This story of a family outing in the not too distant overpopulated future purports to be science fiction; there are those, we believe, who would consider it a fair report on the present. The author writes about herself: "I was born on Long Island; graduated from Radcliffe College; spent several years in Paris in an expatriate F&SF colony where all of us dropped whatever we were doing as soon as a new issue appeared. Now back in New York, I'm an editorial associate at Esquire magazine. I've written articles, but this is my first try at fiction. I have a lot more planned—as soon as somebody figures out where time goes to when it hits Manhattan." Which last might be a good story in itself . . . .

THE TUNNEL AHEAD

by Alice Glaser

THE FLOOR OF THE TOPOLINO was full of sand. There was sand in Tom's undershorts, too, and damp sand rubbing between his toes. Damn it, he thought, here they build you six-lane highways right on down to the ocean, a giant three-hundred car turntable to keep traffic moving over the beach, efficiency and organization and mechanization and cooperation and what does it get you? Sand. And inside the car, in spite of the air-conditioning, the sour smell of sun-dried salt water.

Tom's muscles ached with their familiar cramp. He ran his hands uselessly around the steering wheel, wishing he had something to do, or that there were room to stretch in the tiny car, then felt instantly ashamed of his antisocial wish. Naturally there was nothing for him to do because the drive, as on all highways, was set at "Automatic". That was the law. And although he had to sit hunched over so that his knees were drawn nearly to his chin, and the roof of the car pressed down on the back of his neck like the lid of a box, and his four kids crammed into the rear seat seemed to be breathing down his shirt

collar—well, that was something you simply had to adjust to, and besides, the Topolino had all the five-foot wheelbase the law allowed. So there was nothing to complain about.

Besides, it hadn't been a bad day, all things considered. Five hours to cover the forty miles out to the beach, then of course a couple of hours waiting in line *at* the beach for their turn in the water. The trip home was taking a little longer: it always did. The Tunnel, too, was unpredictable. Say ten o'clock, for getting home. Pretty good time. As good a way as any of killing a leisureday, he guessed. Sometimes there seemed to be an awful lot of leisuretime to kill.

Jeannie, in the seat beside him, was staring through the windshield. Her hair, almost as fair as the kids', was pulled back into pigtails, and although she was pregnant again she didn't look very much older than she had ten years before. But she had stopped knitting, and her mind was on the Tunnel. He could always tell.

"Ouch!" Something slammed into the back of Tom's neck and he ducked forward, banging his forehead on the windshield.

"Hey!" He half-turned and clutched at the spade that four-year old Pattie was waving.

"I swimmed", she announced, blue eyes round. "I swimmed good and I din't hit nobody."

"Anybody", Tom corrected. He confiscated the spade, thinking tiredly that "swim" these days meant "tread water", all there was room to do in the crowded bathing-area.

Jeannie had turned too, and was glowing at her daughter, but Tom shook his head.

"Over and out", he said briefly. He knew a car ride was an extra strain on kids, and lord knew he saw them seldom enough, what with their school-shifts and play-shifts and his own job-shift. But his brood was going to be properly brought up. See a sign of extroversion, squelch it at the beginning, that was his theory. Save them a lot of pain later on.

Jeannie leaned forward and pressed a dashboard button. The tranquillizer drawer slid open; Jeannie selected a pink one, but by the time she had turned around Pattie had subsided with her hands folded patiently in her lap and her eyes fixed on the rear seat TV screen. Jeannie sighed and slipped the pill into Pattie's half-open mouth anyway.

The other three hadn't spoken for hours which, of course, was as it should be. Jeannie had fed them a purposely heavy lunch in the car, steakopop and a hot, steaming bowl of rehydrated algaesoup from the thermos, and they had each had an extra dose of tranquillizers for the trip. Six-year old David, who was having a particularly

hard time learning to introvert, was watching the TV screen and breathing hard. David, his first-born son, born in the supermarket delivery booth in the year twenty-one hundred on the third of April at 8:32 in the morning. The year the population of the United States hit the billion mark. And the fifth child to arrive in that booth that morning. But his own son. The tow-headed twins, Susan and Pattie, sat upright and watched the screen with expressions of great seriousness on their faces, and the baby, two-year-old Betsy, had her fat legs stuck straight out in front of her and was obviously going to be asleep in minutes.

