



THIS CROWDED EARTH

Robert Bloch

AMAZING STORIES
SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

**THIS
CROWDED
EARTH**

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ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY**

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THE EVILS OF LONG AND DANGEROUS YEARS FINALLY ERUPTED IN BLOOD.

1. Harry Collins—1997

The telescreen lit up promptly at eight a.m. Smiling Brad came on with his usual greeting. "Good morning—it's a beautiful day in Chicagee!"

Harry Collins rolled over and twitched off the receiver. "This I doubt," he muttered. He sat up and reached into the closet for his clothing.

Visitors—particularly feminine ones—were always exclaiming over the advantages of Harry's apartment. "So convenient," they would say. "Everything handy, right within reach. And think of all the extra steps you save!"

Of course most of them were just being polite and trying to cheer Harry up. They knew damned well that he wasn't living in one room through any choice of his own. The Housing Act was something you just couldn't get around; not in Chicagee these days. A bachelor was entitled to one room—no more and no less. And even though Harry was making a speedy buck at the agency, he couldn't hope to beat the regulations.

There was only one way to beat them and that was to get married. Marriage would automatically entitle him to two rooms—*if* he could find them someplace.

More than a few of his feminine visitors had hinted at just that, but Harry didn't respond. Marriage was no solution, the way he figured it. He knew that he couldn't hope to locate a two-room apartment any closer than eighty miles away. It was bad enough driving forty miles to and from work every morning and night without doubling the distance. If he did find a bigger place, that would mean a three-hour trip each way on one of the commutrails, and the commutrails were murder. The Black Hole of Calcutta, on wheels.

But then, everything was murder, Harry reflected, as he stepped from the toilet to the sink, from the sink to the stove, from the stove to the table.

Powdered eggs for breakfast. That was murder, too. But it was a fast, cheap meal, easy to prepare, and the ingredients didn't waste a lot of storage space.

The only trouble was, he hated the way they tasted. Harry wished he had time to eat his breakfasts in a restaurant. He could afford the price, but he couldn't afford to wait in line more than a half-hour or so. His office schedule at the agency started promptly at ten-thirty. And he didn't get out until three-thirty; it was a long, hard five-hour day. Sometimes he wished he worked in the New Philly area, where a four-hour day was the rule. But he supposed that wouldn't mean any real saving in time, because he'd have to live further out. What was the population in New Philly now? Something like 63,000,000, wasn't it? Chicagee was much smaller—only 38,000,000, this year.

This year. Harry shook his head and took a gulp of the Instantea. Yes, this year the population was 38,000,000, and the boundaries of the community extended north to what used to be the old Milwaukee and south past Gary. What would it be like *next* year, and the year following?

Lately that question had begun to haunt Harry. He couldn't quite figure out why. After all, it was none of his business, really. He had a good job, security, a nice place just two hours from the Loop. He even drove his own car. What more could he ask?

And why did he have to start the day like this, with a blinding headache?

Harry finished his Instantea and considered the matter. Yes, it was beginning again, just as it had on almost every morning for the past month. He'd sit down at the table, eat his usual breakfast, and end up with a headache. Why?

It wasn't the food; for a while he'd deliberately varied his diet, but that didn't make any difference. And he'd had his usual monthly checkup not more than ten days ago, only to be assured there was nothing wrong with him. Still, the headaches persisted. Every morning, when he'd sit down and jerk his head to the left like this—

That was it. Jerking his head to the left. It always seemed to trigger the pain. But why? And where had he picked up this habit of jerking his head to the left?

Harry didn't know.

He glanced at his watch. It was almost nine, now. High time that he got started. He reached over to the interapartment video and dialled the garage downstairs.

"Bill," he said. "Can you bring my car around to Number Three?"

The tiny face in the hand-screen grinned sheepishly. "Mr. Collins, ain't it? Gee, I'm sorry, Mr. Collins. Night crew took on a new man, he must have futzed around with the lists, and I can't find your number."

Harry sighed. "It's one-eight-seven-three-dash-five," he said. "Light blue Pax, two-seater. Do you want the license number, too?"

"No, just your parking number. I'll recognize it when I see it. But God only knows what level it's on. That night man really—"

"Never mind," Harry interrupted. "How soon?"

"Twenty minutes or so. Maybe half an hour."

"Half an hour? I'll be late. Hurry it up!"

