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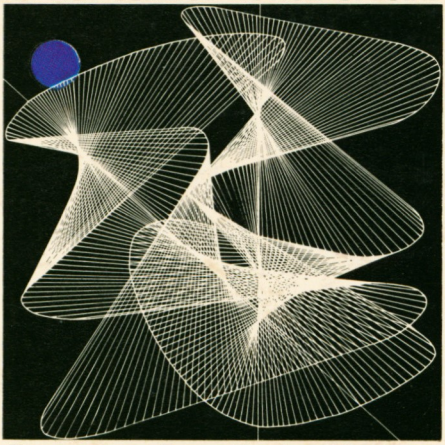

Gertrude Friedberg

THE REVOLVING BOY

"An excellent book."—SPECULATION

Man had always sought a meaning beyond Earth. Lonely, even with the company of his fellow Man, he had sought another spark of life, somewhere Out There. But by the end of the Twentieth Century the gates of space exploration had shut. The Earth was constricted by a radioactive belt of Man's own making: self-enclosed Man was truly Earthbound.

Yet scientists still searched the skies through radio probes for a signal, a hope that intelligent life beyond our galaxy might exist. But the Universe yielded no emissions to the listening devices.

And unless a strange young boy was allowed to develop and understand the baffling "wild talent" he possessed—a talent with no apparent purpose, yet subtly frightening for just that reason—they might never find an answer.

GERTRUDE FRIEDBERG:

Although THE REVOLVING BOY is Gertrude Friedberg's first novel, her short stories have appeared in *Fantasy and Science Fiction, Atlantic Monthly, Harper's, Esquire, Story Magazine* and *New World Writing.* She was also the author of the play *Three Cornered Moon,* which was produced in 1933 with Ruth Gordon in the lead; it was later adapted for a film starring Claudette Colbert.

When she is not writing, Mrs. Friedberg, who graduated from Barnard College, enjoys substitute teaching of mathematics in the New York public schools. She is married and has two children.

THE REVOLVING BOY

Gertrude Friedberg

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THE REVOLVING BOY

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AUTHOR'S DEDICATION:

To Richard and Barbara
and
To Charles.

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PART ONE

I

THE FIRST TIME Mrs. Nagy ever noticed anything was at the beach when Derv was three. Had she known what to look for, she might have seen that he was that way from the start. But what mother ever measured an infant's random moves and reverses around a crib or even a playpen?

They were at the beach. Derv had been playing happily with the sand, pouring it from one to another of an assortment of colored plastic cups, a modest pastime in contrast to the motorized constructions being operated by most of the children there.

Mrs. Nagy, sitting against a back rest, faced the parade of bathers. It was the first year of the recoil from the excesses of the 1960s and both men and women were covered from neck to foot in the new skintight, ankle-length bathing suits, relieved by metalsil flutters around the waists of the women and great spans of cautin across the shoulders of the men. Parasols had recently been resurrected from the past, and the starkly dressed women moved everywhere, flirting the gaily covered ornaments over this shoulder and that and wearing them even into the water where, strong enough

to resist any buffet, they served as life preserver, signal, or, inverted, as a floating shell for the children.

Nearby, on a paved square, a troop of Service Corps Junior Scouts were being instructed in elementary maneuvers by an exasperated young corpsmaster.

"Left face!" he shouted.

Some turned left, some turned right, some stood indecisively or craned around to look at the others.

"Right face!" he offered. "Left about face!"

Derv looked up and watched, letting the stream of sand, unheeded, flow back on the beach. Mrs. Nagy plunged a reading stick into the sand, perched a book, at its top, adjusted the electric page-turner and settled back to read. She had a square, strong face with a slightly upturned broad nose which suited it well and serene green eyes under a cap of tight black curls. Her body was compactly heavy, her movements relaxed and slow, but precise.

"I said, '*Left* about face,' " shrieked the corpsmaster in a frustrated squeal. "What's the matter with you fellows? Now let's take it from the beginning."

He stared beseechingly, his eyes encircling them to press them into precise response.

"Atten-*tion!*"

The water lapped softly, the corpsmaster shouted and the sun beat down while Mrs. Nagy read on. After a while some unexpected sound of rustling feet or perhaps a laugh drew her back into the scene. A small group of bathers had gathered to watch, their faces all fixed in the same wondering amusement. Her eyes followed theirs and she sat up abruptly, knocking over her book and its support. It was not the faltering, wheeling, marching scouts nor their clucking corpsmaster they watched but a small boy who stood behind the entire troop. It was Derv.

"Left face!" shouted the corpsmaster, unaware of the new recruit attached to his company. "Right face. Left

about face. Right about face. Mark time. Forward march. Left, right, left, right. Company, left . . . march! Left, right, left, right. Company, right . . . march!"

And as the squad blundered in incoherent patterns, Derv responded to each command with instant precision, his short plump legs turning virtuous right angles and straight angles, marching to binary measures and halting in complete intervals on the right foot. His face, with a wide, high forehead and a small, delicately indented chin, wore a beatific smile. His luminous far-fixed green eyes seemed to watch neither the flustered master, the discordant puppets nor the astounded audience. He did not even seem to listen. Whatever made his legs move might have been some finely perceptive device buried deep within himself.

"Never saw anything like it in my life," said a man who wore a blue and silver shoulder span as high as his ears. Several of the women, in order to see better, impatiently sheathed their parasols in their waist scabbards. The scouts, each time a correctly performed about-face put Derv in front of them, giggled and pointed with generous admiration.

It took but a moment for pride to swell and burst in Mrs. Nagy. Then cold reason supervened and she knew what she must do. She stood up and buckled a yellow flutter about her waist. Waiting only until a flurry of commands had collapsed into "At ease," she moved to Derv's side.

"Get your colored cups into each other, Derv," she said quietly. "We're going home."

She smiled pleasantly, but she looked at none of them as she led Derv quickly past their "Is that your boy?" "That's his mother." "It's the strangest thing I ever . . ." "You must be mighty proud to have a . . ."

The scouts never came back to the beach, and to avoid running into any renewal of comment on the incident Mrs. Nagy took up her daily sand and sea relaxa-

tions on a different stretch of strand. In the 1970s, when artificial beaches were being spread everywhere, this was not difficult.

The Nagys lived in the district of New England. Their home was painted a deep rose, which had its place in the spread from pink to crimson assigned to the area by the bird's-eye-viewers. Otherwise the street, tree-lined and artificially grass-lawned, looked much as it had for many years. A faint cobwebby appearance might be traced to the almost invisible net which stretched its gossamer duraloy filaments high above the street to protect it from falling air traffic.

Inside the house, all the room walls had been scooped out, since the ceiling could drop a wall, opaque or transparent, wherever you wanted one. The tyranny of draperies and curtains had given way to patterned borders about the permawindows, which admitted dustless air without opening and proper light without shading.

One rainy day when Mrs. Nagy and her little boy were forced to stay at home, Derv said, "I want to march like those boys."

She did not mind as long as there were no strangers to watch and wonder. She threw up the wall she had drawn down behind them for coziness against the rainy windows. The room with its wide bare stretches was ideal for marching.

"You say the things," said Derv, taking his position stalwartly before her.

Mrs. Nagy good-naturedly took command. Derv fixed his eyes on his mother's mobile vigorous face. Her thickset figure in the long loose dress she wore gave her a comfortable dependable look which Derv, in particular, found most appealing.

After a while Mrs. Nagy thought she was doing quite well. Derv was perfect. From the pleased intensity with which he fulfilled each order, one would have thought that to turn left or turn right would be the only choices

he would ever find worth making in his whole life. Mrs. Nagy interpolated a comedy interpretation of the corps-master, conjuring up imaginary blundering scouts on every side of Derv, at whom she shouted, citing Derv as the splendid example to shame them. Derv, smothered in giggles, never missed a step. But gradually his giggling faltered to a stop and an uneasy look came over his face.

Mrs. Nagy, full of remorse that she had led him too far, said, "Company, disband."

"No," said Derv.

"It's enough."

"No. No." His bottom lip began to tremble.

"You're tired."

"But you didn't finish."

"I did. I said, 'Company, halt,' and I said, 'Company disband.' Now you're allowed to do anything you want."

"It's wrong! I'm not finished!" He was crying and stamping his foot. It was quite unlike him.

"Baby, what's the matter?"

"You're bad! You did it wrong. You turned me too much."

"Dizzy? Are you dizzy? Derv, what's the matter?"

"Too much left. Left and left. You didn't say enough right. I'm all turned around and around and around and . . ."

He was sobbing little baby sobs.

"Right about face!" said Mrs. Nagy, distraught.

He executed the maneuver, a brokenhearted soldier.

"Again!" he sobbed.

"Right about face!"

Back went the right foot, swivel and click. His crying stopped quite suddenly.

"One more!"

"Right about face."

He swiveled again, sighed, hiccuped and smiled.

"Again?" asked Mrs. Nagy.

"No more."

Without further instruction—and she might have been at a loss as to what command to give at this moment, short of "Company, wipe nose!"—he broke ranks and sat down to his pegboard as though nothing had happened.

In the bedroom that evening Mrs. Nagy debated whether or not to tell her husband.

Mr. Nagy was a tall, restless man with long arms and large hands, a high bony forehead and deep frowning cuts between disheveled blond eyebrows. When he looked at somebody, he thrust his head forward and squinted, causing the tiny white scar at the corner of the half-closed eye to disappear. His chin was indented in the center, a minor fault of tissue which softened his otherwise rugged, bony face.

Mr. Nagy worked in a communications transfer terminal, his job being to withdraw requested data from the various information vaults dotted about the country and reroute the information electronically to where it was needed.

"Don't tell me anything," Mr. Nagy said frequently. "And don't ask me anything. They're telling me and asking me things all day."

His way of pacing restlessly about, his hands on the back of his hips, coming almost smack up against a wall before turning the other way, gave him a look of perpetually chafing against some imagined confinement.

Fortunately, bedrooms at this time were bare and neat and this one gave Mr. Nagy adequate range. Along one wall ran the inevitable storage units. Halfway up the other was a deceptive shelflike arrangement. If you dropped anything on it, the section thus assaulted tipped back into the wall and reappeared empty, its burden remaining in a file tray until summoned for removal.

An embedded mirror over the automatic shelf looked and behaved as mirrors always have.

Just now it held the image of Mr. Nagy, frowning and preoccupied, moving restlessly around the room, flinging his shoes in the polisher, his suit in the automatic cleaner and other articles on shelves which disappeared.

"I think I must have sent or received over a million inches of data today," he said wearily. "For today, I've had it." And he made a gesture as if sealing off the day from further duress.

It was not a good moment. Mrs. Nagy decided to say nothing about Derv.

II

IN THE NEXT YEAR the signs in Derv were small but increasing. Often Mrs. Nagy took Derv to the shopping center with her. Pedestrian walks by this time had all gone bridgeward over the carways, but at the approach to the center there was still a vestigial four-corner crossing at which passengers and cars confronted each other in the old way, with only a code of lights to protect them from each other.

Once, with Derv's hand tight in hers, Mrs. Nagy had just crossed this street when she remembered an omitted errand. She wheeled about without releasing his hand to return to the other side. As they crossed back, his hand squirmed in hers.

"Derv!" she said sharply, tightening her grip.

Children are always impatient to be free, but he knew the rules. The sudden display of willfulness was surprising. She looked around to see what had attracted him. But when they reached the sidewalk and she let go of his hand, there was nothing he wanted to run to. He merely whirled about in place and then placidly gave her his hand again.

There may have been other instances, but Mrs. Nagy

was an inattentive mother. In the community playground or at home if Derv were busy playing and her household work was done, she read. But one day when he was four and she had come out to the playground without a book, she watched.

He had a set of tenpins on the bench and was setting them one at a time in a row around a tree. Each time that he fetched a tenpin from the bench, he executed a full turn on the way back to the tree. At first she could not believe that the action was invariant, because occasionally he was seduced from his course by a butterfly, or he stopped to watch a passing cloud. But finally there was no doubt.

"What are you doing, Derv?"

"Putting them. They're nice. The blue ones are five and the red ones are three and the yellow one is a baby."

"But why do you turn?"

"I don't turn. I get straight."

It was harmless enough, some small notion the child had. (She had forgotten the earlier manifestations.) She looked around and saw with satisfaction that nobody seemed to notice Derv's turns, not even the mothers of children who occasionally played with him. Well then, as long as it didn't attract attention.

She herself, when she was a girl, used to kick a stone home from school. All the way. The same stone. And some children had to touch each tree they passed, or jump over the arrows in the pedestrian walks.

On the way home she observed his occasional quick whirls with amusement. Very soon she accepted them as part of Derv, and barely attended to them.

When Mrs. Nagy went to school to get Derv's very first report from his preschool teacher, she glowed with pleasure to hear her own good opinion of Derv's placidity, humor and intelligence confirmed by the teacher. But just when she and the teacher were about to part with an exchange of compliments and credits, the

teacher said, "You know we call him 'the boy who whirls.' "

Mrs. Nagy turned back from the door. "Who calls him that?"

"The children. I'm sorry this upsets you, Mrs. Nagy. I had no idea it would. I was determined to bring it up because I think he is in physical danger when he stops to whirl on the stairway."

"Which stairway? Where?"

"Let me show you."

Mrs. Nagy followed her.

"You see how narrow the step becomes where the stairway takes a turn? That's where Derv lets go of the banister and whirls. I hold my breath when he does it. The children don't mean anything by calling him 'the boy who whirls.' They don't know all the names in the group. It's purely identification. They like Derv. Some of them imitate his whirls, except on the stairway. I didn't like to speak to him about it until I spoke to you. Some mothers are being told by their psychiatrists not to mention such things to their children, so I . . ."

"I'll talk to him about it," said Mrs. Nagy.

As she hurried home, her thoughts reeled in mild panic. She would have to tell Mr. Nagy. They would have to take Derv out of the school. "The boy who whirls." "The boy who whirls." "That's Derv Nagy, the boy who whirls." "Who are the parents?"

But at home she calmed herself and felt remorse that she had been more concerned with the notoriety Derv might attract than the danger he faced.

She told Derv in an offhand way that he must not whirl on the stairs and why.

"But what if I have to?"

Although she knew he thought of it this way, in terms of coercive physiological need, she was a little taken aback by the straightforward way he put it.

"How many do you have to take?"

"Just two on the stairs. I take another when I get outside."

"Then suppose you take the three when you get outside."

"All right," he said.

It was as easy as that.

Derv continued to whirl to compensate for the turns imposed on him by his world, but the same compromise as that initiated by Mrs. Nagy, applied in larger and larger compass as he grew older, served finally to eliminate whirling from schooltime and from all occasions on which it was dangerous or conspicuous.

Mrs. Nagy could not imagine how he kept track, but by the time he was seven he was content to take all the necessary whirls at bedtime.

Mrs. Nagy grew easy in her mind. She had not told her husband about Derv's idiosyncrasy. It was all right. Nobody was asking questions.

III

On a dark rainy afternoon they went to visit one of Mrs. Nagy's few acquaintances, who, awarded a permit to have a second baby, had just moved into a new apartment in a nest of building units beyond the shopping center. The buildings were set against each other at unusual angles, askew with respect to the sidewalk and the road. They entered a network of paved walks, turned many times until they found the right unit, then wandered this way and that through inside corridors to choose the right elevator. On the eighth floor they turned through more long corridors.

Mrs. Nagy's friend showed off her new apartment, whisking them in and out of rooms, then set them down in her living room. She asked Mrs. Nagy her color preference and obligingly lit the walls green.

"A pity it's raining. You can't look out. We have a different exposure in every room. The baby's window faces east and this window here faces north, and—"

"South," said Derv.

"I beg pardon?" said the friend. Like many young women who are only up to babies in their maternal careers, she had barely noticed the boy.

"This window," said Derv in his sweet, serious way, "faces south."

The friend laughed scornfully and Mrs. Nagy fidgeted uncomfortably.

"I should think I ought to know which way my own window faces," she said.

"South," said Derv. Yet he seemed sorry enough for her to be willing to drop the matter.

"And how could you tell anyhow? You must have turned a hundred times on your way in here, and the sun can't be seen."

"It isn't even *really* south," said Derv. "It's a little east, too." He stood up and faced the left corner of the window. "There. I'm facing exactly south right now."

Then he whirled and faced the other way and sighed with something of apology and something of pleasure.

"And that," he said, "is north."

He stood transfixed, his green eyes distant, while they stared. A little chill of fear seemed to have entered the room. There was something eerie in his rigidity.

Abruptly the young woman rose and started passing a dish of cookies made of leftover Pablum. The view was not referred to again.

Mrs. Nagy wasn't really surprised when her friend telephoned that night. The young woman's voice sounded hoarse and frightened.

"It *was* south," she said. "It's the dining room that's north. Jim told me when he got home. How on earth could the child know?"

Derv knew.

Mrs. Nagy realized that she had gradually grown accustomed to Derv's sense of direction. Although she had never discussed it openly with Mr. Nagy, she knew that he too had come to rely on this acuteness of Derv's, very much as some men will take quite for granted that their children understand electronic equipment better than they do. The Nagys had grown used to his leading the way, particularly on Sundays when they drove to the city. He told them which way to circle on the confusing cloverleaf intersection in order to get back on the road in the opposite direction, and what corridor would take them directly out of the honeycomb of galleries in the great city museums. And if, wandering to an exit through a strange park, the small boy held a hand of each parent in one of his, who, seeing them, would know which was leader and which led?

Once Mrs. Nagy left him at a party to which he had been invited, not as a guest, but only to keep the younger brother company.

Derv and his little host, left alone, played contentedly for a while until a slight rise in the note of hilarity in the party room drew them to the doorway to watch.

Many of the old party games for children were being revived at this time in reaction to the hopeless elaborations of the 1960s. Derv was strangely excited by what he saw. The boys were taking turns being heavily blindfolded, twirled about until they were dizzy and turned loose holding a sliver of brown cardboard before them. How they wandered and staggered! Derv saw that each boy was trying to fit a tail to the donkey pictured on the large metal sheet hung on the opposite wall.

"Let me try," said Derv, stepping boldly into the room.

The boys ignored him, and his little friend said, "You can't. You're not old enough."

"I want to try," he said again, raising his face gravely toward the birthday boy.

One of the boys heard him and cried out, "Look who wants to try!" The boys all laughed and one said, "Yes. Let him try," and whispered something in the ear of the boy in charge of the blindfolding and twirling.

"Come on, kid," he said, and the boys all sat down rustling with mirth and suspense.

Derv submitted quietly while the boy blindfolded him and then twirled him, adding several more turns than he had given to any of the others.

"All right, kid," said the twirler. "Now put the tail on the donkey." And, stopping Derv when his back was toward the donkey's picture, he gave him a small push.

The boys burst into delighted laughter. One boy said sharply, "But that isn't fair. We weren't—" and somebody said, "Sh!"

Derv went only a step or two in the direction in which the twirler had propelled him, then stopped. He stood still a moment and then, for he might as well be comfortable, twirled himself back the other way.

The boys watched in astonishment and then laughed uproariously, for by the sheerest luck the little boy had ended up facing in the right direction, toward the donkey. Just watching him was a great entertainment. He didn't seem to have the faintest idea what to do. Now he just stood there as if he had forgotten what the game was. Only his small mouth was visible under the heavy bandage. It was hard to know what he was thinking, but they could very well guess that he was feeling pretty sorry he had started the business. His lips moved.

"My name is Derv," he said softly.

A shout of laughter started up, but died as Derv at last started walking slowly across the room. He didn't wave the cardboard blindly in front of him the way the others had, so that they would know when they hit the opposite wall, and he didn't stagger. He just walked across the room, his arms swinging naturally at his sides, and before they could believe what was happening had

pressed the magnet-tipped tail exactly where it was meant to go. There was a stunned silence. Then they cried out in disbelief.

"He can see!"

They accused the boy who had put the blindfold on, accused each other and accused Derv. There was a lot of pulling and pushing and Derv was beginning to look unhappy. Just then the host's mother entered.

The mother had problems of her own, having prepared only one prize for the donkey game and one for the scrambled recordings game, and was in no mood to settle a title dispute.

"We'll do Derv again, properly this time."

She stood Derv in front of her, shook out the blindfold and exhibited it to the boys. She folded it, then tried it successively on her own son and on the chief contender for the prize, a boy who had landed the tail on the left foreleg of the donkey, an unlikely site that any donkey would reject, but closest to that chosen by Nature and by Derv. Both boys acknowledged that they could not possibly see, neither light, nor the floor, nor the ceiling.

Now, while they watched her with unblinking attention, as though afraid of a last-minute substitution, she wrapped the fold about Derv's eyes. The committee came up to test and examine. The fold was clearly enveloping enough. The room was silent and tense. She twirled him, and her desire for a decision being uppermost in her mind, she twirled him excessively, so that he staggered at the end and faced toward the right. She would have straightened him, but her son put a cautioning hand on her arm. Because there was something in his face other than meanness, she drew back.

Again Derv twirled himself in reverse, not merely the half-turn, but as many turns as he had been given. Again he faced correctly at the end. Again he waited while they waited with him, holding their breaths. Again

he strolled, neither quickly nor slowly, but decisively, across the room and pressed the tail to the spot preordained by anatomic logic.

This time there was no possibility of error or deceit. The boys knew they were in the presence of a master and all feeling of competition dropped from them.

"Wow!" "Twice!" "Give him the prize!" "Derv!" "How do you like that little kid?"

The mother stood bemused for a moment, staring at Derv, who, blindfold off, looked around impassively, without triumph. Then, glad that the game was over and the winner satisfactorily appointed, she shrugged and went to get the prize.

Mrs. Nagy, when she heard it, did not like the story at all. The mother who told her pressed her with questions.

"Was he always that way? Were you that way? What do you suppose it is? Nagy. . . . You wouldn't be related to some people I used to know by the name of Naugy that . . . Where did you say you were from?"

Questions. And fear. Again she felt prompted to talk it over with Mr. Nagy. They would move away. They would . . .

She must not panic this way every time Derv called attention to himself. What had happened after all? Nothing. She would simply caution Derv not to exhibit this characteristic of his unduly. Surely it was for the child's own good. If word got around about his prowess, Derv was going to be cut off a lot of party lists at the very threshold of his social life. In the 1970s you couldn't have a birthday party without a donkey game and you couldn't have an honest donkey game with a ringer among the guests.

Derv himself, when she went into his room at bedtime, made all her prepared repressive speeches unnecessary.

Lying in his leaf-shaped bed, he stared thoughtfully at the ceiling, which was lit dimly by a hypnotic flow

of go-to-sleep lights. His small room, instead of being enclosed by four walls, was an architectural prefabrication of climbing and crawling places and comfortable nooks in which to hide.

"I didn't like that," he said.

"What?"

"At the party. The donkey game. I thought it would be fun, but I didn't like everybody saying about me and looking at me and all that stuff."

Mrs. Nagy felt a surge of grateful relief. Trust Derv. She knew that he was trying to say that he didn't like showing off.

"It was all right this once," she said. "Don't do it any more since you don't like it."

He was soothed. When his mother had left the room, he got out of bed, whirled several times to set himself straight, turned out the bothersome lights and went promptly to sleep.

IV

"STRAIGHT" grew more and more complicated as the years went on. When the feeling first arose in him, it seemed only to have to do with right and left. "Home" position was a temporary one, perhaps the position he had been in a few minutes before he had taken the turns which made him hunger for resettlement. Later it might be quite another position to which he needed returning. But this was only in the beginning of his awareness. Very soon it was the position to which he rose out of bed in the morning.

Yet a small mote of dissatisfaction, even with this stance, continued to irk him, growing stronger day by day, until, when he was still but a little boy, he discovered the compass and the definitions of direction on earth. This new sense of deflection immediately became

an integral part of Derv's spatial demonstrations. And every night, when his mother left the room, it was now east and south and west-by-north which he unwound, revolving contentedly, a small boy alone in a dark room. No need to count. He knew when he was through. Ah, then it was good to face toward that mysterious pole, much as if he were himself a quivering needle of magnetized metal.

It was at this time that he asked to have his bed turned so that his head was to the north. But he soon found that this was unnecessary. It was enough to unwind, and to know where he was.

But where was he? The question grew more complex the more he knew, and this was much, because the boys of Derv's time learned early about the phenomena of space. Each new astrophysical revelation—the earth revolving on its axis, the earth turning around the sun, the sun wheeling in its galaxy, the galaxy sliding on its own unknown course—demanded an ever more intricate unraveling of the day's twists and turns.

Nothing so artificial as calculation entered into this nightly correction. A baby, indeed, does not really "learn" to walk, but "remembers" a knack, for which he finds that he has suitable equipment. Thus Derv, gradually approaching a new orientation, "saw" better each day how it could be done, and found he could do it.

One evening Mr. Nagy came home tired and irritable from a frustrating day with a faulty cybernetic relay which kept repeating the same material over and over.

He wheeled his briefbarrow full of manuals to the clamp stand in the entrance hall, still intact with its old stairway. Taking one of the manuals with him into the living room, he summoned a chair from the wall and dropped into it. The compatible chair had grown in favor, molded in one piece from a cast of the sitting figure, and patterned extensions of Mr. Nagy, Mrs. Nagy and Derv stood around the room. Mr. Nagy often man-

aged to summon the wrong chair and now slumped down on his backbone incompatibly in Mrs. Nagy's chair. He tapped a commando button and one of the many-tiered revolving servers rolled up and stood solidly while he discarded some scraps of paper from the pockets of his cobalt-blue, short-sleeved suit, filed a letter, selected a pencil and propped his manual on a page-turner. He reached up and plucked the gay streamer of one of the floating balloon lights. It steadied brightly above his left shoulder.

Mrs. Nagy came from behind the bit of wall she had pulled down before the dining cove and kissed him. Derv came up for an affectionate pat on his rumpled brown hair and then lay down on the floor to read.

"We're ready to eat, Henry," said Mrs. Nagy, "if you'll put a new transistor in the butler ramp for me."

"O.K. Just let me unwind first."

Mrs. Nagy went back behind the wall and Mr. Nagy flipped on the illuminated newsline on the server and slumped back in the chair to read it. He preferred the newsline to the teeviewer newsjockeys, because it gave only headlines and omitted all detail. After a while he sat up.

"What are you staring at me like that for, Derv?" he asked, squinting down at him.

"I just want to watch. May I?"

"Watch what?"

"Watch you unwind."

"You kidding?" He pulled himself wearily out of the chair. On the black etched wall directory, which started with Ambulator, went through Player, Projector, and Teeviewer and ended with Xerox, he found the switch for Barfount. One of the wall panels slid back soundlessly. Mr. Nagy started to fix himself a drink.

"How do you do it?" asked Derv. "How do you unwind?"

"Come on, Derv. Don't be silly. I'm all wound up from the day."

Derv nodded gravely. "I know. But how do you get unwound?"

His father squinted at him sharply.

"Like this," he said. "I read the newsline and take a drink. And gradually I unwind."

Derv thought about it.

"Does the drink help?"

"Maybe."

"Could I have one?"

"Of course not."

"That's not the way I unwind."

Mr. Nagy settled himself again with his drink and his newsline. He was beginning to feel a little better already. He laughed.

"Well, I should say it isn't. How," he asked, his cheek nestling his cold glass, "do you unwind?"

Derv stood up straight and slim and in a twinkling had flung his body up into the air in a complete backward somersault with a half body twist, an extraordinary maneuver which brought his father to the edge of his chair, his drink spilling, his eyes popping with disbelief.

"Good Lord! What on earth was that?"

"You mean that last part?" Derv laughed a little, his green eyes glazing over as he thought about it dreamily. "Kind of crooked-looking, isn't it?"

"Do it again."

"I can't now. That's all I need until the earth turns around on itself again. Lately I've started putting in something for the turn around the sun. It was beginning to bother me."

He sat down on the floor and was back in his book.

For a long time Mr. Nagy sat watching his son. Not a very imaginative man, he had rather taken his son for granted, expecting him to be much like any other boy.

After dinner, when they were alone, he asked Mrs.

Nagy about the unusual performance he had witnessed.

"What's he, nuts or something?"

"It's nothing, Henry. He's always done it."

"Somersaults?"

"Not exactly. Lately it's just gotten a little more complicated. That's all."

She looked away with practiced evasiveness and her fingers drew long slow pleats in her loose yellow robe.

"Don't tell me about it. I don't want to hear it," he said, and he glared at her curiously, trying to read her information in her cap of tight black curls or in the placid set of her heavy body.

But as so often happened, and as she knew him well enough to expect, he said almost immediately afterward, "Come on then, Margaret. Let's have it."

She told him about it, all of it that she could remember, her tone as matter-of-fact as she could make it.

He paced restlessly around the room, his hands on the back of his hips, turning now and again to squint at her sharply.

"It's what they call a compulsive tic," she said.

"Some tic."

"Well, it's tied up with this crazy sense of direction he has. You knew about that."

"I never dreamed it went this far. Why didn't you ever tell me before?" He stopped just short of the wall and wheeled abruptly to look at her. "Or didn't I let you?"

She measured a reply against his vulnerability. "I didn't want to remind you of . . . you know . . . all that," she said at last.

He stopped pacing, startled, and stared at her somberly, the scar at the corner of his eye exposed.

"You think there's a connection?" He frowned.

"I don't know if there is or not. But what if people notice and try to make one. I've been worrying."

"Oh, nonsense. Nobody knows who we are. How are they going to connect Derv up with that?"

She sighed. "Well, anyhow, I'm glad you know about it. I hated to start you worrying."

"I'm not going to."

Nevertheless, he brooded about it for the rest of the evening. Mr. Nagy either hated something or liked it. This exotic, undreamed-of quality in his son held him in confusion. A terrible trick had been played on him.

After a sleepless night, in which he vacillated between horror that he had begotten a monster and elation that he was blessed with a supernormal offspring, he came to breakfast to find Derv eating fruitchucks.

Derv had a reassuring way of eating fruitchucks. It was a quality of Derv's—a quiet naturalness which belied singularity.

"He's a normal boy," he said to Mrs. Nagy when Derv had left for school. "He's just got this talent."

It was the beginning of a new companionship between Derv and his father. Mr. Nagy became an aghast admirer of Derv. Whenever they were together, he watched him closely, as though he were a rocket at the end of countdown, often squinting incredulously at him when the boy was doing nothing more remarkable than bouncing a ball off his bedroom wall, newly papered with overlapping ball-imprints for this very contingency.

Many times he asked Derv, "What are you doing?" especially, rarely, when he caught him in a turn.

"Getting straight," Derv always answered, and sometimes threw in the details.

Mr. Nagy nodded solemnly. He had accepted completely that Derv had a constant sense of where he was and which way he faced, in the room, in the town, in the world, in the sky.

He was even beginning to understand Derv's jokes. Talking over plans for a Christmas vacation trip, Mr.

Nagy said, "Let's go to the same place we were at last summer."

"Wa-a-y ba-a-ck th-e-ere?" asked Derv, popping his eyes open with mock dismay. Then, boy comedian, he clapped his hand to his brow and swooned to the floor.

"Don't be silly," said Mrs. Nagy, and drew a wall down in front of him, as though the sight were too disreputable for her.

They had dinner, and in the middle of his sugarless, Mr. Nagy put his spoon down and laughed. "I get it," he said to Derv. "Way back there."

It was a comfort to Derv that Mr. Nagy knew about his need to turn and seemed, if anything, so taken with it.

But once when Derv, perhaps out of fatigue, had taken two turns in rapid succession, in full view of some passers-by, one of whom turned his head to look curiously, Mr. Nagy fell silent and thoughtful.

He told Mrs. Nagy about it. "Oughtn't we to caution him? Tell him the whole business?" he asked her.

