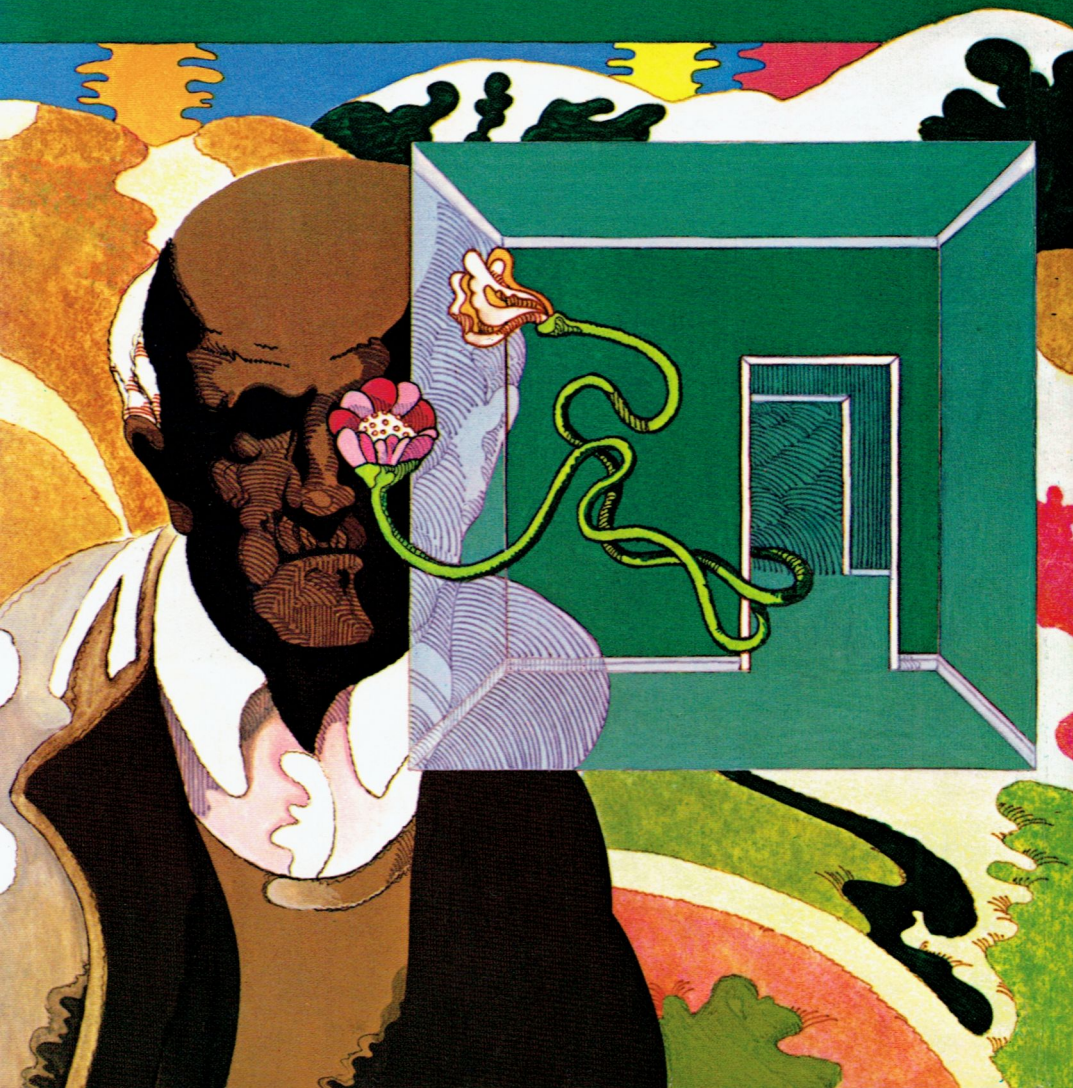
# ROOMS OF PARADISE

New Stories for Tomorrow by Brian Aldiss Michael Bishop
Gene Wolfe R.A. Lafferty Cherry Wilder Ian Watson
Sakyo Komatsu George Turner & others
Edited by Lee Harding Foreword by Roger Zelazny



$8.95

# ROOMS OF PARADISE edited by Lee Harding

From the Foreword by ROGER ZELAZNY: "This is one of the finest science fiction collections I have seen in a long while. Every story in it has something to recommend it, in terms of idea, situation, character, plot, setting, or some combination thereof . . . therefore my recommendation of this book is both enthusiastic and unqualified."

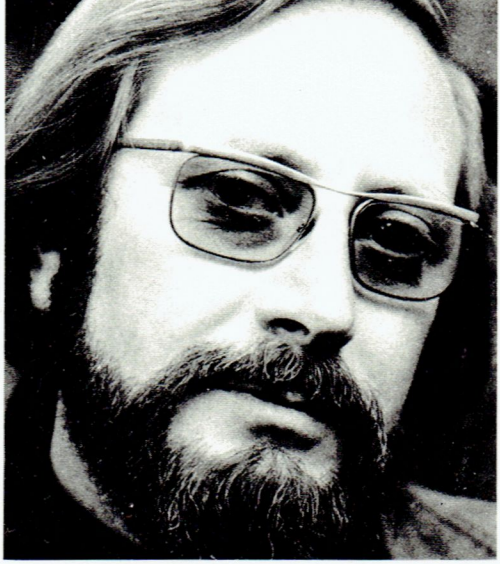
ROOMS OF PARADISE is a superb collection of previously unpublished stories by a galaxy of international science fiction authors. Brian Aldiss, Ian Watson, Gene Wolfe, R. A. Lafferty, Michael Bishop—the contributors read like a roll call of Hugo and Nebula Award winners.

