

*The Sixth
Acolyte Reader*



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Starman

by Thomas Mitchell

I couldn't believe someone would want to spend so much time with me, let alone like me. You see I stutter when talking to him – it's not because I'm nervous, but when I get excited my mind seems to move faster than my lips. I've never talked to anyone about myself before: I live with my mom and can't talk to her, and my dad won't call or visit, even though he lives only seven miles away. Okay, sometimes I feel like a fool when I stutter or use the wrong words with Mr. Chips, but he likes me and makes me feel all right about making mistakes. Like, we all make them – so what?

Mr. Chips and I have been together all summer. I guess people would say he is strange. Like, he always wears a full suit of clothes even in hot weather, because he says his skin is sensitive to the sun, so we usually get together in the evenings, or late afternoons. I'd always meet him at the same place: the city park. On the first day of summer vacation he was sitting on a bench by himself. I don't remember who started talking first, but I do remember there was something about him that was very comforting. It was as if he was sitting there just for me. So I kept him to myself, a secret from the rest of the world, and from my mom.

Who is one of the biggest snoops I know – she makes Sherlock Holmes and Charlie Chan look like amateurs – so slipping anything past her is impossible. I just don't understand how she is able to catch every mistake I make. Like that time I skipped Sunday school last December to work on the city's Christmas parade float. Bitch, bitch – all she does is find fault, criticize – I'm always in trouble. Why doesn't she let me be myself, trust me? I'm not a little boy; I'm grown up now!

That first day in the park I remember telling Mr. Chips all of this while the long late afternoon shadows stretched towards the street, and a cool breeze from over the hill – with its smell of lawn sprinklers and fresh cut grass – finally chased away the day's heat. Most of all, I remember he just listened. You see, I have a tendency to talk too much, and our first meeting was typical.

I told him about my best friend Raymond who's also fifteen, and, like me, is as clumsy as an ox. We have a couple of classes in school together. We're similar in many ways, like we're both growing up without dads. I

keep trying to have Raymond sleep over on the weekend, but Mom is dead set against it because last year he brought over some cigarettes. So, since then, she's claimed he is a bad influence on me. I'm actually forbidden to see him or talk to him – can you believe that?

One particularly hot day the approaching evening wasn't offering any relief, so Mr. Chips treated me to a super-double-decker cheeseburger, with extra cheese, french fries and a Coke, all followed by a piece of cherry pie with a huge scoop of chocolate-marshmallow ice-cream. Himself, he didn't eat, but kept ordering food and sending it my way. Soon the sun was down and the city lights suddenly popped on and in the cooler air I started to really enjoy myself.

Then I saw Bambi walking up the street in our direction. I usually consider myself sort of plain in the looks department, unless I'm hanging around with Bambi. She's a freshman, too, and in my drama class. She was cast as Tweedledum and I, with pillows, was Tweedledee in the school's play. Bambi weighs almost two hundred pounds, but she's lots of fun to be with. You see, Bambi, Raymond and I are like the Three Musketeers because we always pal around together.

Anyways, I'm not overweight like Bambi. Just average in build with no great muscles to brag about, but that's understandable because I'm not an athlete. Oh, God, how I hate those jocks at school! I hate them so much that when the three of us go to a football game I've got to force myself to have a good time and not vomit on the first jock I see. There's more to life than muscles and good looks – hell if I know what it is, but there has to be.

I guess my attitude stinks. Well, when all two hundred pounds of Bambi started waving, shouting and bouncing across the street toward us, I almost choked on my ice-cream. I mean, I panicked. How was I going to explain Mr. Chips and his weird clothes – today he was dressed in a double-breasted pin-striped suit and a wide-brim hat – on the hottest day of summer, yet!

I thought I'd tell her he's my cousin just released from Happy Valley Home for the specially gifted. Then I did a very rude thing – I turned my back to Mr. Chips and tried to make it look like I didn't even know him.

Bambi was out of breath as she waddled up to our table and in her usual high-pitched voice proceeded to tell me the latest summer school gossip – like, who was breaking up with who, or the surprise pregnancy of the month. When she didn't register any curiosity about Mr. Chips I looked over my shoulder to find that he was gone. There was no sign of him anywhere. Bambi continued to ramble on, helping me finish my

desert, but I didn't hear a word she said – I was thinking about the man.