"No," said Mrs. Nagy. "He's too young. It's too much for him. We'll have to take our chances for a while. He doesn't do that often."

"Do people ask questions about us?"

For the sake of his worried frown she did not hesitate. "Nothing I can't handle, so far."

He nodded. "Let them wonder then."

And there they let it rest.

But Derv, too, wondered.

V

ONLY A LITTLE less than the question of "where" he was, the question of "who" he was engaged a great deal of Derv's attention. He had gradually become aware that other people did not share his instant per-

ception of direction. On the contrary, they seemed hopelessly muddled to him, always stopping each other to ask the way to this place and that place. There had been the last residual hope, when his father spoke of unwinding, that perhaps . . . perhaps . . . his own father . . .

Disappointed, he still remained watchful of others, forever hoping that some day he would find another being as singularly endowed as himself.

Once he ran breathlessly home to say to his mother, "Where did I get my name?"

Mrs. Nagy had been talking her domestic reminders into the memophone, which would say them right back to her at the proper moment. She stopped abruptly.

"Derv? I sort of made it up. It's a nice name, isn't it?" She looked at him warily, her strong, broad face cautious.

He had been reading about whirling dervishes, and all manner of speculations as to his origins inflamed him. Looking into it further, he read that a dervish was a beggar, and gave up, humiliated.

At the circus, which he visited in a nearby recreation park, he watched the performers carefully to see if they turned as often one way as another. They did not. For a while he followed with intent love a performing white horse which seemed to have the knack, and later thought of himself as a centaur, born of a mysterious white mare (with a sense of direction) and a brilliant aerial acrobat. Perhaps the performance he saw was the only one in which the horse's turns were evenly matched. He did not go again and would not know. But he was comforted for a little while.

Or he was the only living descendant of Theseus. Derv would not have needed a thread to guide him through the dark Cretan labyrinth. Perhaps, Derv liked to think, Theseus had no thread either. People put the

thread in later because the feat was too incredible otherwise.

One day he asked his mother boldly, "Who else in the family is like me?"

She smiled easily, but a cold alertness seized her.

"Now where do you think you got those green eyes if not from me? And that handsome cleft chin? Isn't it your father's?"

"I mean my direction," said Derv.

"I can't say I ever heard it mentioned." She was trying hard to avoid a direct lie. She pushed a balloon of light away so that her face was in shadow.

"But don't any of our relatives . . ." He stopped, his face filled with wonder. "How is it we don't have any relatives? Any at all."

"They're . . . We moved away from them right after you were born. They're far away."

"I'd like to visit them some time. Could we?"

"Maybe some day," she said, in a tight way that a small boy could take to mean "never."

Derv could, on occasion, feel singularly blessed with his unusual aptitude, particularly when he led his docile parents about an unfamiliar terrain, or heard his father say, "We'll ask Derv, he'll know." But often, in the middle of the night, his confused dreams of antecedent white horses and sure-footed Cretans fused into nightmare and he woke with a dread, recurring fear. Was he human?

Then he met Prin.

One day when he was watching a building being shoed up for removal, he noticed her standing beside him. She had a pink face with white patches like flowers at the cheekbones. Her hair was long, straight and pale, and wisps of it fell across her forehead.

"Hello," he said. "I've seen you at school."

"I've seen you, too. You're the boy with the E-flat

laugh." She pushed some stray wisps of hair from her face.

"What do you mean?"

She imitated his laugh, staying on one note.

"E flat," she said.

"How do you know it is?"

"I have absolute pitch," she said in a neat straightforward way.

"You have? Where?" He watched her carefully, half expecting her to produce a tuning fork like the one Miss Turner, the music teacher, used to start them off on the right note.

"Where, indeed!" She smiled and walked away.

It was a prim, rather grown-up expression. He knew nobody who spoke like that.

A few days later she was in the music room when he passed, her pink face blooming over the long, ankle-length dress she wore. Remembering, he stopped short and laughed.

"E flat," she said and hummed it.

This time he went skeptically to the piano and struck E flat. It was exactly the note she had sung. He looked at her in astonishment.

"Hit a note," she said. "Any note." She turned her back to the piano. Her hair, hanging down behind her, could be about a third of her.

He hit a note quickly, watching to see if she looked.

"D," she said, her back still turned.

He hit another.

"G above high C." "F below middle C." "D flat." "B."

This was a delightful guessing game.

"Now me," said Derv.

She smiled but said nothing and went obligingly to the piano. He turned his back and she hit a note. He turned around in great excitement.

"I haven't the faintest idea what note you played."

"Ask me to produce a note."

"Ask you . . . ?"

"Name a note and I'll sing it."

"Oh. A," he said. "Sing A."

The girl looked at the floor. Derv stared at her, not daring to move. Then, as if she had found it there on the floor, she raised her head and sang a clear note.

Derv rushed to the piano and played A. It matched the pitch of her note exactly. He was very flushed. He walked back and forth rapidly, taking half-twirls before each turn. When he was excited, he did not have the control to save his turns until they canceled each other. He looked at the girl, then at the piano, then back at the girl. She watched him meekly, almost apologetic for all the violent exercise she was causing him.

"What did you call it the other day? Some kind of pitch?"

"Absolute pitch."

"It's wonderful," he said.

"Yes," she agreed. "It's a gift. I can tell you the pitch of any sound I hear without anything else to connect it with. A note or a laugh or a gong or a screech. There's the bell. I have to go." She gathered up her books. "The bell is about halfway between G and G sharp."

He followed her to the door.

"Are you the only one in the world who has it?"

"Oh my, no. It's very rare, though. Not many people have it."

She disappeared, then stuck her pink face inside.

"Mozart had it."

He was elated. If absolute pitch was a quality which was rare, but . . . human (and how he caressed the word), then "absolute direction"—wasn't that what he had?—could also be a quality that some others, if very few, might possess. Some of the dreadful loneliness which had constricted him since childhood lifted.

At dinner that night he laughed unnaturally, prolonging the single note beyond its customary duration.

"What kind of a laugh is that?" asked his father distastefully, squinting hard at him.

He told them about Prin and mentioned what her special talent augured for the universality of his own odd trait. There was a disquieting silence when he finished and the old apprehensiveness welled up in him.

"Derv," said Mrs. Nagy at last, "if there is anybody else with . . . with absolute direction, we've never heard of them."

Mr. Nagy frowned at the boy's stricken face.

"But get one thing straight," he said. "You're human."

"You're—you're sure?" Derv asked, and was reassured, at least on this score, when they both burst out laughing.

"Why, I never dreamed that you doubted it," said Mrs. Nagy, shaking her head with self-reproach. "You're our child, flesh and blood, just as human as anybody on earth."

Derv looked as though he had just been elected to a high office, but Mr. and Mrs. Nagy pursued the subject uneasily when they were alone in their upstairs bedroom.

"I didn't know he thought so much about it. Did you?" asked Mr. Nagy.

"No. Poor Derv. Not human! What an idea!"

"Then why isn't the truth better than that?" he threw at her. "You're making a problem of this. Is there something about this I still don't know?"

She started to protest.

"Don't tell me anything. I don't want to hear about it." He started ranging the room in his caged way, his hands on the small of his back.

"Nothing, Henry, truly. Nothing you don't already know."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

"Time. For him to be older. Once he knows, he has to

keep it a secret as we do. Unless you're willing for it all to come out."

"That's out of the question. You know that as well as I do, Margaret. But with this—this trick of his, calling attention to him, how long can we be safe?"

"What can we do?" She shook her head helplessly.

"Tell him. I'm going to tell him now." And Mr. Nagy started decisively toward the door.

"No. Please! At least wait until we're forced. It will be soon, I'm sure." She was tugging at his sleeve.

"If he's thinking of little green men, we're forced."

"And the truth!" she whispered unhappily. "Is it all so simple and normal? Is it?"

That stopped him. He came away from the door, and sat down heavily on the bed.

"If he has ideas now," she pursued, "what will he think then?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. All right then. We'll wait until we have to."

And soon they had to.

VI

Disclosure of the Nagys' secret might have been forced much earlier if not for Derv himself. Either his need to turn or his ability to discern direction should have soon won enough attention to provoke a denouement. Derv was now past the age when his whirling, if noticed, could be regarded as simply one of the many common compulsions of childhood. Indulged to any extent, it would surely draw from any onlooker a wondering, "What on earth is that?"

But his ingenuity provided a kind of protective coloration which concealed his need for constant realignment. Not only did he save up the day's displacements for a total gymnastic correction at night, but he contrived

various ways to keep himself comfortable during the day.

He became adept at choosing a turn which would soon be canceled by another. Or he introduced a compensatory whirl into a necessary maneuver.

A favorite trick was to snap his fingers as though he had forgotten something, turn back, then pretend he had been mistaken, but instead of reversing himself, continue turning in the same direction until he was faced forward again. This practice, which gave him a complete whirl in one direction, might bring him a reputation for being forgetful, but permitted the deeper aberration to go undetected.

Dropping a pencil, for which he must turn as he bent so that he could continue to turn as he straightened, was another useful device. Derv was always dropping pencils.

He invented a steering game. He was a robot who stepped blindly through the halls, steered by an operator who walked behind him, jabbing his right shoulder to trigger a right turn and his left shoulder for a left. If the operator was slow or forgetful and let the robot go into a wall, it revolved slowly in place until redirected. What license to take the turns he needed this crafty entertainment provided for Derv can be imagined. He played the game with Prin and one or two others. For a while it caught on and spread through the school. Robots with blank staring faces and a jerking mechanical gait staggered horribly through the halls, crashing into walls, desks and each other, until the teachers shrieked with exasperation and banned robot steering from the school.

As for the rare talent which distinguished him, his own intuitive discretion was reinforced by an impression that his parents disapproved of any display of it to others. It needed only a slight change in his father's gait, as they walked together one day when Derv was younger

and misguided enough to revolve in public, to impress him with this disapproval.

Disapproval? That was not the right word. His father enjoyed it mostly. Embarrassment? No, that wasn't it either. There was something in the way they looked at him which he could not understand and which compounded his feeling of mystery.

Mystery and fear. Fear in those who should be fearless is quickly sensed by a child. In one's parents fear is a kind of anarchy.

One day the Nagys wandered happily through a mammoth fair and exhibit, sometimes marveling, sometimes laughing at the plethora of new devices that were being demonstrated.

His father had stopped to examine a motorized surfboard. Derv and his mother had moved on toward the new food inventions. Mrs. Nagy stopped to sample a multinut, which melted in layer after layer in your mouth, each layer a new taste sensation.

Derv noticed idly that a man was watching her. Perhaps he was amused as Derv was by the exaggerated alternating expressions of delight and doubt which her face assumed for her son's entertainment. His mother was concentrating on her miming. Derv reached for a multinut and turned it over uncertainly, wondering whether he should try it. Suddenly his mother grasped his hand very tightly. Surprised, he glanced at her face. It had a stiff, unusual expression, her nostrils slightly flared.

"Derv," she said in a low voice which held steady but had a tone of urgency, "take me back to where your father is."

She offered nothing to the questioning look he threw her. He led her back through a turn or two to where they had left Mr. Nagy. As soon as she saw him, his mother walked ahead quickly and said something in an undertone to Mr. Nagy. Derv thought his tall, bony-

faced father would laugh at whatever had frightened his mother, but his face grew as taut as hers.

"I'm sorry, Derv," he said. "We're going home." He squinted down at his son in a suppliant way which was quite unlike his usual authoritative manner. Derv said nothing. They went home.

His parents never referred to the incident, but Derv began to notice how they started and looked at each other whenever a bell rang, the inaudible exchange of anxious whispers excited by nothing at all—a picture in a magazine or a name dropped by a newsjocky. And with covert glances he would watch his mother's capable face grow grave and his father's frown deepen.

What did they fear? They were hiding. He was more and more sure of it. The man at the fair. Was he a law officer of some kind? What terrible crime had been committed? And what was his part in it?

Sometimes they seemed to be hiding him, as though he were the prize or the scar of some nefarious deed of their past.

Even so, it was no direct impulse toward concealment but merely a disinclination to put himself forward which led him in school to profess as much disorientation as anybody else. Perhaps if somebody had asked him outright about the precision of his bearings, he would have answered quite naturally. But nobody asked him, and he was content to be retiring, to be like everybody.

Once when the class was taken for a picnic in a thickly wooded area, he found himself in a group which wandered off and soon asserted loudly and tearfully that it was lost. Although he felt almost certain that he could lead them out, he waited with extraordinary control, suffering all the unnecessary fatigue and hunger that attended the incident, until they were found and led out.

The Nagys were still safe.

They were less safe the time Derv was caught com-

pletely off guard. It was in the home room, during the question period which followed the composite taped unit of sociostudy on the closed circuit.

"All books closed," said Miss Grindig, the teacher. "Can anybody tell me where Thailand is?"

There was a show of buzzer lights.

Miss Grindig's bifocals swept the room approvingly. Derv Nagy had a book open before him, his face almost hidden behind it. She pulled the overhead close-upper down over her glasses. At first she was reassured to see the sociostudy programmed text propped up on Derv's desk. Then she saw another taller book open inside it, its title clearly legible: *The Sun and Its Family of Planets.*

"Derv Nagy!" shouted Miss Grindig, furious with his inattention. "Where is Thailand?"

Derv jumped to his feet, blushing guiltily, and without thinking pointed down toward the corner of the floor and wall.

"There!"

The boys and girls laughed for a long time. Derv, abashed, laughed with them. Miss Grindig let them laugh it out, then used the first opportunity to sweep them all on to a different issue.

Later Miss Grindig found that she was more puzzled by Derv's action than annoyed by it. Derv was a good student, no prankster, and certainly never impudent. What on earth had he meant, pointing so unthinkingly, so decisively? She thought about it. She studied a globe and thought about it some more.

At home she drew a picture of the classroom, with one of many little squares labeled "Derv Nagy." She covered it with arrows, then tore it up. She drew another picture of the school, set the classroom in it and started on a contour of Asia, but there was no room on the page and she tore that up too. She made a model of room and desk and boy with plastisheet, took it to

school and stuck it on the globe, where it looked ludicrously out of proportion and told her nothing.

In the week that followed, sometimes when the classroom was empty, she sat at Derv's desk, leaped to her feet and pointed as he had, to make sure of the spot. Then she took the long stick she used to demonstrate slides, stuck the end at the corner where floor and wall met and held it there, musing, long-jawed and solemn, her left arm pointing northward for a guide.

Once Mr. Borchardt, the principal, entered the room without her being aware, and saw her in the far corner of the room, leaning on a stick in her right hand, her left arm rigidly extended. He watched her for a moment in silent amazement, but she did not stir.

"What have you impaled in that corner, Miss Grindig? A bit of wildlife?"

She started and whirled about, her face hot. He would be witty about it for weeks to come.

She told the other teachers about it at lunch.

"So that's what he caught me doing, pointing at Thailand. Because that's exactly where Thailand is. Where that boy pointed. I've worked it out. And he didn't even stop to think."

"They're very bright nowadays," said the home appliances teacher.

The rest were skeptical. It was accident. Or the boy was just trying to be funny. They brushed it aside.

But Miss Grindig could not put it aside. As faculty adviser to the school newspaper, she ran a column called "View from the Close-Upper," about student personalities. Perhaps there was a paragraph in Derv. She took to watching him. There was something about him, the way he moved, something studied, something planned. She could not quite make out what it was.

She gave Derv a note to give to his mother, asking her to come to see her about Derv.

"Why, Derv!" said Mrs. Nagy. "What's this about?"

Her steady green eyes, not as wide as his, surveyed him without reproach. The thought of Derv being involved in a misdemeanor was only amusing. She gave him the letter to read.

"I thought it was about that," said Derv.

He laughed a little sheepishly and told her about the Thailand incident. He thought his mother would be amused, but an inexplicable uneasiness was settling in her face. Her eyes kept darting away from him.

"I guess she thought I was being fresh," he said.

"It seems a very small thing to call a parent up to school for," said his mother. "Is she that angry about it?"

"She doesn't act angry at all. Now, I'm not sure. Maybe it isn't about what I thought."

"What else could it be?"

Grindig. Besides being Derv's teacher, wasn't there something else she did?

"I can't imagine," said Derv. "Oh, don't bother about it. I don't think you have to go."

"I must, Derv. I can't ignore the note."

"Well, let me just ask her first if it's about that. If it is, I'll tell her all about my direction and that stuff and that will be the end of it."

His mother's eyes slid away from him again and she looked as if he hadn't solved anything with this proposal.

"I don't know. I'll see. Let me think about it."

She remembered, then, about Miss Grindig's column.

When Mr. Nagy came home, he said immediately, "What's up?" having read in her face that something was amiss.

She made sure first that Derv was in his room reading.

"It's about Derv."

"Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"I just want to ask you something."

"And don't ask me anything. People are asking me things all day."

He made himself a drink and slumped into Derv's chair, extending his long legs ahead of him. She was still there, waiting patiently.

"Well, what, then?" he asked.

She told him.

He laughed when she got to Derv pointing through the floor.

"How do you like that?" He shook his head in disbelief. "However does he do it?" He would not doubt for a moment but that Derv had pointed correctly.

She told him about the note, who Miss Grundig was and Derv's intention. His thick brows knitted anxiously.

"He can't do that. It'll be all over the school."

"Just tell him straight not to discuss it with her."

"What shall I tell him?"

"He'll want to know why."

"Well?" he said.

She could see that he had made up his mind. "We must tell him everything. Mustn't we?"

"I've thought so before this."

"Tonight then," she said. "He can't go back to school not knowing."

The time had come.

VII

IMMEDIATELY after dinner that night they began.

"Derv," said Mrs. Nagy, "I told your father about Miss Grindig's note. We don't want you to tell her anything about your—your ways of knowing direction."

"Why?" asked Derv, routine filial attention yielding instantly to intense curiosity.

"There's something we haven't told you that we want you to know about now," said his mother. "When you were born . . ."

It was coming. He felt a shiver of anticipation. Then he was right. There *was* a mystery about his birth.

"You were born in 1970. Right?" asked his father.

"Yes."

"What do you learn in school about that year?"

"I don't know. Europe proclaimed a commonwealth . . ."

"No."

"Africa . . . No, wait. That was the year they stopped space flights. Wasn't it?"

"That's right. Space flights."

Space flights! What did it have to do with space flights?

"Your father and I . . ." His mother hesitated.

His father shrugged impatiently. "We were space fliers, Derv."

His eyes opened wide.

"You were?"

"We don't look it now, do we?" his father asked.

"No."

Mr. Nagy squinted at him amicably, but sat up straighter in his compatible chair.

"There weren't many of us," he said, "perhaps a few hundred, and not many women. Your mother was very brave."

"Or very foolish," said Mrs. Nagy.

Derv looked at his mother skeptically. It was hard to associate her with space flight. She went better with zipper-mending and cereal and changing the bedstrips.

"What did she do?"

"She . . . Well, that last year they were trying to find out all the effects of no gravity on humans. Like: If you took a drug, was its action slowed in free flight? Did the heart muscle deteriorate from prolonged weightlessness? What happened to the inner ear in free flight? Were there special exercises to compensate for effects on the circulation? Would you eat less, weightless?"

"I remember that one," said Mrs. Nagy. "That's just the way the headlines had it—WEIGHTLESS EAT LESS."

"Oh, there were dozens of them," said Mr. Nagy.

He stopped, lost in thought. Mrs. Nagy took it up.

"We were in the very last experiment," she said.

Mr. Nagy got up and started walking around the large room, flinging up a wall here and there to give himself room.

Derv's heart beat fast.

"Tell me. Tell me, please."

"We volunteered for it," said Mrs. Nagy.

"If you can call it that," said Mr. Nagy. "We were expected to volunteer. There were only two other married couples and we were the only couple that . . ."

"We were the ones they wanted," said Mrs. Nagy. "But when it was over, we were sorry we did it."

"Why? What happened?"

They didn't really look like criminals.

"Oh, it went all right. Everything was perfect."

"Perfect," said Mr. Nagy. "We kept telling the ground and the ground kept telling us how perfect everything was. 'How's the fuel cell look?' 'Looks all right to us.' 'Does that cuff still keep you awake?' 'No, just at first.' 'You lost Stage Two. Everything looks good here. How about there?' 'Looks good here, too. How's our oxygen pressure?' " He broke off. "Questions and answers every minute of the day. That's when I got overcommunicated," he added gloomily.

"Is that why you were sorry you did it?" asked Derv.

"No," said Mr. Nagy. "It was what came afterward. The publicity."

"Interviews? Like the ones on the teeviewer?"

"Much worse. They hounded us," said Mrs. Nagy.

"But why?" asked Derv. "Weren't there lots of space fliers by then?"

"Yes, but what we did was special," said his mother.

His father broke in, his voice rising in remembered

iritation, "We couldn't go anywhere, step out of the house, without a camera or a microphone poking into our faces, people following us and staring at us."

"Even when you weren't doing anything special, just moseying along?"

"Just moseying along," said Mrs. Nagy, "or eating at a counter and getting mustard on our noses, or looking in a store window to see how you looked with your hat on backward."

Or trying to find the true direction!

"And always asking you what did you think about this," put in his father, "and what did you think about that until you just didn't seem to think *anything* any more."

"Oh, how I would hate that," said Derv, who had good reason to treasure his moments of private thought.

"We knew you would," said his mother. "And that's what worried us most of all. We didn't want you to grow up being watched every minute like that."

The story had taken an odd turn. He was startled.

"Oh, was I there?"

His parents looked at each other.

"Yes, you were there," said Mrs. Nagy.

"We took you and ran," said Mr. Nagy. "Sneaked out. We had saved a little money. We changed our names and—"

"What *was* our name?"

Mrs. Nagy shook her head warningly.

"If we told you it would be a bother to you never to say it, never to know it. It's better not to know."

"You're Derv Nagy," said his father, and Derv liked to hear him say it in that commanding way. "That's all the name you have to know."

"And didn't anybody ever find you?"

Again they looked at each other. No need to tell him about the plastic surgery, or Mrs. Nagy's hair dye. No need to describe the faked "accident" with the capsized

sailboat. And best not to tell a boy, "Everybody thinks we're dead."

"They never found us," said Mr. Nagy.

"And is that all?" asked Derv.

The facts of life, as always, were an anticlimax to everything you wondered about.

Mrs. Nagy nodded to Mr. Nagy.

"Don't you see?" said his father. "That's why we've never wanted you to call attention to yourself with this . . . your direction talent. We don't want people being interested in us, wondering about us."

Derv was numb with disappointment. Then that was all?

"You don't have to worry. I don't show it. The Thailand business—well, that won't happen again."

"We were worried about Miss Grindig especially, Derv, because of that column she runs. If she wrote about you—"

"About me! Let her just try!" he said with quite ordinary boy-versus-teacher fierceness.

"What will you tell her?" asked his mother.

"I don't know. I'll see if it's about that. If it is, I'll get out of it somehow without telling her anything."

"Tell her your mother is too busy to come down if that's all it's about," said his father.

Derv nodded. Mrs. Nagy came over to kiss him. But the interview, the great scene which had promised so much, seemed over. Derv got up. Their eyes followed him anxiously.

"But what *was* the experiment?"

Now there was a heavy, frightened silence. Then some signal must have passed between his parents. Signals were always passing between them. Mrs. Nagy sat down again and faced her boy.

"The experiment," she said, "was you. You were born out there."

Derv fell back into his chair, his eyes wide.

"You were the first," said his father. "And right after that was when they found earth closed in by the belt of nuclear waste from all the testing and the ban on space flights started."

"So you were not just the first," continued Mrs. Nagy. "You were the only!"

"The only what?" His lips were dry, his heart pounding.

"Why, the only child ever born in free flight. The only human being ever born weightless!"

"Weightless! What—what do you mean, weightless?" he asked, although he knew very well.

"Free of gravity. We were in orbit, far out in space. You floated," said his father.

At the time they had wondered if gravity would claim him when they came back.

"What if he floats away?" Mrs. Nagy had offered.

Full of love and curiosity they had stared at the tiny infant huddled in its incubator-suit, floating between them in the instrument-lined cabin. And with nothing better to do, they bandied the idea back and forth.

Mrs. Nagy thought a buoyant son who hovered several feet up in the air entailed endless inconveniences.

"I would have trouble feeding him. And when I take him out I'd have to tie him to a string and sail him behind me like a balloon."

He had laughed at her. "Don't worry. Any boy of mine is going to have his two feet on the ground."

And, as they had never seriously doubted, the baby was heavy enough when they were down. Within a few minutes Mrs. Nagy had handed him to her husband, sighing, "You take him. He weighs a ton."

Here was Derv now, stammering, "And I am the only . . . the only . . . ?"

"It looks as if you will always be the only one."

"I can't believe it. It's so . . ."

He had no more questions. He seemed shocked into a trancelike state. Staring blindly, he stumbled to his feet.

"Derv?" asked his mother anxiously. "Are you all right?"

"I want to think about it," he said.

Dumbly they watched him go upstairs to his room and shut the door behind him.

For years they had feared that the knowledge of his peculiar beginnings might disturb him in some unbearable way. He would be lonely! He would be frightened! He would feel freakish! Now his stricken face confirmed their dread.

The anxiety suffered by his parents was not entirely unjustified, for Derv himself had been anticipating despair. He had always known that some day he would learn a terrible truth about himself, which would isolate him forever from every child he knew. One of the most recurrent fantasies which frightened him was that he had come from some other planet, a fear which he would never confide to his parents. When they admitted that they had been space pilots, he thought for a moment that he had guessed the truth.

He couldn't say why it frightened him. Perhaps the thought was that if he had come from that other distant world which he imagined, then there would always be the threat of monstrous pursuers who would seek him out to snatch him back where they felt he belonged.

Yet, among the many emotions that Derv took with him to bed that night, none of these feelings were present. There was little logic in how he felt. In complete reversal of what he had expected and feared, now that he knew himself certified unique, he was transported with delight.

First there was relief. Oh, how relieved he was! There were no two-headed gargoyles lying in wait for him. Nor were there any one-headed policemen lying in wait

for his parents. There had been only his father, his mother and himself in that floating home. He was comforted by this knowledge that they had so surely been with him on the first day that he had breathed. And far from being engaged nefariously, they had been in splendid enterprise.

But the elation which now held him had nothing to do with gratification in having been a part of so glorious an undertaking.

It was only this. He had been born weightless! The best of all. He was the only one with absolute direction. It was real and true and had faultless reason. He laughed for joy.

He executed his leaps and twirls and twists quickly and plunged into bed to think about the explosive revelation which had been made to him.

The door opened and his father stood at the threshold of his room.

"Derv?"

"Dad!" He sat up. "Oh, I'm so glad you told me at last."

"Are you?" His voice was creaky.

"It explains everything," said Derv. "Doesn't it?"

"Well . . . we don't really know that."

"Anyhow, it's wonderful," sighed Derv. "I'm so happy."

It was all his father needed to know. He hurried out to tell Derv's mother.

His parents might wonder whether there was any connection between his phenomenal talent and the extraordinary anomaly of his birth, but to Derv the etiologic relationship was conclusive and eminently fitting.

There was something so delightful, so inevitable in the manner of his birth that he felt almost as if he remembered it. He imagined himself just born, floating, weightless. Free from gravity. Free of the everlasting, constraining special tug which was so trivial, so irrele-

vant to . . . free . . . free . . . free to respond to . . . to . . . He jumped awake.

There had been something else then. There was something else now too—something which had nothing to do with the attraction of the mass of a human body for the mass of the earth. There was some influence struck then on his freely floating, quivering being, which all these years he had been striving to remember through the blur of gravity.

He sat up in bed, straining eagerly, his forehead cold with condensing beads of perspiration. There had been occasional moments in his nightly somersaults when he had achieved a strange peace of position, truer than any he ordinarily attained. In such brief instants, gone as soon as he knew them, he had felt himself wholly in tune with what? a pulse? a sound? a force, which turned and pulled him? He could think of it only as a direction, the Direction. And he knew that it had compelled him at birth and compelled him now.

Even when he corrected the day's deviations, he merely cleared himself for a more vivid sense of the source which drew him. For really, if he floated free, couldn't he find it immediately, as he sometimes found it by accident in his aerial revolutions?

He fell asleep to dream that he and his parents were all afloat in the sky. They kept asking, "Which way? Which way?" "Like this," he told them. But they could not follow him, no matter how they tried.

VIII

"I WOULD LIKE to tell Prin about it," said Derv one evening.

His mother put down her spoon. There was a constrained silence.

"Who is Prin?" asked his father.

"The girl I told you about. With absolute pitch."

"No," said his father. "The answer is no. Didn't you expect it to be?"

"Derv, you were a good boy to ask our permission. But it's impossible. You know the reasons as well as we do. We've talked about it enough."

"I'm surprised that you'd even ask," said his father.

"I've got to tell her. I've got to." Such intensity was unusual for Derv.

"Why?" asked his mother.

"Just about me. About my directions." Now he pleaded eagerly. "Nothing about you."

"And the space flight?"

"Oh no. Certainly not about that. Or about your being pilots or any of that."

They weighed this. His father shook his head.

"It's too risky. Where would you draw the line?"

"Just what I said. How I feel direction and the way I have to turn myself."

"It would be all over school the next day," said his mother.

"No! Not if I told her not to tell."

His father snorted at such naïveté and started flinging himself around the room like a caged lion, or like a space flier who had once tasted a terrible confinement.

"Oh, Derv," said Mrs. Nagy.

"She wouldn't. You don't know Prin. I'm the only one she ever talks to in the whole school. All she cares about is her piano playing. And now she's learning the clarinet too. She's by herself all the time in the library or in the music room. And she always walks by herself when she's not with me."

This incoherent account drew a vivid picture of a withdrawn, asocial creature who might, of all types, be conceivably the one who could be trusted with a secret.

"If you are very friendly with her, perhaps she has already noticed the way you turn," said his mother.

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Derv.

"You're yielding. I can see it," said his father angrily to his mother.

"I don't see the harm if he limits it as he says. We know we can trust him."

"There's one more thing I want to put into it," said Derv.

When he told them, they threw up their hands.

It was Mrs. Nagy who thought of a way out which would not impose a lie on Derv and would not betray their secret. Over the next few days they hammered out a protocol of exactly what he could say and what he could not.

"He never told us *why* he has to tell her," said Mr. Nagy. "But don't ask him. I don't want to know."

"It's because she's his friend. That's all. I don't think he has a special reason."

But he did have a special reason.

The next day, armed with the limited release granted by his parents, Derv looked eagerly for Prin.

He did not pass her, as he usually did, after his Interlingua class. On his way to univertical mathematics he looked into the music room, but nobody was there except three girls whirling through a dance rehearsal. They looked at him with distaste, and he withdrew quickly, taking a few nervous twirls himself when the door was shut. And suddenly there she was before him, pushing strands of hair from her flowered pink face.

"I knew you were here," she said.

"How?"

"I could see the hall ceiling from the room I was in and I saw a shadow go round and round like a propeller and I thought of you."

"You did? Why?"

"Oh, I've often seen you whirl around fast when you think nobody is watching."

His mother had been right.

"Meet me after school," he said. "I have something to tell you."

"What is it?"

"The bell's going to ring any minute. Meet me. At the west gate."

He hurried away to his next class.

She was there waiting for him after school and they started down the hill together.

"Guess what I have," he said.

"Chicken pox?"

"What's chicken pox?"

"A disease children used to get."

"No. No disease. I have absolute direction."

"What on earth is that?"

"It's why I whirl."

He told her about it, very cautiously, observing all his parents' injunctions. It made it difficult but exciting, like being a captured spy.