Harry clicked the video and shook his head. Half an hour! Well, you had to expect these things if you wanted to be independent and do your own driving today. If he wanted to work his priority through the office, he could get his application honored on the I.C. Line within a month. But the I.C. was just another commutrain, and he couldn't take it. Standing and swaying for almost two hours, fighting the crowds, battling his way in and out of the sidewalk escalators. Besides, there was always the danger of being crushed. He'd seen an old man trampled to death on a Michigan Boulevard escalator-feeder, and he'd never forgotten it.

Being afraid was only a partial reason for his reluctance to change. The worst thing, for Harry, was the thought of all those people; the forced bodily contact, the awareness of smothered breathing, odors, and the crushing confinement of flesh against flesh. It was bad enough in the lines, or on the streets. The commutrain was just too much.

Yet, as a small boy, Harry could remember the day when he'd loved such trips. Sitting there looking out of the window as the scenery whirled past—that was always a thrill when you were a little kid. How long ago had that been? More than twenty years, wasn't it?

Now there weren't any seats, and no windows. Which was just as well, probably, because the scenery didn't whirl past any more, either. Instead, there was a stop at every station on the line, and a constant battle as people

jockeyed for position to reach the exit-doors in time.

No, the car was better.

Harry reached for a container in the cabinet and poured out a couple of aspirystamines. That ought to help the headache. At least until he got to the office. Then he could start with the daily quota of yellowjackets. Meanwhile, getting out on the street might help him, too. A shame there wasn't a window in this apartment, but then, what good would it do, really? All he could see through it would be the next apartment.

He shrugged and picked up his coat. Nine-thirty, time to go downstairs. Maybe the car would be located sooner than Bill had promised; after all, he had nine assistants, and not everybody went to work on this first daylight shift.

Harry walked down the hall and punched the elevator button. He looked at the indicator, watched the red band move towards the numeral of this floor, then sweep past it.

"Full up!" he muttered. "Oh, well."

He reached out and touched both sides of the corridor. That was another thing he disliked; these narrow corridors. Two people could scarcely squeeze past one another without touching. Of course, it did save space to build apartments this way, and space was at a premium. But Harry couldn't get used to it. Now he remembered some of the old buildings that were still around when he was a little boy—

The headache seemed to be getting worse instead of better. Harry looked at the indicator above the other elevator entrance. The red band was crawling upward, passing him to stop on 48. That was the top floor. Now it was moving down, down; stopping on 47, 46, 45, 44, 43, and—here it was!

"Stand back, please!" said the tape. Harry did his best to oblige, but there wasn't much room. A good two dozen of his upstairs neighbors jammed the compartment. Harry thought he recognized one or two of the men, but he couldn't be sure. There were so many people, so many faces. After a while it got so they all seemed to look alike. Yes, and breathed alike, and felt alike when you were squeezed up against them, and you were always being squeezed up against them, wherever you went. And you could smell them,

and hear them wheeze and cough, and you went falling down with them into a bottomless pit where your head began to throb and throb and it was hard to move away from all that heat and pressure. It was hard enough just to keep from screaming—

Then the door opened and Harry was catapulted out into the lobby. The mob behind him pushed and clawed because they were in a hurry; they were always in a hurry these days, and if you got in their way they'd trample you down like that old man had been trampled down; there was no room for one man in a crowd any more.

Harry blinked and shook his head.

He gripped the edge of the wall and clung there in an effort to avoid being swept out of the lobby completely. His hands were sticky with perspiration. They slipped off as he slowly inched his way back through the crush of the mob.

"Wait for me!" he called. "Wait for me, I'm going down!" But his voice was lost in the maelstrom of sound just as his body was lost in the maelstrom of motion. Besides, an automatic elevator cannot hear. It is merely a mechanism that goes up and down, just like the other mechanisms that go in and out, or around and around, and you get caught up in them the way a squirrel gets caught in a squirrel-cage and you race and race, and the best you can hope for is to keep up with the machinery.

The elevator door clanged shut before Harry could reach it. He waited for another car to arrive, and this time he stood aside as the crowd emerged, then darted in behind them.

The car descended to the first garage level, and Harry stood gulping gratefully in the comparative isolation. There weren't more than ten people accompanying him.

He emerged on the ramp, gave his number to the attendant, and waved at Bill in his office. Bill seemed to recognize him; at least he nodded, briefly. No sense trying to talk—not in this sullen subterranea, filled with the booming echo of exhausts, the despairing shriek of brakes. Headlights flickered in the darkness as cars whirled past, ascending and descending on the loading platforms. The signal systems winked from the walls, and tires screeched

defiance to the warning bells.

Old-fashioned theologians, Harry remembered, used to argue whether there really was a Hell, and if so, had it been created by God or the Devil? Too bad they weren't around today to get an answer to their questions. There *was* a Hell, and it had been created by General Motors.