The car crawled forward at its allotted ten mph, just one in a ribbon of identical bright bubble cars, like candy buttons, that stretched along the New Pulaski Skyway under a setting sun. The distance between them, strictly rationed by Autodrive, never changed.

Tom felt the dull ache of tension settled behind his eyes. All of his muscles were protesting now with individual stabs of cramp. He glanced apologetically at Jeannie, who disliked sports, and switched on the dashboard TV. Third game in the World Series, and the game had already begun. Malenkovsky on red. Malenkovsky moved a checker and sat back. The cameras moved to Saito, on black. It was going to be a good game. Faster than most.

They were less than a mile from the Tunnel when the line of cars came to a halt. Tom said nothing for a minute. It might just be an accident, or even somebody, driving illegally on Manual, out of line. Another minute passed. Jeannie's hands were tense on the yellow blanket she was knitting.

It was a definite halt. Jeannie regarded the motionless lines of cars, frowning a little.

"I'm glad it's happening now. That gives us a better chance of getting through, doesn't it?"

Her question was rhetorical, and Tom felt his usual stir of irritation. Jeannie was an intelligent girl; he couldn't have loved her so much otherwise. But explaining the laws of chance to her was hopeless. The Tunnel averaged ten closings a week. All ten could happen within seconds of each other, or on the hour, or not at all on a given day. That was how things were. The closing now affected their own chance of getting through not one iota.

Jeannie said, thoughtfully, "We'll be caught sometime, Tom."

He shrugged without answering. Whatever might happen in the future, they were obviously going to be held up for a good half hour now.

David was wriggling a little, his face apologetic.

"Can I get out, Daddy, if the Tunnel's closed? I *ache.*"

Tom bit his lip. He could sympathize as well as anyone, remembering the cramped misery of the years when his own body was growing and all he wanted to do was run fast, just run headlong, anyplace. Kids. Extros, all of them. Maybe you could get away with that kind of wildness back in the Twentieth century, when there were no crowds and plenty of space, but not these days. David was just going to have to learn to sit still like everybody else.

David had begun to flex his muscles rhythmically. Passive exercise, it was called, one of the new pseudo-sports that took up no room, and it was very scientifically taught in the playshifts. Tom eyed his son enviously. Great to be in condition like that. No need to wait in line to get your ration of gym time when you could depend on yourself like that.

"Dad, no kidding, now I gotta go." David wriggled in his seat again. Well, that sounded valid. Tom looked through the windshield. The thousands of cars in sight were still motionless, so he swung the door open. Luckily there was a chemjohn a few yards away, and only a short line in front of it. David slid quickly out of the car. Tom watched him start to stretch his arms over his head, released from the low roof, then sheepishly remember decent behavior and tighten into the approved intro-walk. "He's getting tall", Tom thought, with a sudden accession of hopelessness. He had been praying that David would inherit Jeannie's height instead of his own six feet. The more area you took up the harder everything was, and it was getting worse: Tom had noticed that, already, people would sometimes stare resentfully at him in the street.

There was an Italian family in the bright blue Topolino behind his own; they too had a car full of children. Two of the boys, seeing David in front of the chemjohn, burst out and dashed into the line behind him. The father was grinning; Tom caught his eye and looked away. He remembered seeing them pass a large bottle of expensive reclaimed-water around the car, the whole family guzzling it as though water grew on trees. Extros, that whole family. Almost criminal, the way people like that were allowed to run loose and increase the discomfort of everyone else. Now the father had left the car too. He had curly black hair; he was very plump. When he saw Tom watching him he grinned broadly, waved towards the Tunnel and lifted his shoulders with a kind of humorous resignation.