"How extraordinary!" she said, and looked at him with great favor as though she were about to bestow an honorary degree upon him. "I had often noticed something of the sort about you, but I never guessed it was so much."

"It's very much."

"But what is it in you?"

"Well, what is it in you? Sounds of different pitch have different wave lengths. Do you have some way of measuring them in your ear?"

"Of course not. But let's see. What *do* I do?" She stopped walking and stood listening. "I think I remember. G has a different sound from B or A, even aside from its pitch. I remember it and when I hear it, I say, 'That's G.' But what do you do?"

This was the ticklish part. Her own explanation helped.

"I remember too," said Derv. "For some reason I remember a direction I was in when I was weightless."

"Weightless!"

"Not now. I weigh one hundred and ten."

"When were you weightless?"

"When I was born. Everybody is. You float in some fluid in your mother."

"Amniotic," she said. They had all learned it in Life Study class. "But *I* can't remember when I was weightless."

"And I can't remember any pitch I hear."

Yes. She understood special ability. She was the very person to understand that.

"But what direction *is* it that you remember?"

"Listen. Can you get out at night in the dark?"

"When? Tonight?"

He looked up at the gray sky.

"No. When I tell you."

"But what will we do?"

"I don't know for sure. There's something I have to find out. You can help. I need somebody to watch."

"Are you going to become weightless?"

"I wish I could. Oh, how I wish I could."

He thought over everything he had told her. He had told her enough, not too much, and he had not needed to lie. There was one thing left to say.

"Prin, you have to promise something. Not to tell anybody what I've told you now."

"Why?" Her head tipped receptively on her long neck.

"Because I don't want it known."

Instinctively he had given her the very reason that she would find most acceptable.

"Then I promise. I won't tell anybody."

"Not your father. Not anybody."

She looked at him with surprise, as if he had offered her a chair when she was already sitting. "Of course. What you told me is yours. It belongs to you. If you gave me your coat to hold, I surely wouldn't hand it over to my father or anybody else."

He always liked the way she said things.

The next two days it snowed, but the third day the sun shone and by the afternoon the sky had frozen to blue clarity.

He stopped Prin in the school hall. She shook her head at him.

"My father says I can't go out after dinner."

"Oh." He was crestfallen. "But look, maybe we don't have to wait that long. Just until the sky is good and dark and the stars are out. Won't that be before dinner?"

"I don't know. If it is, I'll be there. At the Japanese lawn of the Institute."

The light faded slowly during the long afternoon. Derv, waiting impatiently, had long since finished his homework. If he waited too long, he would be called to dinner and Prin would not meet him afterward. He went to the window once again to look at the evening sky. It seemed quite dark. Perhaps it would be black by the time he got to the Japanese lawn. Already a few stars had broken into sight.

It seemed queer to perform his somersaults so early, and fully dressed. He might have to repeat them, or at least some of them, later when he went to bed.

His mother saw him in his winter weatheral, ready to leave the house.

"Derv! Where are you going? It's almost time for dinner."

"I'll be back."

"But it's dark outside."

"I just want to see something. I'm not going far. Just as far as the Japanese lawn and back."

He was out before she could ask any more.

The sky was black at last, the points of light sharp enough to stab. Here the pedestrian bridge was cleared of snow, but as he approached the Japanese lawn the walk descended to level ground. On either side of him stretched soft white fields of snow.

Prin was not there and he was cold. He leaned against

a tree and closed his eyes. Had he been cold when he was born? He tried to remember his first minute of life and almost it seemed as if he could, but he knew very well he was making it up.

There was only one thing he did remember. Of that he was positive.

"I'm here and I'm *freezing*," said a voice.

He opened his eyes. There was Prin.

"Oh, good. Listen. It won't take but a minute. I need a stick."

"A stick?" She looked around vaguely, determined not to move if she could help it. Her pale hair flowed out from beneath her cap and lumped over her thick collar.

He went over to the exotically cut hedge which led to the rock wall. Its branches were black and stiff with winter. He broke off a long branch, almost as tall as he was. He stuck one end of it into the snow.

"All right. Now you stand here next to it. When I yell 'Now,' you point the stick the way my body is pointed."

"On the snow?"

"No. Leave it sticking into the snow. Just poke it so it stands the way I do when I say 'Now.' Can you do that?"

"I suppose so," she said. She knew already that she would fail.

To her astonishment he leaped up and backward, his heels going over his head. Light as his weatheral was, it was more than he usually wore and he barely got off the ground. Almost instantly he was returning to his feet and panting, "Now!" Frantically she wiggled the stick.

"Did you get it?"

"Oh, I . . . I haven't the faintest idea. It was so quick."

"Well, didn't you even watch?"

"Of course I did. But I didn't even know what you were going to do. All I could see was just a bunch of clothes and then there you were."

"I'll do it again. Now you be ready."

"Wait. When you say 'Now,' couldn't you just hold it for a second so I could see—"

"Oh sure. What do you think I have here? Wings?"

He was furious with her, precisely because he was not so equipped.

"Well, don't get angry. It's hard to do."

"I suppose you think it's easy to do my part."

"Oh, that's wonderful, Derv. I never saw anything like it. I can't imagine how you do it."

"Oh, it's easy."

He stood still to poise himself. If he were home now, he would first fling himself into a forward somersault to undo the turn he had just taken. As it was he could only unturn the lateral twist. He was left feeling dissatisfied, unhinged. But he knew that if he tried the front leap, he would not be able to do another afterward, and the side twist could only be performed together with the back flip, at this stage of his prowess. Still . . .

"Now watch and be ready."

Prin watched and was ready. Lips pursed, shoulders hunched with cold, she clutched the stick as though it were a scalpel about to be demanded by an operating surgeon.

Suddenly he was in the air. As suddenly he was on his feet again. And again she was overcome with the mortification of failure. Tears started up in her eyes.

"Oh, I missed it. I just couldn't. I *tried,* but I don't know what happened, I just—"

"Oh, don't be silly. I didn't say 'Now,' at all."

He was panting. She was overjoyed.

"Didn't you?"

"No. It was no good. I felt it."

She was sorry for him, having learned all about frustration in her music lessons. She stood silent and patient, knowing that he wouldn't want her to say anything. She wished he would give it up so that they could go home.

She was cold and hungry. But when she practiced the piano and tripped over the same passage five times, ten times, it infuriated her if her father told her to give it up. So she waited.

At last he sighed.

"I'm going to try something different. Maybe you can get it better this way. Just watch me and point the stick when I say 'Now.' "

He twirled quickly and wordlessly in place, then stopped and waited.

She tensed, wondering which way he would leap. Her eyes burned with cold and watching, ready to capture the explosion of a movement. Her hand froze on the stick. She waited. He was still. He seemed to have forgotten she was there.

Derv stood absolutely still, emptying his mind of thought. He closed his eyes to shut out the street and the rigid perspective of forward and back, side to side, up and down. Empty. Empty. Only Derv. Derv and space. Now he was beginning to settle into it. Now his sense of it was welling up in the emptiness. A little this way. He turned slightly, stopped, stood several minutes more, then turned an imperceptible fraction more. Ah, yes. He raised his head slightly, his eyes still closed. It was there. It was there.

"Now!" he shouted and heard Prin scream.

And suddenly, although he had no sensation of falling, he found himself flat on his face in the snow.

He stood up, feeling a little silly.

"What happened? Did you hurt yourself?"

Prin's anxious face gleamed before him.

"I'm all right."

He blew snow from his nose and wiped his face and hair.

"Did you faint? I never saw anybody fall that way. You didn't even put your hand out. If not for the snow, you would have broken your nose."

"Did you get it?"

She shook her head miserably. He would never speak to her again. She had failed him. She was ready for the sentence of excommunication which would destroy her.

But he laughed, thoughtfully and quite happily.

"It doesn't matter."

He looked up at the sky and stared at a small patch of it. Yes, he knew which way it was. Only the curse of gravity prevented him from resting aslant on the imaginary line of force which he felt to be his life line.

He pulled out the stick and pointed with it quite surely.

"That way," he said. Then he threw the stick away. "Let's go home."

"You're not angry with me?" she asked. "I was so frightened. I couldn't imagine what you were up to. What *were* you doing?"

"I was being weightless."

IX

HE ALONE in all the world knew the Direction. He, Derv Nagy.

For a few weeks he embraced the thought, but when spring came and the days grew longer, the vivid sense of the way it went relaxed. Not his remarkable inner detector of deflection. That was forever with him, together with the need to turn at night to correct the daily earth-bound revolutions and the slow wheel through the sky.

But that other, the remembered command at the core of him, waned and he began not to think of it very much. Through the summer, engrossed as he was with the daily baseball game which was everlastingly in progress at the public sports area, his need to align his body with the one great Direction, a need which at best could

only be satisfied in one vanishing instant of a somersault, was vague and neglected.

In the fall he started at high school, a new and varied life.

One night he was doing his turns rather perfunctorily before retiring. He was thinking back over the school day, trying to find why he had a persistent feeling of irritation. He finished his turns and got into bed, dissatisfaction still present, its source still unresolved.

He was almost asleep when for no reason at all a memory of the fall in the snow assailed him and he knew instantly the reason for his discomfort. The yearning to spring athwart the magic line, which had been dim during the summer months, had returned. Now that he recognized it, he realized that it had been getting stronger day by day.

He stood up in bed. He had never tried it before. The sponge metal base gave him an elastic footing which propelled him high. Almost—almost he found it and was down. But he felt better and soon he slept. In succeeding nights he used the bed again and again as a take-off.

"Just look at that bed," said Mrs. Nagy angrily on a no-school day.

Derv looked at his bed.

"It looks all right to me."

His father stopped in the hall at the door.

"Henry, come in and look at Derv's bed," said Mrs. Nagy.

"I don't want to know about it," said Mr. Nagy, coming to the door and squinting curiously at the bed.

"Look underneath. The bedcover rollers are almost touching the floor."

Mr. Nagy bent down and looked underneath. "Now how did that happen?"

"You've been jumping on it," said Mrs. Nagy to Derv.

Derv blushed. He hadn't thought anybody knew.

"I didn't think it would hurt it any."

"Aside from the bed, Derv, I think it's pretty dangerous," said his father.

"I'll cut a couple of slats for it in shop at school and nail them across," said Derv.

Mrs. Nagy twisted her mouth in frustration and resignation. She knew she couldn't stop him from jumping. He had to do it. She rolled a fresh strip of bedcover onto his bed. At least the rollers still worked.

It was Mr. Nagy who came up with the solution. He gave Derv a small trampoline for his birthday.

"He'll break his neck," said Mrs. Nagy.

"Not Derv," said Mr. Nagy. "And it'll be good for his posture, straighten him out."

"I hope so. Stand up straight, Derv. Throw your chest out."

Derv plucked at his chest and mimicked a throwing gesture toward the window.

"Oh, you," said his mother.

A few nights later he stood in the street at night after a Home Technology demonstration which he had attended with his parents. They had walked ahead, leaving him to dream at the stars.

These nights he found it easily. Oh yes, it was the way he wanted to turn, the way he wanted to align the axis of his body. Every electron of every cell of his body seemed to yearn in that direction. Odd that he had lost the feeling of it during the summer.

His eyes turned toward the patch of sky which had drawn his attention the night he had fallen in the snow. There was a small cluster of stars nearby. None of them had anything to do with him. No. There was no star at all in the Direction. He only used the cluster as a guide. But his line went right past them into blue-black space. If there *was* a star there, it was not visible to sight.

He heard a sound and turned to find his father behind him, watching him intently.

"What is it, Derv?"

"Nothing," he said, his face closing down.

He no longer talked to his father as he had when he was younger. He could not bear his questions, so weighted with admonition and parental anxiety. Stop dreaming. Straighten up. A good way to avoid questions was to ask some of your own.

"When you were a space pilot, did you get to know much about the layout of the sky?"

"The constellations? Oh, I can spot a few, but they don't mean anything to a pilot. A space pilot is more of an engineer than anything else. I probably don't know much more about the stars than you do."

"You know the Milky Way at least."

"Now don't take advantage of my modesty. I even know it's just a crowding of stars we see by looking across the surface of the galaxy disk we're in."

He tried to make his next question sound casual.

"Mm-hm. And where do you suppose the center of our galaxy would be?"

His father's eyes searched the sky. Derv's heartbeat waited for the answer.

"It has to be in the Milky Way, but I haven't the faintest idea where. You ask your science teacher that."

His science teacher. His science teacher barely knew the biology which came over the closed circuit series. He would be the last person to know where the center of the galaxy was.

Mrs. Nagy joined them and they started back to the house. One thing was certain. His tone had been casual enough so that his father had no inkling how much this question meant to him. For his father had already wandered off to another topic, a familiar topic.

"You know, Derv, you're always worrying about how

tall you are. If you stood up straighter, it would add at least two inches to your height."

The same old tune.

At school, on the bulletin board in front of the science room there was a picture he liked, showing clouds of stars, nebulae. There was also a picture of the galaxy in which the sun is included, imperfectly spiral. An arrow singled out the sun.

One day when Derv was staring at it, a teacher he did not know stopped beside him.

"Do you like the stars?" asked the man.

"They're all right." His fervid gaze, challenged, fell away from the picture.

"You're the boy who talks to Prin."

Prin? Derv, confused, looked at him. The man had white flat hair combed to the side in a youthful curve which contrasted strangely with its color of senility. He looked like an elderly boy.

"I'm her father. I teach music in the upper grades."

"Oh."

The music teacher did not seem to mind this unflattering response. He returned to the star pictures.

"That's an unimportant spot we're in, isn't it?" he said, pointing to the dot marked as the sun. "Certainly not the center of things."

Would a music teacher know anything?

Derv put his finger on the center of the galaxy.

"I wonder which way that is from here. From where we're standing right now."

The music teacher looked vaguely around the corridor and at the ceiling. "Hm," he said.

Derv had tried to make his question sound idle, but he could not keep from throwing quick searching looks at the elderly boy's face. There was no answer in it.

"I guess I better get to my next class," Derv said.

"I know somebody who knows," said the music teacher. "I'll find out."

He gave Derv a quick, secretive nod of promise, like that of a salesman who has the very thing you have been searching for in his stockroom in the rear, and hurried away.

A week later Derv stood in line on the way into assembly. Somebody tapped him on the shoulder. Now what? Didn't the man have any sense of privacy? Was he going to start a conversation about stars and Prin and the center right here, with Derv's classmates on every side?

"I need a boy to take this music up to the piano on the platform," he said to the waiting line of students.

"All right. You," said the music teacher blandly, and thrust a pile of music into Derv's arms.

He looked at Derv as if he had never seen him before. He and Derv moved away from the line in a natural way that Derv approved.

"The piano is on the right, just behind the curtain, and that other feature you mentioned," he added in a lower tone, "is not in the sky right now. It's on the other side, in Sagittarius. But tonight at nine twenty-three it will be in the direction of the gold tip of the flagpole up there."

There was the smallest possible flick of his smooth white crown toward the front of the auditorium, where high up near the ceiling, an American flag hung.

"From here," he added, then turned and went away. If there was a hint of badly played international agent in his manner, it was not out of mockery for Derv but only from a fondness for secrets and games.

Derv stood stock-still as though frozen. He looked down at where he stood and at the walls at either side to note the spot. Then he let his eyes wander to the gold-tipped flagpole. But . . .

He mustn't think about it yet. He mustn't jump to conclusions. He hurried down the aisle to perform the errand asked of him. He was hot, confused and weighed

down. He put the music on the piano and went back to his class.

He had time to think about it as he sat unhearing and unseeing through assembly. But he had known in that moment of sighting from feet to flag end. It was wrong! It was not his direction. Not even close.

That stupid music teacher. He was wrong. He must be wrong. Only Derv knew where the center of the galaxy was. Only Derv in all the world.

No, he knew that was silly. Was he himself in error? It was true that during the day he did not feel the tug as clearly as at night, but always, no matter where he was or what he was doing, he knew which way the Direction was, of course with the necessary corrections for the earth's turning.

In Sagittarius. He haunted the library. At night he searched the sky. After a week he was convinced. His own special Direction, the Way that he had learned at birth when he floated free, away from the distractions of earth's gravity, had no relation to the center of the galaxy, no relation at all.

Now when he spied the music teacher in the hall, he passed him quickly, his head down.

But he couldn't ignore him when he planted himself right in Derv's path and just stood there.

"You don't care for the center of the galaxy being in Sagittarius."

"I guess it's all right."

"You would prefer it to be elsewhere?"

"I don't care about it one way or the other."

The elderly boy let him go, but shook his head in perplexity as he watched Derv walk sullenly away.

It was not long before a new thought came to Derv. If it was not the center of the galaxy, then it was the center of the universe. That was it. That was it, surely. The center. The very heart of all.

He decided to forgive the music teacher. A unique

boy, headed toward the core of all creation, could afford to be magnanimous. Especially since the man had been quite right about the center of the galaxy. Prin's father was right. His direction was not toward the center of the galaxy. It was toward the nub of the universe.

The music teacher was surprised when the boy appeared in front of his desk, as cheerful as he had been sullen, and with a new question.

"I've been thinking some more about the stars."

The music teacher nodded and patted his smooth white forelock. "Nice to think about."

"I've been wondering where the center of the universe is."

The music teacher only blinked gravely.

"Say if I stood right here," went on Derv, "tonight which way would I point to it?"

Derv was sure he himself knew the answer. It was all he could do to keep from pointing.

"That's a difficult question. My friend—the one who answered your first question—gave me a book."

He reached and took it from his desk.

"Is he an astronomer?"

"No. He's a physicist. But the book is about the stars. He says it is very up-to-date."

Derv was eyeing the book avidly.

"Here," said the teacher. "Take the book with you and when you're finished with it, give it to Prin."

"Thanks. There wasn't anything in the library."

"If you can't find what you want in that, I'll ask my friend again."

Eager as he was, he couldn't bear to open the book until he was home in his own room with the door shut.

The book was unequivocal and heartbreaking.

X

NOBODY KNEW if the universe had a beginning, a center or an end, in space or in time, and perhaps nobody would ever know. The more he read, the more foolish it seemed to think of something so unknowable as a center of the universe. How childish he had been.

He found Prin and thrust the book into her hands as though he were returning an injury.

"Give it back to your father. There's no answer in it for me."

He told her what he had been looking for.

"It would have been very fine," she said.

They stood at the foot of the hill where their paths home would diverge.

"So there's no reason for my direction. But I feel it. It's part of me. Then what's it for?"

He frowned, his eyes on the ground. She watched him, sad for him, her long neck drooping.

He was thinking of something he would not say, even to her. The week before, in English class, there was that poem they had studied. A few of the words haunted him. He found himself repeating them, over and over. "And that one talent . . . Lodged with me useless. . . ." Lodged with me useless. That one talent which is death to hide, lodged with me useless. Useless. In bed at night he found himself repeating them. In school, tying his gym sneakers. Sharpening a pencil. Lodged with me useless. That one talent . . .

"Derv," said Prin, "did you know that you list?"

He looked up, startled and amused.

"What? I do not." Then, showing off, "I hiss my *s*'s as sibilantly as you do."

"Not lisp, list. Straighten up!"

She put her hands on his shoulders and pushed.

He laughed and pushed her away, embarrassed and hurt.

"See you tomorrow," she called and ran off down the street, a little frightened by her own boldness.

Later in his room, he sat on the edge of the bed and thought about it. Prin was getting to be a tease. "Straighten up!" Who else had said that to him recently? His father! More than once! His mother too. Parents nagged. But Prin! Come to think of it, his gym teacher had said it. And he had been annoyed, because his good posture had always been something he was proud of.

His room, long ago stripped of all childish accessories, was a proper rectangle, the walls bare except for the ball-print pattern, a hanging target, a magnetic board and a small mirror. He got up and went to the mirror.

At first he saw nothing wrong. He looked at the line of his body and the lines made by the intersection of walls and doors. But as he stood and stared and measured, he began to see that the lines were not parallel. His body sloped, unmistakably.

It was frightful. He was a freak!

But the next day, in the bright light of morning, the thought of deformity seemed unlikely. In any case there was no time to examine himself in a mirror during the preschool morning rush. Then at dismissal Prin popped before him. They looked at each other in the faintly humorous, challenging way they had adopted.

"Well," he asked. "Do I still list?"

"Stand still." She pushed the hair from her face, the better to see him.

He stood still and then exaggeratedly drew himself up stiffly in a military posture.

"No," she laughed. "You don't."

He relaxed and laughed with her. But she remained in front of him, looking at him while his thoughts wandered away from her.

"Now," she said suddenly.

"What?"

"Now, you're listing again."

She was dismayed to see horror grow in his face. Abruptly he turned and ran off.

"Derv! It's nothing. Wait!"

He would not stop for her. She must never mention the listing again.

Outside the sky had clouded over and was dark with the early night of winter. Derv walked rapidly, staring at his legs as he went. Was one leg shorter than the other? He stopped and stood with his legs together, looking at his feet. He stayed that way for a long time, hunched over, motionless, measuring. A woman approaching him faltered, then crossed to a side bridge and hurried away. He couldn't tell. Perhaps it was his spine. He was sick. Perhaps he was dying.

He stood absolutely still. Nothing hurt. He had to admit that he really felt all right. His eyes sought the sky, but the clouds were unbroken. He could find no solace there. He might as well go home.

On his own block he found himself accompanied by his shadow cast by the arc of light which bridged the street. The wavering dark image seemed to slant as his distorted body slanted. A thought welled up and exploded in his brain and he ran into his house.

"Do you have a little mirror?" he asked his mother.

She pressed the Lingoteach button on the wall directory and a panel slid open. The playerback kit had a small mirror for the correction of lip movements.

She looked at him curiously. "What do you want it for?"

"Just something. Kind of an experiment."

She was used to his evasiveness.

In his room he locked the door. He faced the wall mirror, relaxed and settled, and saw that he still leaned to the left. Then he turned his back on the mirror and

held his mother's small glass before him, moving it about until it held the image of his back in the large mirror.

Oh yes! How stupid of him! Why hadn't he known all along? The two mirrors showed him that when he turned his back on the mirror, he no longer leaned to his left, but to the right, *his* right.

Then it was not his legs or his spine.

What new wonder was this? How was it possible?

XI

THE MUSIC TEACHER was making discreet inquiries about Derv.

In school very few persons noticed the leaning, or, having noticed it, thought more than momentarily about it. The music teacher noticed it. He saw Derv standing aslant before a diorama exhibit of a government undersea farm. He saw Derv lost in thought, laterally inclined, waiting for his turn at the po-ball court. He saw Derv relaxed, in deviating posture, laughing at a wall cartoon.

To the music teacher it was one more interesting characteristic in a rather odd boy who won his attention by being Prin's only friend.

In the teachers' lunchroom he discovered something else about Derv Nagy.

At his table they were talking about a new craze which had spread through the school. Students who rolled their books in briefbarrows had taken to running down a hall with them, then jumping with one knee on the carry-case for an unsteady ride.

"It's worse than that wild robot-steering game they played last year," said an English teacher.

They reminisced about the robot-steering game.

"It was Derv Nagy who started that. You wouldn't think it, would you? He's such a quiet boy."

The music teacher, who was about to go for a napkin missing from his tray, decided to do without it.

"I *would* think it," said the sociostudy teacher from the lower school. "It was a game of direction. And that would be the very sort of game Derv Nagy would invent."

It was an opportunity for her to tell her Thailand story again. The story was new to the music teacher.

"He tries to conceal it, but he has an amazing feeling for direction," finished the sociostudy teacher.

Another teacher nodded. "I've noticed it. It's uncanny. It's perfect."

A per diem teacher, anxious to enter the conversation, found a way to insert a word. "Absolute. Absolute, as opposed to relative. Wouldn't you say?"

The talk went back to briefbarrows.

The music teacher mentioned it to his daughter that night.

"I heard something about your friend, Derv Nagy, today," he told her as he set out the music for their evening duets on piano and clarinet.

Prin poked through the box of clarinet reeds and frowned at the one she selected, but said nothing. The white patches on her cheeks were vivid.

"The teachers say he has a remarkable gift for direction."

"Do they?" she said, clamping the reed on the clarinet mouthpiece. "Let's do just the second movement tonight. I have a lot of homework."

One morning as the music teacher approached the school, he saw on the steps the visiting physics master, who went from town to town to give high-level personalized instruction to selected students enrolled on the closed circuit.

"Robert," called the music teacher. "I've been looking for you."

"I'm just on my way in now," said Robert Hailtree.

He carried two cases of equipment. They made him look even smaller than he was.

"Let me help you with your stuff. What is it all?"

"Games and toys for the kiddies. Levers, pendulums, Cartesian divers—stuff like that. Don't drop that."

They moved into the school. Hailtree had a thin nose and watery, red-rimmed eyes, and over his head he wore a strip of fur which ended in earmuffs. The corners of his thin mouth were turned down unless he laughed. His laugh was a thin high-pitched giggle.

"I have something for you, Robert," said the music teacher.

"Oh, have you?"

They liked to offer each other oddities of one sort or another. The last time, Hailtree had offered his friend a piece of music which proceeded from beginning to middle and then repeated its first half in reverse, note for note, back to the beginning again.

Hailtree looked at the other with sardonic suspicion. "What have you got?"

"I have a boy with absolute direction who leans."

"My God, what's that? I don't know what a boy with absolute direction is, let alone one who leans."

"He's the boy I told you about, the one with the questions," said the music teacher. He repeated the Thailand story and described the latest development.

"How utterly delightful," said Hailtree, and giggled.

"Can you explain it?"

"I wouldn't dream of explaining it. I just want to be amused by it. Where do you keep him?"

"He's in the library this period. Let's leave your stuff in my office. I'll show him to you."

The library was on the top floor. Through the glass windows of the door the music teacher pointed out a boy who was sitting at a table with his back to them.

"I don't see anything unusual," said Hailtree.

"It's too bad he's sitting the way he is. He seems to be taking notes. Wait till he gets up."

They waited.

The librarian looked up and came to the door.

"Don't you want to come in? Can I get anything for you?"

"No. Nothing. Thanks."

She left them.

"I feel silly," said Hailtree. "Let's go. Some other time." He started away.

"No. Look. There he goes."

They looked through the window. They saw the boy saunter to a further wall. Then he stood still in front of the rows of books, perhaps scanning their titles.

Hailtree shrugged. Again he moved a few steps away.

"Wait," said the music teacher, putting his hand on Hailtree's elbow. "Now!"

Hailtree came closer and peered through the glass.

"Well, look at that!" he said, staring with astonishment.

The music teacher beamed.

Just then Derv found his book, and turned around to go back to his table. They could see his face now.

There was a fresh mutter of surprise from Hailtree.

"What's his name?"

"Derv Nagy. Mean anything to you?"

They walked away from the door.

"No. No, it doesn't. For a moment I thought he looked like somebody I knew long ago. But I was mistaken."

"What do you make of it?"

"A rarity," said Hailtree.

"I knew you'd like it," said the music teacher.

For the rest of the day Hailtree was haunted by a vivid memory.

The face of the leaning student recalled with startling accuracy the boy he had first met years ago when they sat next to each other at school. They had referred

to him then as the boy with the Chinese name who was not Chinese, an ironically insignificant epithet considering the high-flown phrases that would ultimately be used to describe him.

The boy-face he had known so well fused with the man-face he had known just as well and both faces merged in a third face, the face of a boy he did not know at all.

Who was Derv Nagy?

XII

THE DOORBELL RANG. It was a strange sound in the after-dinner quiet of the Nagys' secluded lives.

Mr. Nagy looked quickly at his wife.

"Expecting anybody?"

She shook her head, her eyes alert and worried. Neither of them made a move toward the door. Derv was out for the evening, but anyway he always used his key.

"It must be a mistake," she said to reassure him.

The doorbell rang again.

"If I don't get rid of whoever it is, they'll go making inquiries," said Mr. Nagy. "It's probably only a neighbor, but maybe you'd better get a wall down just in case."

She nodded. In a moment the room was half its size and empty. Mr. Nagy went to the front door and opened it.

A flesh-and-bone mirage stood on his doorstep. The shock was great. His hand clutching the doorknob turned to water. The light from the hall shone directly on the visitor's face.

"Yes?" said Nagy. The years of control were not for nothing. There had not been a flicker of movement in his bony face or long body to signify that the man before him was anything but a complete stranger.

"I'd like to see Mr. Nagy, please."

"I'm Nagy."

The visitor's face changed. Smaller than Nagy, he peered up at him with his red-rimmed eyes as though from a great distance. Then he looked down at the car keys in his hand and turned each one carefully, full circle on the ring. He let go of them and they sprang back into his pocket.

"Well," he said, lifting his head again. "I wonder if I might speak to you about your son, Mr. Nagy. I'm Robert Hailtree, physics master of Third Area."

"What about?" Was he being ruder than was natural?

"May I come in?"

Nagy made no move to widen the opening in the doorway. He knew he couldn't risk a prolonged interview.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I have some work that I must finish."

His voice had fallen readily into the cadences he had affected long ago for concealment.

It was awkward keeping him there on the doorstep. And painful. Bob Hailtree. Still wearing earmuffs. The pinched nose and weak eyes. The turned-down mouth.

"At the school I heard something about your son. And I saw him from a distance. This is a rude question. And I suppose you won't answer it. Is he adopted?"

And how well-remembered, the bold, exact way of talking, so out of keeping with the diluted face and uncertain manner.

"No. He's our own," said Nagy.

Hailtree sighed and looked past him wistfully into the warmly lit hall within.

"He looked so much like a man I knew who died. He had a child I never saw and I got this notion . . ." He giggled with embarrassment.

Ah, that giggle. It smote him.

"What else did you hear about my son?"

"Nothing unpleasant. That he has an unusual feeling for direction. The teachers admire the talent. And they are puzzled about another peculiarity. He has a lateral stance that almost seems to defy gravity."

They had all noticed then. How could they not?

"Did they ask you to inquire about him?" His tone grew even icier than it had been.

"No," said Hailtree, "but I was interested in both characteristics and I'd like very much to see the boy."

"He isn't home. He's at choral practice."

"I see." Hailtree stood there, rebuffed, uncertain, dejected.

Nagy kept silent. The wild emotion was subsiding. It was apparent that he had not been recognized. He was safe. It was a cruel safety.

"I won't keep you any more then," mumbled the visitor, his words drowning in embarrassment. "Would you just tell me, please, which way I drive back to the second-level highway? I have a car below."

He gestured apologetically toward the street beneath the pedestrian platform.

"Take a right at the next corner and go two blocks past the old burial place there. You'll see an illuminated directory overhead that will take you down the right ramp."

"Thanks."

He crossed the walk and started down the steps to the carway. Nagy took a last look at the thin shamed shoulders and began to close the door.

When only his earmuffed head was visible, the visitor turned.

"Alex," he said softly, his voice quivering with emotion. "Is it you?"

Nagy held the door and stood as still as a shot animal.

"You've made a mistake," he said. "I told you."

The physics master came doggedly back up the steps, his mouth dour.

"You said 'byoorial place.' You always said 'byoorial.' "

Nagy shrugged. "I imagine the mistake is a common one."

Again he made a move to close the door, but Hailtree boldly put his foot in it.

"Alex," he said, gently but urgently. "I must talk as if I'm a blind man, because you don't look like Alex. If you don't reveal yourself, won't I be more likely to talk about the whole thing—about the boy and about who I thought he was and who I thought you were? But if it *is* you, would I do anything to hurt you? Won't I protect anything you want protected?"

At the almost closed door, held open only by the width of a man's shoe, the long-guarded secret still refused to give way. Was the intrusion a wedge for betrayal or an invasion for rescue? To think, to hesitate would in itself be admission. But to close the door might be to seal in error. He must choose instantly.

"Cóme in," he said.