Harry's temples began to throb. Through blurred eyes, he saw the attendant beckoning him down the line to a platform marked *Check-Out #3*. He stood there with a cluster of others, waiting.

What was the matter with him today, anyway? First the headache, and now his feet were hurting. Standing around waiting, that's what did it. This eternal waiting. When he was a kid, the grownups were always complaining about the long seven-hour work days and how they cut into their leisure time. Well, maybe they had reason to gripe, but at least there *was* some leisure before work began or after it was through. Now that extra time was consumed in waiting. Standing in line, standing in crowds, wearing yourself out doing nothing.

Still, this time it wasn't really so bad. Within ten minutes the light blue Pax rolled up before him. Harry climbed in as the attendant slid out from behind the wheel and prepared to leave.

Then a fat man appeared, running along the ramp. He gestured wildly with a plump thumb. Harry nodded briefly, and the fat man hurled himself into the seat beside him and slammed the door.

They were off. Harry read the signals impatiently, waiting for the green *Go*. The moment he saw it he gunned his motor and got the car up to twenty-two and zipped away.

That's what he liked, that's what he always waited for. Of course it was dangerous, here in the tunnel system under the garage, but Harry always got a thrill out of speed. The Pax could do thirty-five or even forty, probably, on a theoretical open road. Still, twenty-two was enough to satisfy Harry.

He whizzed up the ramp, turned, headed for the street-level, then braked and waited for the signal to emerge.

Harsh sunlight pierced the smog and he felt his eyes watering. Now the street noises assailed his ears; the grinding of gears, the revving of motors. But at

least the total volume was lower, and with the windows tightly closed against the acrid air, he could hear.

Turning to the fat man beside him he said, "Hello, Frazer. What's the urgency?"

"Got to get downtown before eleven," the fat man answered. "Board meeting today, but I forgot about it. Knew I wouldn't have time to wait for the car, and I was hoping I'd find someone who'd give me a lift. Lucky for me that you came along when you did."

Harry nodded but did not reply. At the moment he was trying to edge into the traffic beyond. It flowed, bumper to bumper, in a steady stream; a stream moving at the uniform and prescribed rate of fifteen miles per hour. He released his brakes and the Pax nosed forward until a truck sounded its horn in ominous warning. The noise hurt Harry's head; he winced and grimaced.

"What's the matter?" asked Frazer.

"Headache," Harry muttered. He menaced a Chevso to with his bumper. "Damn it, I thought they didn't allow those big four-passenger jobs on this arterial during rush hours!" Gradually he managed to turn until he was in the righthand lane. "There," he said. "We're off."

And so they were, for all of three minutes, with the speed set at fifteen on autopilot. Then a signal went into action somewhere up ahead, and the procession halted. Harry flicked his switch. As was customary, horns sounded indignantly on all sides—a mechanical protest against a mechanical obstruction. Harry winced again.

"Hangover?" Frazer asked, solicitously. "Try aspirystamine."

Harry shook his head. "No hangover. And I've already taken three, thanks. Nothing does any good. So I guess it's just up to you."

"Up to me?" Frazer was genuinely puzzled. "What can I do about your headaches?"

"You're on the Board of City Planners, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"Well, I've got a suggestion for you to give to them. Tell them to start planning to drop a couple of heavy thermo-nucs on this area. Clean out

twenty or thirty million people. We'd never miss 'em."

Frazer chuckled wryly. "I wish I had a buck for every time I've heard *that* suggestion."

"Ever stop to think why you hear it so often? It's because everybody feels the same way—we can't take being hemmed in like this."

"Well, a bomb wouldn't help. You know that." Frazer pursed his lips. "Robertson figured out what would happen, with the chain-reaction."

Harry glanced sideways at his companion as the car started forward once again. "I've always wondered about that," he said. "Seriously, I mean. Is the story really true, or is it just some more of this government propaganda you fellows like to hand out?"

Frazer sighed. "It's true, all right. There was a scientist named Robertson, and he did come up with the thermo-nuc formula, way back in '75. Proved it, too. Use what he developed and the chain-reaction would never end. Scientists in other countries tested the theory and agreed; there was no collusion, it just worked out that way on a practical basis. Hasn't been a war since—what more proof do you want?"

"Well, couldn't they just use some of the old-fashioned hydrogen bombs?"

"Be sensible, man! Once a war started, no nation could resist the temptation to go all-out. Fortunately, everyone realizes that. So we have peace. Permanent peace."

"I'll take a good war anytime, in preference to this."

