

*A Short Story*

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LESTER DEL REY



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TINY WINDOWS

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*When the enemy believes the worst of you, they  
won't settle for anything except the worst!*

*Volcek believed his weapon would be humane, and  
less destructive than the dreaded fusion bombs.*

Stefanie was still white and weak, but the worry on her face had nothing to do with her recent sickness as she rushed about the small, crudely furnished apartment, trying to appear normal. Johann Volcek studied his young wife, worrying more about her than the meeting for the moment.

If the child had only lived....

Then he smiled a bit ironically, before letting his mind come up with the old palliatives. There'd be other children for him and Stefanie—and for this half of the world. The other half would simply have to suffer painlessly through a generation, for the good of the whole world.

"But the Director, Johann...." Stefanie's voice was on the thinnest edge of hysteria. "Johann, to our place! If I'd known, I could have made curtains, at least. And can you be sure...."

"It isn't suspicion, radost moya," he assured her quickly. "I told you the Director trusts me—he has to. And he simply wants to see you. You know he's a family man himself."

But he let her work, fussing about the place, refilling his coffee, brushing an imaginary speck of dust off his coat. The doctor had told him that work was best for her—anything to get her mind off the lost child until there could be others. And the Director may have been a better distraction than any of the others, aside from the flattery of it.

Then the telephone on the wall rang sharply, and he answered it, smiling back at her. "Volcek."

"Good, Johann." It was the Director's Secretary of Science, Jean Petrecci and Volcek's sponsor. "We shall be there soon—and it's a beautiful day for the test, not so?"

Johann agreed quickly, though he had not yet had time to look through the windows even, with Stefanie's worry over the visit of the Director. But as he looked out now, he saw that it was a good day, clear, with only thin wisps of cloud in the sky.

Then, in the street below, there was a stirring, first of big cars, and then the shouts of the people. It was silenced, and the creaking elevator began to thump upwards. Stefanie made a last frantic dash into the bedroom, brushing nervously at her hair, and came out just as the knock sounded.

Johann had been right—the Director must have trusted him, since the big man had come up with only three of his guards, and now came thrusting his broad shoulders in, his greyed head not even darting about the room, his eyes leading him toward the Volceks.

Quick admiration filled his eyes at sight of Stefanie, and his gruff voice was soft, the voice the radio brought them when he was the Father of the State, or when he was telling them of the new plans for more food and better living.

"Sit—I'm only one of you, you know. Ah, Johann, this is the little Stefanie. I've wanted to meet you, to see the one Johann has spoken of so often." His language was perfect, but with the queer stilted effect it always had when he was not reading a prepared speech.

Watching Stefanie stammer over the honor of the Director's presence, and then relax gradually as the spell of the man took over, Johann began to smile more naturally. The Director was talking of his own beginnings—in much less than this—and the moving they would soon be doing, into a newer apartment, a fine new suburb. And surprisingly, he was talking of his own wife and children, and Stefanie was answering.

Remembering stories of the Director, Johann found it hard to recognize this as reality. The man had come up from the lowest ranks, an iron hand leading him up the ladder of Centralia's autocratic bureaucracy. But now the hand was sheathed, and even Stefanie began to smile.

Then it was over, and the Director was rising. Johann kissed his wife quickly, embarrassed slightly at the Director's approving smile, and they were out in the elevator, heading toward the big, waiting cars.

"Now I trust you, Johann Volcek," the Director told him. "Now I can go with you to this test. With such a wife waiting you, there can be no

trickery against the State. No—don't say it! It is not you I could distrust—it is everyone I must distrust. But not now. What does the doctor say?"

"Another year." For a time they had been afraid that Stefanie could never have children again, but the new treatments had apparently been effective. Centralia's progress in all phases of gynecology had been spectacular.

The Director nodded. "Good. The State needs such children as you will have. And a man has need of little ones. But tell me—you still feel sure of this test?"

Then the talk became technical. Johann was sure. There had been smaller tests, during the two years the project had been going on, and all of them had been effective.

Then cold fingers ran over him, tingling at the ends of his nerves, as he realized the trick semantics was playing on him.

Test? It had been the name they had given it, and in time it had come to be no more than that in his mind—a test of his theories. But this was not just a test. This was the feat itself, the step that would bring an end to half the world, the culmination of the hopes of Centralia, and the final, positive proof of the ideas of Volcek.

He had been almost unaware of the power that had grown from his idea, but now it hit him. It wasn't easy to do that to half a world, even in these days. But it had to be done.