XIII

"Don't go unless you want to," said his father.

"I want to," said Derv.

"You may tell him anything you want to. He knows all about us. The whole thing."

"He's our friend," said his mother. "He was our friend then. And he's our friend now."

So with thumping heart, a few nights later, he pressed the button next to the name, Robert Hailtree, in a high-rise apartment in the next district.

The thin-nosed man who came to the door looked morose and unfriendly, but nodded when Derv said who he was.

"Ah! The leaning boy. Come with me."

Inside it didn't look very much like an apartment that one lived in.

The physics master led him down a dark passage which curved rather than angled. At the end of it they entered a series of small laboratories made out of two large rooms with drop-walls, haphazardly placed. They were filled with worktables, apparatus, electrical and electronic equipment of all kinds. Hailtree and Derv stepped over wires, circled benches, went in and out of apertures left by pieces of wall and finally emerged in a somewhat larger, comfortable study. Hailtree sat down at his desk and motioned Derv to a chair.

"Now then," he asked abruptly. "Where is north?"

Derv smiled at the triviality of the test and pointed instantly. Hailtree giggled, his pink-lidded eyes fixed unblinkingly on Derv. He turned and looked carefully in the direction which Derv had indicated, searching the corners of the bookcase and the molding near the ceiling, almost as if he expected to see a sign saying "North" in letters which could be read if you knew the code. Then he turned back to Derv and giggled again.

"And the leaning. You are not leaning now." It sounded like a reproach.

"It takes a while. It's only when I have sat or stood in one position for a time. When I'm relaxed."

"Ah." His mouth turned down bitterly while his eyes shifted from one shoulder to the other of the boyish form facing him. "Now tell me. How *do* you know how much you've veered from your direction west or north or—"

"Or up or down? You have to put them in too, you know."

"All right. Or up or down. I'll throw them in because that's what I've heard from your father. Such a perception seems inconceivable."

"Don't *you* know when you're upside down? Don't you know when you're bending?"

"But that's gravity, and since you're made of the same stuff I am, come to think of it, why don't you know that—" He broke off abruptly, a startled look coming into his face. "Ah-hah!"

"I suppose I'm leaning," said Derv comfortably.

"You don't feel it?"

"I saw it in your face."

Hailtree giggled. Then he got up and walked around Derv, looking at him from various angles.

"As I was saying, why don't you know that you're leaning?"

"Usually I don't know. But if you ask me about it, I know. If I think about it. If I notice."

"But why isn't it as uncomfortable as it would be for me?"

"I don't know. It's just that it's more—more natural to obey one pull than the other, so I ignore gravity without really thinking about it."

"And what do you suppose is that other pull?" Hailtree underlined the word with a grimace of distaste.

Derv's amateur scientific interpretations of his phenomenon received short shrift from Hailtree.

"Nonsense," he said, almost before Derv had a word out.

"Or maybe when I was weightless and had no gravity acting on me, other influences could get through that—"

"Nonsense."

"Like some kind of wave that—"

"What kind? We know all the kinds. Nonsense."

You couldn't mind his "Nonsense." It was so gentle, directed almost at what he conceived was his own straying into fantasy.

"And that's what made me so aware of every turn. What I felt was any turn from the Direction, but at first I just knew difference without knowing. . . . But now the radiations are making me—"

"Garbage."

Derv stopped talking, still unoffended, even though he did not know that "garbage" was an inoffensive term used by physicists for an unsound explanation. Yes, it was garbage. Something in his own good sense responded to the shudder of revulsion with which Mr. Hailtree had greeted the word "radiations."

There was silence, during which Derv looked sadly at Hailtree and leaned.

Hailtree sighed. "And I suppose that if you get up and turn the other way you will lean in the opposite direction?"

Derv stood up, turned his back to the science teacher and waited, relaxing, settling. In a little while Mr. Hailtree spoke.

"Yes."

Derv sat down again. Hailtree smiled as if he were remembering something. Then he giggled. Then he stared at Derv while Derv stared back.

"No radiations, Derv. No mysterious influences. I think you are blessed with an extraordinary talent, just as . . . Well, your friend, Prin, for instance. You know about her acuity?"

"Yes."

"Yes. You are gifted as she is. I believe in your talent. I believe in your perception of direction and in your need to twirl yourself back."

Derv's face was flushed. He felt choked, afraid to breathe.

"But the rest of it . . ." Hailtree stood up, put his hands in his pockets, and walked around, looking at the floor. "I think the rest is psychological overlay which has become somatically real. At some time during your childhood you conceived of a single direction and it took hold because it helped to anchor you and make your turns consistent with what you knew of the nature of the universe."

Derv did not speak. A tear ran down his cheek. How

could he refute this clever man? It was reasonable, all of it.

"You say you know when you are leaning. And I say you lean, not because some mysterious radiation draws you against gravity but out of knowledge of where this self-appointed direction is. It's another way of righting yourself against the many insults your perfect sense must suffer during a day."

Yes. Ye-e-e-es . . .

"I have disappointed you," said Hailtree.

"The truth is better than anything else."

"So forget it, Derv. Mark yourself blessed and use your gift for what it is. Don't try to spread it into fantasy. That way lies neurosis. Forget it. Put it in its place, like your good brain and your strong body. Use it to its best, but don't think about it."

Derv went home repeating the last words of the teacher to himself. Painful as the interview had been, it was worth it. For the first time in his life he had been able to express freely his ideas about the phenomena which both distorted and exalted him. He felt eased.

XIV

DON'T THINK about it.

It might have been difficult to do if it hadn't been that shortly after this visit Derv entered a belated adolescence. He grew tall, and a thousand and one of the usual distractions of the period crowded out all thoughts of abnormal inclination and magnetic direction.

There were other girls than Prin. There were other mysteries than his own. There were all kinds of wonders about which to learn and think. There was a book he was reading that was the best book ever written. Then there was another that was even better. History was fascinating and algebra delightful.

His obsession fell behind him like his childhood. He stopped searching the sky. He stopped looking at charts.

Even at night on the trampoline his mind was elsewhere. He no longer bothered to think what axis he obeyed. The direction and number of the somersaults and twists he needed for his comfort were dictated purely viscerally.

For a new adventure gripped his attention.

He had stumbled into it quite by accident. A teacher sent him on an errand. He was to find the engineer and ask him to come up to fix the remote-writer unit of the blackboard projector.

Following directions, he went down to nether quarters he never dreamed the school possessed. He found the engineer's office and delivered his message, but returning, he decided to come by a different route which would take him closer to his next class.

He hurried through one corridor after another. It would be fun to be lost, as other people were. He knew, of course, that he could not be, even for a moment. But he was having trouble finding a stairway that would take him up to the first floor. Perhaps he would never find it and he would wander for days. They would have to come looking for him. He would starve and grow thin and perhaps send a message by tapping on a water pipe. It was nice to think about.

At last he came to a small flight of steps which led not up but down to a pair of double doors. A sound, clanging and echoing, and a damp chemical odor coming from behind the doors stirred a memory. He descended and pushed the doors open. It was the swimming pool.

He had been here before. On the first day of high school when the class had been taken on a tour of the school, he had viewed its chlorinated attractions with complete indifference. Swimming, at any other time than the summer, had never appealed to him.

But today there was something going on which made the steamy resounding room a place he could not bear to leave. He had entered from the rear and nobody had seen him. He stood still and watched.

Six boys, all in identical ankle-length luminous swimsuits, probably the school's swimming team, were diving from the high board. They stood a few feet from the edge of the board, took three steps, then thud on the edge of the board, high into the air, somersaulted forward or back and plunged into the rocking water. As each came up, he looked to the side of the pool where a man in an incongruous straw hat was sitting, his torso creased in rolls of fat, a whistle hanging around his neck.

Derv could not hear what he told the boys. Sometimes he only nodded and the boy would look sedately pleased. Sometimes he said a great deal, making scrubby circles in the air with his finger or extending a flat palm downward to imitate a faulty entrance into the water.

Derv was filled with awe and envy. How clean, how neat each dive! What a clumsy bag of old clothes his own performance on his trampoline seemed in comparison. How he longed to stand on that black board. As each diver took up his stance, he stepped with their steps, leaped as they leaped, soared and plunged.

He would be late. He went out, circled the pool around to the front entrance and was at the stairway leading up.

He had been trying to lose himself, but had succeeded instead in finding a part of himself he did not know existed.

Derv found it easy to join the swimming squad. You needed only to say that you wanted to and pay a quarter deposit for a locker. When at last he stood in a luminous suit beside the flickering green water, he trembled with excitement as much as with cold.

All about him boys were plunging from the edge of

the pool, practicing their crawl stroke, or racing each other, leaving a noisy white double furrow.

"How about it? You there."

It was the coach. He sat on a high perch at the center of the poolside, the straw hat still protecting his brow from some imagined nether sun, his eyes on everybody at once.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked Derv.

"I don't want to swim. I want to dive."

"Then dive." He gestured toward the lower board.

Derv looked at the high board.

"From that."

The coach looked at him with a little more interest. Then his ceaselessly patrolling eyes turned to follow the swimmers.

"You're new here. Where'd you dive before?"

"I . . . well, I never really did it before, but I'd like to try."

He saw the interest go out like a light.

"Lemme see you plunge in here first."

"I don't know how to plunge in from here. But I think I can do it from that board."

Some more boys had gathered now and were listening, more unbelieving than amused, while the water streamed in triple lines from their elbows and noses.

"Well, for God's sake. What am I supposed to do? Let you break your damn neck?"

"I won't hurt myself. I know I won't."

"How do you know if you never did it before?"

"I've done it before but not at a pool."

"Where?"

"On land."

The boys roared with delight. The crowd had grown and boys were pulling themselves up on the pool edge and hurrying over to see what had happened.

"Shut up," roared the coach.

There was silence.

"What's your name?"

"Derv Nagy."

"All right, Nagy. But you keep your head down between your arms. If you don't, that water hits your belly like a ton of bricks."

"Oh, but I don't want to go head first. I wouldn't know how. I want to land on my feet on the water."

Another roar of laughter. The coach boiled over.

"Then what're you bothering me about? You wanna jump in, jump in. Whaddye want me to catch you or something? Can you beat that?" he asked as Derv scampered shamefacedly toward the ladder. "Wants my permission to jump in. Wants an audience. A grandstand."

The boys coughed and choked and stamped their feet.

Pleased with the response, he looked more charitably at the boy who was emerging at the top of the ladder.

Derv was appalled at the stir he had created and the audience which faced him. He had only wanted to make sure that the board was available to anyone who wanted to try it.

It seemed much higher above the water than it had looked from the poolside. If he were alone he would have climbed right back down again. But he wasn't alone.

There was silence now, except for the gurgle of the pool outlet, the faint slap of water against the sides, and the hollow, cavernous sound.

"Hey, Nagy," the coach called. "Jump from the edge. Awright, fellas. In the pool. What's to watch about a jump?"

In a moment they would have turned away and missed it. But in that moment Derv started forward on the board and it was apparent that he intended to take a spring off the board.

The coach leaped to his feet. No spring, you little fool.

But he held back the cry. To interrupt a dive created greater dangers than it sought to avert.

The boy's body shot forward and up, his legs leading the rest of him, and while his watchers were still gasping in fear of the debacle which could result from an unpracticed spring, unbelievably the crazy kid did a somersault. It was a backward somersault while facing forward, a dangerous dive for any but the seasoned diver.

It was over in another moment. Derv's body barely missed the board in its descent; the badly arrayed arms and legs sorted themselves into an upright figure. He entered the water on his feet as he said he would, and holding his nose.

When he saw the spring, the coach felt a moment of fury. He's a diver. He's been making a fool of me. But another instant made it clear that this was a tyro. The form was abominable.

There was silence when Derv's head rose to the surface. He looked at none of them. He knew what he had to do.

"Well, now," said the coach, expecting Derv to stop for the usual conference.

To the rest there was nothing more to watch. They had seen better dives, but they wouldn't laugh at him again. They started plunging back into the pool.

Head down, Derv walked past the coach as though he didn't exist and started up the ladder again. Those who saw him called to the others and there was a dash to clear away to the side of the pool. They watched.

He didn't want to do this second dive. But he couldn't, couldn't leave his body with that uncompensated turn gnawing at his senses all day.

Again he sprang. This time he ducked forward, with a hard downward thrust of his arms which turned him into a forward somersault. Again he landed head up, in

a sort of awkward squatting position. Again he held his nose.

"My God!" said the coach.

This time murmurs of approval rose from the boys. A boy slapped him on the back.

"Pretty good. What're you going to do now?"

Derv shook his head. He pushed past them, and walked up to the coach, looking straight at him.

"What did I do wrong?" he asked.

The coach sighed guardedly. He was filled with joy at discovering gifted raw material. What I can make him!

Then he ripped into him, enumerated the faults one by one. When he finished, he had a flicker of worry. Was his harshness going to drive the boy away?

Derv had listened in silence, frowning. But now he looked straight into the coach's eyes and smiled. They both wanted perfection. It was all right.

"Mean to say you never been in head first?"

Derv shook his head.

"Okay. We start from the beginning."

You wouldn't believe it. He had to have his feet held like a little kid, while he bent far over the water until he lost balance and fell in.

At least, told to keep his head down between his arms, he never, not even the first time, lifted it to see where he was going.

"Keep your eyes open. They'll close by themselves when you hit the water." Then he remembered something. "Those two high-board dives. When you landed, I could see your eyes were closed, but I guess that was just as you hit the water?"

"I closed them as soon as I left the board, and kept them closed until I came up out of the water," Derv confessed.

The coach's dark freckled face paled.

"Then how did you know when to do what and where the water was and where you were?"

"I always know where I am," said Derv.

"Oh," said the coach.

XV

He haunted the underground cavern. He moved quickly from poolside to low board and within a few sessions advanced to the high board. At the bottom of the squad list the name Derv Nagy appeared. Within a few months he was one of the diving stars of the school team.

Small wonder that all the old preoccupations had been crowded out of his mind. He was obsessed with form, the perfect expression of the body in motion, the strict confinement of arms and legs within a single fluid outline. This held his attention.

At night in his sleeping dreams he performed miracles of athletic poise and acrobatic difficulty. And here at home, as he sat at his desk, his waking dreams were filled with correction and resolve—to come down harder on the board, hit the very edge, use his arms for more lift, and up, up, up. And at the top of the leap, back go the legs, out spread the arms, your back arches and you fly, swooping down, face lifted as though you had forgotten the water was there; then at the last moment, arms over head, a thin, straight, vivid line, you cut the water's edge.

He sighed. He would never finish his algebra this way. And he wanted to do an extra assignment so that he wouldn't fall behind during the Friday practice and meet. If he didn't hurry . . . What time was it, anyhow?

His clock was wrong. He had forgotten to set it again after the annual electrical conservation day.

He swiveled his chair around in a familiar gesture so as to face the window, knowing that he would see

the new church clock from that position. He faced a blank wall. Had they taken it down? It would be too bad. It was a great convenience, particularly when he was in the street, after he left the house in the morning. He got up and went to the window to see.

But there it was! Why hadn't he seen it? Yes, he had time to do the algebra.

Idly he went back to his desk and sat down. The desk filled a small alcove, so that it could not possibly have been moved to one side or the other. He settled into his chair as he always sat in it, then swiveled again.

Blank wall.

Then where *was* the clock? He leaned to his left a very few inches and there was the clock! But he had never *leaned* to see it from the time it had been set up six months ago.

Not that he looked at it often, now that he had his own desk clock.

He had grown. Was that it? He tried making himself small, letting his spine sag and his neck sink deep between his shoulders. There, he was shorter. Then immediately he knew that his height was irrelevant. For his desk chair was adjustable. It was true that he had grown. But the telescoped legs of the chair had been collapsed in proportion.

A cold sweat broke out on his forehead. He pushed back his chair and stood up.

His wall converter was only three-way, but might just as well have been one-way for all the use he gave to the plain wall or the mirror unit. He always had Magislate on. All right, he thought grimly. Be a mirror. He pressed the converter switch.

The wall brightened and seemed to pull away from him as it grew transparent and the image of his bedroom emerged from shadow into light. He faced himself with a puzzled frown.

He could see all of himself at once. There was a clear

background of vertical lines behind him, door, corner, ceiling-high bookcase. He took his time settling into his stance, until he stood straight, straight. . . .

Yes, straight! He was straight as a plumb line, straight as the vertical lines of door and wall.

The leaning had gone. Mr. Hailtree had been right. He'd grown out of it. He realized now that he hadn't heard anybody say "Straighten up" for a long time. He could not help feeling a small bitter pang of disappointment, as when one learns that there is surely no life on the moon.

For a long time he gazed at himself sadly, a tall slim boy with distant green eyes and ruffled brown hair. But the lines which were parallel remained parallel. At last he switched the surface back to Magislate and the image vanished.

It was not surprising that he was not up to his usual mark at the meet. On one of his best dives he overshot, his legs carrying his body past the angle at which he ought to enter the water. He felt very dismal, but the coach patted him on the shoulder and said, "Don't worry. We'll work it out."

The next day at practice, he overshot three more times. The third time he came up, the coach called out, "Nagy, come here."

Derv swam to the side of the pool.

"It's what I been telling you. You do it every time. You're leaning too far forward at the start. Stand straight when you get up there."

Derv climbed up to the board. At its edge he stood straight, lifting his head, setting his shoulders.

"No, no! You're leaning forward. Don't you know how to stand straight?"

Derv rose from the board into his dive. This was his worst performance yet. Not only did he go over, but one knee was bent, something he had not done since his first days of diving.

The coach shook his head. Was his prize going sour so soon? This kid was going to need a lot of talking to. He watched anxiously for Derv to emerge, wondering what he should say to him.

But to his astonishment there was no melancholy discouragement in the face that rose to the surface. Derv seemed strangely alight with discovery and excitement.

"It's all right," he panted. "I know what it is. I want to go home now."

Hardly knowing what he was doing, Derv hurried into his clothes. He was completely unaware of his transit from school to home. All he could hear was a shout of words in his brain.

Forward! Of course! Forward! Dear God! He was leaning forward! It all fit. The other night when he looked for the clock on the tower and couldn't find it he had also been leaning forward, because when he swiveled his desk chair he faced southeast and when he stood on the high diving board he faced southeast.

He ran up the stairs to his room. His coat still on, panting and perspired, he sat down in his desk chair in the usual position. He waited until he had settled, then swiveled. No clock. The other night he had leaned sideways and was able to see it. Now he leaned back and . . .

There it was!

As for the mirror on the converter-wall, there was nothing contradictory there. For it was simply a continuation of the very wall which held the window through which he saw the clock on the church tower. Then of course he would appear straight in the mirror. The leaning forward would not show.

The old mirror, in which he had looked at himself six months ago, had stood on the same wall that held the converter. And in it he had been leaning to the left.

But how if he faced in another direction, say, directly

east? In his mother's room there was a mirror on the east wall.

She was not in her room. He tiptoed in and stood, a pale shadow, staring into the mirror on the east wall, not knowing what to expect.

He was leaning to the right. He gazed entranced. Then he must have been leaning all along, all these months, but had just been too busy to notice. Yet his parents . . .

He heard a sound and looked up to see his mother in the doorway. She smiled wryly.

"It's still there," said Derv.

"Yes."

Older now, he realized that she must have known all along.

"But you and Dad never . . . you didn't mention . . ."

"Mr. Hailtree told us not to. And we had the wall converter put into your room because we knew you wouldn't have the mirror-wall switched on very often. We thought the leaning would go away if you forgot about it. We asked your teachers to drop the matter. They agreed on that. They felt you were being made too self-conscious by all the nagging about your posture."

A conspiracy. But it had failed. Not only did he still lean, but as the sun dragged the earth through the heavens, his own axis was swinging its own small obedient complex of circles.

A great exultation filled him. The pull. The one true Direction. It was not a vagary of childhood. It was not self-induced by morbid concern with the phenomena of his aptitudes. He had forgotten all about it. Yet it was all there, all as true as rain.

Prin was the one to tell. He had not seen her in some time. She was not hard to find. There she was beside him almost as soon as he looked for her.

"Why didn't you tell me I still lean?"

"You didn't ask me." Then she was sorry she said it.

It sounded too much like a reproach. Before he could offend her by apologizing, she added quickly, "I thought you knew."

He told her about the dive that overshot.

"I will have to lean backward in order to stand straight."

"You're in the same fix I'm in with my B-flat clarinet."

"I don't understand that."

"Anybody else playing a B-flat clarinet is told that the B flat is C and he accepts it. But it isn't C, it's B flat. If a piece is written in B flat for a whole orchestra, they give the B-flat clarinet music written in C and say, 'Play it in C and you'll be right in with the orchestra that's playing in B flat.' But I keep hearing C as B flat and D as C. So I transpose. They make it harder for me instead of easier."

"I never realized it was as bad as that for you. You have to make an adjustment nobody else makes. And so do I."

They looked at each other with new sympathy, each for the other's handicap. Yet a gratified sparkle of the eyes attested to their mutual affect, not so much of misfortune as of endowment.

At the next diving practice, Derv merely leaned backward instead of standing "straight." When he came up to the surface he looked over to the coach, who appeared like a man reborn. The coach made a circle with his right forefinger and thumb and held it up, nodding sharply in approval.

"Do you remember Mr. Hailtree?" his father asked him that night.

"The man I went to see?" His pulse quickened.

"He would like to see you again if you are willing."

"All right," said Derv, as if it did not matter. Immediately he was filled with excited anticipation.

The science teacher seemed equally pleased to see

him. When they had hurried through the honeycomb of little cells, Derv sat and settled in the same chair. No word of explanation appeared to be necessary.

Derv stood for him, faced this way and that for him, and then sat again. Mr. Hailtree giggled and rubbed his hands.

"Oh, delightful. Delightful. But don't start about radiations and rubbish. Let's just say we don't understand anything about it."

"But—"

"Nonsense."

Considering his skepticism, the proposal which he ended by making to Derv was astounding.

Derv's mouth was so dry he could barely speak.

"Do my parents know about it?"

"I had their permission to tell you. They thought you would enjoy hearing about it."

"Hearing about it! I must go there! Oh please talk to them."

"Not me," said Hailtree. "I won't try to persuade them. They must decide for themselves. If they want to ask me anything, I am available."

The Nagys discovered that they had underestimated the extent to which Derv's central idea was fixed in him.

Mr. Nagy felt the walls of his privacy beginning to crumble. But there was one unassailable truth to which he and his wife returned again and again. It was she who said it.

"Our purpose was to protect Derv, not to smother him."

Mr. Hailtree was summoned for urgent conference. What guarantees could he give them?

"Let's not make too much of this," he said. "If there is nothing in it, you remain safe. The man I want to take Derv to will accept whatever limits I propose. But I am not going to make any unrealistic promises. If something turns up that the world should know, you must ask

yourselves if you have the right to suppress it. In my own opinion the possibility is quite unlikely, but consider it before you let him go."

"The world," said Mr. Nagy, banging around the room. "The world knows too much about everything."

"Perhaps," said Hailtree. "Still . . ."

They were all silent then. Hailtree put his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders, looking away. Mrs. Nagy tried to look indifferent. But Derv's eyes . . .

"All right," said Mr. Nagy. "Whatever has to be."

It was too big a venture for them to place their small lives in the way.

XVI

THE NAGYS led so secluded a life in their upstate district that there were many novelties Derv had never experienced. The zip train was one of them.

Derv stared at the ground which fled beneath them.

"I can't get over being held up by nothing but air. Ten feet off the ground makes it more exciting than a plane."

"Well, it's smooth enough and fast enough," said Mr. Hailtree. "I had to promise your parents I'd get you to West Virginia and back to school within the weekend."

He took out a batch of papers to correct.

"It's just amazing," said Derv. "We're going absolutely straight southwest, never the slightest turn."

"Ah, that's the idea. The zip doesn't have to go around things. That's what makes it faster than the ground train."

For a while they were silent. Mr. Hailtree worked and Derv watched their passage over the land.

"Mr. Hailtree?"

"Mm."

"You don't really believe in all this—in what we're going to do. Do you?"

"No." He said it good-humoredly, as though a No were as good as Yes.

"Then . . ."

"I just wouldn't like to leave it undone."

"And at the observatory. What do they believe?"

"About you? Only one man there knows your story, so be careful."

"About what we're going to try."

"That it's a joke, a lark. Something for them to kid each other about." He looked at Derv. "You don't like that. But you're too nice a boy to fool. I don't want you to build this into a glamorous project."

"No. Of course I . . . I know . . . I realize that."

Hailtree shook his head. "Derv, you're a good boy. Stay with the facts and you're all right. At the observatory it's a joke, but it's a joke that has a possibility of being grandly, gloriously true."

"Still, they do have a project for it. You told me Project Ozma."

"Fanciful name for a fanciful project."

"And the idea of Project Ozma is to look for a signal from some other planet?"

"It seems reasonable to suppose that if there is intelligent life in the universe, they would be trying to communicate with us."

"But I thought there wasn't any life out there," said Derv. "We have pictures of Mars and Venus close up and—"

"Not on the planets around our sun, but out of the billions of stars in our galaxy, it seems logical that there should be some of a temperature and size not too different from those of our sun. And that some of these suns may carry planetary systems. And some of these planets may support intelligent life. At the observatory they laugh and kid, but they all believe this."

"How many stars do they think would have planets with life?"

"Oh, about one hundred eighty million. Suppose I said half a million. Wouldn't it be enough?"

"Oh, yes. If there was just one planet with people on it trying to signal us—"

"You mustn't call them people. Intelligent life."

"I know," said Derv. "They may be insects or vegetables or have three heads and no hands. But if that's what they are, how could they build something to send a signal?"

"Many biologists now think that the way evolution worked here was inevitable, rather than a miraculous chance; that four limbs, two for ambulation and two for transportation of tools and food, are most likely; and that sense organs where they are and a brain in the head is the way it would usually turn out."

"That's good." Their pleasure in this fact seemed mutual.

"So if they are there, and have the technological competence to transmit a signal—"

"Would any of them have gotten that civilized?"

"That isn't very civilized. We're hoping some have gone much further."

"But a signal!" said Derv, treasuring it.

"If there is one coming from anywhere, we want to catch it and return one of our own. Only, *they* don't know where we are if we are, as we don't know where they are if they are."

Derv stared out of the window soberly, his eyes full of fierce resolve, as though somehow he was going to see to it within the next few minutes that everybody knew where everybody was and could start a vigorous interchange of information.

"Have they been searching for long?" he asked.

"It started in the sixties."

"Oh, but that's so long. Aren't they ready to give up?"

"No, because they had to quit early in the seventies for the Solar Decade. All instruments were comman-

deered. Then it took a number of years to stir up interest and find the men. They only took it up again last year."

"Where do they look?"

"They started by examining two of the nearest stars which looked as if they might have solar systems, but I think they've given up on those."

"What do you mean, 'looked as if'? How can they tell?"

"The star's orbit wobbles."

"How would they know if they got anything?"

"They aren't even sure of that. They have this enormous dish, as tall as a tall building. It catches radio signals and runs them into a box to a small viewing screen. They know what signals are hereabout and can block them out. If they got anything strange . . ." He giggled. "They just don't know where to look. They must try every conceivable direction, and it will take centuries, unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Unless they get a steer."

"From me," said Derv.

"I told you not to think that way. There isn't a chance."

"At least, that's where I come in?"

"You don't come in. We put you in. I suppose they wouldn't let us past the front door if I didn't have this friend, Gene Kuttner, working there. Gene will try anything and he knows I'm not a nut. So when I told him, 'Listen, you want to hear a crazy idea?' he listened. It remains a crazy idea and nobody really expects anything from it."

He giggled.

"Still," he went on, "it *is* a cute idea."

The baggage racks above their heads had begun to move slowly toward the exit chutes. They were there.

XVII

IN THE ANTIGRAVITY chamber, Derv came slowly out of a faint. He had hoped he would not faint. The doctors who had examined him and prepared him had insisted that he could easily bear the phenomena of the accelerating chamber. Perhaps he had been too keyed up to his part in the experiment.

He could not move. With the realization that he was strapped in a sitting position, he became instantly alert. He must not waste any of the weightless period. Had it come and gone? His release was to be self-operated.

They had explained that his body must be strapped into this particular posture during the period of acceleration because in any other position the human system could not support the increase of weight. The worst position was for the body to be parallel to the direction of acceleration, for there would be a possibly fatal rush of blood away from the head.

He looked blankly at the meters and controls before him. There seemed to be so many more of them than when they were instructing him. Then he remembered. That was the one. Third from the left. He read it easily. He was almost at zero gravity. And then he was to press the button under his right index finger. Carefully he felt for it. Where was it? He felt an instant's panic as his groping fingers swept over smooth surface. No, it was more forward. He found it. His finger stuck to it gratefully.

The needle crept toward the zero line, matched it. Now. He pressed the button and the metal bands confining him sprang open. He pushed very gently, as he had been instructed, against the back of the seat and found himself floating in the limited space of the chamber.

He had pushed too hard. As he approached the opposite wall, he barely put a staying finger against it, so that instead of bouncing all the way back again to the seat he floated a little less than halfway.

He felt extraordinarily happy and stretched out fully. He felt his body turning slowly, rolling almost imperceptibly. This, then, was how it had been when he was newborn. A baby floating in the void. What fun it was. But he was not a baby and he had his job to do.

He had wondered how it would be, wondered if he had been overconfident. Would he feel anything at all in this artificial environment and if he did would he be able to respond to it?

It was clearer than ever. And he had only to turn his head very slightly for his body to follow.

There was an instant of yearning so piercing that he wanted to cry out, and then an ecstatic acceptance as his body strung itself out on a line more deeply satisfying than any he had dreamed of or momentarily attained in all the twirlings and somersaults of his entire life.

Hailtree and Gene Kuttner, watching through the transparent walls of the chamber, stared unbelievingly. Hailtree giggled and hiccuped. Kuttner looked down quickly at the illuminated recording box set before his instrument panel. A series of dark lines, which a moment before had criss-crossed in every conceivable direction, had merged into one.

"Freeze it," he muttered to the technician beside him.

The man nodded and the thin line held, looking no more significant than an idle pencil stroke. But the technician now stood up and carefully removed the top of the recording device. Hailtree and Kuttner looked inside. A gleaming ten-inch needle, mounted with invisible support, mimicked the pencil stroke in a three-dimensional projection.

"Does it look like anything?" asked Hailtree.

"Good enough so far," said Kuttner. He was dark and had a pointed face, which turned in jerks this way and that, darting sharp looks at everything.

"Get him out of there then," said Hailtree, with a worried look at the boy floating so stiffly, so strangely.

Ah, how Derv hated to wrench himself away from this ineffable peace. But Dr. Kuttner's voice on the communicator was insistent. Obediently Derv unbuckled the small metal weight which hung at his side and tossed it ahead of him. In countermotion his body drifted gently back until he was within reach of the guide straps. He grasped one and pulled himself back into his seat.

In a few minutes he was out of the chamber.

They looked at him as though he had indeed been far out in space instead of merely feigning it.

"How are you?" Hailtree's watery, red-rimmed eyes were filled with fatherly concern.

"Fine." Derv looked from one to the other. "Was it . . . Did you get it?"

Kuttner smiled. "We got it."

Derv sighed and submitted his arm to the injection of sedative which he knew was part of the post-acceleration care. Before the tilt-table stretcher on which he was rolled away had reached the door of the room, he was unconscious.

XVIII

"WAVES AGAIN!" said Hailtree, his thin nose quivering. "I scold the boy every time he mentions them and now *you*."

"If you don't like it, *you* give me an explanation. You brought him here," said Kuttner.

