

The Escape Pod

By Kevin McCarthy

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After my parents split, my father and I got together on alternate weekends. At first, this was great. We fished, played cards, and built things like mad. But after a couple of years it became clear that while I was on the fast track to coolness, the old man was lost in time. His hair grew wispier as mine grew wild. He smoked a pipe. He had a white, 1961 Chrysler Imperial with a pink rag top and fins bigger than our collie. This he drove with stately deliberation – even slower when passing my school.

I'm the youngest of six, so Dad was older than every father I knew. And his eccentricities magnified all differences. Football didn't interest him. His idea of a good time was tinkering with precision machines and conducting physics experiments. He brought a Van de Graaff generator to my school for show-and-tell, and floated a foil ball in the air. Once he charged his body up as a capacitor and danced around the yard with a glowing fluorescent light in his fists. I was mortified.

He carried so many lucky coins from all over the world that his pants drooped. He wore a thin mustache for fifty years. Though liberal in his beliefs, he was a former intelligence officer and spoke fondly of the OSS. His fishing boat was a huge, pre-war, crescent rowboat, festooned with umbrellas, that had been designed for use on the Colorado River. He made pemmican. He built precise pyramids and sharpened razors in them. He danced ridiculously. He eagerly told everyone – including my friends and total strangers – how much he paid for his Salvation Army clothes.

One late summer night, when I was fourteen, I was in the yard when his luxury liner glided to the curb. The top was down, and Half-and-Half pipe smoke wafted through the neighborhood. Dad looked small, like he was sitting in a wide, cartoonish bathtub. I'd gotten used to him floating about in this time capsule. But why did it have to be so white? And massive? It was an entourage. Dad's broad forehead glinted in the fading light as he beamed at my discomfort. "Hop in, laddybuck!" He was wearing the ascot.

He was handsome, in spite of all, but vain. He devoured *Scientific American* and books on the lost civilization of Mu. He was a crack shot. He loved to be called "Spock," of *Star Trek*, yet succumbed to intense displays of emotion that were incongruous with the moniker. He sketched beautifully. Every day for several months, his sonorous voice had floated out of the radio, reciting the news. He took hot baths for entire afternoons. He could be hilariously playful, or silent for hours, then inexplicably hold forth on nearly any topic to banal boorishness. He told heartfelt stories of the Gurkha and Kachin tribesmen.

I slunk into the passenger acreage and slid low on the pink leather seat. We swung through the neighborhood at funereal pace, in case anyone needed to admire the fins. Dad was feeling chipper, as usual. "How about a movie?" Well, we couldn't have that. Too many classmates there. Too many normal fathers. So he patiently ticked off a list of possible activities while I gauged the relative magnitude of my expected discomfort. Billiards? The memory of Dad lecturing the proprietor about Chiang Kai-shek was too fresh. Miniature golf? Not under the lights with that mustache.

Long silences crept in, and I realized he was slipping into his showboat trance. He couldn't care less whether we actually arrived anywhere. He was ready to pilot that barge all over town with his time-warp clothes, his Ronald Colman profile, and me – the long-haired, cool guy – on display. We were passing a bowling alley, which I'd dismissed. But as I scanned the area desperately, I noticed an empty parking lot beneath the "Open" sign. "Let's go bowling," I said. Dad fired the retro-thrusters, and we touched down.

We had a great time. The place was quiet, the exercise calming. Dad did his crazy dances, and I just laughed. We were alone. Eventually other bowlers trickled in, but that was okay. They were all adults I didn't recognize. We played on, smirking and grandstanding as in the old days. Soon the place was full, but I still didn't recognize anyone. It looked to be a free night. My image would remain intact.

But inherited curiosity had something to say about that. The ball return mechanism beckoned. How did it work? I peered down its gullet. I could see one spinning wheel that pushed the ball along. There must be others. I reached my arm in as far as it would go. Thuck! A ball shot up the spout and jammed just below my armpit. My arm was stuck solid. Dad moved toward me, looking concerned, but no one else had noticed. Maybe we could keep this among ourselves.