"Harry, you don't know what you're talking about. You aren't so young that you can't remember what it was like in the old days. Everybody living in fear, waiting for the bombs to fall. People dying of disease and worried about dying from radiation and fallout. All the international rivalries, the power-politics, the eternal pressures and constant crises. Nobody in his right mind would want to go back to *that*. We've come a mighty long way in the last twenty years or so."

Harry switched to autopilot and sat back. "Maybe that's the trouble," he said. "Maybe we've come too far, too fast. I wasn't kidding about dropping those thermo-nucs, either. *Something* has to be done. We can't go on like this

indefinitely. Why doesn't the Board come up with an answer?"

Frazer shrugged his heavy shoulders. "You think we haven't tried, aren't trying now? We're aware of the situation as well as you are—and then some. But there's no easy solution. The population just keeps growing, that's all. No war to cut it down, contagious diseases at a minimum, average life-expectancy up to ninety years or better. Naturally, this results in a problem. But a bomb won't help bring about any permanent solution. Besides, this isn't a local matter, or even a national one. It's global. What do you think those summit meetings are all about?"

"What about birth control?" Harry asked. "Why don't they really get behind an emigration movement?"

"We can't limit procreation by law. You know that." Frazer peered out at the swarming streams on the sidewalk levels. "It's more than a religious or a political question—it's a social one. People want kids. They can afford them. Besides, the Housing Act is set up so that having kids is just about the only way you can ever get into larger living-quarters."

"Couldn't they try reverse-psychology? I mean, grant priority to people who are willing to be sterilized?"

"They tried it, on a limited experimental scale, about three years ago out on the West Coast."

"I never heard anything about it."

"Damned right you didn't," Frazer replied, grimly. "They kept the whole project under wraps, and for a good reason. The publicity might have wrecked the Administration."

"What happened?"

"What do you suppose happened? There were riots. Do you think a man and his wife and three kids, living in three rooms, liked the idea of standing by and watching a sterilized couple enjoy a four-room place with lawn space? Things got pretty ugly, let me tell you. There was a rumor going around that the country was in the hands of homosexuals—the churches were up in arms—and if that wasn't bad enough, we had to face up to the primary problem. There just wasn't, just isn't, enough *space*. Not in areas suitable for maintaining a population. Mountains are still mountains and deserts are still

deserts. Maybe we can put up housing in such regions, but who can live there? Even with decentralization going full blast, people must live within reasonable access to their work. No, we're just running out of room."

Again the car halted on signal. Over the blasting of the horns, Harry repeated his query about emigration.

Frazer shook his head, but made no attempt to reply until the horns had quieted and they were under way once more.

"As for emigration, we're just getting some of our own medicine in return. About eighty years ago, we clamped down and closed the door on immigrants; established a quota. Now the same quota is being used against us, and you can't really blame other nations for it. They're facing worse population increases than we are. Look at the African Federation, and what's happened there, in spite of all the wealth! And South America is even worse, in spite of all the reclamation projects. Fifteen years ago, when they cleared out the Amazon Basin, they thought they'd have enough room for fifty years to come. And now look at it--two hundred million, that's the latest figure we've got."

"So what's the answer?" Harry asked.

"I don't know. If it wasn't for hydroponics and the Ag Culture controls, we'd be licked right now. As it is, we can still supply enough food, and the old supply-and-demand takes care of the economy as a whole. I have no recommendations for an overall solution, or even a regional one. My job, the Board's job, is regulating housing and traffic and transportation in Chicagee. That's about all you can expect us to handle."

Again they jolted to a stop and the horns howled all around them. Harry sat there until a muscle in the side of his jaw began to twitch. Suddenly he pounded on the horn with both fists.

"Shut up!" he yelled. "For the love of Heaven, shut up!"

Abruptly he slumped back. "Sorry," he mumbled. "It's my damned headache. I—I've got to get out of this."

"Job getting you down?"

"No. It's a good job. At least everybody tells me so. Twenty-five hours a

week, three hundred bucks. The car. The room. The telescreen and liquor and yellowjackets. Plenty of time to kill. Unless it's the time that's killing me."

"But—what do you *want*?"

Harry stepped on the accelerator and they inched along. Now the street widened into eight traffic lanes and the big semis joined the procession on the edge of the downtown area.

"I want out," Harry said. "Out of this."

"Don't you ever visit the National Preserves?" Frazer asked.

"Sure I do. Fly up every vacation. Take a tame plane to a tame government resort and catch my quota of two tame fish. Great sport! If I got married, I'd be entitled to four tame fish. But that's not what I want. I want what my father used to talk about. I want to drive into the country, without a permit, mind you; just to drive wherever I like. I want to see cows and chickens and trees and lakes and sky."