Hailtree threw up his hands in complete perplexity. Silently they stared at Derv, who lay, still asleep, in the narrow white infirmary bed. The small room was opaque-windowed, dimly lit and bare.

"Let's begin by separating his uncanny general sense of direction from whatever makes him lean," said Kuttner. "The first is not unheard of."

"O.K. He just has it to a more marked degree."

"But the other," said Kuttner, marking it off.

"Yes, the other. What was just demonstrated in a-gravity. What *is* it?"

"What is sight?" asked Kuttner slyly, like a lawyer preparing a trap.

"A chemical response in specialized tissue to a narrow portion of the electromagnetic wave."

"Then why couldn't there be a response to an electromagnetic wave of a different frequency?" argued Kuttner.

"Because the eye is the only part of the human body that has ever responded to any such wave."

"Aha! That's where you're wrong," said Kuttner. He had a dogmatic, combative way of talking. "There have been about a dozen people who have been able to identify colors with their fingertips."

"You don't mean it." Hailtree was frankly surprised.

"Most of them were women. Most used their fingertips. Some used the inside of their wrists. One used her elbow."

Hailtree paused to consider, his mouth turned down bitterly. "But that's still the same narrow band of visible light. How can a human be sensitive to any other electromagnetic wave but light?"

"What about X-rays? Hey?" Kuttner stabbed a pointing finger at him and sneered forensically.

"What about it? They go through flesh and are stopped by bone. But do the bones know it?" Hailtree held his hand up and looked at it. "Do you say, 'My left lower molar was X-rayed and will never be happy until it faces again in the direction of the rays?' "

"Humans can get cancer from an overdose of X-rays," said Kuttner. "That's a response, isn't it?"

Hailtree looked nonplused. He shook his head. "But something as far out as a signal, a particular frequency from a particular direction. To respond to that he must have sensory equipment nobody else in the world has."

Kuttner paused. "I say again. You brought him. You must believe something about him."

"I don't know. The way he leans. Can you lean like that? I've tried it." Hailtree leaned grotesquely and stumbled against the wall. "You see? And the peculiar way he was born."

"Exactly. The way he was born."

"Nothing of that goes into your laboratory journal, by the way."

"You've made that clear. Don't worry about it. But just think of the way his parents were chosen, the way space fliers were screened in those days, the balance and acceleration tests. Isn't it conceivable that the child of a pair so chosen, *both* parents, mind you, might have certain rare physiological qualities?"

"Rare, yes, maybe," muttered Hailtree. "But we're saying he's the *only* one."

"Not necessarily the only one. Perhaps, for all we know, we all have the capability of sensing other portions of the spectrum."

"Why don't we know it?" asked Hailtree.

"None of us ever floated newborn in an environment from which distractions like gravity and sound and local radio signals had been eliminated."

"And nothing waves but a signal from outer space."

"You can't laugh me out of this," said Kuttner. "I think that if there *is* a signal, Derv and his space vehicle just happened to be situated where it was strongest. It might have been the first impression he had."

Hailtree shrugged. "And that would be enough to make him want to return to it for the rest of his life?"

"If a baby is awake, he turns his head toward the

light. The signal was rhythmic, therefore pleasurable, and he had the equipment to sense it."

"A strange sense," mused Hailtree. "I once said something to a class about the five senses and a student corrected me. He said man has twenty senses."

"What do we know, anyhow, about the senses of man? Or of animals? Is it a visual or auditory or some other sense which leads a horseshoe crab back to the sea, no matter what sand hills are in its way? How does a crow estimate how many miles it has gone or how many enemy men of the five menacing him have gone away?"

"He can count?" asked Hailtree incredulously.

Kuttner shrugged. "What's counting? A bat tells direction by echolocation, but what does he use far above the middle of an ocean? Birds can migrate at night, with no moon. Do they read the stars or is there some other sense which tells them where they are?

"All the ways of sensing," Kuttner went on. "Look at that girl you know, what's-his-name's daughter, the one with absolute pitch."

"Prin."

"Yes, Prin. What kind of a sense is that? Every circus performer doing his feats of juggling and balance should remind us of the endless possibilities nature has up its sleeve. How does a seed know when it is spring? And how"—here he looked down at the boy sleeping quietly —"how does your young friend here recognize his preeminent direction?"

At this moment Derv stirred, moved one arm overhead and turned a little, but his eyes remained shut.

"He has slept an awfully long time," said Hailtree uneasily. "Is he supposed to?"

"Don't worry. According to that thing he's all right." Kuttner's sharp face jerked toward the medical chart which hung at the foot of the bed.

"What was the idea of sedating him anyhow? Ritual or what?"

"No. It's safer. Men and animals, we've found, can do queer things after being in a condition of a-gravity."

"Like what?"

"Chickens, for instance, try to stand on their heads."

A faint smile appeared on Derv's face.

"Derv? Are you awake?" asked Hailtree.

"Yes." Derv sighed, smiled, yawned, still with his eyes closed.

"How do you feel?" asked Kuttner.

"All right," he said sleepily. "At least I don't have any urge to stand on my head."

"I don't suppose," said Kuttner, "he could say right now which is north. I never saw him do that. Could he?" he asked, as though Hailtree were the trainer of some dumb animal that knew a special trick.

Hailtree shrugged doubtfully, but a languid arm rose from the bed and pointed.

"North," said Derv, still without having opened his eyes.

The men looked at each other, then hurried to the opaque window. Kuttner pushed the adjuster and the window grew instantly transparent to the bright day outside.

"Well?" asked Hailtree impatiently.

"Wait. I can't tell. Let's see. There's the back road. He's wrong. No, wait. We're in the east end of the building and—"

"The sun. Where's the sun?"

"There's no sun. But that's the service plant and all that, and when you go in the front door, you're facing . . . south! My God, he's right. North is that way, where he pointed."

Hailtree giggled. They looked at the boy with silent awe.

"Almost as good as a horseshoe crab?" asked Hailtree.

"Unbelievable," said Kuttner. "He came in here unconscious and hasn't even opened his eyes."

"There's something in it, you must admit."

"Admit! I like that. *You're* the skeptic. Here I've been trying to get *you* to admit that there is something unique here." Kuttner poked at Hailtree's shoulder and shook his head, overwhelmed.

"I'm glad the a-gravity chamber didn't have any effect on his ability. Do you suppose it would do anything to the other—his sensing of the major direction?"

"I don't know." Kuttner spoke in a low tone, presumably inaudible to Derv. "It might have removed the need for seeking the Direction. On the other hand—"

Derv sat up.

"I'm awfully hungry."

While the two men watched him apprehensively, he jumped out of bed and faced them challengingly.

He was leaning dreadfully.

XIX

THEY TOOK Derv to a restaurant in Green Bank. His questions were mounting like fever.

"What is happening now?" he asked between mouthfuls.

"Well, let's see," said Kuttner. "By now the computers have done their work."

"What was their work?"

"To translate your stance into numbers that the big antenna can take as a direction."

"The antenna. Is that the big white dish higher than the roof of the laboratory?"

"Yes. Then they watch and wait. Turn it a little, maybe. Watch and wait some more."

"If they see anything . . . Are we going back there?"

"If anything happens, they'll buzz him," said Hailtree. "And it's not immediately likely, so finish eating."

For all their nonchalance the two scientists started

more violently than Derv when an angry buzz started up from Kuttner's coat pocket.

"Yes?" he said into the small instrument.

He listened, put it back in his pocket and slid a phone out from the underside of the table.

"It's the laboratory," he said and dialed. "What's up?" he said into the mouthpiece.

Derv and Hailtree, watching intently, could see no sign in his face.

"I'll come down soon," said Kuttner. "Something queer," he said to the others.

Hailtree stopped eating. Derv stopped breathing.

"What?" asked Hailtree.

"Not sure. They've been riding the big dish antenna in a minute circle around Derv's direction and they've got something on the radiometer they want me to look at."

Derv's heart revved. He gulped two more mouthfuls of food, wondered what that stuff was in his mouth and put his fork down.

"I'm not very hungry any more."

At the observatory Kuttner led them to a room they had not been in before. It was filled with boxlike instruments, like silent workers, each intent on his own task, making its own kind of hum or tick and occasionally flashing an intelligent eye. Wires drooped untidily here and there.

A research assistant stood in the rear of the room before a large instrument panel, studying the bewildering array of indicators. He turned when Kuttner entered with his two friends.

"I'm getting it even better now," he said. "At first it was covered by a lot of interference.

"What frequency?"

"It's 1422.36 megacycles."

"Close enough to hydrogen frequency if you allow for a Doppler effect."

"Here. Take a look now." The young man moved aside and Kuttner moved up close to the panel.

"Mm," said Kuttner. His dark head turned abruptly from one indicator to another.

Hailtree moved beside him.

"Look at that," said Kuttner. Then he turned and beckoned to Derv. "Come here, Derv."

Derv took his place in front of the instrument. At the lower right-hand corner of the box there were three recording panels, bands of light running across them. Kuttner pointed to the third panel.

"What am I supposed to be noticing?" asked Derv.

"Do you see every once in a while there's a little bump at the top of the smooth band?"

"No. Where? I don't see anything." Derv strained and frowned.

"There. Now watch. There. And there again."

"That tiny bit?"

"That tiny bit. It's extra. And it's regular. Watch for it."

They watched a moment in silence.

"Cosmic noise is broad band?" asked Hailtree.

"Yes. The receiver uses two feed horns. It switches between them, giving two beams. One is pointed at the target and the other alongside the target, for purposes of comparison."

"Is this at all unusual, then? What we are seeing here now?" Hailtree did his best to sound offhand.

Derv didn't know whether to rivet his eyes on the bands of light or on Kuttner's face. Neither told much.

"I don't think we've ever had anything like this before. Have we?" he asked the young man.

"I don't think so. I had to fool around with the comparison band before I got anything in the way of a net output."

Kuttner stared somberly at the running bands of light.

"All right," he said abruptly. He patted the young man on the shoulder. "Keep at it."

To Derv's intense disappointment he ushered them out. Little had been said. Less had been seen. Nobody was around. No telephone calls had been made.

"Well?" asked Hailtree when they were seated in Kuttner's office.

Kuttner shrugged.

"Well, what? There's a possible blip there that isn't cosmic noise, if we can count on Tony's programming. But it's going to take a lot of watching before we can be sure it's always there, and more than that before we can have any idea whether it's somebody's vacuum cleaner or . . ."

"Oh, come on."

"All right. But there *are* other things it can be. We've been fooled before. There's one thing we can say about this. It's apparently, only apparently, mind you, out of the direction we got from Derv."

Derv was sitting on the edge of his chair. Now he leaned forward excitedly and almost slipped off his seat.

"There's a nasty little thing called gravity they seem to keep around this place," said Hailtree.

A man opened the door. He had lank hair which fell long on either side of his face, which was yellow and damp.

"Do you know what's out there in that direction you gave me?" he asked.

"You looked already?" Kuttner was surprised. Maddeningly he stopped to introduce Dr. Naug Den before going on. "Well, what's out there?"

Dr. Den's mouth twisted wryly.

"Nothing."

Kuttner looked at Derv. Derv clapped a hand to his jaw as though he had a toothache.

"Impossible," said Hailtree.

"Nothing galactic, you mean," said Kuttner.

"Or luminous," said Dr. Den. "Of course, farther out there might be something, but you said you were only interested in objects within the galaxy."

"That's right," mused Kuttner. He looked at Derv again, apologetically, as if everything had been arranged rather badly and he was somehow responsible.

"But I knew that," said Derv excitedly.

They stared at him. Dr. Den smiled incredulously.

"I could never understand it," Derv went on. "I was always looking that way and there wasn't anything there. Only I thought a telescope . . ."

"Then what's the signal?" asked Hailtree. "Nothing?"

"There's a signal?" asked Dr. Den. "Since when?"

"There's something on the small twenty-one receiver," said Kuttner cautiously. "We're working on it."

"Funny," said Den, "because on your big radiometer . . ."

"What?"

"I did a routine radiotelescopic check. There's nothing there, as I say, but if you really have a repeating signal on the selective receiver—"

"We don't know for sure," said Kuttner irritably. "Look, you're not going to say there is something because we hear something. Is there or isn't there?"

"I just don't get the usual emissions of a stellar mass, but . . . No, I can't say for sure. Any more than you can say whether or not you have a signal."

"You're right. I'm sorry. What *do* you get?"

"Something I just can't make out. Remember that talk about things they called interlopers back in the sixties? And then they didn't get anything more on them and dropped the whole idea? Well, I get a possible dark intragalactic object that either is an error or it's what they were describing then."

There was silence. Kuttner looked at the astronomer more patiently. His tone was puzzled.

"A quasar?"

"No. I'd know a quasar." He shrugged. "I don't know what it is. I have to study it."

"Oh, great. What we have then is a planet unattached to a sun or a sun which has been extinguished. What kind of life would be on that?"

The astronomer shook his head. "We don't even know that much about them. They're *not* dark stars. When they gave them up, they said they were errors."

Hailtree sighed. Then Kuttner sighed.

"Well, there you are," said Kuttner. "It looks as if we have nothing, nothing at all."

"It has been instructive anyhow," said Hailtree, rising. He looked wan and impoverished.

"What a way to put it," said Kuttner.

"I'll just take a look at whatever you've got there on the twenty-one receiver," said Dr. Den.

Kuttner nodded and the other bowed himself out.

When the door closed, he turned to Hailtree.

"They have the vaguest idea of Derv's connection with this. I want you both to understand that."

"But they know what you're looking for and that he was in the a-gravity simulator."

"They think I'm indulging a whim for the boy's amusement, that this was a direction I was intending to search anyhow."

"Thank you. Derv's parents will be relieved."

Kuttner put out his hand. "You're leaving on the night zip?"

Derv sat with his head in his hands.

"Yes. You'll let me know if . . . if . . ."

"Oh, if they start beaming us their planetary anthem, you can be sure I'll let you know."

Derv stood up. There was a round of handshakes and compliments and thank-yous.

Kuttner stood in the doorway as they left.

"All the same," he said, "there's one thing we're going

to do even if every astrophysicist in the world gets sick laughing at me."

Hailtree and Derv turned to see his dark pointed face lifted toward the star-studded sky.

"What?" asked Hailtree.

"We're going to send our own signal, as powerful a signal as we can put into space, right out in the direction Derv showed us."

"Will you really?" Derv searched Kuttner's face for signs of levity, but there were none.

"If I can get the grant of money," said Kuttner.

"Happy fund-hunt," called Hailtree and giggled.

The door of the observatory closed and Hailtree started off toward the rented carlet which would take them back to the local zip-shunt terminal.

Derv stood alone a moment, staring at an empty spot in the sky, the spot he knew so well.

"Is anybody out there?" he whispered. "Oh, is anybody at all out there?"

Several mocking replies occurred to him. The silent stars blinked inscrutably. He took one last look at the listening ear on top of the giant grasshopper legs of steel towering above the laboratory, then turned and stumbled after his friend toward the car.

XX

THE TAPE-LETTER was stuffed in Hailtree's pigeonhole at the Channel 17 Central Studio, the container criss-crossed with readdressings, bearing witness to its uncertain journey.

The handwriting on the original label revived in him some long-lost sensation of mystery and excitement, even before he had quite identified it.

In his office he tore open the container. It was the first tape-letter he had ever received and he was glad

his office contained the proper wall spindle for it. He snapped it in place and clicked on the player.

If it was the first he had received, perhaps it was the first his friend had ever sent, for his style was haunted by old epistolary forms.

"Dear Bob," the familiar voice began, absurdly enough. "I'm still here, although I'm afraid I've rather lost track of you. Somewhere I read that you were made director of one of the TV schools, but I don't remember what channel, so I don't know whether this tape will ever reach you. Anyhow, congratulations. Do you still teach from that helicopter, or are directors grounded full-time?

"I haven't written in the past five years because there was nothing more to report about the signal after those first few weeks of excitement in which we wrote so much. Some fellow published a paper in which he tried to prove that our 1422 was nothing more than an echo of a local emission bounced off one of our own satellites, but we dusted his mathematics and proved him quite wrong. So the best we can say for the signal is that it *is* still there, still exhibits a mole-run tendency, and still cannot be attributed to any source other than the dark spot found that second night.

"Everyone and his assistant has taken a shot at what that dark spot is. One thought is still Den's interloper—remember?—but the signal is now thought to be too strong for that. A wild idea—and I still see it cropping up in the literature—is that it is a dark star doubling with and obscuring a hot one. But what kind of rotation could such a double have that wouldn't at some time reveal a glimmer?

"Another idea is that the signal does come from an object near a light source, but is being bounced off this dark object because the senders do not have a clear direct path to us. While that isn't unreasonable, it doesn't

appeal to us because then how could we ever find those senders and reply to their signal?

"The best guess now, but I don't favor it, is that there *is* a luminous star there, but that a galactic cloud of dust blocks the telescopic window. I prefer to go along with Den, who insists the thing is inside the galaxy. Even so, it can be anywhere from five light years away to eighty thousand. Agonizing, isn't it?

"As for whether the signal is being *sent* to us by intelligent beings, we know no more than we knew five years ago. I had always hoped that if there were anyone out there, *they* would make their little message more explicit by changing it in some way we could recognize.

"Well, it's never changed. Maybe they think we're too dumb to bother with or maybe they haven't the wherewithal, or maybe there's just nothing there, but one way or another 1422 just goes on regularly, and I am beginning to think there is not too much to our fanciful notion.

"As a matter of fact, Project Ozma is on the skids, having nothing but this little blip to show for itself. Putting our own signal out into space took everything we had in the way of funds. We have no more money to search further for other signals or to continue investigating for a likely source of this one.

"Oh, I don't mean to say that we won't keep some kind of track of it. It's like the way you just hate to let a plant die that you've had for a long time and that doesn't need much care. So I suppose there will always be somebody willing to plug in and take a quick look at 1422 and jot a note on the chart that it's there.

"Which brings me to the purpose of this letter. I don't know how much longer I'll be here. It is therefore my intention to leave some kind of note somewhere about the facts concerning Derv Nagy's connection with the project. Note that I am not *asking* you to release me from my promise of secrecy. I release myself and I

warn you that I do so. I don't know yet in what form the note will be left but it will be sealed with some kind of directive that it is to be examined only in the event, etc. So there is no immediate danger for your friends.

"Maybe it's scientific conscience or something, but I couldn't bear leaving this place without depositing somewhere all the pertinent facts that are in my possession. It would feel like running off with the family silver.

"If you're ever around, come in and we'll have another of those unscientific conversations. In the meantime, tell your young friend—if he's still around—that *it* is still around. As ever, Gene Kuttner."

Tell your young friend, thought Hailtree.

He removed the tape and put it in his private file.

Unfortunately he had completely lost track of Derv Nagy. The music teacher had died. The girl had gone to live with relatives in another state. And as for the Nagys themselves, they had moved away without a word to him. He was not offended. He knew it must have been a return of the old fears.

An inquiry to Derv's school drew a blank. He had gone on to college with a changed name that none of them knew. His record had been removed from the school files.

A week later, Hailtree, on a helicopter supervisory visit to member schools on his circuit, found himself in the neighborhood of Derv's school. On an impulse he dropped down beside it.

In the teacher's lunchroom there were many familiar faces. He sat down beside one who would have known Derv.

"I guess I know as much about the story as anybody around here," she said, "but it isn't much. Derv was well liked here, but he had certain peculiarities that drew a lot of attention to him. Then there was his diving. And there were a lot of queer rumors floating around about him."

"What kind of rumors?" Hailtree was annoyed.

"Oh, they were silly enough. That he had strange powers, that he had X-ray vision or something and could see through solid objects."

The teacher laughed, but Hailtree was frowning.

"Garbage," he said.

She stopped laughing and looked uneasily at her lunch plate.

"I even heard one story," she said, "that he was involved in a government project. And once somebody told me that Mr. Nagy had been on the moon."

She looked quickly at Hailtree, who looked back expressionlessly.

"What I want to know," he said, "is how he could have gone to college with a changed name. Wouldn't you have to know it? Didn't he need a record to send them?"

"Yes, of course. The principal called us to a meeting, the few of us who had him as a senior, and told us that Derv wanted to study abroad with a changed name and would we trust him to copy the records and put a name on that we would never know. He read us a statement from the school psychiatrist and he convinced us that it was for the boy's good. We were all fond of Derv so we agreed. We don't even know where the records were sent."

"But the principal knows?" asked Hailtree sharply.

"Yes, he knows. But he's a rock you'll never crack. Nobody ever got a word from him. He even claims that he's forgotten the new name. I believe him. His memory is terrible. He forgets my name too. Derv is probably still in Europe."

"He was a diver. Hasn't there been some American abroad who has attracted attention as a diver?"

"I think he may have given up diving."

"What would he do that for? He was on his way to become a great champ."

"That's what we all thought. He was a star here in the school. But diving, that kind of diving, isn't too good for you, you know."

"Why?"

"Ears. Of course if the one thing you are in the world is a great diver, you'll risk the possibilities of chronic sinusitis and ear trouble gladly. But Derv had other things he did well, and once when he missed a big meet because of an ear infection he told the coach he might give it up. We all heard about it because he said, 'I couldn't bear to have anything happen to my middle ears.' "

"Oh, go on. You expect me to believe that? How would you remember he said anything like that?"

"Because they lampooned him in the senior show. Poor Derv. But it *was* funny. Let's see." She started humming. " 'In all my years, my middle ears have kept me up and leaning, and now my dears, I have such fears that . . .' Well, I guess I *have* forgotten after all."

Hailtree didn't encourage her to remember.

"Then that's why the Nagys went away," he said.

"Yes. It was too bad, really."

"And nobody ever heard anything?" He thought about it a moment. "What about the coach? They were friends."

"Ask him yourself. There he is. Over near the wall."

The man in the straw hat didn't want to talk about Derv Nagy.

"Don't spoil my appetite," he said rudely.

Hailtree took a step backward but remained, staring forlornly at the heavy, freckled face. The coach ate half a sandwich with one bite and three swallows.

"I put my heart into that boy. But what was the good? He had no ambition, no purpose in life. If he hadn't quit, he coulda been Olympic for sure."

"You're positive he quit?"

"He couldn't dive anywhere in the world and me not know about it. I don't know where he is or what he's

doing. But whatever it is, it ain't off the big board. That's for sure."

"Well, thanks," said Hailtree. "I'm afraid I—"

"No sense of direction," said the coach. "That was his trouble." He nodded emphatically and drained the glass of milk in what seemed like a single gulp.

Hailtree hurried away before he could be favored with further reminiscences or analysis.

So then, Derv, like his father and mother before him, had found it necessary to disappear. Hailtree didn't answer the tape-letter and never heard from Kuttner again.

But 1422 ticked on.

PART TWO

XXI

AN ANGUISHED CRY is not heard readily by a woman whose only child has grown up and gone away. Besides, Reine always concentrated deeply when she was at the kitchenmeter selecting dinner.

She never took dinner exactly as it appeared on the panel, preferring to manipulate a blend or substitute a different sauce. The monthly Dining General Issue in hand, she frowned at the intricate meter. She chose an all-blue meal on yellow plates, then pushed the appropriate buttons with a quickly retracted hand, as though she feared they might push back at her.

Thin, with long disjointed legs and arms and a languid neck, her smooth flushed skin and timid eyes gave her an impromptu prettiness. Her dress, stripped from the dispenser in the morning, changed color frequently and adapted to movement, sleeves disappearing with a certain shake of the arms, the skirt bifurcating or closing narrowly according to need. Her pale hair was wound in and out of a purple covering, the whole joining at the back of her neck in a long thick coil which Reine, being married, wore properly over her right shoulder.

Music swelled about her. She stood on a tiny balcony wall-climber, overlooking the living room, which just now was filled with members of a symphony orchestra in energetic performance.

Ignoring the players, she glanced anxiously at the Diet Control panel to see if any of her choices were illegal. She was always getting something wrong. The "Accepted" flashed on and she grasped the effective lever, then stopped short.

Had she heard a cry above the music?

A quick movement turned off the teevy. As the music stopped, the players vanished from the pit of the living room. Her foot touched a pedal and the balcony sank to floor level. The living-room exit swung open as she approached it.

"Fred?"

There was no answer. She glanced outside, but although they were quite high the nearest airway was too far away for any accidental appearance of a stray flier at her window. And it was not the season for parachutists from the upper apartments.

She had imagined it.

She went back to the meter and turned it on. There was time to read before dinner. She chose a book from the large microfilm library in the four-foot-square niche and snapped the tiny roll into the projector.

She heard a groan. This time it was unmistakable.

"Fred!" she cried, and ran to the easy.

The teevy was on, the room full of marchers, but Fred was not there. She ran through the further exit and almost fell over a body in the passage to the sleep.

"Fred! What happened? What's the matter?"

A tall man was crouching on his hands and knees, his head pressed sideways against the wall.

Reine sank on her knees beside him. Oh God! What was it? A heart attack? But in his thirties!

"The sleep," he gasped. "Where's the sleep? I must lie down."

His face was wet with perspiration and his eyes were open but rolling.

"Fred! Can't you see?" She took his face in her hands,

her voice rising in terror, her own heart almost squeezed to a stop.

"I'm sick," he groaned heavily. "I can see, but I'm sick."

He had never been sick. She felt helpless.

He crawled uncertainly away from her and bumped sideways into the wall. It was terrible to see him, tall Fred, crawling like a wounded animal.

"Let me help you up. What is it? Can't you walk?"

Kneeling beside him, she put his arm around her neck. He was weeping. Fred, weeping!

"I don't know where I am. I don't know where anything is. Get me to bed. Call an ambulance. Oh . . . h . . ."

He moaned uncontrollably.

He clung to her as she dragged him, half crawling, to the bed. He was unable to get into it, fumbled at the wrong end of it, seemed about to go under it or to lie across it until she pushed him over and he fell back on the headrest.

"Pain? Are you in pain?" She stared down at his face, now so terrifyingly white.

He shook his head, then grasped at her hands.

"I'm falling." His eyes opened wide in fear.

"No, you're not. You're in bed. Close your eyes."

He closed them.

"Shall I raise your head or your feet?"

She groped for the bed-adjuster with her free hand.

"No. No, please," he moaned. "Just don't leave me. Something terrible has happened to me."

A stroke? Was it a stroke? But he was so young. What other things happened to people?

"What were you doing? When it happened."

He held her hands tightly.

"Nothing. Watching the teevy. I felt fine. They had pictures of Intercontinental Youth and I was wondering if I could see Lorvy. The shopping hour was coming on

next and I was thinking I'd call you in and make you buy yourself a winter dress-roll."

He spoke in a halting monotone as if to keep the force of utterance from jarring his head.

"Then did you get up?"

"No. Just sitting. All of a sudden something happened. As if something were gone. I fell out of the chair. I didn't know where I was."

"I must get you to the Center, Fred."

"No, don't leave me."

He held her tighter.

"Let me just go to flash them. I'll be right back."

"Don't we have an emergency button in this room?"

"Oh, yes. We've never used it. I forgot. Here. Hold one hand and I'll reach. There."

He was so much sicker by the time he was wheeled into Reception at the great Area Medical Center that Reine herself collapsed. He had grasped at every person who neared his stretcher, tearing at their clothes lest they leave him, groaning constantly, "I'm falling. I'll fall. Hold me."

He was given an injection of bidermerol and put on intravenous fluid feeding. A little later he was given Aerozinecort, the motion-sickness hormone, and an hour later he was able to talk to the medical programmer who came to program his history.

"Not much of a history," said the programmer. "A touch of epidemic viral splenitis, a forearm fracture from skiing, with A-1 healing, and this. Sure you've told me everything?"

Reine, herself under sedation, and feeling relaxed now that Fred seemed quieter, stared through the transparent one-way at the artificial overhead lake. A faint memory stirred. Was there anything else? It was gone. No. Fred had always been healthy.

"Everything," said Fred.

"Well, we'll see what Objective Tests can add, then I'll run it through the machine."

Objective Tests, including hormone ratios, colloidal gold count and the new arterioscanogram, were negative.

But the patient, when propped up in bed, fell over sideways, not always to the same side.

In another hour the electronic Diagnoseter, which had been fed a programmed composite of all the data, spewed up its report. A copy was channeled to Dr. Pickering's desk.

Hearing the soft slap from the Immediate chute, Dr. Pickering removed the report and sat down to read it carefully. Then he offered it to Dr. Joffet, who had been sitting waiting for it.

"Look at that. Why doesn't it simply say, 'I don't know,' " Pickering said irritably.

"I worked under a computer in Chicago which was always saying, 'I don't know,' " said Joffet, glancing quickly over the single sheet. "We got rid of it after a while. My chief said, 'Get one that knows.' " He handed the report back to Dr. Pickering.

"But it's nonsense," said Pickering. "Four diagnoses. (1) Meniere's disease. (2) Brain tumor. (3) Viral invasion of middle ear by nonpyogenic organism. (4) Psychomotor syndrome."

"Where do they get that last?"

"Here. They've got a postnote on that: 'Loss of father role affecting sense of identity. Son, Lorvan Gany, is cub trainee in Intercontinental Youth."

"What do you make of it?"

"Farfetched. Watch him for the first three possibilities. Rule out the third by tomorrow."

XXII

THREE LONG, deadly weeks passed. A new battery of tests was ordered. Consultations were set up from hematology, neurology, endocrinology and otology departments.

The patient with the mysterious illness remained in the hospital. On Aerozinecort every four hours he was almost comfortable, provided he did not try to sit or stand. His wife came every morning and stayed beside him most of the day.

"It may disappear as suddenly as it came," a doctor told them. They lived in hope.

One evening Reine met a team of doctors emerging from Fred's room. Her heart started pounding.

"Mrs. Gany?"

"Yes, Dr. Pickering?"

"Oh, come now," he said gently. He put a quieting hand on her arm. "Nothing new has happened. But Mr. Gany will have some information for you." He paused and considered gravely. "We have been quite frank with him."

Fred did not look at her when she entered. He stared at the ceiling, his face stricken.

"What did they tell you?" She bent over him.

"They're going to do an exploratory operation."

"For what? Where?"

"My brain. They're going to look for a tumor on the auditory nerve. The anticancer serum can't be used in the brain."

Reine sat down and they were silent.

"When are they going to do it?"

"Tomorrow at fourteen o'clock."

A brain tumor. She wrung her hands. It was what she had begun to fear.

"Oh, then let them. You've been here three weeks and nobody knows what it is and nothing changes."

He looked as if he had not heard her.

"Are there any risks?" she asked, her mouth dry.

"A small risk." His voice was low and bitter. "If the auditory nerve is accidentally severed, I'll remain deaf for the rest of my life."

She closed her eyes then.

"Who's doing it?"

"The area surgery team, I guess."

"Why can't we just hold off awhile and see?"

Her question seemed to drag him back from far away. "Oh. Because if they let it go, it can become inoperable very rapidly. They explained that. Risk deafness or risk death."

Deafness or death. She could not understand the detached way in which he offered her the insufferable ultimatum. Almost, he seemed to be thinking of something else, as if anything else was of moment now.

"Reine," he said then, and his voice was two and a half tones lower than she had ever heard it.

"Yes?"

"They're not going to find anything."

What could you say to that? To blind confidence?

"Then they'll rule that out and get on to something else. It will be some sort of progress."

"No, it won't help. They'll never know. I'll never get out of here, never walk again or work again."

"Fred, don't. Please."

"There's only one chance." It was almost a whisper, but it carried such urgency as to startle her.

"Chance? What do you mean?"

"Reine, you've got to go to Green Bank for me."

For a moment she couldn't remember what Green Bank was. She stared at him stupidly. Then, dismally, she knew.

"That again."

"Yes, that again. Reine, I'm helpless. You're all I've got to pull me out of a living death. Reine, dearest Reine, if it's what I think . . ."