I don't like the way I look, much, 'cause I have acne eruptions along my chin and I'm short and I should wear glasses, especially when I read, which I like to do a lot – read, I mean, not wear glasses. I read authors like Tolkien, or Orson Scott Card – he's the greatest – and I like to watch old movies. I haven't told Mr. Chips I'm a four-eyes yet; I figured if I was my real self he'd not have anything to do with me. So I didn't tell him I'd forgot my glasses when he took me to the movies. I was scared I'd lost him because of Bambi's intrusion, but there he was, sitting on the park bench, and inside I was as excited as a little kid on Christmas morning. I don't really remember what happened in the movie we saw; I just remember when the lights went dim I almost couldn't see the screen, but that was all right.

Agatha is my cat. She was fast asleep on my pillow until the barking of a neighborhood dog startled her awake. She crawled onto my lap to make herself comfortable again. I named her after Agatha Christie, the mystery writer. Mom had her declawed to protect the furniture. She is snow white, except for a black diamond shape on her chin that I call her Fu-Manchu. When I'm busy reading or doing homework she likes to come around and roll on top of one of my books. She hasn't left my side all evening. I'm scratching her chin while she purrs loudly, basking in all the attention – not wanting me to leave. Amazing how animals seem to know.

We went to the beach, Mr. Chips and I. We took the crosstown bus, changing to a west-bound, and then straight across the city to the shore. As usual, I was talking so much we almost missed our connection.

The late afternoon sun was low, hugging the edge of a nearby rooftop when we arrived. A roller-skater unexpectedly careened around a corner and collided with Mr. Chips, almost knocking him flat on his ass. I shouted after the guy to be more careful next time, but he quickly skated away with a radio blasting in his ear.

By that hour there were only a few joggers on the beach – the sand was almost deserted, still warm, and it felt good to my bare legs – I crossed them, but then changed my mind and uncrossed them and lay back. I felt so happy. Mr. Chips did his best to protect himself from the sun. He lay next to me in a light pink double-knit jacket with matching pants, patent leather wing-tips, white gloves and baseball cap. What a sight we must have been! But I didn't care; I was just happy to relax into the soft sand and close my eyes. I hadn't said much on the last mile of the bus ride, so Mr. Chips asked what I was thinking.

"Oh, nothing," I stuttered. "I-I like you very much and feel great right now, almost as if I was free." Which was true. It was a tough thing for me to say, and I could feel him smile at me from under that crazy hat. He wasn't imposing or asking silly questions like other adults. For a while we watched the sun setting, then walked along the shore, ate hot dogs under the pier, played pinball, and that's when it dawned on me that I didn't ever want to go back home.

All those good feelings changed yesterday, Saturday. Oh, the day started off pretty routine. Mom was up early and off to work, allowing me to sleep in. Then Raymond came over after lunch to watch a video movie, an almost X-rated spy story, on my new recorder. It was real 'gordy', not the kind of thing I would choose. I smoked up a storm because I had never seen so much nudity before – I was really embarrassed – and had to keep covering my hard with a pillow.

Well, after the film we started horsing around, wrestling and jumping on the sofa. Raymond chased me through the house – it was a game we always played – to be caught meant you'd get goosed between the legs till you were screaming with laughter, begging for mercy. Only today it went further. Raymond tackled me and pinned me on the floor, where he worked his hand down my waist and found my hard – it hadn't gone down since the video. He squeezed it, and that wasn't so radical – like, it wasn't the first time one of us had checked the other guy out – but he wouldn't let go. So I got him the same way.

Well, there he was staring down at me and I was staring up at him, and this big shiver went through me. It was like we both had the idea at the same time: we shoved our clothes out of the way, and then we were in this terrific hug that moved. I guess I don't have to tell you how good it felt, with Raymond being my best male friend, even if it was a surprise – not that either one of us ever thought about doing such a thing before – and I don't have to tell you what happened next. Splash. All over each other. Talk about embarrassed! But, mopping up, Raymond started to laugh, and so did I. I mean, it was serious, and, for me anyhow, the world had changed, and there I was laughing like to bust a gut, and somehow my foot caught the edge of the coffee table, causing the lamp to go crashing to the floor. That put an end to everything. Raymond thought it doubly best this time if he wasn't around when my mother came home.