Tom drummed on the wheel. The extros were lucky. You'd never catch them worrying unduly about the Tunnel. They had to get the kids out of the city, once

in a while, like everybody else; the Tunnel was the only way in and out, so they shrugged and took it. Besides, there were so many rules and regulations now that it was hard to question them any more. You can't fight City Hall. The extros would neither dread the trip, the way Jeannie did, nor . . . Tom's fingers were rigid on the wheel. He clamped down, hard, on the thought in his mind. He had been about to say, *needed* it, the way he did.

David emerged from the chemjohn and slid back into his seat. The cars had just begun to move; in a moment they had resumed their crawl.

On the left of the Skyway they were coming to the development that was already called, facetiously, "Beer Can Mountain." So far there was nothing there except the mountainous stacks of shiny bricks, the metal bricks that had once been tin cans, and would soon be constructed into another badly-needed housing development. Probably with even lower ceilings and thinner walls. Tom winced, involuntarily. Even at home, in a much older residential section, the ceilings were so low that he could never stand up without bending his head. Individual area-space was being cut down and cut down, all the time.

On the flatlands, to the right of the Skyway, stretched mile after garish mile of apartment buildings, interspersed with gasoline stations and parking lots. And beyond these flatlands were the suburbs of Long Island, cement-floored and stacked with gay-colored skyscrapers.

Here, as they approached the city, the air was raucous with the noise of transistor radios and TV sets. Privacy and quiet had disappeared everywhere, of course, but this was a lower-class unit and so noisy that the blare penetrated even the closed windows of the car. The immense apartment buildings, cement block and neon-lit, came almost to the edge of the Skyway, with ramps between them at all levels. The ramps, originally built for cars, were swarming now with people returning from their routine job-shifts or from marketing, or just carrying on the interminable business of leisuretime. They looked pretty apathetic, Tom thought. You couldn't blame them. There was so much security that none of the work anybody did was really necessary, and they knew it. Their jobs were probably even more monotonous and futile than his own. All he did, on his own job-shift, was verify figures in a ledger, then copy them into another ledger. Time-killing, like everything else. These people looked as though they didn't care, one way or the other.

But as he watched there was a quick scuffle in the crowd, a sud-

den, brief outbreak of violence. One man's shoe had scraped the heel of the woman ahead of him; she turned and swung her shopping bag, scraping a bloody gash down his cheek. He slammed his fist at her stomach. She kicked. A man behind them rammed his way past, his face contorted. The pair separated, both muttering. Around them other knots of people were beginning to mutter. The irritation was spreading, as it seemed to do from time to time, as though nobody wanted anything so much as the chance to strike out.

Jeannie had seen the explosion too. She gasped and turned away from the window, looking quickly back at the children, who were all asleep now. Tom pulled one of her pigtails, gently.

The skyline loomed ahead of them, one vast unified glass-walled cube of Manhattan. Light rays shot from it into the sunset; the spots of foliage that were the carefully planned block gardens, one at each level of the ninety-eight floors of the Unit, glowed dark green. Tom, as he always did, blessed the foresight that had put them there. Each one of his children had been allotted his or her weekly hour on the grass and a chance to play near the tree. There was even a zoo on each level, not the kind of elaborate one they had in Washington and London and Moscow, of course, but at least it had a cat and a dog and a really large tank of goldfish. When you came down to it, luxuries like that almost made up for the crowds and the noise and tiny rooms and feeling that there was never quite enough air to breathe.

They were just outside the Tunnel. Jeannie had put her knitting down; she was looking intently ahead, but as though she were listening rather than looking. In spite of his own arguments, Tom felt his fingers thudding on the dashboard. On the TV screen, Malenkovsky triumphantly moved a king.

They had reached the Tunnel entrance. Jeannie was silent. She glanced at her watch, irrationally. Tom pressed the tranquillizer button and the drawer shot out, but Jeannie shook her head.

