subodhana Wijeyeratne, Leonard Richardson, James L. Cambias, Marissa Lingen, and others.

End the year on the right note and don’t miss it!