

A Strange Selection

by John Billingsley with acknowledgment to A H Davis

Chapter I. Finding Betsie.

The third day of drinking our breakfast tea black and eating dry cereal, we'd had enough.

"You're just going to have to tether that cow," both Dad and Dave told Mother. But she would have none of it. The milk tasted better if the cow roamed free. She could always find the cow and milk her by lunchtime and we ought to keep some of the milk until the next morning.

Then Dave had his bright idea.

"Why don't we use satellite navigation," he said. "It's cheap as chips, even the cheapest cars have got GPS as standard." Every car knew where it was to a couple of metres and had speed limit details which included every school crossing.

It meant that we could pick up a top notch system from the wreckers for just twenty bucks.

Sorting out a battery to power it was a bit of a problem, until we had the idea of putting a solar cell on Betsy's back. It was a good thing she was docile.

The next day we hurried down to breakfast. Black tea again!

"But it's got to be working. She should be pinpointed to a metre," said Dad.

"She might know where she is, but how am I supposed to find out?" retorted Mother. "She isn't sending her position back to me!"

The next day we had milk. No, not through any great technological breakthrough. While he was puzzling about the way to send back the information, it occurred to Dave that if he tied his old cell phone around her neck, he could hear Betsy ringing for the cost of a phone call.

Come to think of it, it didn't even cost us that much. Betsy never did answer her phone.

Chapter II: The Day the Dam Ran Dry

It was the year of the big drought. Dad had always been proud of our dam, which had seen us through a lot of lean years without running dry. Now its level was falling. More and more of the muddy creek bed was coming into view.

Down near the dam wall, I could see a strange shape buried deep in the mud. It reminded me of one

of the huge old robot tractors.

My mind went back to our quarrel of a few years ago. Over tea, Dad had announced, "I've been offered a Magnifico virtually for nothing at all. That'll solve all our tillage problems!"

"But they're illegal," yelled Dave. He could yell as good as Dad when he was upset. "That must be one that missed the buy-back. They're using you to get rid of it. Don't you remember the Henderson case?"

"That poor kid," muttered Dad, with sympathy in his voice.

Wages and labour shortages had risen even faster than the price of fuel. The temptation to put a driverless tractor on the market was more than the Red team or the Green team could resist, in spite of warnings from their lawyers. Gimmicks and gismos could be bolted onto a conventional tractor, but that left the owner at the mercy of the "systems integrators" who cut the gadgets into the hydraulics and cable harnesses and charged an arm and a leg to fix them when they went wrong.

Those new machines were sleek and smart. With precision GPS, computer vision, NMR detectors for moisture, salinity, nitrates and anything else you cared to mention, their huge motors could rip up a field in no time at all and squirt into it anything it needed. Without a delicate, messy human on board, they could rattle along in a fog of dust and chemicals and get the job done without any interference.

Then came the Henderson case. One digit was entered wrongly and a housing development exactly ten kilometres west of a farming property got cultivated flat. Most people heard the racket and got out of the way in time, but poor, deaf little Annie Henderson was barely alive when they pulled her free from the rubble.

What silicone breast implants had done to Dow Corning was nothing compared against the slaughter of the big tractor firms. The 'buy back' of their machines for destruction or recycling was a laugh. The government's meagre compensation offered to owners did not work, but the huge prison sentences did!

"I don't know what anyone would do with such a thing," said Dave. " Sticking a cab on top of it wouldn't fool anyone. It broadcasts all its information back to base. Anyone could pick up the signal the moment it was switched on."

Dad looked uncomfortable. The next morning he disappeared for a couple of days. So did the old Magnum and a roll of steel cable.

So when the muddy shape brought all this back to my mind, my first thought was to drag Dad along to see it and ask him how it might have got there. But a couple more days went by before we could find time to get away.

When we did get back, the water had fallen even lower. The corpse of the once magnificent machine lay on the creek bed. The crows had already started nesting in her.

Two days later, the rains came and rising waters hid it all from view.

Chapter III. Our New Robot.