"What *can* you think? What can you possibly know about it if the doctors . . . ?"

"I think the signal stopped."

She looked at him in astonishment and fear.

"The signal! What signal?"

"My signal. The signal they got at Green Bank, *after* I steered them to it."

"Oh, Fred," she said despondently.

He turned his head toward her as much as he dared. His green eyes held a wild intensity that she had never seen before.

"It stopped, I tell you! Something stopped in me suddenly! I had been fixed on it all my life and when it stopped I fell, I was lost, I didn't know where anything was. It stopped!"

His voice had risen and a nurse put her head in.

"Anything I can do for you?" Her eyes appraised him quickly.

"I'm all right," he said sullenly.

The nurse looked questioningly at Reine.

"Nothing. We were just discussing something."

The nurse moved on.

"But, Derv . . ." Taken back in time, she let the old name slip out. "It's years and years. You were a boy. And you never heard or read anything more about it. How can I go there?"

"Prin, I must know. I can't lie here wondering."

"*Why* would it stop? Why *now*? Just tell me that."

He groaned. "Oh, how do I know. Something got in its way or whatever produced it isn't there any more. Collision or meteors or—I don't know."

She was overwhelmed with pity for him. "Derv, I'll put a flash through to Green Bank. I'll ask them."

"No use. I asked a nurse to do it. It was no good. It

needs somebody on the spot who knows the story and can ask the right questions. Somebody must *persist* until we get an answer one way or another."

"They'll throw me out." She was near tears with vexation and conflict. "Or supposing they say it stopped. Then what? Then it's hopeless. Is that it?"

"No, Prin, poor girl. If it's the signal and it's stopped for good, I'll just have to adjust to being without it. I'll refuse the operation. I'll go home and learn to walk and turn like anyone else. I know I can do it."

"No. No. No."

"You used to believe in my crazy magic sense."

"It's so long ago. I've forgotten."

"We're so used to it we never mention it. We don't mention your absolute pitch either. But if it suddenly stopped, Prin, what would that be to you?"

That shocked her. Her pitch gone? A world of sound in which you no longer knew the way?

"Wouldn't you think some extraordinary event had taken place which needed an extraordinary explanation?"

Extraordinary, yes. He saw her hesitation.

"But what if it really is what they think?" she asked. "What if only an operation can save you?"

"That's why you must be back with an answer before fourteen o'clock tomorrow." He closed his eyes and said softly, "Because that's when they cut into my brain unless I have a superb reason to stop them."

What a monumental delusion fed him! She was anguished. She pitied him so much that she hated him. At last she stood up decisively.

"Reine?" His voice quavered with fear.

"I'm going down the hall to flash Comsat Philharmonic to tell them I won't be in for rehearsal tonight. Then you'll tell me everything I have to do and say."

She knew she would fail. She always failed at the things he asked her to do. But she couldn't remind him of that now.

XXIII

THERE WAS NOTHING to be gained by leaving at night. She slept at home and got an early start the next morning. They had calculated everything down to the last second, allowing for unforeseen delays.

It was Fred's suggestion that she take their own Torque airsled. Jethop would be faster, but he told her that she couldn't count on air taxis at the other end, in West Virginia. And after hearing what it had been like around Green Bank, she agreed.

She headed out toward the great new six-level airstream which had just opened up out of Boston-cross-Hartford. She thought herself lucky when she was able to get on the lowest level, only two feet off the ground, after only a few minutes' wait. It bore mostly women, timid like her. Men preferred to fly high. Let them. She stayed on it all the way to Washington.

She slid down a terminal ramp and asked the checker if there was a south stream to Staunton.

"Field seven," he said. "But I think they've got some trouble there."

"Trouble? What trouble?" There. Things were going badly already.

"They've got a kink in the stream."

Teams of sprayers were roaring out. Desperately she read the progress report on the blinking board.

She had breakfast while she waited. When the board read "Airway Open," she was the first to zoom out. She took the second level to make up for the minutes lost. It wasn't as difficult as she had thought, perhaps because traffic was fairly sparse.

Juggling minutes, dividing distances by rates to get time, she was so distracted that she missed the turnoff at

Staunton and went thirty infuriating miles out of her way. *Why* couldn't she do things right?

From Staunton to Green Bank she had to follow an old arrowed stream, hardly more than an unfortified natural current. It took everything the Torque had to keep afloat, especially in the valleys. The hills were better. She wondered why there wasn't a better stream. Outside of Cass she fluttered down to a small servport and spoke to an information sentry.

"Green Bank?" The girl looked surprised and doubtful.

"The observatory."

"Oh, you mean the old observatory. Well, there's a fine stream to the new space site five miles west of it. And they're building—"

"Doesn't anybody go to the observatory?"

"Oh no. They're tearing it down. Obsolete. They're going to extend the space site and build a new observatory to hold the space photography unit. Ever since . . . What's the trouble? Don't you feel well?"

"I'm all right. I just want to sit down a bit."

She sank into a chair and wet her dry lips.

"I'll get you a cold drink if you like."

"No. Thank you. I . . . I haven't time. Isn't there anybody there at all? At the old observatory?"

"I doubt it. Oh, I'm not sure, really. I don't think they've actually started the demolition yet. There may be a watchman. My husband was out there a couple of days ago. He just went down the road a piece. He might know."

"I can't wait. How do I get there? Please."

"Why, just over that tree and turn left at the hill with the little red house on the top and then you'll see it. But my husband will be—"

A few minutes later she almost ran into the pale saucer turned to the sky. Atop the three cricket-like steel-traced legs, it looked like a monstrous insect, all head and legs. It was only about eighty-five feet high, but

it easily dwarfed the tiny boxlike laboratory building beside it.

It was exactly as Fred had described it to her. She had been so engrossed with time that the purpose of her journey had sunk beneath consciousness and the vivid apparition before her, which she knew as though she remembered it, gave her a feeling of disjointed experience, like walking into a dream of Fred's.

Over the hills she could see the white mountainous cluster of constructions for the new space site.

She put the Torque into flutter and sank down on shabby thin grass. The ground was flat and treeless, the laboratory building with its few auxiliary sheds alone and abandoned. Under the glaring sun she felt pitilessly exposed, she and her foolish errand. The huge blind, insect face, listening to a soundless sky, mocked her.

She had to walk under the steel cricket legs to approach the laboratory building. There was no demolition going on, but the building looked deserted, the windows black. The front entrance was frame-locked.

She had come for nothing. Hadn't she known all along? And Fred, poor Fred, putting all his hope in her. Death or deafness.

Timidly she knocked on the door, then waited, listening. Nothing. Only grass rustling in a light breeze.

She walked, unseeing, along a path which circled to the back. She would omit nothing. He would look for loopholes. He would ask her, "Did you go around to the back?" At least if there were demolition workers in the back, she would have something positive to report.

She looked at her wrist. Oh, how time ran ahead of her. If she left immediately, she would be at his side when they came to put him on the stretcher. She would get the atomic fueler recharged in Staunton, and teleview the hospital while she waited. She continued quickly to the further side.

A door! There was no framework on this one. It was

an old door with a manual opener—knob? She didn't know whether to push it or pull it, then found that it turned rather easily. She pushed at the door and it swung open. Then she stood still, her heart beating fast. Had she heard a sound?

XXIV

Dr. Pickering, hurrying along the gleaming white corridor on his way to conduct grand rounds, spied Dr. Joffet at an intersection.

"How's our man in U-26? Any change?"

"Dr. Pickering. I'm glad I found you. Trouble. Did you know we've lost our surgeon?"

"Stalag? What happened to her?"

"Commandeered for a priority job."

Dr. Pickering cursed vulgarly.

"How can they do a thing like that to us!"

"Deauviet is on hand ready to take over for her. I sent him a complete file," said the younger man.

"Deauviet." Pickering made a face.

"You don't like him?"

"I've seen his operative mortality index. It's one of the poorest in the area."

"Shall we put it off?" asked Joffet. "In a week we might be able to get Oretano back from the Philippines. Or maybe we can move our patient to another area."

"Not a brain job. It has a high code number. Must stay in the area."

"There's one thing against postponing it," said Dr. Joffet. "The nurse on U-V heard him having a scene with his wife. She thought he sounded disturbed, certainly different from the way he's been. She said his eyes had a wild look."

"He may just be uneasy about the operation."

" 'Hysterical' is what she actually said."

Pickering shook his head. "Not good. The psychiatric report had his general behavior mild, placid. I don't like it. It could mean—"

"Nevency saw him. He left a note. He thinks it should be done."

Dr. Pickering pondered. "If we wait, we may get somebody worse than Deauviet."

"Worst of all, we'll lose the operating room. We may not get it again for a month."

"The main consideration is that if we wait we may be taking a more serious risk than if we go ahead. So let's proceed as we planned. Fourteen o'clock."

Joffet nodded. "Fourteen o'clock."

He hurried down the ramp to the nearest call-input. He ordered the patient into preparation. Calls were made to the operating room, the U-V nurses in attendance, the anesthesia team, the special duty U-26 nurse and the orderly desk, and finally to Deauviet.

Everything would happen now at its appointed time, like a well-rehearsed play.

Later in the day a white-clad orderly checked over the items on his cart and started up toward U-V on the long wide ramp.

Most preparatory routines would be performed later, when the patient was under sedation, but a few preliminaries needed his conscious cooperation.

The orderly paused at the top of the ramp and stopped to show his authorization pass to the green-coiled nurse at the desk.

"U-26," he said. "Scheduled for fourteen o'clock."

She checked each item on the cart against a list before her.

"All right. Go on up."

He started off.

"Don't move him, you know."

"They told me."

"He can't even lift his head without help. He's been on his back since he got here."

The orderly nodded and moved on, rolling his cart before him.

In front of U-26 he stopped. He knocked on the door only because that was regulation, but you never really expected a patient to answer. He heard nothing, waited just a moment, and then pushed the door open, maneuvering the cart carefully through it.

"Well," he said with gruesome hospital cheerfulness, "we've got a lot to do today. Haven't we?"

Then he looked toward the bed and his jaw fell open. He stood still and took it all in dim-wittedly. Another moment and he was racing out of the room. The cart, unheeded, was left to roll and clatter against the wall.

XXV

THE YOUNG MAN, working alone in the dusty office, seemed as startled as Reine. His brown hair fell forward almost to his sleepy brown eyes. He had a round head with low flat ears, and a slow way of turning it as though its weight were too much for him. He wore the customary office coverall with labeled pockets running down each side and wide flaring cuffs at the knees.

"Oh!" he said. "I couldn't imagine who would be coming along here."

"I'm sorry if I . . . Are you in charge of the observatory?"

He certainly didn't look as if he was.

The young man laughed.

"In charge? I'm in charge of the dust anyhow."

"Which room is the main office, please?"

She had a hand on the door as if she were just on her way. Purple-blond coil. Long helpless neck. Gawky, but pretty in a way.

"There's nobody else here. I'm alone. Whom did you want to see?"

At least he wasn't the kind who intimidated her and made her completely stupid.

"Could I look something up?"

"There's nothing down here. You must want the new site."

"No. This one. The old one."

They introduced themselves then, she, in abrupt quick syllables, he, discursively. He was Paul Carter.

"I work in photography probes at the new site. We have an interesting project going right now on . . ." His glance drifted dreamily to the window through which the white towers could be glimpsed, but seeing that her eyes did not accompany his, he broke off abruptly. "I guess you wouldn't be interested in that."

She did not deny it.

"But you keep your files here?"

He shook his head.

"We're taking them apart. Each department has been taking a crack at this stuff, pulling out anything that might be useful. I'm here for my department. It's a dirty job." He looked down at his coverall throwaway.

"Doesn't the regular staff come in any more?"

"There isn't any regular staff here. The observatory has been empty this past year, but even before that it was pretty inactive. They didn't get a renewal from UN Space Financing, which is understandable with the new place going up. What are you looking for?"

"I've been doing a follow-up on an old project I once worked on," said Reine. The patches on her cheeks flared white.

It was an involved lie she told him, with something about having been a summer student doing trivial research at the laboratory long ago and about the signal.

His expression didn't change when she mentioned the signal.

She told him nothing about Fred, but she mentioned a deadline. Fourteen o'clock.

Paul Carter glanced at the wallochron, which carried local time and adjusted time.

"Well! You haven't much time. Have you?" The discovery seemed to cheer him.

"No. I haven't." She would be that forceful woman who would succeed where Prin would fail. It felt as strange as wearing somebody else's coil.

"And you want to know if the signal is still coming in. Well . . ."

The young man was clearly the deep-thinking type who would never jump into an action for quick dispatch. He looked around vaguely at the dusty piles of reports, as if they were disreputable acquaintances of his past whom he no longer cared to know.

"I never worked here myself and I don't see how—"

"Oh, please. It means so much to me."

The tone of sharp entreaty made him raise his head heavily and he cast a worried look at her.

"Well, I can try, I suppose," he said. "Most of the stuff is gone, but if this is an old project, we might still find a note about it that was left behind."

He opened a file drawer, looked at it distastefully.

"It might be under Project Ozma. It was called that at the time."

"Project Ozma. Never heard of it myself. Whose was that? Russia's? Libya's?"

"It's just the name of it," she said curtly. She could only think of it as Derv's.

"Well . . . Project . . . Under P."

She breathed silent congratulations at his facility with the alphabet.

"There's no Project Ozma. Not under P." He opened the O file. "These files are antiques."

He was obliging, but slow, slow. She wished she dared to take his place at the file.

"Nothing like that here." He was thinking. He had a rather visible way of thinking. "It might have a number, but I wouldn't know how to find it."

"Doesn't anybody come in who would know?"

"Oh no. Everybody's over at the other place." He glanced wistfully out of the window at the distant towers, like a child left out of a party.

"There must be something in the way of a register." Desperation made her think of things.

"Wait. I saw something like that."

In the corner on the floor were several piles of volumns.

"Here. Wait till I get some of this dust off."

He went to a drawer, found a dusting disintegrate, carefully spread it over all the piles, then crumpled it and dropped the inflated deeter. It floated down, dwindling rapidly and had disappeared before it touched the floor. The young man found it necessary to watch this interesting chemical activity, his eyes half closed.

Probably spends hours in the summer watching the artificial snowstorms on the ski runs, thought Reine.

"What year did you say?" He hovered over the piles, lifted some off and peered at the remainder.

"1986."

"No. These are recent."

Her pleading eyes pushed him to another pile.

"These archaic systems. Eighties. Eighty-six."

He leafed through it, stopping occasionally when an entry caught his eye.

"I think my watch is fast," said Reine.

Carter, unmoved, seemed interested in everything. After one particularly long pause he suddenly looked up.

"It *is* here," he said, surprised. "What do you know? Project Ozma, 23976-oz. Well, that gives us something to go on, doesn't it?"

She stopped twisting and squirming. Somehow she had not really expected him to turn anything up.

"Can you find it now?"

"Let's just see." He crossed the room.

He was really a nice young man, merely incapable of hurrying.

"These files are numbered . . . 23970 . . . 1 . . . 6. A . . . G. Here it is, 23976-oz."

Reine clutched the edge of the counter.

"I'm afraid it isn't much if they left it." He opened the folder. "There's just two pages."

She waited while he read through a paragraph. She moved a foot, her shoe scraping, to bring him to.

"They were looking for intelligent signals," he said. "That was big in those days."

She nodded impatiently.

"And . . . I'll just summarize for you. They got a steer from something they don't go into and then found a strong signal on a frequency of 1422 megacycles."

Yes, yes. But now. Was it still on now?

"You're not interested in all these details, are you? Here they've got the various quantities involved in the phase modulation." His voice trailed as he pursued the written calculations silently. "I see. M-hm. Heterodyned with cosine 2 pi nu t, but then how do they—?"

"What *happened?*"

"Oh. Well, they sent out a signal of their own."

She knew that, too. Derv had told her that.

"Here. You can read it yourself."

She couldn't read it herself. She wished she could keep her fingers from trembling. His slow quiet gaze fell on them. Then he took the paper from her.

"Well . . . This part is just some notes on where they think the signal came from. Intergalactic, a dark star, a relay satellite, an unmanned space probe. Then someone thought it was five to fifteen light years away; someone

else thought fifty. A good many thought it a lot of nothing."

"But what about the signal? It continued?"

"They checked it every week for a while, then every month." He turned the page. "No notes from now on. Just dates. Every year. Every two years. And the very last entry is five years ago. And that's all."

"But that can't be all. How can it?"

"The signal must have stopped then, or . . ."

Stopped *then*? But that wouldn't have anything to do with Derv. Stopped five years ago?

". . . Or else they traced it to the Cheng spectral hyperergic effect. That's what happened to most of those signals."

"Then that's that," she said. She shook her head.

Paul Carter looked at her with a puzzled frown. If this was the information she wanted, why did she still look so unhappy?

"Will you be on time?" he asked.

"What?" She barely glanced at the clock. "Yes."

She turned and walked to the door. She had worse than no answer. *Persist*, he had said. It needs somebody who will ask the right questions. But her mind felt numb. At the door she stopped, scraping for something to keep the dying inquiry alive.

The young man was looking at her, patient as with a child who cannot get done with her uneasy questions.

"Perhaps there's another report. A later one."

"It would be here."

"The men who worked on it. Would any of them . . . ?"

He consulted the names of the team.

"Kuttner. He's dead. Den. Never heard of him. Harry Abelson. He's gone into biophysics. Dutweiler. I know who he is. He's in Nigeria at the Duplicate Confirmation Observatory. We could . . ."

Too slow. Too slow. His eyes followed hers to the wallochron.

"You know," he said, "there could have been other reports that were taken over to the new site."

Oh, how her head went up.

"But why would they leave this?"

"Oh, maybe by mistake. Or maybe it's a preliminary report and there was a more complete write-up."

"Then it *is* possible that the signal has been coming in right up to this year . . . ?"

He hesitated. He didn't think so. There was something dead and abandoned about this project. And he was too used to scientific truth to ride a wish, even for a desperate woman.

He couldn't bear her eyes on him.

"Let's find out."

He flashed a code on the teleson. Reine could just see the picture. A young woman's face appeared.

"Instant Research, please," said Carter.

Another face appeared. "Instant Research," said the second young woman.

"Do you have anything on 23976-oz?"

"I'm sorry. All inputs on Instant Research are being used. You could get at it if you were here, but we're not taking anything from outside."

"Oh? That's a new one," said Carter. "Could I speak to somebody in . . . uh . . . radiotelescopy?"

"Oh no. They're all up in Conference General. Unless . . . Who are you?"

"Paul Carter. I'm in space photography."

"Wait a minute." She consulted a list in front of her. "No, sorry. There are only certain calls I can put through. Try them tonight at eighteen o'clock."

Carter switched off.

Reine had heard it all on the amplified sonal. Try them tonight. By tonight Derv will have been operated, perhaps a part of him destroyed.

"Miss . . . Mrs. Gary," said Carter.

"Gany."

"Mrs. Gany, if you just report what we have here, why wouldn't that be enough?"

"It's not just the report. I can't explain. Something much more important depends on this. It's a very serious personal matter."

"Then what *do* you want?" He was not impatient, only sorry for her.

She looked squarely at him to ignite him with some of her own intensity.

"I have to know whether the signal is on now. Now! Right this minute."

She looked a little demented and he could not imagine what drove her, but the problem, now clearly formulated, was sufficiently familiar for him to give it his slow but penetrating attention.

On the wallochron the pointers of light swept round and round, while Carter studied the floor.

Suddenly he snapped his fingers.

"Why didn't I think of it? The radiometer installation. Maybe it's still connected, or maybe I could set it up. The antenna is still there. Why wouldn't it still be working?"

"Here?" Please, here. Not miles away.

"Here. Come on. We'll see for ourselves if that signal is still coming in."

He led her down a corridor, tried a door. It was locked.

"Wait a minute. I have a whole bunch of keys for this place." He sounded very resourceful.

Oh, clever young man. He fished in several pockets, his expression changing from confidence to concern to dismay. Then, ah! Keys. In the pocket labeled Markers.

The third key worked.

They were in a room filled with equipment. Paul Carter looked around, nodding approvingly.

"Data digitizer," he said, greeting the large squat box on the left.

It did not reply.

"And this looks like the antenna control." He laughed. "With a parametric amplifier. I haven't seen this type for a long time." He gloated over it snobbishly.

She wished she could be equally amused.

"Here's the receiver. And here's a twenty-one-centimeter receiver. What's more . . ."—his eyes traced wires to inputs and outputs—"everything seems to be still hooked up."

"Is it really?" Her own eyes looked fearfully for trailing ends and unmated plugs, culprits in many of her own household calamities.

"Good. No broken circuits," he said. "Now the question is, can I work it? Where's that report?"

He stood, paper in hand, in front of the antenna control, reading the indicators. He grunted with surprise.

"Funny."

"What?"

"It's right on the same steer. As if they were working on this same project right up to the end."

Her breathing quickened.

"I'd better not change it then. I wish they had an attitude-direction ball on this panel."

He moved on to the radiometer.

"Very old. Ve-e-r-r-y old." He laughed again. "A quartz-crystal oscillator and they had the nerve to label it high-stability!"

The clock in this room was an ordinary old one, but the passage of time on it was no less relentless.

"Can you turn it on?"

"Let's see." He consulted the report. "They've got 1422.36. Twenty-one centimeters is 1420 megacycles, but if it's still the way it was, maybe it's on 1422.36. I guess the filter outputs are the two components of a phasor."

He flipped a switch. There was a faint hum.

"What's that?" she whispered.

"That's just the machine. There ought to be a switch for the feed horns. Yes, here."

He switched it on. Noise.

"It sounds like radio static," she said, contributing.

"Some of it is galactic noise. Oh, this is really easy to read. The noise differences to zero and the differencing circuit . . ."—he looked up and found it—"runs down here to three synchronous detectors."

He turned a knob very gently.

"Ah, narrow band. And this?" He turned another knob. "Wide band." He turned a third knob.

In the small rectangle, a single bright band of light, narrow and clean, showed. It had a left-to-right movement, barely perceptible.

He watched it for a moment while her heartbeat ran far ahead of the beat of time. Then he started and turned toward her.

"Did you see it?"

"What?"

"The blip. Watch!"

"Where is it? What should I look for?"

Her eyes widened anxiously.

"Just there. Watch for a difference. I just saw another. Now watch."

Another moment passed while their eyes remained glued to the steady band of light.

This time she saw it too. A tiny thrust upward and downward, then the steady band. The "blip."

"Is that it? That little—?"

"That's it. Yes."

She could see now that the tiny hump returned at regular intervals, like the beat of a slow subhuman heart.

"Well, what d'ya know?" he cried, turning to her triumphantly. "We got it. The very signal they were watching sixteen years ago. At 1422 megacycles! I never thought we'd turn it up on this—Mrs. Gany!"

My poor deluded, sick Derv. How could she have

submitted to the fantasy that his illness had anything to do with this foolish little glimmer hundreds of miles away from where he lay in terror and suspense.

"I'm all right," she said.

Carter looked distressed for her and a little disappointed that she had not been pleased with what he considered a bravura reproduction of her signal.

She must tell Derv that he would have to submit to the operation. There was no way out.

"If you will just let me use the teleson?" She started down the hall.

"Wait a minute." He looked up and followed her.

"It's a Fourth Area call," she said, picking up the digicode. "But I can code the charges off."

"I'm dreadfully sorry," he said. He looked like an embarrassed host. "They've cut out all service here, just left this local hookup to the big place."

"Oh."

"Why don't you let me run you over there?"

"Yes, please."

Carter locked doors behind him. Against the side of the building there was a scooter she had not noticed on her way in.

No airsled? She stopped short.

"No, I must get started back. Where would the nearest place be toward Staunton?"

"Cass. At the big mileage indicator."

Cass was on the way at least.

"You've been very kind," she said, dismissing him.

He looked disappointed. "But maybe we could get more information on it at the site."

She shook her head firmly. "I don't want anything more." She thanked him, looking less than grateful.

Paul Carter helped her into her Torque. She smacked angrily at the starter and the Torque rose unevenly, dipping and tilting inexpertly, and then with sudden resolution zipped over the hedge.

Unexpectedly she circled back toward him. He plunged to the ground to avoid being hit and heard her call, "Thank you." Then she was off, zooming toward the first arrow embedded in the summit of the green hill.

XXVI

IT WAS THIRTEEN and a half hours when her flash from Cass got through to the Northeastern Medical Center in Norwalk, Connecticut. She saw her call register on the hold-board, fifth in line. She waited, fuming.

So late, late. Would he still be in the room?

Her call moved to fourth place. Then third.

Had he resisted the preliminary injections without any explanation? Or had he simply called the whole thing off? Her call was second. She was going to break his heart with what she would tell him now.

Her number went blank. She was on. The small picture-box showed an oldish man's face.

"Hello? Is that Room U-26? May I speak to the patient there, please?"

"I just came on, ma'am. I'm maintenance, to clean up, you know."

Clean up? The words had a brutal sound.

"Isn't Fred Gany in that room?" Her voice was shrill.

"The patient isn't here, ma'am. Nobody here. He's been moved out, I guess." He looked around vaguely.

"Oh, please. Can't you connect me to anybody in the room he's been taken to? It's urgent."

"Wait a second. I'll try to find out."

Half the image became a blur of slanted lines. She waited, frantic, while he flashed and buzzed.

"Central registry." She could hear but not see.

"I got an outside flash here wants the patient from U-26. He been moved?"

"U-26? U-26 was due for the OR. Frederick Gany. Try OR registry."

She pressed her ear closer to the extended speaker.

"OR registry."

A young woman was on.

More buzzing and flashing. The woman disappeared, then reappeared.

"Listen. Party on my line wants Gany, was in U-26. You got him there in any OR?"

"Well, what if I have? What do you want me to do, get him off the table and bring him to the viewer?" The girl's voice grew faint as she turned away. The picture was blurred and small.

A man in a white coat had stopped behind her, bending over. He seemed to ask her a question and she said something to him.

"Maintenance," said Reine. "Thank you. I'll talk directly now." Relieved, he hung up.

The picture grew clearer. The girl at the OR registry had a different expression when she turned back to the teleson scanner. Concern? Agitation?

"Did you say Gany?"

"Yes. This is Mrs. Gany."

She tried to keep her voice calm. Her neck ached.

The girl turned again to speak to the doctor behind her. He grabbed the transmitter from her, pushing her rudely out of the chair.

"Mrs. Gany. You remember me. I'm Dr. Joffet."

Something had happened. It was in his face.

"Yes, Doctor. Where is my husband?"

"Mrs. Gany, your husband has disappeared."

"Disappeared!"

The word had no meaning. She had had death on her mind. It still sounded like death.

"He was due for an operation this afternoon in fifteen minutes," said the doctor.

"Yes, yes. I know." Know to the second, to the half-second.

"They never got started. The orderly found the bed empty." The doctor's voice was sad and gentle.

Then he had . . . He had waited and waited for her and at last he—

"Mrs. Gany. Are you all right?"

"Yes. Have they looked out . . ." She couldn't say it.

"No, no. Nothing like that. He took his clothes. He left the hospital most certainly."

"But, Doctor, he couldn't walk."

"We thought you had come for him. Apparently you didn't. Somebody must have. His parents?"

"They live in Japan. They don't even know he's sick."

"We sent somebody to your home. He's not there."

"You've searched the hospital? The stairs?"

"Yes. Well, we can't send the police after him. But you can send out an alarm if you wish."

"An alarm? Why?"

"It isn't normal to run from an operation like this, Mrs. Gany. How did he seem to you the last time you talked to him? Normal?"

No, doctor. He sent me on a madman's errand. What could she tell the doctor?

"He was worried, Doctor, I'm leaving for home immediately. He may still get there or he may have left some word." She switched off.

Some word. Some last word of farewell. He must have gone under the strength of the last dose of Aerozinecort. Maybe he had managed to hide an extra tablet.

He had gone home to die, to die in his own bed. It had taken him hours, stumbling and clutching at sides of buildings and resting and falling. That's why he hadn't been home when they had sent somebody to look.

She stopped only another minute, to flash her home, knowing that it was useless. Even if he were there, he wouldn't answer, afraid it might be the hospital.

The two hours it took her to get home seemed like two days.

From the walk she stared up at their windows far above in the sky, barely identifiable. Nothing to see from here. And few people on the street. No cluster of gapers around a man collapsing from dizziness.

She hung the Torque on the air-tree, waited a moment to make sure it would start floating up, then ran inside.

She took the diagonal elevator to save time, although it always made her feel uncomfortable.

As soon as she opened the front door of their unit, she called loudly, "Fred?"

No answer.

She ran through the rooms. No Fred. No Derv. No body. No note. Nothing in the easy.

"Derv?"

Not in the sleep. Not in Lorvy's room. The upper annex? She slapped the automatic to escalate the stairs and ran up with them.

Not in the storage. Not in the file room. The terrace pool? She reversed the escalator. Flew down. Nobody in the pool. No body under the glinting surface.

She went through all the recesses, the music alley, the game alley. Then she rode the wall-climb balcony up and down the living-room walls to peek behind the kitchenmeter and, higher, behind a panel on the opposite wall, at the little fashionable Escapery nook that she had given him last Presents day but that he had never really used. No one.

She returned to the floor and was about to descend to the lower annex when she heard a sound and turned.

XXVII

BACK IN THE observatory, Paul Carter thought about the woman who had floated away over the hill.

He had wasted a precious afternoon on her. She was probably a paranoid psychotic, he thought bitterly. Even the new site was always getting letters from cranks who claimed that the "vibrations" from the new antenna—so much huger than the little saucer outside—were blighting their petunias or discoloring their blood.

The trouble was that as her interest ended, his began. He couldn't get the signal out of his mind. The little blip on the steady band at 1422. On an old abandoned radiometer. Had they really given up watching it five years ago? Had some information turned up which made it negligible?

It looked like it. If there were anything in it at all, they would have run it to the ground. There was nothing hotter, after all, than the search for other life in the universe, ever since their own explorations had been limited to unmanned probes. The further they pushed ahead in technical proficiency, the more they longed to spread beyond earth.

A great race, earthbound. They had spatial claustrophobia, all of them. There wasn't a man in science who didn't figuratively have his ear to the door listening.

All fruitless, of course. Everything had bubbled into nothing, disappointment.

And now that they had taken off the restrictions on manned flights into space, there was a great resurgence of construction of sites and rockets of all sorts.

That, too, was limited, they all knew. Limited by what time was, by what space was. So nothing would ever be as great as a sign from space of others, who lived and listened and wanted to tell. A sign. A signal.

He himself knew little enough about what had been done and what could still be attempted.

The report was still on the counter. Project Ozma. What a skimpy report. No statement of purpose. No . . . Then he noticed that the page he held was headed: "C: Operation." Ah, then there *was* more. And it must have been taken to the site.

He had to see it, the whole thing. The more he thought about it the more insistent became his curiosity.

He ought to finish salvaging for his department from this graveyard of abortive projects. How slow he was. He moved one pile onto another pile and never seemed to dispose of anything definitely.

Oh, bother the files. He gathered together the few pertinent folders he had found, locked the outer door and jumped into his small scooteroo.

It wasn't as good as an airsled but it had a jump shift, which took him up in small hops as if he were on the back of a kangaroo. He hopped it over to the astrophysics building in the new site.

He had been here only a few times, but he knew where their Instant Research was. As he walked down the hall, he thought of the woman again.

He had to be honest. She was no psychotic. Just very upset about something. About what?

"Can I use Instant Research yet?"

"It's very full. But there isn't too much lag. Do you know how to make out a program?"

He was offended and simply drew a blank form from the tray without answering her.