Thirty years before, there had been a sprawling group of small nations and several large powers. But with the beginning of the atomic age, that had shaken itself down until now there were actually only the two hemispheres. Centralia had most of the world's population, but the West had achieved equality by its head-start in the sciences and in industry. For thirty years, little nation had accreted to big nation, until now there were the two of them. Nominally, the little nations still existed; but it was a polite fiction, like the fiction of bland softness the Director had adopted before Stefanie.

And this was not a world where two powers could exist. They had somehow achieved it, while the accretion of control over the neighboring states went on. There had been fracas piled onto struggle, but never outright war. Now, though, things had reached a stage where each side knew that sooner or later the hydrogen-bombs must fall, and where those

bombs were of a size and efficiency that might even end the world. There were even rumors of solar-phoenix bombs which could turn the world into a flaming, lesser sun.

Volcek sighed. This was better than that. Better that half the world should slow down and come to a gradual halt than that the rain of hell should descend from the heavens, perhaps igniting the world itself.

They were at the laboratories, now, and Volcek got out of the car behind the Director, vaguely conscious that taking second place was a mark of honor. Inside the building, one of the rooms had been cleared, leaving a few seats, a stand, and a single board of levers against the wall. Already, the seats were taken, and men were rising to salute the Director.

Ki Fong, Tsamatsu, Bhandaputra, Simonolov, Schwartzkopf, Jordssen—all of the big names of government and science—were there. Some were scowling intently as they tried to digest the printed formulae on the big blackboard which gave part of the theory behind Volcek's work; others were smiling, assured only that this was the day when Centralia would come into its own. And some, as always, were estimating Volcek, wondering how his importance would conflict with their own.

The Director smiled thinly, dropping an arm over Volcek's shoulder. "After this day, Johann, you'll need bodyguards. I have seen to that. And Petrecci ... well, we shall see...."

Johann caught himself before he could wince. He'd liked Petrecci, had no desire to replace him. But if the implication of the Director's words was what he thought ... still, it would be good for Stefanie. She had had too much trouble, and it was time life smiled on her a little. It would be good for their children, too, to grow up with comfort, even a little luxury, tutored perhaps with the children of the Director, himself. As Secretary of Science, Johann Volcek could give his family a great deal. He caught Petrecci's eyes on him, and turned his head quickly back to the other men.

At the Director's nod, he began outlining the facts to them. Some already knew of what was being done here, but all were listening as if the Director himself were speaking.

He could only give the barest facts. He'd been experimenting with a means of controlling fission for some power application, working on the problem of getting hydrogen to fission at temperatures below the millions

of degrees where it normally began, and in tiny amounts. And by sheer accident, he had stumbled on a process where nitrogen fissioned, instead —two atoms of nitrogen combining into one, straining the nucleus that now held fourteen protons and fourteen neutrons, distorting it until some of the binding force of the nucleus released energy, and it broke up into simpler atoms again—as if both fission and fusion were going on.

It had not been successful, from a commercial angle, but it had produced an unexpected result. The mice which had been kept to test out danger of radiation had not been killed—but they had been sterile, as events proved, from then on. The release of radiation was not quite normal gamma rays; it was subtler than that—some queerly polarized radiation that struck at the fertility of animals and ended it.

"But you were not sterilized," Ki Fong interrupted him.

"I was lucky—I had been using a shield that was heavy enough to turn aside the radiation—the four-foot walls of the oven where the experiment was conducted. It only leaked out through the panel we later found had a crack in it—but that was toward the mice."

Three years had been spent in testing it on mice, before the reports had found Petrecci, and brought him to the little laboratory of Johann Volcek. By then, Volcek had developed a complete control of the process, and had learned to fuse and fission oxygen as well as nitrogen, but without the production of sterilizing radiation this time.

After that, there had been no more mice. Volcek shuddered, trying to conceal it, as he remembered the prisoners who had stood before the portal of the oven, and gone away, sterile. And there had been tests in the big, deserted wastes near the Gobi, where balls of fire had leaped from his tiny little devices, and cracked themselves into flaming energy that grew and spread before vanishing. More sterility had followed.

"It requires very little apparatus," Volcek said, finally. He pulled a small tube from a drawer near the wall, and held it out to them. "This is the source. A small battery, these coils, tubes, this little crucible—nothing more. Once we knew why it started the fusion, it was easy to simplify."

And it was simple. A man could carry one of the devices with him in a small bag, and it was meaningless in appearance. It could be built into a radio, as if it were part of the tuning device. It could slip past customs, harmless in its looks, and be spread wherever wanted.



And now....

The Director took over, then, telling them what had already been done. In every city and hamlet, from coast to coast and from polar cap to polar cap, the West was covered with these tiny little devices, each equipped with a little crystal delicately attuned to one here, so that they would all function at once.