"I hate this, Tom. I think it's an absolutely *lousy* idea."

Her voice sounded almost savage, for Jeannie, and Tom felt a little shocked.

"It's the fairest thing", he argued. "You know it perfectly well."

Jeannie's mouth had set in a stubborn line. "I don't care. There must be another way."

"This is the only fair way', Tom said again. "We take our chances along with everybody else."

His own heart was pounding, now, and his hands felt cold. It was the feeling he always had on entering the Tunnel, and he had never decided whether it was

dread or elation, or both. He was no longer bored. He glanced at the children on the back seat. David was watching television again and gnawing on a fingernail; the three little ones were still asleep, sitting up as they had been taught to do, hands folded properly in their laps. Three blind mice.

The Tunnel was echoing and cold. White light slipped off the white tile walls that were clean and polished and air-tight. Wind rushed past, sounding as though the car were moving faster than it actually was. The Italian family was still behind them, following at a constant speed. Huge fans were set into the Tunnel ceiling; their roar reverberated over the roar of the giant invisible air-conditioning units, over the slow wind of the moving cars.

Jeannie had put her head down on the seat back as though she were asleep. The cars stopped for an instant, started again. Tom wondered if Jeannie felt the same vivid thrill that he felt. Then he looked at the line of her mouth and saw the fear.

The Tunnel was 8500 feet long. Each car took up seven feet, bumper to bumper. Allow five feet between cars. About seven hundred cars in the tunnel, then: more than three thousand people. It would take each car about fifteen minutes to go through. Their car was halfway through now.

They were three-quarters of the way through. Automatic signal lights were flashing at them from the catwalk under the Tunnel roof. Tom's foot moved to the gas pedal before he remembered the car was set on Automatic. It was an atavistic gesture: his hands and feet wanted a job to do. His body, for a minute, wanted to control the direction of its plunge. It was the way he always felt, in the Tunnel.

They were almost through. His scalp felt as though tiny ants were running along the hairs. He moved his toes, feeling the scratch of sand on the nerves between them. He could see the far end of the Tunnel. Maybe two minutes more. A minute.

They stopped again. A car, somewhere ahead, had swerved out of line to search for the right exit. Once out of the Tunnel it was legal to switch back to Manual drive, since it was necessary to pick the right exit out of ten, and all too easy to find yourself carried to the top level of Manhattan Unit before finding a place to turn off.

Tom's hand drummed at the wheel. The maverick ahead had edged back into line. They started movement again. They picked up speed. They were out of the Tunnel.

Jeannie picked up her knitting and shook it, sharply. Then she dropped it as though it had bitten

her fingers. A bell was clanging over their heads, not too loud, but clear. Just behind their rear bumper a gate swung smoothly into place.

Jeannie turned to look back at the space behind them where the Italian family in the bright blue car, and others, had been. There were no cars there now. She turned back, to stare whitely through the windshield.

Tom was figuring. Two minutes for the ceiling sprays to work. Then the seven hundred cars in the Tunnel would be hauled out and emptied. Ten minutes for that, say. He wondered how long it was supposed to take for the giant fans to blow the cyanide gas away.

"Depopulation without Discrimination", they called it at election time. Nobody would ever admit voting for it, but almost everybody did. Aloud, you had to rationalize: it was the fairest way to do a necessary thing. But in the unadmitted places of your mind you knew it was more than that. A gamble, the one unpredictable element in the long, dreary process of survival. A game. Russian Roulette. A game you played to win? Or, maybe, to lose? The answer didn't matter, because the Tunnel was excitement. The only excitement left.

Tom felt, suddenly, remarkably wide awake. He switched to Manual Drive and angled the round nose of the Topolino over to the Fourth Level exit.

He began to whistle between his teeth. "Beach again next weekend, sweetie, huh?"

Jeannie's eyes were on his face. Defensively, he added, "Good for all of us, get out of the city, get a little fresh air once in a while."

He nudged her and pulled a pigtail gently, with affection.