YURK! The ball ratcheted further up my arm. Rubber wheels shrieked rhythmically against the ball. YURK! YURK! YURK! For eternal minutes, Dad and I labored, but there was nothing to be done. Every inch of my stupid, skinny bicep had been devoured, leaving us no leverage. A crowd gathered. I writhed in a nightmare of unwanted attention, pinned on an altar of idiocy.

YURK! YURK! YURK! Myriad hard surfaces responded with layers of echoes, which fed a deafening crescendo. Soon the clamor was pulling people out of the parking lot. I laid my head on the machine and shut my eyes. I wanted to be back in that cheesy old car, rolling away. A minute later, a sea of concerned faces wobbled before me. I recognized four girls – the extra cool ones – from my school. YURK! YURK! YURK! The ball return began to buck.

Suddenly, it was all over. The ball dropped into the evil maw, and my arm snapped back. The manager had thrown the master switch, disabling everything. He rushed up to us. I desperately wanted him to make a joke, so we could laugh it off. But he was pale and serious. You'd think I'd been trapped in a coal mine. "Are you all right?" No, I wasn't. My soul smoldered. I was so hot from the collar up, I thought my hair would fall out. "Oh, sure," I said. The girls giggled and looked away.

We were out of there in a heartbeat. In the refuge of the Imperial, I slid to the floor. Dad walked the beast behind the building and parked. I sat up and gulped cool air. He flipped a toggle. A hum rose from the depths, and the pink rag cocoon slid slowly into place. He adjusted the windows and lit a pipe. I breathed in the Half-and-Half as if for the first time. How had I come to hate that rich, sweet smell?

He had tried to train me – fruitlessly, it turned out – for a military career. He would come at me deliberately, slicing the air with karate chops like a robot Cato stalking Inspector Clouseau. Or the ambush would be intellectual: logistical problems to solve under a ticking clock, or general philosophical challenges. "Should America be the world's policeman?" he'd ask. "If you're so afraid of the criminal in the alley that you attack him first, who's the criminal?" Whatever I'd say, he'd take the opposite view.

But tonight, there would be no jousting. My feeble jokes were ignored. Quietly, Dad dredged up a story from the Pleistocene, when he was a boy. He'd been engaged in the age-old sport of towel snapping in the school locker room, when, stark naked, he'd burst through the door into the boy's gym. Forgetting the girls were there that day. His retreat pathetically delayed by the slippery floor. Torture and imprisonment seeming preferable to facing his classmates again, he'd begged the principal to let him drop out of school. The man was unmoved. "What makes you think any of them saw your face?"

It was a silly story, one I'd heard before, but I laughed anyway. He always told it well, with winks, smoky pauses, and shoulder slaps. Yeah, I'd made a fool of myself, but at least I hadn't exposed my scrawny body to a gym full of girls. News of my escapade would spread, but in a week or so I'd stop getting razed. I remembered how embarrassed I'd felt during the Van de Graaff show, but then it had turned out that some kids liked it after all.

The briar pipe glowed. I'd never seen Dad hide the Imperial before. That was something. And he'd facilitated a quick escape. Zinged us right out of there. At first I thought it was because he was embarrassed, too. But that wasn't possible. He reveled in absurdity. No, he'd seen the girls. He'd played bodyguard for my starlet vanity, and hustled us masterfully into the escape pod.

He puffed casually away. Why would a guy wear an ascot? Well, why would a guy jam his whole arm into a bowling ball return? Windows hummed wider and I blinked at the stars. He could go on about the weirdest things. He loved comic stories. He might yet, that very evening, exhume some archaic nuance of Asian diplomacy that he considered hilarious. But he wouldn't breathe a word about the surreal skewering of my pride.

Smoke slid languidly out the window. I stretched out and remembered things: him pulling me out of a lake, inventing strange outdoor dishes, coming up the walk with a toy sailboat. Once he'd shown me a secret mountain glade. The pine had been fragrant there. Like Half-and-Half.