But what could he ask? He couldn't ask for the folder, if there was one, without going through an application procedure. He didn't have that much time.

Then he had an idea. She had said there was something personal involved. Of course. What could it be but that she . . . no, not she. She didn't know the first thing about the radiometer. Her husband maybe.

Since Instant Research when used by outsiders was only for questions that could be answered Yes or No, he was very pleased with his programmed question. Translated into words, it read, "Was anybody ever fired from 23976-oz?" He found an empty input and pushed in the metal card.

With one question he would know whether the project was in their records and a possible reason for the woman's unhappiness.

He was elated when the answer came back, *Yes.* Then he saw that the blue light was on, indicating that there was more information available on the same point. He thought a moment, then programmed, "Was the person ever reinstated?" It was a weak question. The answer came back, *Yes.*

Now he was completely at sea. He knew less than he had before. Somebody had been fired, perhaps for letting the record lapse five years ago, and then reinstated. Because it didn't matter? But why was she so upset that the signal was still coming in now, sixteen years after it had first been found?

Sixteen years. Why, if the source were no more than ten light years away, it would have received our own signal by now. The report said we had sent one. And if—*if* there were any intelligent beings to receive it, they might have sent back an answer that could reach here in two or three years.

It was no use. He had it bad. The occupational disease. Listening. He had to know everything now or he wouldn't sleep again.

He went back to the center desk.

"Are they still in conference up in the radiotelescopy department?"

"Yes, but it isn't closed any more. Anybody can go right in."

XXVIII

ON A SUN-DRENCHED street in Boston a man in a black coat, which bore a silver arrow under the identification flap, stopped short suddenly and stared at the ground. His own shadow on the walk grew toward his left. But there were two other shadows, somewhat to his right, cast by two persons behind him. One of these shadows ran parallel to his own. But the other was just slightly askew.

The man in the black coat wheeled abruptly. Two men stood a few feet away, talking earnestly. The taller of the two leaned. He was a man in his thirties, perhaps the late thirties, with dark hair and a thin line of mustache.

"Excuse me," said the man in the black coat.

The leaning man turned toward him, clearly annoyed at being interrupted in the street.

"Yes?"

"By any chance is your name Derv Nagy?"

The man stared. "No, it isn't," he said and pointedly turned back to his companion.

"You are leaning," persisted the man in the dark coat, "and I was wondering . . ."

The tall man reddened and his companion shook his head angrily at the man in the dark coat and gestured. To his discomfiture the intruder now noticed that the man aslant was leaning heavily on a transparent pole, attached like a third leg to his hip. It was almost invisible.

He backed away quickly under the torrent of abuse which poured from both the men.

Another blank.

XXIX

PAUL CARTER, emerging from the circling elevator, found himself in the thick of much more activity than he had ever seen in his own building. The large interoffice communication salon held two knots of four or five persons each, men and women. One group was in vigorous discussion. From the other group, which stood bemused around a large map, a heavy round-shouldered man with a large pasty, dark-stubbled face, detached himself and started toward the entrance at which Carter stood uncertainly.

"Excuse me," said Carter. "Where do I make an application to look at some files?"

"What do you want to bother with that for? Just tell me what you want to know."

Cheeky fellow. He looked as if he knew what he was doing and was entertained by it.

"It's rather obscure, I'm afraid. I'm trying to find out if a certain signal of 1422 frequency has been under observation up to this year."

The genial confident expression disappeared from the man's face. He looked hard at Carter, almost as though he thought some subtle meaning underlay the simple request.

"I don't think that's very funny. And you can tell whoever thought it up that I don't think it's funny."

He hurried away, harassed and grim.

Carter was astonished. A fast brush-off. The departments were expected to exchange information readily. This was unheard of.

At the door the man turned. He was young, perhaps only a research interne like Carter.

"You're in this department, aren't you?"

"No. I'm in Photography 8-M. Paul Carter."

"Oh-h." Now he looked contrite enough. "I'm sorry. I thought you were riding me about something. The answer is yes; 1422 has been under observation since 1986."

"Yes," Carter thought. Without even looking it up or asking him what signal or where!

Carter watched him go to a centocommunication tube and pop a paper inside. One hundred copies of the paper would be delivered to as many desks within three minutes.

Returning, the man stopped once more in front of Carter.

"I'm Oliver Fenner," he said. "They hear about 1422 in your department?"

"No. I was working down in the old site, salvaging, and I saw an old project report, but I couldn't find any follow-up on it."

"I'm surprised you found anything at all. Everything on 1422 is here."

"Well, when I got the signal on the radiometer . . ."

Fenner stared.

"*Where* did you get the signal?"

"At the old site. There's still an installation."

"When?"

"This afternoon."

Fenner turned and boldly interrupted the group standing around the map, who were now deep in discussion.

"Professor Hjalstrom," said Fenner loudly. "Someone here got 1422 on the radiometer at the old site . . . today!"

The entire group turned to stare at Carter and the second group lifted curious faces. Carter knew who Hjalstrom was—chief of the new space site observatory.

Hjalstrom, a short, stocky man with a fierce wide face which seemed to have been squeezed together from forehead to chin, turned to a man in the second group.

"I thought that installation had been dismantled."

"Aren't we fortunate it wasn't."

They looked at Carter expectantly. He didn't know what they were waiting for him to tell them. A woman went quickly to the door of one of the inner offices, opened it and said into the office, "They got 1422 on the old radiometer." In a moment two more men had joined them.

Professor Hjalstrom came close to Carter and peered at him, his chin thrust belligerently forward.

"You're not one of my men. Is he?" he demanded of the members of his department, as though Carter were the last person to know.

"He's in Mars picture development. Paul Carter," Fenner said.

"And you received a signal of 1422 megacycles today?"

"Yes, sir."

"Will you tell me now, *when* did you detect the signal?"

It seemed to Carter that the room had filled up and that everyone was waiting breathlessly for his answer.

He began to feel uneasy. Had he done something illegal? At the university he had been told that one of the pleasantest things about working for the International was that all information was open to everybody. Had he assumed too much?

He looked at the wallochron nervously. He had looked at it often enough when the woman was with him, but not *just* at the moment that he had seen the signal.

"Today at about thirteen and a half. I can't put it any closer."

"Had you been getting it every day at that time?"

"Oh no. I was there by accident. It was the only time I ever saw it." He wet his lips nervously, and looked around at the intent faces.

"You turned it on at that time or had you been watching for some time?"

"No. I turned it on at about thirteen and a half, observed the signal, then switched off."

A sign—was it of disappointment?—went around the room.

"Thirteen and a half. It was on at thirteen and a half," said Hjalstrom. "Hey?" he demanded, darting a fierce look around at the men and women behind him to collect opinions on this new information.

One of them shrugged. He had white hair which stood up straight from his forehead, and a deeply lined face.

"I don't see what it adds," he said.

"Maybe just that there's nothing wrong with our own radiometer," said Fenner.

The same man—Carter thought it might be Professor Maynard, whom he had heard lecture—shrugged again.

"Nobody thought there was," he said. He had a cold crisp voice. "At least thirteen twenty-one still stands as the time of renewed onset."

"Unless we hear differently from Nigeria," said Hjalstrom.

"*If* we hear anything at all from Nigeria," said a red-haired woman with a shrill positive manner. "We haven't heard yet. I think that fact alone makes it pretty clear that this was nothing but an adventitious interruption, as I've said from the start."

"Adventitious interruption due to . . . ?" asked a gray-coiled woman in a floor-length disposable.

"A local solar phenomenon. At Nigeria they've probably traced it and they're not interested in it. And that would account for . . ."

Her words were blurred as other voices rose in dispute around her.

XXX

THE NEWS that the man was safe had already flashed all around the earth. A one-minute sensation. It would be mentioned briefly on the teevy and there would be a line or two in the specials to the effect that the man who had become detached from a touring party deep in the mazes of the newly discovered Manatoba Caverns had miraculously found his way out. For the one minute the man seemed tremendously important to those who surrounded him, as well as to himself.

An overworked courier pushed his way through the knot of interviewers surrounding the haggard, wanly smiling survivor. The courier held up a white shield with a black-crossed double bar on it, the universally respected symbol for privacy, and the crowd immediately retreated, clearing a ten-foot circle around the man.

The courier put his lips to the man's ear.

"Is your name Derv Nagy?" he whispered.

The man frowned, incredulous.

"I'm Harrison Reyes," he said. "A moment ago I had the impression that everybody in the world knew that."

"Was it ever Derv Nagy?" whispered the man again.

"No. What's the idea?"

The courier shrugged. "Don't ask me. I thought they were crazy too."

"Who wants to know?"

"Silver button," said the courier and lowered the black and white shield.

The crowd closed behind him as he pushed his way out.

XXXI

THEY ALL SEEMED to have forgotten Carter.

He stood listening with rising excitement to the bits of conversation which floated about him. Most of it was about the signal.

But some of it was about a man—a man or a boy—who had something to do with the first reception of the signal.

"We have to find him. It's the only way we can be sure of the interval."

"I don't see how he matters at all. If Nigeria—"

That was on his left. On his right he caught:

"I don't believe it."

"I don't understand you at all. What don't you believe?"

"After sixteen years—"

And on the left again:

"Dr. Costello, are you any closer on the name, at least?"

"We're working as fast as we can. On four letters there are only twenty-four permutations, but that's a lot of people." This was a plump, black-eyed woman with soft white skin and a dark blue coil which she wore boldly down her back in the new free style.

"Why on earth are you limiting yourself to permutations? Why couldn't it be something else entirely?"

"Because statistically a permutation is the usual change," said Dr. Costello, her black eyes flashing.

And on the right again:

"But Cook in England and Novgorod in Russia are positive it's five to fifteen light years away, and . . ."

Now a man in one group crossed over to the other.

"I still don't see why we don't put out an all-points for him," he said impatiently.

"How can you suggest such a thing? Here's a man who takes the greatest trouble to conceal his identity and you want to . . ."

The groups spread and coalesced into one.

"I must confess," said Professor Maynard, gravely

emphatic, "that this whole idea of how the attitude fix was first obtained leaves me faintly skeptical."

"In Kuttner's letter—" sputtered one of the younger men.

"The letter. A fantasy. What manner of scientist leaves a letter like that? Kuttner was indulging his humor."

"Oh no!" said Hjalstrom, turning his back rudely on Dr. Costello in order to answer Maynard. "You can take it from me that Kuttner was in earnest. It wasn't hard to know when he was joking. And he was not a prankster."

"Perhaps," said Maynard, politely unconvinced.

"What I want to know," roared Hjalstrom, turning suddenly back to Dr. Costello, "is how long will twenty-four permutations take? Six months? Three years?"

"We've eliminated half of them. And we're narrowing the possible location," said Dr. Costello, her bottom lip trembling.

"How? He could be anywhere in the world."

"No. On statistical grounds also. They tend to return to within a two-hundred-mile radius of—"

"Two-hundred-mile radius! My God, woman . . . oh, don't cry. Dr. Costello, if you *please*."

The woman had hurried away, her head down. Professor Hjalstrom was about to follow her when a young man stopped him.

"Professor Hjalstrom. I just wanted to report on the man in the caves in Canada. Negative."

"Mm. Keep at it. Have you had anything out of the English universities that sounds at all promising?"

They walked off together.

Just then Oliver Fenner came by. He was carrying a sheaf of long narrow programmed strips.

"At least *you* won't get fired," he said jovially to Carter. His mood seemed improved.

"*Fired?* Why would I be?"

"You won't. You're not in the department. But I got

fired for not knowing *exactly* when the 1422 signal went off."

Then it was Fenner who was fired! Not Mr. Gany.

"When was that?"

"Three weeks ago. That's why I was so sticky about it when you asked. I came in for a lot of ribbing and I was sick of it. Besides today things are tense and I'm not sure whether I pulled another boner or not."

"You weren't fired for long."

"Oh, Hjalstrom's temper. Did you hear him with Costello just now? I was back the next day. It wasn't really my fault more than anybody else's. I'm theoretically in charge of the radiometer so I have to have somebody assigned to it all the time."

"That thing I turned on down there?"

"Oh no. Haven't you seen our installation? You could put that one into one minor unit of the new one. It's a monster. The whole floor above this one."

"And the signal actually stopped?"

"Stopped. Who would have dreamed? We had all given up bothering with that signal. It was routine to keep track of it as we kept track of everything. At least it was I who found it was off. But I didn't know whether it had happened during the night or within an hour or what. So there was hell to pay."

"What about the confirmation observatory at Nigeria?"

"They didn't know it was off until we told them. Then they found it off there too. So nobody knew just when it had gone off. It might even have been a week. We were taking weekly readings, or when the spirit moved us. Still, I don't think we were more than a week out of the way."

"Why does the exact time matter?"

"Because we want to match their interval exactly. We interrupted our own signal when we found theirs off. And now we want to start again to show that we got their message."

Fenner nodded, by way of extricating himself, and started to move on. Carter put an irrepressible hand on his elbow. He *couldn't* let him go now.

"*Their* message." His voice trembled in spite of himself. "Then you really think . . ."

Fenner turned a large, pale impassive face toward him.

"*Some* of us think. Don't ask me what *I* think. I've stopped thinking. It's the sixteen years that has us whipped up."

"From 1986 to now?"

Fenner nodded. "There was a lot of work that seemed to pin the source down to about eight light years away."

"Time to have received our signal and replied with an interruption. Well, my God, aren't you excited?"

Fenner's heavy rounded shoulders rose in a shrug. He rubbed a knuckle over his forehead. "You're a space listener like the rest of us, aren't you?"

Carter nodded.

"You must know how many times the world has been excited and how many times it's been nothing."

"I never heard anything like this," said Carter.

Fenner was silent a moment.

"You're right. There never has been anything like this. Sure we're excited. A signal that persisted for years, stopped, and then resumed. You should have seen us an hour ago. We were half crazy. But now we've gotten cold and cautious."

"Why?"

Fenner looked at the sheaf of curling strips of paper on his arm.

"I'm keeping you from your work," said Carter, not as contrite as he might have been.

"Here, let's take it at this table. I just have to look for programming errors. I can do it with my eyes shut."

They sat at one of the well-lit tables. Fenner put his

papers before him and started running down the columns of symbols, his eyes not shut but wide open.

"What are you cautious about?" repeated Carter, leaning far out over the table toward Fenner.

"Nigeria for one thing. Why haven't they called us to say their signal has started up again too?"

"Should they now?"

"Now. Because if they don't get it until the world has taken half a turn around, it's nothing but a local solar disturbance. One of the women has worked out the relativity effects and she's driving us nuts with it."

"But great Heavens! If it really is a signal!" said Carter. "And if there's really an intelligent source eight light years away—"

"Sh!" said Fenner.

"What's the matter?" Carter looked around.

"They may hear you."

"Oh, I know. I must sound ridiculous to you."

"Oh, not really. I'll tell you the truth. We walk around kidding about it, but at night we break out in a cold sweat. You know what I hope?"

"What?" Carter's face was eager and very young.

"I just hope they're calling us an intelligent source."

He could only be silent after that. Fenner finished a strip and turned to the next one. The room was fairly quiet. The talk had simmered down. Some of the people had retired to their own cubicles lining the side wall.

A dripping faucet made a recurrent soft plop sound. Plop. And then again. And again.

Fenner rubbed his forehead and looked up at a point on the wall behind Carter's head.

"There's one other thing that makes us cautious."

"What?" His receptive smile was compromised by alarm, as if he were a doting father being offered criticism of his favorite child.

"The signal hasn't changed."

"I should think that would confirm . . ."

Fenner shook his head. "The same old blip with the same frequency and the same amplitude. Why didn't they change it, if there *is* a they?"

"Why should they?"

"To show they're really there and thinking. You can bet we'll change ours. First we'll imitate their interval of silence, as closely as we can. Then we'll resume, but we'll add something so they'll know."

Carter felt mounting anxiety. The radiometer was on the floor above. How could Fenner sit here so calmly while some inexpert deputy guarded the precious instrument? What if right this instant some subtle nuance of rhythm was going undetected? Carter wanted to race upstairs himself and sit with his eyes glued to the band of light.

Fenner turned his pages calmly. The faucet dripped on.

"But who is watching the radiometer?" Carter blurted out in dismay.

The heavy shoulders shook a little with a mild merriment.

"We all are. Look behind you. And there and there."

How had he not seen them before? On every wall there was a large illuminated panel of glass with an identical band of light which was rhythmically interrupted by a tiny upthrust. The signal! Exactly as he had seen it in the small dusty room.

"Oh," he said, completely abashed.

"I had them set up last week, but we weren't going to use them when it seemed the signal would never come back. Then an hour ago Professor Hjalstrom told me to activate the entire circuit. It works like the cardiometers they use in the hospital. Hear it?"

He listened, but could hear nothing but the blasted dripping faucet. Then instantly he realized that the steady plop which he had taken for the drip of water was actually a translation into sound from the pulse of light.

"Oh," he said again.

"What's more," said Fenner, "if there should be the slightest change in the thing, in its frequency or amplitude, an alarm would sound that we could hear right down the hall and through the entire building, just in case we had all forgotten about it and wandered out of the room." His shoulders shook again.

Carter looked around the large room. It was comforting to know that everyone was watching and listening to the mysterious beat.

And if a bodiless thought, that rarest and most extraordinary of the forms of creation—one asked of it only that it be coherent—were to arrive here, here in this room, advising man, "unique" man, of the existence of kin, however dissimilar, millions of miles away in some remote pocket of the universe, then the bells would ring.

Not only here, but throughout the building, the city, the nation, the world!

For the search had been long and tireless, and—for all the wishes and dreams and jokes and tales—thus far, without a single sign.

XXXII

A SALLOW MAN in a bright green suit approached Professor Hjalstrom.

"I have an idea for you," he said.

"Please don't tell me anything that will take months of research. I have enough of those ideas." The wide, compressed face glowered with impatience.

"I don't think it would take long. Inquire at all the area medical centers if anybody has come in for dizziness."

Hjalstrom frowned. The Asian doctor's elliptic style was sometimes inscrutable.

"Dizziness?"

"Admitted approximately three weeks ago."

"You think it would have done that to him?"

"I think nothing. We try everything."

"How many times do you suppose it would yield for us to check out? Anything within reason?"

"If we flush out one of the permutations, there will be only one name to check out," said Dr. Punjab.

"It's a thought," said Hjalstrom. "A good one." He turned and walked away briskly.

XXXIII

THERE WERE more people in the room than before. Carter recognized two men from his own department and a woman from radioengineering. Word must be drifting around the site that something was up.

In the old days, before the Twenty-Seventh Amendment established freedom from the press, the place would have been crawling with teevy men by now.

Professor Hjalstrom was in a corner of the room, reading something to a girl at a large teleson switchboard. Professor Maynard was at a blackboard arguing suavely over an equation with the red-haired woman.

"Can I stick around?" asked Carter.

"Nobody minds," said Fenner. "Besides, you found the signal on the old radiometer."

"And to think that if I had turned it on just ten minutes earlier, I wouldn't have gotten that signal at all."

And he would have missed it all. He shuddered.

A girl approached Fenner. She carried similar ribbon sheets.

"Mr. Fenner," she said, "we think the Fourier transform doesn't check out on the fourteenth equation."

"Where?"

They bent their heads over the sheets on the table.

"Right there," she said.

"It's an error," said Fenner. "Now how far back did it start?"

He fumbled hotly through the sheets.

"Let's see now. Oh. That's Paul Carter there. He's the one who found the signal on the old radiometer. Hanya Ploompiu here. My right-hand man."

He ran a pencil down the sheet while the girl smiled at Carter.

"How did you happen to look at it?" she asked.

"Oh, there was a woman . . ." said Carter.

He sat up rigidly and clapped his hand to his forehead.

"Holy decimal! How I deceived that poor Mrs. Gany. She thinks it never stopped!"

"Ah, here we are," said Fenner, cheerfully checking a line on a sheet. "It starts here."

"That isn't too much," said the girl to Fenner. "I'll fix it and run it through again."

"Good girl," said Fenner and the girl left them. "You were saying you deceived someone?" he asked Carter.

"If she had just given me a chance. I wanted to bring her up here to find out for sure, but she just flew off over the hill."

"Isn't that just like a woman?"

Fenner, scribbling corrections, was barely listening.

"Did she ever work here?" asked Carter.

Fenner looked up inattentively. "Who?"

"The woman who wanted to know if the signal had stopped. At the old site today. Mrs. Gany."

Extraordinary, the effect of these words.

Fenner merely looked at Carter expressionlessly for a few moments.

"Mrs. Gany?" His voice had a croak in it.

"Do you know her?"

"How do you spell it?" asked Fenner.

"I don't know. G-a-n-e-y, I suppose."

"Not G-a-n-y?"

"Maybe."

Fenner said the name again, listening to himself. Then he said it backward, then forward again. Then he leaped out of his chair so that it crashed to the ground.

Heads turned toward him, then quickly toward the pulsing light on the wall monitors, then back to Fenner.

"Costello!" bellowed Fenner.

Dr. Costello emerged from her office. Professor Hjalstrom left the switchboard and hurried up. Professor Maynard put down his chalk.

"Gany," said Fenner to Dr. Costello. "How does Gany sound to you?"

The woman nodded. "Yes. Good." She looked at him questioningly.

"Where?" asked Hjalstrom.

They all spoke rapidly, their voices alert and hard and pushing each other on.

"A Mrs. Gany," said Fenner. "She was here today asking if the signal had stopped."

"Ah-hah!" said Hjalstrom and looked at Maynard.

Maynard shrugged. "I acknowledge a connection. I remain skeptical as to its significance," he said coolly.

"H-He . . ." said Fenner, pointing toward Carter.

In a moment there they were around him again, popping excited questions at him.

"Mr. Carter again," said Hjalstrom.

Carter felt like the small boy who has not only left the lights burning all night but also allowed the water to overflow in the swim-bath.

"Yes, sir. That's why I turned on the radiometer. At her request. I got the signal for her and she seemed very disappointed."

"That it had not stopped?" asked Maynard.

"I suppose so. I couldn't figure her out."

"Why would she be disappointed?" Hjalstrom asked Fenner.

Fenner shook his head. "I don't get that at all."

"The woman was alone?" asked Hjalstrom.

"Yes."

"Nobody waiting outside? No man?"

"No. I saw her off. She was *very* upset about it all."

"How old was she?" asked a man, dialing "Age" on a dialform dossier which had been made up on the case.

"Oh, not old. Maybe thirty or a little more."

The man nodded and showed the figure to Hjalstrom. "That would be correct for his wife if he has one."

"And her address?" asked Hjalstrom, coming so close to Carter that the young man had to step back a pace.

"Her address! I don't have it. She didn't give me any."

"She said where she was from?" It was a low growl.

"No, I'm sorry. I had no idea that it mattered."

What a fool he must look to them.

"She was here and we've lost her!" roared Hjalstrom. He pounded his fist in his palm in frustration, his squeezed face making him look like an angry dwarf.

There was silence. Paul Carter felt overheated in his temperate coverall. What was he doing here, anyhow, in this department he did not belong to?

"If you really intend to pursue this will-o'-the-wisp," said Maynard indifferently, "shouldn't we have Dr. Punjab up here?"

Hjalstrom digested this, his chin up. Then he glared around at his department. "Well? Isn't anybody going to get Punjab here for me, or do I have to go for him myself?" he roared, as if he had given the order repeatedly before and been stubbornly disobeyed.

One of the younger men hurried away.

"Gany," sighed Dr. Costello. "I would have come to it. I was up to Nyga, working backward."

Fenner put a hand on her shoulder. "If you hadn't set us thinking of permutations, I never would have noticed it when Carter said the name."

She brightened and smiled.

"Stop congratulating yourselves and let's get to work on it," said Hjalstrom. "Where is your list of areas?"

She fumbled through a folder.

"Here are the ones I've worked out as most likely."

Hjalstrom took them to a wall intercom. You could hear him barking orders into it from across the room.

"Kill the predictive career profile. We have the name. Gany. We haven't got the place. Costello says here rather than England. I'm sending the areas down."

He dropped the list into a tube.

Dr. Costello had joined him. "Run Derv through on the 903-Abbott," she said into the intercom. Then to Hjalstrom: "Only a few of its permutations will sound like possible first names. Maybe none. Verd? Revd?" she shook her head.

A young man entered the large room, walking so fast that he appeared almost to be running.

"Professor Hjalstrom, I have something for you," he said breathlessly. He was very young, excited and nervous. "There was an Alexander Yang. Y-a-n-g."

"Chinese? We're not looking for a Chinese man."

"No, that's just it. Only his *name* was Chinese. He wasn't Oriental at all."

"Well? What about him?"

"He disappeared with his wife and child."

Hjalstrom looked hard at the eager young face. Then he looked at Dr. Costello. She blinked nervously.

"I *must* have checked out all the Yangs."

"We had no possibilities and now we have two."

"It's one too many," said Dr. Costello.

"What does he do?" asked Hjalstrom.

"He was an orbiter," said the young man.

"Was! How old is he?" asked Dr. Costello.

"Now? I don't know. He disappeared in 1970."

"Ohhh!" groaned Hjalstrom and rudely stalked away.

"The man we are looking for," said Dr. Costello, gently, "was only just born in 1970, but an occidental named Yang was a very good possibility."

The young man was a cheerful type. "I really thought I had it," he said. "Oh, well."

"We think the name is Gany," said Dr. Costello. "Go and help them check out Gany all over the Northeast."

He walked off, whistling.

Professor Maynard was approaching Paul Carter, who stood in earnest conversation with Oliver Fenner. Behind Maynard walked the sallow man in the green suit.

"Dr. Punjab," said Maynard, his cold voice deferential, "this is the young man. Paul Carter."

Carter recognized one of the great names in space medicine.

"Now," said Dr. Punjab, looking hard at Carter. "Think deeply, young man. The woman—Mrs. Gany—she may have mentioned some place, some area. . . ."

"No," said Carter. "I don't think she did."

"I already asked him," said Fenner.

Maynard raised a deterring hand and frowned.

"Even indirectly . . . any name . . . of a river, perhaps, or a route . . . or a mountain, or monument," pursued the doctor.

Carter closed his eyes, then shook his head.

"I can't . . . I can't remember."

Oliver Fenner threw up his hands impatiently. "It's hopeless. We must put out an all-points call. Nothing else is going to turn him up."

Professor Maynard cleared his throat. "On this point I agree with Professor Hjalstrom. *If* this man exists, he should not be hunted down like an antisocio, whether or not he has performed the service Dr. Kuttner described."

"But time, Professor Maynard!" said Fenner. "Time, sir! We can only interrupt our own signal for as long as they interrupted theirs or they won't know we understood. We have . . ." They all looked at the wallochron.

"Less than three hours," said Maynard sharply, the lines on his forehead deepening. "I know."

"Please," said Dr. Punjab, holding up a quieting hand. "There are three possibilities. An electrode insertion in the brain will give us a complete rerun of the scene with Mrs. Gany."

Carter blanched.

"Oh, just a little electrode," said Fenner deprecatingly, and stabbed murderously at his own head.

Carter looked less than reassured.

"Or," went on Punjab, "if the young man would submit to a dose of LSJ-12, he will have total recall and—"

Carter shuddered.

"No," said Punjab. "Then do you know how to use a free association tape with a data digitizer and selector attachment? Painless. Nothing touches you."

"I've never done it, but I guess I could."

"If there is any place-name in his subconscious connected with this woman, we'll have it in ten minutes," he said quietly to Maynard. "I'll stand by and accelerate the process as much as I dare."

"If you have any objection, Mr. Carter," said Maynard, "please don't hesitate to—"

Fenner raised his large, pale face to the wallochron and rubbed his forehead with a knuckle.

"No. No. It's all right. I don't mind," said Carter.

"Follow me, then," said Dr. Punjab.

Carter did not feel quite as much equanimity as he had expressed at the prospect of having his subconscious given a turnover. What would show up besides place associations? He was envious of Fenner. This was a more exciting place to be than photography. And what if he had had ideas about the woman? He didn't remember having any, but she was fairly attractive and he was of average susceptibility.

Following with his head down behind Punjab, he suddenly stopped short. Perhaps jogged by this disinclination to being examined, or perhaps merely because

his subconscious had been involuntarily at work from the moment the problem had been set, it suddenly produced a thought where no thought had been before.

"Wait a minute," he said. "You know what she did?"

Hjalstrom had joined them again. "Well? Well?" he barked. Four or five others had gathered with him.

"Sh-she said she was going to Cass to make a distance call. They would have . . . Cass is so small that—"

They scattered on that, all except Hjalstrom and Fenner. Hjalstrom's squeezed face looked almost benevolent.

"Fenner," he said. "Why don't you give this young fellow the output on Nagy. Maybe it will help to dig out everything he knows about the case in one piece instead of item by item."

"Come on," said Fenner. "It's about time you read the libretto on 1422."

Carter followed him to a wall unit which opened to reveal a revolving shelf of mimeographed reports. Fenner assembled a set of them and put him down in a reading chair. There were numbers of people now sitting around, reading the reports.

By the time he had finished reading, the destination of Mrs. Gany's flash from a box in Cass had been discovered and a call put through to the medical center.

Carter pushed through the group around the teleson. The department had the usual facilities for an open teleview call with enlarged picture and amplified sound.

Hjalstrom had just asked if anybody by the name of Gany was registered there and the office of admission and discharge was checking.

"Gany. Is that G-a-n-y?"

"Yes," said Hjalstrom.

"We had a Fred Gany here." The clerk was studying a large computer card.

Fred, thought Dr. Costello. Of course. Fred.

"Had?" asked Hjalstrom. "Isn't he there any more?"

"Mr. Gany left the hospital at some time after noon without a proper discharge."

"Where is he now?"

"We don't know."

Dr. Punjab spoke to the transmitter attendant. He seemed somewhat incensed. "Turn this talk to private instantly. Nobody listens to a conversation about a hospital patient."

The screen blacked and there was silence. Even Hjalstrom looked abashed. He put his lips close to the transmitter.

"What was the patient in for?" he asked.

Even Fenner, standing at his elbow, could not hear him say it.

Hjalstrom listened, then turned helplessly to Punjab. "They're not permitted to give out information of that sort."

"I should hope not," said Punjab.

Hjalstrom made way for him.

"This is Jateen Punjab," he said softly into the transmitter.

His name and gentle statement of urgency in behalf of an International site unit elicited the information that Fred Gany, a chemical engineer, had been admitted October 24, for a suspected brain tumor which had not been confirmed, and that he had left before a scheduled exploratory and possible auditory neurotomy.

The group of listeners had been waved away by Professor Maynard when Punjab made his outburst.

When Punjab finished at the transmitter, he turned to Hjalstrom. "I have his teleson code," he said, "but he's not at home. The hospital has been trying to reach him there all afternoon."

He gave the code to the transmitter attendant.

"Keep at it," Hjalstrom said to the attendant. "Don't let anything else through."

"Unless it's from Nigeria," said Fenner.

"I *know*," said the operator.

"Can you tell us why Gany was in the hospital?" asked Maynard respectfully.

Punjab thought a moment.

"Yes. I think I can. He was in for a suspected brain tumor."

"Then it was all wrong," said Hjalstrom, "this idea that he would be affected by the withdrawal of the signal."

Punjab had a glitter of amusement in his sad eyes.

"On the contrary. It was exactly right."

"But a brain tumor," said Hjalstrom.

"Loss of balance," said Punjab. "It's a primary symptom."

They looked at each other. Then Hjalstrom looked at Maynard, thrusting his chin in the air. Maynard turned his palms outward and his forehead rose into the ready horizontal lines.

"I don't know. I watch. I listen. I am skeptical. I am ready to be unskeptical at a moment's notice."