There would be no war. Centralia had labored to avoid war in spite of the hatred and lusts of the West. Now, they would be even more agreeable, even more meek. They would take the insults; they would not fight. Because, once the nitrogen of the air had done its job, there would be only a generation of patience, while no more children were born to the West. And some day, there would be only one Power—Centralia.

Schwartzkopf asked the question that was bothering the others, though he already knew the answer. "But these balls of fissioning or fusioning nitrogen—when they go off over the West, they are too much like atomic bombs. Won't the West feel it is attacked and retaliate with their genuine bombs?"

"We, too, shall be attacked!" It was Volcek's other process, of course. Simultaneously, there would be released similar "bombs" over all of the territory of Centralia. The heat and power would do a minor amount of damage, of course—but this process produced no sterilizing radiation. "Only New Zealand will be free."

New Zealand had somehow held out of the two coalitions, by its hardest efforts and with the help of its location. It was weakly allied to the West, but too remote.

The Director smiled again, the tight smile that was reserved for private meetings. "We shall, of course, accuse the West—but within the hour, when word of their trouble comes, we shall ask for a truce to find the culprit. Simple, is it not?"

The clock on the wall indicated five minutes before zero hour, and Volcek wiped his hands surreptitiously against his coat. It was simple enough, this use to which they had put his discoveries. And, he told himself again, it was better than any rain of real atomics. The West would not be hurt seriously—it would simply die out slowly, as no more children were born. It was really the most merciful solution to the politics of this world.

He could picture some of the panic, of course, when the little tubes did their work. First a tiny spark would form in the tube, with a spitting and hissing. Then it would grow, breaking out of the tube and through walls or anything in its way, growing and rising, spreading erratically horizontally, moving with a strange random motion, as it climbed upwards and grew larger and larger. It would reach the size of a normal atomic bomb, in a few minutes. And some would be killed by its heat, as some buildings would catch fire from it.

But mostly, there would be the terror as the people in the cities saw it spread its visible radiation and heard the familiar crackling thunder of its detonation. The terror would kill some of them, in their panic-flight, even while the thing itself drifted upwards until it found a layer of air too thin for it to go on, and it came to an automatic end.

But they would mostly escape, except for bad cases of "sunburn" and the results of their own panic. Dry material flamed quickly before its peculiar radiation, but men were not made of dry material, and it was almost harmless. They would simply have no children. And that was better than most of them could expect in a day when each morning marked the beginning of a new fear of hydrogen-bombs or worse.

One more minute.

Volcek had expected the Director to move to the panel where the big switch would cut on the surprisingly small oscillator that would trigger the little crystals in the tube projectors. But the Director was stepping back, motioning him forward. "You, Johann—it is an honor I have reserved for you."

There was silence in the laboratory room as Volcek moved slowly toward the board. He straightened, his eyes going down to his coat, where a bit of lint clung to it. Stefanie would have spotted it at once and rushed to brush it off. Stefanie who knew nothing of what his great work was, but who was awed by having a husband who could receive a visit from the Director. Stefanie who could have other children, after all, in this world that would have ultimate peace in spite of all the war threats, because of the work her husband was now about to do.

Suddenly, he wondered how many Stefanies there might be in the West. How many women would wait for the children they wanted, and never find them? How many would curse him, when they finally realized the truth, without ever knowing that he was the man they were cursing?

He cut off the thought, savagely. There would be others in the long centuries to come, who would know his name and would then bless him, as their children grew up without the threat of war and extinction. His children would be proud of him—his and Stefanie's.

He touched the switch that was to set off the harmless, fake "bombs" over their own world first. The Director was at his side, his face no longer smiling, but narrowed to that of a wolf.

Then the Director chuckled, and the edge of his lips curled up. "Let there be light," he quoted, and his eyes showed that he knew the original usage of the term in the Book he was quoting.

And there was light, as Johann's finger hit the switch. A tiny, spitting, hissing thing lifted from the nearby city, going up and forward in weird, erratic movements, growing larger, and spreading out, now beginning the muttered, staccato thunder that was not unlike a plutonium bomb.

The Director reached over and pressed the other switch that would send the sterilizing bombs up over the West—but he did not depress it fully. He stopped, and nodded to Volcek, and again Johann's hand went out, pushing the lever of the switch.

He should have brought Stefanie—if only she could have known nothing of the results. She would have been proud of him then, as the Director solemnly shook the hand that had done its work, and the other men began to cluster around him.

Then they moved toward the windows, hesitantly at first, not quite sure that this fire in the heavens over the city beyond was really the safe kind. But the Director led them, together with Volcek, and they stood gazing out.

It was a huge ball of blazing fire in the sky now, partially softened by the filters that had sprung shut over the windows automatically, and the mutter of its detonation reached them as they stood there.