I heard her pull into the driveway not an awful lot later.

"You've been smoking," she mumbled, not in a good mood and walking past the broken lamp. "I can smell it, and where were you until

late last night?"

"I didn't smoke."

"Don't lie to me, young man."

"You smoke. Why can't I?"

"I'm an adult and if I want to ruin my body I'll do so, but I'm not going to allow you to follow the same path your brother did."

She believes my brother's life was ruined by smoking, which led to marijuana, which led to his drinking, which led to drugs. I don't really know my brother because he's twelve years older than me.

"I could always tell when he was on drugs," she would say. "He would walk in the house and just sit in a stupor on that couch." She'd point to where I was sitting. "He wouldn't answer my questions, just sit there and stare. I always knew. He wasn't able to fool me, and neither can you!"

She doesn't know it, but I tried pot once – it wasn't that bad. At school all the smokers go across the street to the park for lunch. A joint is passed around and once I had a quick puff. Sometimes the guys pass some funny looking pills. They don't offer me any because I'm not part of that crowd, but I don't care.

Anyways, it wasn't until Mom walked by the lamp the second time that she noticed it was broken. As much as I'd been expecting that moment, it still startled me. When she starts shouting I just want to crawl into a hole and hide.

Now she was really off: "I spend good money to furnish this place and make it look nice and you repay me by destroying everything! I didn't want a house – if it wasn't for you I could be living in a condo on the beach. But, no, after the divorce everyone told me that with a boy I must have a house in a good neighborhood, near good schools. I send you to private schools and to summer camp. What good does that do? How do you repay me? By flunking out and smoking, by lying and destroying my property! I know that Raymond boy had something to do with this. He's a rebel. Wait till I get a hold of his mother...!" And so on, and so on.

All of this over smoking and busting a stupid lamp. What would she of thought if she'd seen me humping off on the floor with Raymond the rebel? For that matter, what did I think of it? Mom's hysteria wasn't giving me much of a chance to figure anything out.

Last year she actually called the police after she caught me smoking for the first time and demanded that they arrest me and lock me up. But the police officer was very kind. Of course there was nothing he could do, so he gave her the phone number of the juvenile authorities and they put her in touch with a psychologist.

She makes me dizzy when she starts shouting like that; it's as if I'm walking in a fog and can't recognize anything around me. At the first sign of trouble Agatha had scampered off my lap, leaving me alone. I got up. Walking out on Mom when she's acting like this makes her angrier, so she soon began to shout until the whole street could hear her. I shut myself up in my room in order to lie down.

I threw my old camp duffel bag on the top bunk. Mom's footsteps echoed on the kitchen floor at the other end of the house and I knew she was reaching for the aspirin. Agatha was scratching at the door to come in, knowing as always that something was wrong. If I let her in she would crawl up on the bed and snuggle into my neck to cheer me up. I tried to forget all that was going on, lay down, picked up a book and lost myself in *The Wizard of Earthsea*. Suddenly Agatha jumped up on me and Mom was standing by my side.

"Who is Mr. Chips?" she demanded. A shock wave of panic flashed through me and I started to sweat. How did she know about Mr. Chips? I tried to ignore the question and pretended to read my book.

"Who is Mr. Chips, young man?!" she yelled, yanking the book from my hands and ripping it in half. "I read your diary and want to know about Mr. Chips!"

Agatha tried to snuggle up to me and I pushed her away. What gave Mom the right to sneak into my room when I was away and read my private thoughts? Mr. Chips was *my* friend, not hers. My stomach was hurting. I had to go to the bathroom, but all I could think about was getting out of the house.

I've almost finished my packing. Sitting at the window I watch the approaching night, and it suddenly occurs to me that I've forgot about my diary. It is under a pile of underwear at the bottom of my dresser. It falls open to an entry I'd made a couple of months ago: *I sat by the phone all day today. Should I call him or not?* It is dated June 14th, my birthday.

You'd think after all that time I'd of learned not to expect much from my dad. It was over a year since I'd heard from him. Almost as if he'd disappeared or walked out of my life. Oh, he kept in touch for a couple of years after the divorce, but now I don't hear from him at all. I told Mr. Chips about the incident that had happened last year. Mom had burst into my room early one morning and woke me out of a deep sleep.