The first robot Dad bought was a Mark I ARF. Well, it was the first one he would admit to buying. Arfur, as we named it, wasn't much to look at. It was about the size of a four-wheeled motorbike, but with a high belly to straddle a row of crop.

All around it were bright orange panels. These were what saved it from the condemnation and fate of the old robot dinosaurs. One kick and Arfur would be stopped dead in his tracks, not just by the magic of electronics but by a solid spoke jamming his wheels.

"But what'll it do?" we all asked, "It can't pull anything and those little hoey things don't look up to much."

"So you enjoy chipping?" asked Dad, and we saw it in a more favourable light.

Even so, "Is that all it can do?" we couldn't help asking.

The instruction book was pretty dog-eared and hard to read. Dad had bought the machine from a bankruptcy sale over near Roma. We studied it hard and found that Arfur was a cunning little chap. If you told him where to find a row crop, he could guide himself to it with his satellite navigation, then use his cameras to follow the row to within a whisker.

Anything spaced at regular intervals, he regarded as a seedling and allowed to grow. But anything stepping out of line got swift attention from his hoes. Alternatively he could give it a squirt from the tank on his back.

That wasn't the end of it. Put him in a cotton crop and he could snuffle out the heliothis grubs. Put him among the cabbages and his infra red vision made the caterpillars stand out like beacons. The same went for weeds which appeared to his spectrum sensitive scanners as totally different in infra-red colouring from the plants they hid among.

"But it's listing up we need to do right now," said Dad. "He's not up to furrowing up, is he?"

"Well he can make a good scratch you can follow," said Dave with his nose in the manual.

Dad nearly fell off the shed roof, mounting the box that was the 'base station'. We weren't sure what to do with the CD-ROM full of software, so we pressed a few buttons for a 'manual demo'. A pull on his starter cord - automatic starting would be an added risk - and Arfur went purring away.

I must say that I was really impressed. Each row was as straight as the eye could judge and absolutely parallel to the rest. We left him to it, apart from a refill of fuel, and soon the entire paddock was finished.

Dad was so pleased that Dave didn't have the heart to tell him that with another five minutes setting up, the rows would all have been parallel with our boundary, rather than being parallel with the paddock in Roma.

Chapter IV. How we Saved on Tax.

With a bit of help from Dave, Dad had got to grips with the new accounting computer system.

Well, there wasn't a lot to get to grips with, really.

All transactions and payments went through the bank. There was only one. The government had nationalised all the old banks and called them the 'Federal Bank'. Some said it was the first popular thing the government had done in years.

The bank shareholders whinged a bit, but when faced with the prospect of prison sentences the directors were keen to encourage them to take the offer. It was the only one they would get. So everything we bought and everything we sold went through the government's computer. To some it was a blessed relief from having to work out what to reveal and what to conceal. To Dad, it was an irksome challenge.

Even the purchases from the city supermarket went on the government bank card. Of course all the shelves were 'virtual' by now, because there was no other way to stop tampering. Taking all food off the shelves hadn't been enough. There were the razor blades in the fluffy toys and million dollar ransom demands to match.

So now, even if you visited the supermarket you made your choices from the screens. You could carry away the sealed esky box the machines had packed for you, or, like us, you could choose from your own screen at home and wait for the postie to deliver the goods.

"Use barter to avoid tax," the email had said. "With our digital certificates you can buy and sell from your neighbours without the government getting involved." Dad was delighted and sent off his card number for his thousand dollars-worth at once.

"Um, won't the government ask what the thousand dollars was for?" asked Dave. "They'll charge you GST on it just in case."

"But like the email says, those certificates can go round and round without involving any more tax," said Dad.

"You mean like GST gives us back the tax on our outgoings?" asked Dave, but Dad didn't want to listen.

It was just short of midnight when the police called. Dad's digital cheque had bounced higher than a kite and led the search straight to the con-men. The police just wanted him to give evidence.

"Good thing you didn't try to spend those certificates," said the constable. Nobody would have accepted them except our undercover lads. Then we would have nabbed you, too."

