

When the Sky Was Blue

by Janet Aldrich

Michael shifted impatiently as his mom steadied the gyrocycle above the parking space. A rather blank, empty smile came over her face, and Michael understood. The Proctors were everywhere and where they weren't, there was always a Neighbor who would be happy to tell the Proctors about any dissatisfaction. It was better to be seen smiling.

She turned to him and flipped the cover off his ventmeter.

"You're in the yellow. Make sure you charge up before we leave."

"Got it, Mom." He carefully assumed the expression he'd spent hours practicing before the mirror, the one that made him look like one of the kids in the Aero Guides manual.

The two of them pulled their gloves up to cover their wrists and put on the breathing masks. His mom grabbed the two tubes out of the back of the gyro and prepared to lift the door.

"Ready?"

"Ready on green!"

They joined hands and boosted to the front of The Store. She maneuvered them past slower people and made sure they were in the airdock, waiting with the others. The dock vent shut behind them and they loosened their masks.

Over the door, there was a large sign. "The Proctors announce water today!" A Guide walked past them, shockstaff in hand. He studied faces as he passed. No one spoke. Everyone wore a smile like the one Michael and his mother had assumed in the gyro. Satisfied, he pressed a button on his uniform and the door irised open. Slowly, in order, the customers entered.

Michael went to get a carry for his mom, and helped her put the aquatubes in it. "While we're here, I'll use some foodcredits for bread."

"Great, Mom!" As they walked to the water dispensers, Michael kept a surreptitious watch out. He loved to come to The Store — not because he necessarily wanted to buy anything (or that they could,

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anyway — his mom was only a Grade 3 ChildGuide) but because of the movement in the beams of the building. He was fascinated by the flutter of wings. The birds were small and brown, not very exciting, but it had been years, long before he was born, that the last bird had disappeared.

“Oh, no!” Ahead of them a man who was filling his aquatubes didn't complete the disconnect fast enough and water spilled to the floor. Everyone carefully avoided looking at him, and a Sensor hummed through the air and hovered in front of his face.

“I'm sorry — really!” he told the unseen watchers. “I was just tir—I mean, it was a mistake!” A Guide came out of a nearby door and grasped the man's arm, pulling him along. “Please, you don't understand. Please, don't! Please, I've never had a writeup or even a speakup.” The Guide pulled him along, unhearing, and the door closed behind them. The man was gone as if he had never been

A Klenbot rolled out and absorbed the water. After a moment, it extended an arm and recycled the moisture into the storage tank.

“Waste not, want not.” Everyone nearby tapped their lips and then their chests, over their heart. Michael eyed the poster of the Leader, with the Holy Words printed boldly across them. Then he used the distraction to look a little higher, at the rustle of wings high above them.

He'd never seen a sky that was any other color than the brownish-gray that was the everyday experience, nor a tree or grass that grew outside. Every home had a dwarved, small tree or two to help filter the air, and genetically-altered grass was everyone's carpet. None of these was truly green — only a pale green-brown. And he would never have seen a bird, had it not been for the remnant that fluttered above them. Michael had asked his mother once, when they played the music high so they could talk unheard, why the Guides or the Proctors hadn't just gotten rid of the birds.

“Leader knows. Maybe they think it's too much trouble. Maybe they enjoy teasing us, those who remember how it used to be, when the sky was blue and you didn't need a mask to breathe outside.”

While his mother filled their tubes, Michael wondered what color blue the sky had been, if it was the blue of the denim they wore, or the color of a Guide's uniform or if it had been pale blue, like his mother's eyes on the rare occasion when she was really happy.

"Let's go." They went to get the bread and then stood in line to scan the chip in his mother's hand. As they advanced up the line, they came abreast with the AirFill. Michael deftly transferred enough air to bring his tank to green and closed the valve.

"That's well done! You must be top of your Cadre!" A heavysset older man behind his mother reached out and Michael knew enough to fist bump and tap fingers in the Aero Guides fashion.

"Thank you, sir."

"That's a fine boy, there, Ma'am. A Proctor in the making if I ever saw one!"

"You're too kind, sir." His mother dropped a curtsy.

After they paid, they refixed their masks and boosted back from the airlock to the gyro.

"Belt hooked?"

"Yes." Michael settled back against the seat against the thrust of the cycle and dreamt of feathers and birds in a blue sky.