"Get up! Your dad wants to talk to you!" When I stumbled into the living room I could hear her arguing with him on the phone. "I want you

to tell him to listen to me," she said, "and to buckle down in his classes. We don't pay tuition at a private school for nothing. Tell him that he's going to have to shape up or you'll come over and... Oh, George, he's so difficult to handle now he's a teenager..."

I knew my father didn't want to talk to me, and when she handed me the phone the first thing I heard was him hanging up – click! Mom stood there listening for a long time while I held a conversation with the dial tone. I nodded and smiled, promised to be good, while all the time it was tearing me apart inside.

"Have you ever wished you could make yourself disappear?" I asked Mr. Chips as we walked down the late night street. I was still shaking from my argument with Mom coming on top of whatever it was I'd done with Raymond. Mr. Chips was walking tall, listening to me as I kept up with his easy stride. The bright neon from the shop lights reflected off his suit and shoes, making Mr. Chips look almost magical. I knew it was going to be a special night. We came to the park and walked towards the rose garden. I was babbling at the mouth, unable to stop talking, while he leaned forward from time to time to politely ask questions. I felt so comfortable with him I told him about me and Raymond that morning.

Just as quickly I regretted doing so. Why did I expose myself like that? Now he's really going to consider me a geek, I thought. He won't want to have anything to do with me anymore. Boy, you really blew it this time, stupid! Why can't you keep your big mouth shut?

But that's not what happened – he just stopped walking and leaned closer to me than he ever had before, and I foolishly started crying. What I couldn't figure out was how he could like such a slob as me! I mean, I couldn't do anything right – I couldn't even talk to him without crying.

We were in the deep shadows of the park trees. It was late and quiet in the park. I'd never been here at this hour of the night. What Mr. Chips did next didn't scare me at all. In some way I guess I was expecting it. He stood in front of me and casually slipped out of his blue suit. Fully naked, he stood on spindle-like-legs and seemed taller than just a few moments before. In fact, I had this weird thought that I was seeing a caterpillar going through his transition from ugly to beautiful. When I looked up, I found bright friendly eyes, watched his long slender fingers move silently towards me until they caressed my cheek and neck. This all seemed like a dream. His arm was like a paper streamer waving in the breeze. Slowly it wrapped around my waist, the other around my shoulder, and I allowed myself to be undressed and tenderly pulled into his body. This made me

weep even more, so I clung tightly, sacred I might lose him.

For once, time held still for me, and the frantic pressure of the day seemed far away. I now nestled my head under his chin. I could smell the sweetness of his breath. Moonlight sparkled off the pastels of the surrounding roses and, like on a movie screen, they reflected off both our bodies. We glowed in the dark. Unexpectedly I was lifted off the ground until my head was in the trees. I felt his strong arms hold me tight, his huge hands knead my buttocks. His face, void of all hair, was so handsome, and I ran my fingers over the spot where his eyebrows should have been, then followed the contours until I found a narrow mouth and felt his breath lightly brush my cool skin. I'd never known what love was, not in my dreams, however sexy they were, not in that quick, tentative grappling with Raymond, but I was learning, learning fast. For the first time in my life I really had nothing to say. So, snuggled in his arms, I just listened closely, felt, dreamed as I'd never dreamed before, as Mr. Chips talked. In the rose garden, in the middle of the night, there was only the man and me bare-ass to the world.

It's a rare, clear California night. The sun will be rising in a couple of hours, so I'd better be going. Only the barking of a neighborhood dog cuts the dew-heavy air as I open my bedroom window to breathe it all in one final time.

Buckling the last of my personals into my duffel, I lift it high onto my shoulders. Agatha is sleeping on my last long entry in the diary. I gently lift her up and tuck her into my shirt, allowing her head to pop out between the button holes so she can see where we are going. Taking one last look around, I whisper my goodbyes to the room, snap off the light and slip out the window into the darkness.

I've never felt this good before. I'm confident I can take on the world. I hurry down the street, past Raymond's house. The hardest part is leaving my friends. I'm going to miss Bambi and Raymond very much. I wonder what Raymond is thinking about yesterday; now I'll never know. Then I turn, start running into the night, catch a breeze, until it seems I can fly and, looking up, gaze at the moon and reach for the stars.