There was some damage, of course, even here. Some of the older wooden buildings near where it had first appeared were bursting into flames, and the distant figures of people had gone into a panic—they had to believe it was real, just as the West must believe for a time that both powers had received the same treatment.

Stefanie? But Volcek had taken care of that, with a drug in her coffee. She would be asleep, unaware of the tumult, and not one of the mob trying frantically to escape what could never harm them.

Now the ball of fire was rising upwards more steadily, its own heat driving it up as a blast of hot air is carried up over a fire. The brightness began to fade as they watched, moving up and turning smaller, shrinking, and finally going away.

Volcek sighed, and the Director echoed it, a satisfied sigh, and a somewhat regretful one. "It is hard to see even a few of my people hurting themselves," the Director said slowly. "But it is best. And—it is done."

He turned to Volcek, and Johann straightened, reminding himself that whatever the Director said must be remembered. He would have to tell Stefanie—and someday, he could tell his children, and his grandchildren. He must remember it.

But the Director's words were never spoken. There was a shout from the windows, and they swung back, to see another tiny flame leaping up, this time nearer, growing and spitting.

There was something wrong with it. The other had grown more slowly. This raged out, savagely, growing more sure of itself as it leaped toward them, then darted sidewise.

Volcek turned suddenly to the instruments packed in the drawers. The spectrovisor and the diffractograph came out in his shaking hands, and he slapped them down onto the wooden sill of the window, already beginning to smoke faintly.

Then his hands steadied as he adjusted the instruments.

One look was enough. This was the nitrogen-fusion, not the harmless oxygen reaction.

His eyes met the Director's, and he nodded, but the nod was unnecessary. The Director had already guessed.

They moved toward him, a harsh mob sound coming from them, but the Director was before them.

"No! Stop!" The voice that had been trained to command a power greater than men had ever held before stopped them. "No, if the West has scientists too, that is no fault of Johann Volcek. Johann, you did not fail; you will not suffer."

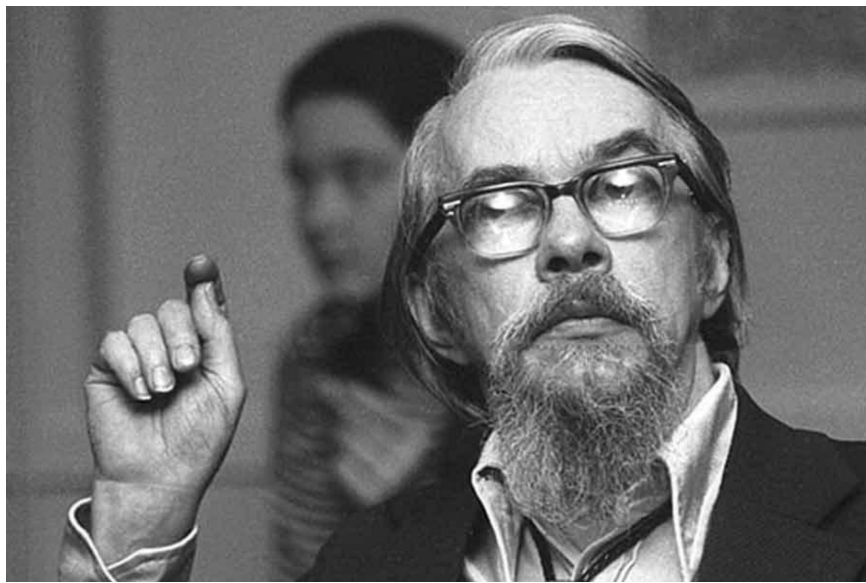
Volcek heard him, and saw them fall back. He thought again of the lint on his coat, and looked down at it. He picked it off, while the others drew back, and the Director was assuring him that all would be well with him.

Stefanie would have no children now. There would be no grandchildren to hear the Director's senseless words, telling him he would not suffer.

You don't suffer when you've killed a race.

THE END

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**L**ester del Rey began his writing career in the 1940s and gained recognition for his science fiction stories and novels. He often explored themes of technology, space exploration, and the impact of scientific advancements on society. Some of his notable works include "Nerves" (1942), "Rocket Jockey" (1952), and "The Eleventh Commandment" (1962).

In addition to his writing, del Rey played a crucial role in the field of science fiction publishing. Alongside his wife Judy-Lynn del Rey, he established Del Rey Books in 1977, a publishing imprint that became renowned for releasing science fiction and fantasy novels. Del Rey Books played a significant role in promoting and popularizing the works of numerous science fiction authors.

Lester del Rey's contributions to the science fiction community earned him multiple accolades, including the prestigious Hugo Award for his work as an editor. His writings and editorial influence continue to inspire and entertain science fiction enthusiasts around the world.



## TINY WINDOWS

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