So we saved on our tax bill to the extent of a two-hundred-dollar reward. That brought Dad's bank balance up to two hundred and twenty dollars and fifty cents.

Chapter V. Our Digital Television

"What do we need all these maps for?" asked Dad. "We've got yield maps, salinity maps, moisture maps, elevation maps, geological infrastructure maps, vegetation maps.... Every time those darned robots go out, they send back another map!"

One after another the maps flashed onto the screen which took up most of the wall of the sitting

room. He gave a vicious tap to the keyboard and we prepared to settle down for a serious Sunday afternoon's entertainment instead. But it was not going to be so easy.

Even digitally remastered and with stereo sound, there are only so many times you can enjoy watching "The Good Life". The same goes for "Yes Minister", "Mother and Son", a hundred or more colorised "Gainsborough" films and the dozens of episodes in the life of James Bond. After half an hour of channel hopping, Dad was hopping mad.

Another thump at the keyboard and the TV wall turned back into a window.

I have always enjoyed the view from the top paddock and it always filled Dad with pleasure. He could never resist boasting of the ten dollars a year the TV company paid for the signals from the tiny camera buried in a gum tree.

He didn't mention the twenty dollars he was charged to use the 'screensaver' - though it did give him the right to gaze out on a Thai rice paddy or onto downtown New York. I wondered how many millions were watching our own view right now.

It was a shame nobody had thought to warn young Jed before he took his young lady up to admire the sunset. It had caused quite a stir.

"If they'll pay to look at a view, how much more will they pay to ride through the paddock?" asked Dad. It seemed a great idea. Arfur's cameras were linked to our TV so that we could look in and give the odd bit of advice on what was a grub hole and what was a black pebble. It was amazing what tiny problems seemed to upset the robots.

In no time, the data had been linked back through the web and any city folk could enjoy the ride as Arfur made his careful way through the field, popping in each seed at exact intervals to give the 'Scottish tartan' effect you expect of a decently planted field.

It was very popular.

It was only when the plants were half a metre tall that we realised that the hackers had got at Arfur. How else do you explain a magnificent set of crop circles?

Chapter VI. Not Growing Cotton

"We're not growing cotton this year," said Dad.

"But we've never grown it. Not to get anything we could sell, that is," said Dave.

"But this year we're not growing it for money. Lots of money."

Australia had joined the European Community market. Well, after the American Second Civil War there wasn't much else to join. We had given Asia a go, but they really didn't seem to think our faces fitted. It made more sense to join Europe, after all our dollar seems to have been locked to their Euro for decades.

CW2, as it was called, had its good points and its bad points. Lots of trading markets were left for us to compete for and oil prices had dropped like a stone. The Arabs could hardly give their oil

away. On the bad side, it seems that a lot of the American lawyers had got out in time and headed for Australia. But it gladdened our hearts to see how many of their American dollars it took to buy one of our cents.

Anyway, there we were, signed up to a funny new set of European rules.

"They pay you money not to grow things," gloated Dad. "Those Frenchies have a word for it. They call it 'setaside'."

"Sounds more like suicide to me," grumbled Dave.

"So we're going to grow no cotton in Old Murphy's paddock." Said Dad, "Then they'll give us heaps of Euros. To get the money, we just mustn't take a crop off the paddock."

But Dad still couldn't sleep until he had thought of something he could do with the paddock instead.

He took to tinkering with Arfur and Archie, calling up their programs on the TV wall. He even seemed to have taken an interest in the maps they made, as they plodded in dead straight lines to and fro across the fields.

I wondered what ever he could want with bags and bags of poppy and canola seed. I didn't dare ask.

It was quite a few weeks later that I found out the answer. He had a brand new Hoverdrive parked out front. We rode in style up to top paddock and our famous view. I hadn't seen it on TV lately.

As we topped the ridge, the blaze of colour nearly took out my eyes. We looked down over hectares of red poppies and yellow canola on a background of dark soil, shaped in glorious arches.

"You don't have to like hamburger," he said, "But it's almost as pretty as the cheque from the advertisers."

"Makes you feel nostalgic for the poor old US of A, though."