Hjalstrom thought again of the day on which they had discovered the absence of the signal and had torn the files apart at the old site, ferreting for every scrap of pertinent information. It was Fenner who had found the dusty crumpled envelope, wedged behind a drawer of a file, and Maynard who had thought it only a joke, with its jocular inscription: NOT TO BE OPENED UNTIL SOMETHING MAKES YOU LOOK HARD ENOUGH FOR IT.

It was a bizarre report and it had sent them on an even more bizarre search for a man who "heard" like a radiometer. Silver Button had not been able to track him down. The old teacher, Hailtree, had lost him years ago. There were no records, no traces, no clues.

And now, sixteen years after the attitude experiment performed by Kuttner's group, either by extraordinary coincidence or by equally extraordinary consequence,

there were indications of connection between an astrophysical event and the life of one Derv Nagy.

The net was closing in on the leaning man.

XXXIV

PRIN GASPED. It was Derv. Standing there in the archway with his characteristic list, just now to starboard.

She fell against him.

"Prin. You poor thing. I didn't know where to reach you."

"Where were you?" she sobbed. She hit him. He laughed and she hit him again.

"I was looking for you. When they told me the Torque wasn't back, I took a helicopter taxi to the six-stream exit to wait for you. I wanted to surprise you."

"I came off the top level."

"I never dreamed it. You're always on the low."

"Oh, Derv. I hurried so. I wanted to be back in time to see you after the operation."

She stepped back and stared at him. "You're walking! You're well!"

"Like that!" he said, snapping his fingers. "Just like that. As suddenly as it started, it was over. I felt as if a light went on in me. No, that doesn't describe it. I can't describe it. I just suddenly felt right, completely right."

He whirled in place, laughing, then pointed. "North!" He whirled back again. It was the old Derv.

She beamed at him with delight.

"Oh, you. You're a rotten husband and a terrible patient, but a marvelous compass."

"And the One True Direction is just that way," and he pointed, squinting, as though aiming a gun.

She looked away uneasily.

"Derv. Derv, dear."

"What? Come on, tell me."

They sat down together.

"I was there," she said.

"Green Bank? Did you get in? Did you ask?"

"Yes, I did."

"The signal?"

"The signal is on. It's still on there at Green Bank."

"Ah," he said. "Good. I knew it. Of course it's on or I wouldn't feel this way."

She shook her head but didn't say anything.

"It's on and it has always been on?" He seemed incredulous.

"We'll never know if it was off. They haven't been following it. There are no records . . . just this one young man who was there by accident and didn't even care. There's no interest in it. It's all dead there. The staff is gone. The place is going to be torn down." She got it all out quickly.

He could not hide his bitter disappointment.

"What of it?" she said.

"How can you say that?"

"But you're well. I can hardly believe that the terrible either-or threat of the operation is gone. No operation. No brain tumor. No weeks of convalescence while we measure your hearing. I can breathe again. I can sing. I can dance."

Derv threw her a desolate look which repudiated song and dance.

"Do you know what I did before I went out to meet you?" he asked. "I went to the library. There wasn't a thing new on it. I felt abandoned." He stopped. Then he burst out with, "But I thought surely somebody was watching it, noting it."

How he had harbored it all these years, the thought that his singular aberration was in some unearthly way relevant to a phenomenon which would one day permit him to play a useful role, negate forever the haunting fear that he was merely a sport of nature. She had not

known it meant so much to him. After the early years he never talked about it.

Ah, poor Derv. It hurt her cruelly to see him so cast down. They sat silently, staring at the floor between them.

"Then all that is finished forever in my life. I have to get used to not hoping."

"Oh, Derv," she reproached him.

"I know, I know. I ought to be glad I'm alive. I am, I suppose. Still, everything is so . . . so bleak." He shook his head slowly, trying to encompass a devitalized future.

"You must have had some infection after all."

"I guess so. Maybe it just blocked out whatever keeps me in balance."

The teleson was flashing and buzzing. Prin moved toward it.

"No, wait."

Flash. Buzz.

"It must be the hospital," said Prin.

"I can't talk to them now."

Flash. Buzz.

"They must have been calling all afternoon."

"I can't help it. I don't want to go into it with them. Tomorrow maybe."

The teleson stopped.

"I can't understand why you sneaked out the way you did," Prin said. "Why didn't you call them in and say, 'Look, I'm well.' "

"I was afraid. I didn't know how long I'd last."

"You thought it would come back?"

"I didn't know. I was afraid they'd keep me for a few tests. I had one idea. Just to get home. If it hit me again, I wanted to be in my own bed and stay there if I had to for the rest of my life."

"But you went to the library."

"Because I felt so well. I began to feel as if it had never happened. A bad dream."

"We'll have to tell them."

"I will. Just let me get over some of this."

"Do you want something to eat?"

"No. I don't know," he said dispiritedly. "I think I'll go out on the terrace to the trampoline." He looked out the window. "No. I don't really want to."

"Why don't you take a swim? I'll put the air-warm on for you."

"Maybe." He walked toward the window again. "No, I don't think so." He revolved in place once, gloomily.

"There was a nice tape-letter from Lorvy. It's on the player."

"Later."

She had never seen him so low-spirited.

"I think I'd better see what's doing at the plant," he said. "I'm behind on some funnel designs for a filtered snuff factory."

"But it's so late! You'll be there alone!"

"Let me. I think it's what I need. Don't worry about me please. I may not get home until very late. But I'll be all right. I promise."

"The telesons will be dead. How will I reach you?"

He kissed her absently and patted her cheek.

"If it gets very late, I'll flash you on my way home. You can call the hospital, if you want, when I've left. Tell them anything you like. Just get them off me."

The door shut behind him.

She went directly to the piano, but sat there, staring at the keys. She could not think of what she would like to play. Perhaps she was too tired to play. Her shoulders slumped. What if he got sick again out at the plant? With nobody there to know?

The teleson flash-buzzed again. She jumped up and hurried to it, glad that Fred had given her permission to answer it.

The viewer showed a teleson operator and several thoughtful-looking men watching anxiously behind him. Well, she could understand the hospital's concern.

"No, he isn't here. But it's all right. This is Mrs. Gany. I've seen him and talked to him and he's perfectly all right. You can tell the surgeon that—"

"Mrs. Gany, this is the New International Space Site and Observatory at Green Bank, West Virginia, and we must speak to your husband as soon as possible."

Green Bank! Chills fluttered the nerve-endings in her cheeks and down her back. Green Bank! And all these intent people wanting Fred. How different it looked from the near-empty place she had visited only this afternoon. New, he said. New international. The towers she had seen in the distance. Then she groaned.

"Oh, dear. He won't be back now until late tonight."

"Tonight is too late. It's very urgent."

"He went to Zero plant. He's a chemical engineer there. But the telesons go off after hours."

"If we send a messenger, will he be able to get in?"

"Wait." Oh, think. Think fast. The great event. Be equal to it. "He just left. I might be able to catch him. Let me call you back."

"No, no. We'll hold on here."

"You'll be sure to wait? It may take several minutes. I don't know if . . . I'll hurry."

"We'll hold. Don't you worry about that, Mrs. Gany."

They didn't have to tell *her* how important it was. It was the most important call he had ever received in his life. And not to *be* here!

She took the express lateral elevator down, leaning almost like a Derv Nagy. On the street, no Fred. She knew the way he'd go. She raced to the corner. He wouldn't take the Torque. The air streams were cluttered at this time of day. He would take the Deep. She must catch him before he got there and went down.

She jumped on the moving sidewalk, leaped im-

mediately to middle speed and then to high. Frantically she searched the faces she passed on middle and slow. If he, too, was on high, she'd better keep moving. She walked forward, not too rapidly lest she miss him.

Oh, where was he? Had she skipped a face? Was that? The man turned. No. Maybe he hadn't gone to the Deep at all. If not, she would have to decide at the next intersection whether to go left to the airhop port or right to the Deep.

Up ahead the moving belts forked wide apart. People looked at her curiously as she searched their faces in an agony of haste.

Then just before the cloverleaf she saw him. He stood alone on middle, staring gloomily at the taped news pictures which circled the floor.

She had passed him. She stepped briskly to middle and walked back, pushing through the lines of people who were waiting to make the change at the cloverleaf.

"Derv. Derv." She grabbed him by his arm, the old name, as always in times of emotional excitement, coming most readily to her lips. Breathless, she could barely speak.

They never used the name in public. He looked up, surprised and frightened. People turned to look at them.

"Come back. Teleson."

He paled. Only some dread event could bring her out like this to chase him back for a teleson flash.

"What? Lorvy?"

"No. T-teleson," she panted. She was pulling him to the other side to the slow reverse.

He held her as they jumped together.

"Green Bank!" she got out as they steadied and poised for middle on the reverse.

His eyes opened wide and a look of wild expectation and incredulity came into them. He grabbed her hand. His was trembling. They boarded high speed together.

"Tell me the number. Quick."

"No. They're holding. They're waiting for you."

"I'm going to jump from high when we get to the corner. You get back on slow before you get off."

He ran ahead to add his own speed to the mechanical one. Then she saw him leap. He almost collided with an air-tree, stumbled, then righted, twirled twice and in a moment had disappeared around the corner.

It was against the law to jump off high, but who could blame him.

XXXV

DISEMBARKING PROPERLY, she was only a minute or two behind him.

By the time she was at his side, he had apparently identified himself as Fred Gany. A Professor Hjalstrom, the letters spelling out his name across the viewer, had identified himself, and the new observatory had identified itself, pictures of its towers and domes being every now and then superimposed over the pictures of the speakers, giving the grotesque impression that they were constantly changing their hats from tall conical ones to flat bowler-shaped ones.

"Let us not waste time," said Professor Hjalstrom. "I ask you now—and I leave it to your own knowledge of the complexities with which we are dealing to know how imperative is the truth—is your name Derv Nagy?"

The complexities. Ah, who knew them better than Derv?

"Yes," he said. "I am Derv Nagy." He said it as if he had been saving it all these years for this supreme moment of affirmation.

They stared at him now as though he were an archaeological find that they had just turned up after years of patient digging.

Prin was surprised to see even more faces crowded

around the other end than at the beginning of the call.

"I suppose what you want to know," said Derv, "is why on earth I sent my wife to find out if the signal had stopped. You see, I had this idea that—"

The man with the fierce wide face brushed the explanation away.

"Mr. Nagy, the signal you speak of stopped and was absent for some time. It resumed today."

Derv's mouth opened. He shuddered and tears came into his eyes. He swallowed, tried to speak, but could not. He looked at Prin.

"It *was* off. It *was*," he said.

She was bewildered. One of the faces in the viewer was that of the young man who had turned that machine on for her.

She could understand nothing but Derv's joy. He stood there, listing markedly.

At the other end they gaped at the crooked stance, all of them having read every known detail of his history.

"Yes, indeed," murmured Punjab.

Derv had eyes only for the man at the transmitter who was making his life a whole.

"Then you don't know just wh-when it went off?"

"Unfortunately, no. Our observations at that time were intermittent." Here the speaker turned to glare at one of the men close by him. The man feigned warding off a blow. Hjalstrom's mouth twisted into a fragment of a smile. "Shortly after you went into the hospital," he continued to Derv, "it was discovered, quite accidentally."

"And you don't know when it came on?"

"Oh, since then you can be sure we observed continuously, round the clock. We *think* we have the time it came on again."

"It was—"

"Just a moment." The same man at his side had whis-

pered something to him. "Children's games!" snorted Hjalstrom, but turned to a woman behind him. "Let me have that chart with the resumption time that we used in the closed teevy conference."

The woman nodded, disappeared for but a moment and then slipped a chart into Hjalstrom's outstretched hand. He held it face down before him.

"Now, Mr. Nagy," said Hjalstrom. "The time was?"

Derv spoke confidently. "I can't say the minute I got sick. It was October twenty-fourth between eighteen and nineteen o'clock. But in the hospital, the instant I got well I looked at the wallochron to see when I was reborn. It was thirteen twenty-one."

Hjalstrom smiled broadly, a smile which was echoed on the faces behind him as he held up the pale blue chart for Derv to see. The numbers were large and black: 13:21 Adj/Glbl Tm.

A man with a lined forehead whom the orthographizer on the viewer immediately identified as Professor Maynard nodded abruptly at Professor Hjalstrom and then impassively grasped a corner of the chart to steady it.

"My God!" said Derv. He turned to Prin and smiled foolishly as if he weren't sure how one smiles. His teeth were chattering.

"Look!" cried Prin. "Look at the viewer!"

He turned quickly back to the viewer.

The wide panel was a fiery red and completely blank as though all his interviewers had been consumed in some violent radioelectronic conflagration.

They had never seen anything like it in their lives. They stared at the red panel dumbly while moments ticked by. Then suddenly the screen was white and brightly illuminated, but still empty.

At last a metallic voice boomed, "Emergency. Please stand by. Your caller has a first priority call which must take precedence. This is orbit Emergency Triangulation."

There was a pause. Then the voice came on again. "The statement you have just heard cannot be repeated."

Prin looked at Derv. He shrugged. "Improvements all the time," he said.

Silence and a bright white viewer.

"What are we supposed to do?" whispered Prin.

"I'm not going anywhere," said Derv.

They waited. At last they heard Hjalstrom's voice.

"Operator, please give the party I was just telesoning a double screen. We want a three-way all around."

"Yes, Professor Hjalstrom. For the Nigerian party also?"

"Yes."

The white screen vanished. Professor Hjalstrom's face reappeared. Now he sat at a desk, his name on a plaque before him, facing the screen. Beside him sat the man with the lined forehead. The plaque in front of him bore the name, Professor Joseph Maynard. There were others crowded behind them.

Two new faces supervened transparently over the Green Bank faces so that the features of all mingled confusedly. Then a black line grew down the center of the screen and each face dwindled and moved sideways until the two scenes, each a half-size picture, confronted each other on the split viewing panel.

Again everything disappeared in red. Then the bright white screen and a new voice, faintly accented, made its announcement.

"Nigeria International Space Duplication and Confirmation Observatory and Laboratories. Astrophysics Unit 9. First priority call. Professor Harry Dutweiler and Professor Rheen Lugboom."

Back came the two scenes side by side. Derv recognized the famed old astrophysicist sitting before the transmitter. Seated beside him was a black man Nagy had never seen. Behind them, five, six, eight . . . many faces—most, dimly out of focus.

Paul Carter, in Green Bank, held his breath. Dut-

weiler and Lugboom! And on the left the mysterious Derv Nagy, the revolving boy, who was now a man with an oblique slope. He caught glimpses of the woman with him, the woman who had tiptoed stealthily in on him, half frightening him to death.

And Carter had only to turn his head to the right or to the left or to look behind him and he could see another wonder, the continuing glowing impulse which posed the greatest question man had ever confronted. He watched it hypnotically for a while: blip . . . steady . . . blip . . . steady. . . .

A slow gutteral voice brought him back with a start to the viewer.

"You have a lot of people there," said Professor Dutweiler, peering from one side of the viewer to the other. The Green Bank men laughed.

Dutweiler stared at Nagy.

"That one I don't know," he said with the rudeness of the old. "George, is that you?" he asked plaintively, peering at Professor Hjalstrom. "And that's Maynard. Good."

"Yes, Harry," said Hjalstrom. His voice was softer than usual. "We have all been hoping you would call."

There was silence as though tension had gathered in all three rooms.

Dutweiler's voice, when it began again, trembled. Perhaps it was from age.

"George, a most astonishing thing. The signal that you called to our attention, the signal that we both found missing . . . aha! I can see by your faces that you know what I have to say."

Professor Lugboom clapped a fist into his palm.

"Yes, George," said Dutweiler. "It came on again today. Our 1422 megacycle signal. Today at . . ."

He looked at Lugboom, who whispered something in his ear.

"At thirteen twenty-one adjusted."

The magic moment was confirmed. Paul Carter looked at Fenner, whose pale face gleamed above and behind Professor Hjalstrom's chair. *If* Nigeria confirmed, Fenner had said. Fenner was nodding, his eyes half-closed, his lips tight.

"Thirteen twenty-one adjusted," said Hjalstrom unnecessarily to the men behind him; then, into the transmitter, "Here, too, my friend."

On both sides of the screen everyone laughed and broke into applause, as though they had just seen the close of a delightful comedy on teevy. This curious reaction to spectacular accomplishment of many working together rather than of one working alone, a phenomenon first observed on the occasion of the first photographic probe to the moon, has been extensively studied. Opinions as to its cause vary.

To Derv, so uniform was the clapping motion in both halves of the screen that it seemed contained in one room, rather than in two separated by half a world.

XXXVI

It was Dr. Costello who thought of it, oversensitive, hypersentimental Dr. Costello. It was easy enough to do during the interval of applause. A brief exchange with Derv Nagy and a few words spoken softly into the wall intercom. Everything would move from there without her—within seconds.

From his room high in the Seaview Airotel, he was watching the airtrains slide down the ramp onto the reception roof below him, carrying weekenders from all over the world. His thin shoulders were more hunched than ever.

He did not hear the knock and was surprised when a young woman in uniform appeared beside his chair. She was the girl from the office downstairs.

She smiled and said something. It sounded like teleson and he looked toward the instrument in the corner of the room. She shook her head.

He giggled uncertainly. Where was his hearing aid? He found it, adjusted it.

"What? What is it?"

"A Silver Button Service call," she said. "I must take you to the office downstairs."

"Silver Button? For me? What would they want me for? It must be a mistake."

"Come," she said. "We must hurry."

The lateral express whizzed them down fifty-four floors and deposited them both in the inner offices.

The girl set him in a comfortable chair, gently removed his hearing aid, noted its capacity, adjusted a headset accordingly and fixed it on his head. Then she turned on the giant teleson viewer in front of him.

He giggled again and gaped in bewilderment. His thin nose quivered.

XXXVII

A FUGITIVE from communication cuts himself off not only from bad news but also from good—occasionally from the very best news he might hear all his life.

In the Japanese town in which Derv's parents had settled, Mr. Nagy's "Don't tell me anything" had hardened into a wall of isolation. It had been a bitter blow to the Nagys that Derv had been forced into the same escape and concealment which had been their own lot. Mr. Nagy could not bear to hear about it. Although Mrs. Nagy assured him that Derv was happily married and had a fine normal son, he would not listen to details. Wary of the misfortunes which lurk in cheerful recitals of fact—("the pressure is . . . ," "your fuel," "that nose cone," "the heat could . . .")—Mr. Nagy would not have a teevy in the house, or even a teleson.

"But if they should need us," begged Mrs. Nagy.

"Only little children need parents. Everybody else is better off without them."

"You don't even know what he calls himself."

"I do too. Verd Angy. Ved. Something like that."

"Fred Gany. See that? If something happened to me . . ."

"Write it down somewhere. Just don't tell me about it."

Only the argument that they themselves might some day need emergency aid moved him. The instrument was installed, but Mrs. Nagy allowed her husband to perform certain operations on it. As a result, it never buzzed. But if somebody was calling them, the picture appeared on the viewer—without a sound.

Mr. Nagy never looked at it. But Mrs. Nagy never went near the computerizer to input the day's formulas without glancing at the empty screen of the teleson. Sometimes a ghostly face appeared in it. The lips moved. It smiled. Then the features assumed a look of mild surprise which quickly changed to anger and frustration, melted into resignation and vanished.

That morning Mrs. Nagy woke at dawn. It was an hour she never missed. Long ago, high in her orbiting capsule, she had seen the dawn return again and again, with impossible frequency, like a performer insatiable for applause. Now the sky was just reddening. Mr. Nagy was still asleep.

She slid through the warm bath and out through the drier. Thrusting one arm through the hanging loop of the dress roll, she turned quickly and snapped off at the perforation as the robe self-closed about her. In another moment she stood in front of the computerizer. She had tapped only a few of her morning codes before a glimmer of light caught her eye.

There were faces on the teleson. Four men she did not know. The screen was strangely divided in the middle. Somebody had cut her line in on some kind of con-

ference by mistake. Their names flashed on occasionally.

She sat down to her siphon of tea, then took another look. The same four men. How could they have anything to talk about this early in the morning? They were certainly not calling her because they didn't even look her way. Suddenly the picture jerked, two men disappeared and a new face appeared in their place. She reached for a bit of crumble and berry, then looked again. There was something about the new face which gave her the sensation of looking at her own hand.

Derv! She leaped up and the siphon-sipper crashed. She ran screaming for her husband.

Her screams brought Mr. Nagy to his feet.

"What is it?"

"Derv! On the teleson!"

"Huh? What? Derv? At this hour? What does he want?"

"How do I know? I can only see him. Oh, come quick or he'll be gone."

For a man who did not want to hear anything about anyone, Mr. Nagy was astonishingly quick in getting to the teleson. Four men, talking. Then he started with delight and apprehension. Derv, talking to two of the men.

"Oh, what are they saying?" wept Mrs. Nagy.

"The speech unit. Where'd we put it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Is it this box thing? Can you fix it?"

"I took it off, didn't I?" He was working frantically. "What's happening? Anything different?"

"No. I just can't make out what it's about."

"How does he look?"

"Nice. Sideways, but nice."

"He's in trouble, I'll bet. He must be up against an investigating committee of some sort."

"It can't be. No senators. Just professors."

"Then it's an examination. And he's failing. I won't listen."

A message flashed across the bottom of one picture.

"Did you see that?" asked Mrs. Nagy, breathless.

"What?" His fingers felt swollen with clumsiness.

"Green Bank. It said Green Bank."

"Green Bank!" He felt the nerve-ends in his scalp tingle. He was trembling as he plugged at last into the remaining jack. "There! Throw the switch."

A murmur of voices came on. They stood before the glimmering screen, every sense extended to catch the smallest sound, the faintest gesture from this strange scene in which their son seemed to be playing a mysterious but decisive role.

XXXVIII

PROFESSOR MAYNARD was speaking in his cold, cutting voice.

"I think we are agreed, then, that the interruption, like the rhythmic impulse, is extrasolar in origin. We are also agreed, are we not, that we still have little indication that the signal is intelligent, and/or deliberate."

Professor Lugboom, his voice musical and quaintly inflected, bobbed his head toward the transmitter.

"We are careful here, as you are there, not to permit our wish to outrun truth," he said.

At the bottom of the picture Derv was watching, right across Lugboom's knees, a message flashed.

"What was that?" asked Derv, who had been concentrating on Lugboom's lips so that he could understand what he said in his unfamiliar accent.

"It said, 'Nagy parents and teacher cut in and receiving,' " whispered Prin.

"Ah, good," said Derv.

Lugboom continued. "Yet, on the chance that we have been"—he paused for a word and chose a good one —"hailed, we must act immediately not only to acknowl-

edge receipt and understanding but to advance some small piece of information about ourselves."

He broke off abruptly. He had been staring at Derv. Now he said, "Who *is* that young man?"

"Ah-hah!" said Hjalstrom. "This is another confirmation, a most peculiar one. But you know all about him. Look carefully."

"I see now," said Dutweiler. "He is askew. It is Derv Nagy, Kuttner's boy."

Tardily the orthographizer ran the eight letters of his name across Derv's forehead.

In her own room, Prin laughed. "Hear that?" she said to Derv. "You're a crooked fellow, as I've always said."

Derv waved a hand at her behind his back. He was much too intent to feel personally involved. They were talking not about Derv Nagy but about a celestial phenomenon.

"He suffered physical manifestations," said Maynard, "which were exactly coincident with the withdrawal and resumption of the signal. So we know the duration of the interval. Professor Hjalstrom worked it out very successfully."

Hjalstrom jerked his head sideways toward Maynard and then looked at Fenner to underline Maynard's full capitulation to the relevance of the Nagy anomaly. Fenner raised his eyes skyward, ironic but pleased.

Lugboom now said something to Dutweiler and Dutweiler leaned forward.

"George," he said, "my friend, Lugboom, has been making a study of the Nagy complex. He thinks he has three other authenticated cases of humans, nonluminous electro-magnetic reception. He asks that you send him everything you have on this subject."

"Good," said Hjalstrom. "We have been working here on a return signal. We intend to use time intervals as one of our significant parameters. We shall mimic their —the—interruption first, then improvise."

"We must keep it simple," said Maynard sternly. "Binary code can run away with us."

"One of our men here," said Dutweiler, "has suggested that the duration of the interruption may be a relevant one in their"—(Carter was pleased to see that Dutweiler was not as self-conscious as the others in proclaiming himself boldly in support of a "they" somewhere in the universe)—"diurnal rotation pattern."

"We can advise of our own," said Hjalstrom, "by leaving a twenty-four hour interval between improvisations."

"It will be sixteen years before we have a reply," said Lugboom, "but in the meantime there may be informative improvisations from the alien source."

"We have verified the Doppler shift you recorded," said Dutweiler. "Our source must be orbiting. Around what, we do not know."

"There is always the old Shapley theory of the dark star heated from within," said Hjalstrom.

"The Doppler may have thrown us off from the original attitude. Our return signal must be aimed with the utmost precision," said Lugboom.

"Exactly," said Hjalstrom. "For this reason we are asking Mr. Nagy if he will give us a fresh steer toward the source. That was one reason we were hunting for you," he said, looking directly at Derv. "We have a new way to use you in the antigravity machine which would yield an unbelievably fine correction."

"That machine I went into when I was a boy?" asked Derv.

"The present machine is nothing like the old. You will have absolutely no discomfort and will be able to return home immediately afterward."

They all looked at Derv now. He turned away from the viewer and looked questioningly at Prin. Prin had been set dreaming by Lugboom's phrase "advance some small piece of information about ourselves."

Which small piece, she was wondering? Oh, tell them that it is sunny here. Tell them some of us play the piano. Read them a poem. Tell them we used to make war. Tell them what we laugh at.

"Prin?" asked Derv. "They want me to go to Green Bank again."

"Don't look at me," she said. "I'm far up."

Derv turned back to the viewer and had barely opened his mouth to reply when the appalling din of a clanging alarm broke out in the Green Bank station.

XXXIX

ITS EFFECT was paralyzing. Derv stood motionless, his mouth still open. In Green Bank every man and every woman in the twenty-six stories of the Unit Building stood mute and frozen.

The Nigerians stared in puzzled incomprehension at their overseas partners, for the extraordinary blare of sound undoubtedly came from there.

And in the Green Bank room they were, for the instant, equally confounded. For people who live in a world full of bells, each with its own special message of summons, dismissal or alarm, reaction to each new clang is at first suspended while the brain frantically examines its assortment of stored clues for the proper response, and finally chooses.

Oddly it was Paul Carter, the outsider, who was first to shout, "The signal!" But the delayed recognition seemed to seize all those in Green Bank instantaneously, perhaps one second later, and as one man those in dim focus on Derv's viewer vanished and the two who sat leaped from their chairs and were gone.

Derv was left to stare in wonderment at the bewildered faces of Professors Dutweiler and Lugboom, but only for one additional moment. For suddenly, as if

in response to a call behind them, these men also turned, hurried from their chairs and, along with all those who had surrounded them, floated rapidly out of sight.

Both screens were empty.

"What happened?" asked Prin, her voice dried to a whisper.

Derv shook his head. He waited, not daring to move away.

Hailtree, watching alone in the corner of the airotel office, and the two in Japan, stirring only to grope backward into chairs, waited too, heart in eyes.

What could have happened in Green Bank which was also summoning attention in Nigeria? Derv's foot was numb. He stamped on it. He wiped his face.

Suddenly Professor Lugboom was at the Nigerian transmitter.

"Halloo! Hjalstrom! Are you there? Maynard!"

He was breathing rapidly and seemed in the greatest agitation.

Professor Hjalstrom moved rapidly into focus. He sat down. He started to say something then shook his head, overcome with emotion. Lugboom was nodding his head rapidly up and down.

Other figures moved back into focus.

Maynard sat down and put his hand on Hjalstrom's bowed shoulder. Hjalstrom looked up. They shook hands, as if they had just met in unfamiliar surroundings.

Dutweiler fell into a chair and put his head down. Maynard spoke, his voice thin and breathless.

"The signal . . . has . . . changed. Changed. Here," he said, turning to direct some men behind him. "Get a teleson adjunct up there on that wall signal. Closer. Now. Listen. Watch."

Running across the bottom of the Green Bank picture was a little luminous band, which Derv remembered from many years ago. He even remembered what to

notice, the tiny little upthrust. With it came a sound like a drip of water. Prin, too, knew what to watch.

Blip. . . . Steady. . . .

"It's changed!" she cried.

You could not help but see and hear the change.

For after the steady interval came two blips in quick succession, then the steady band, then four blips! Then steady. Then eight! Steady. And one again!

And if anyone were to miss it, Maynard was counting in a breathless monotone: "One, two, four, eight, one, two, four, eight, one, two, . . ." He shook his head and tears ran down his cheeks.

"Yes. Yes," said the Nigerian. "They tell us they know the geometric progression. They tell us."

Derv, overwhelmed with joy and awe, watched, while figures moved in wild confusion in both pictures. Many merely stood, grinning fatuously and applauding. Men clapped each other on the back and said, "Congratulations," the only word they knew with which to greet an unusual event.

There were tears on many faces. A woman fainted.

And the four who sat babbled to themselves, to each other, to the transmitter. "They are there." "They heard us." "Eight light years away." "Number, the universal." "They are there." "They are there."

Derv and Prin held each other tight, wordless.

"But why didn't they do it in the first place?" asked Carter. "Why stop and start again?"

"I think I've figured that," said Fenner. "Their signal may have been going out for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years. Suddenly there's an answer. They're not ready with a change, so they stop to show they heard. But they don't know if we're getting signals from other sources, so when they come on again it's with the same one to identify themselves. *Then* they changed it."

"Ah, yes," said Carter. "It's wonderful. Isn't it wonderful?"

"I don't know," said Fenner. "I only hope they can count higher than eight."

He turned to kiss Dr. Costello on the forehead.

Dutweiler's aged cracking voice rose above the tumult. "Good-by, my old friends. Thank God for these miracles. Thank God we lived to see them."

The Nigerian side of the picture went black.

In the airotel office, Hailtree sat alone, saying, "One, two, four, eight, one, two, four, eight." He didn't want to say or do anything else for a long time.

In Japan, Mr. Nagy said gratefully, "We saw it all. We saw and heard it all."

Mrs. Nagy patted her perverse husband's hand.

Professor Hjalstrom spoke into the transmitter to Derv. "Nagy?" It was a hoarse whisper.

"I'm here," said Derv. "I'll come at once."

"Wait there. International Silver Button will pick you up on your rooftop in ten minutes."

He moved his hand toward the switch-off, but Maynard held him back.

"We are in your debt, Mr. Nagy," said Maynard. "The world . . . We can't say *the* world any more, can we? The two . . . we all . . ."

Hjalstrom leaned forward and switched it off.

They were all gone now. The viewer was blank.

Derv and Prin looked at each other, silent with wonder. At last Prin sighed.

"I'm thinking of the sad thing you said to me one day when you were a boy," said Prin.

"What?"

". . . 'And that one talent which is death to hide,
Lodged with me useless . . .' "

"Did I say that?" asked Derv.

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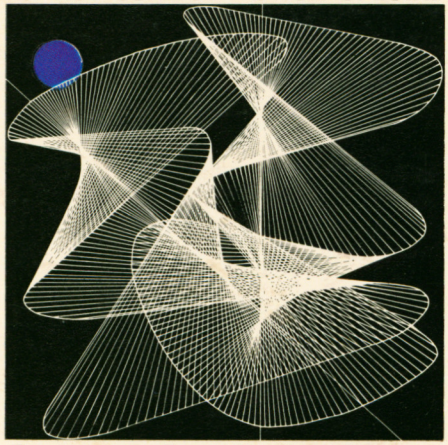

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