"You sound like a Naturalist."

"Don't sneer. Maybe the Naturalists are right. Maybe we ought to cut out all this phoney progress and phoney peace that passeth all understanding. I'm no liberal, don't get me wrong, but sometimes I think the Naturalists have the only answer."

"But what can you do about it?" Frazer murmured. "Suppose for the sake of argument that they *are* right. How can you change things? We can't just *will* ourselves to stop growing, and we can't legislate against biology. More people, in better health, with more free time, are just bound to have more offspring. It's inevitable, under the circumstances. And neither you nor I nor anyone has the right to condemn millions upon millions of others to death through war or disease."

"I know," Harry said. "It's hopeless, I guess. All the same, I want out." He wet his lips. "Frazer, you're on the Board here. You've got connections higher up. If I could only get a chance to transfer to Ag Culture, go on one of those farms as a worker—"

Frazer shook his head. "Sorry, Harry. You know the situation there, I'm sure. Right now there's roughly ninety million approved applications on file.

Everybody wants to get into Ag Culture."

"But couldn't I just buy some land, get a government contract for foodstuffs?"

"Have you got the bucks? A minimum forty acres leased from one of the farm corporations will cost you two hundred thousand at the very least, not counting equipment." He paused. "Besides, there's Vocational Apt. What did your tests show?"

"You're right," Harry said. "I'm supposed to be an agency man. An agency man until I die. Or retire on my pension, at fifty, and sit in my little room for the next fifty years, turning on the telescreen every morning to hear some loudmouthed liar tell me it's a beautiful day in Chicagee. Who knows, maybe by that time we'll have a hundred billion people enjoying peace and progress and prosperity. All sitting in little rooms and—"

"Watch out!" Frazer grabbed the wheel. "You nearly hit that truck." He waited until Harry's face relaxed before relinquishing his grip. "Harry, you'd better go in for a checkup. It isn't just a headache with you, is it?"

"You're not fooling," Harry told him. "It isn't just a headache."

He began to think about what it *really* was, and that helped a little. It helped him get through the worst part, which was the downtown traffic and letting Frazer off and listening to Frazer urge him to see a doctor.

Then he got to the building parking area and let them take his car away and bury it down in the droning darkness where the horns hooted and the headlights glared.

Harry climbed the ramp and mingled with the ten-thirty shift on its way up to the elevators. Eighteen elevators in his building, to serve eighty floors. Nine of the elevators were express to the fiftieth floor, three were express to sixty-five. He wanted one of the latter, and so did the mob. The crushing, clinging mob. They pressed and panted the way mobs always do; mobs that lynch and torture and dance around bonfires and guillotines and try to drag you down to trample you to death because they can't stand you if your name is Harry and you want to be different.

They hate you because you don't like powdered eggs and the telescreen and a beautiful day in Chicagee. And they stare at you because your forehead hurts and the muscle in your jaw twitches and they know you want to scream as

you go up, up, up, and try to think why you get a headache from jerking your head to the left.

Then Harry was at the office door and they said good morning when he came in, all eighty of the typists in the outer office working their electronic machines and offering him their electronic smiles, including the girl he had made electronic love to last Saturday night and who wanted him to move into a two-room marriage and have children, lots of children who could enjoy peace and progress and prosperity.

Harry snapped out of it, going down the corridor. Only a few steps more and he'd be safe in his office, his own private office, almost as big as his apartment. And there would be liquor, and the yellowjackets in the drawer. That would help. Then he could get to work.

What was today's assignment? He tried to remember. It was Wilmer-Klibby, wasn't it? Telescreenads for Wilmer-Klibby, makers of window-glass.

Window-glass.

He opened his office door and then slammed it shut behind him. For a minute everything blurred, and then he could remember.

Now he knew what caused him to jerk his head, what gave him the headaches when he did so. Of course. That was it.

When he sat down at the table for breakfast in the morning he turned his head to the left because he'd always done so, ever since he was a little boy. A little boy, in what was then Wheaton, sitting at the breakfast table and looking out of the window. Looking out at summer sunshine, spring rain, autumn haze, the white wonder of newfallen snow.

He'd never broken himself of the habit. He still looked to the left every morning, just as he had today. But there was no window any more. There was only a blank wall. And beyond it, the smog and the clamor and the crowds.

Window-glass. Wilmer-Klibby had problems. Nobody was buying window-glass any more. Nobody except the people who put up buildings like this. There were still windows on the top floors, just like the window here in his office.

Harry stepped over to it, moving very slowly because of his head. It hurt to