Lee Harding asked each author to write a story that would examine the impact of the future on the individual, and the result is a refreshing thread of humanism which runs throughout. Why ROOMS OF PARADISE? "In my father's house are many mansions," and the extraordinary visionary qualities of these stories reveal a rich and varied approach to "paradise."

"Something went wrong with my re-birth," complains the protagonist in Ian Watson's title story. In Brian Aldiss' **Indifference** a missionary on an alien planet confronts his god—with awesome consequences. In **Collaborating** Michael Bishop explores the problems of cohabitation when two personalities have need of the same body. **The Savage Mouth** by Japanese author Sakyō-Komatsu, together with Kevin McKay's audaciously Australian **Pie Row Joe,** emphasizes the unique international flavor of the book.

It is rare nowadays to find new themes in science fiction, but both R.A. Lafferty's **Bequest of Wings** and Damien Broderick's **A Passage in Earth** contain elements of shock, while Gene Wolfe's subtle story juggles with the burgeoning nineteenth century "sciences" of mesmerism and phrenology in a delightfully Dickensian setting.

These are twelve stories notable for their humanity, their compassion, and their freshness. Lee Harding, already Australia's best known science fiction writer and anthologist, will find an eager international audience for this volume.



ROOMS OF PARADISE is Lee Harding's first original science fiction anthology—comprised of stories commissioned by the editor and not previously published—but his previous works establish him firmly as Australia's top science fiction writer. He has two other science fiction anthologies to his credit, BEYOND TOMORROW and THE ALTERED I, published in 1975 and 1977, respectively. In addition he is the author of four novels, the most recent of which, DISPLACED PERSON, won the 1978 Alan Marshall Award and is being published this year in the United States.

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LEE HARDING

Foreword by

ROGER ZELAZNY

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ROGER ZELAZNY

# Foreword

This is one of the finest science fiction collections I have seen in a long while. Every story in it has something to recommend it, in terms of idea, situation, character, plot, setting, or some combination thereof. In addition, the quality of the writing itself is uniformly high. I could simply stop right here with a '. . . therefore my recommendation of this book is both enthusiastic and unqualified' and be delivering nothing less than the truth.

In a place such as this, however, a prospective reader may ask for more than the enthusiasm of a partisan. All right. There are other points of interest along the Scenic Drive.

Some years ago, when Toffler's breathless account of the fracturing of our respective psyches by the sonic booms of Scientific Progress was enjoying great currency among the Concerned, I recall reading through it and mumbling, 'No, no; it's not like that.' Thomas Kuhn's less widely read but more thoughtful *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* examined the phenomenon which renders much of Toffler's thesis nonsense. With each major turnover in the development of a science—with the creation of each new paradigm—a great quantity of early material is purely and simply junked. It is correct in the old context but it no longer matters, like Ptolemaic epicycles. That terrible pace threatening us all with terminal jitters looks worse on paper than anywhere else, because it is only a compilation of facts. In our heads, we dwell in a world of co-ordinating ideas, not fissioning facts—and it is there that science fiction has its home.

Each science fiction story is a universe of its own. The author establishes his own ground rules governing the behaviour of people and things, as close to or as far removed from current consensus reality as he chooses, and plays out his game within these terms. For me, a large part of the enjoyment of the story is a result of the contemplation of the background premise.

If you think that I am going to say that each story in this book has interesting and aesthetically satisfying ground rules, you are correct. That is Scenic View No. 1, if anyone is counting.

The next twelve Views are contained in the dozen universes themselves—

*Indifference:* Brian Aldiss is a master of that species of philosophical speculation C. S. Lewis did so well. He sets his stage carefully, times entrances and exits to perfection and remains out of sight while his characters work their ways to the necessary revelation.

Kevin McKay's *Pie Row Joe*, in the easy to read but difficult to produce form of the monologue, has the added virtue—and challenge—of being a well-controlled dialect-piece, ironic (and pie-ronic) to the end.

Cherry Wilder's *The Falldown of Man* is one of the most difficult sorts of story to do well—a tale told from an alien viewpoint—moving in such a fashion as to reveal something of the narrator's character and society while delivering the story-line in excellent condition. A *tour de force*.

Sakyō Komatsu's *The Savage Mouth* is a bizarre fable, almost a parable, with a striking central image that will return in recollection for a long while.

*Re-deem the Time*, by David Lake, contains one of the few time travel ironies I had never before come across.

Gene Wolfe's *Our Neighbour by David Copperfield* involves one of those peculiar situations he manages so well. What more can I say? A Gene Wolfe story is always a special pleasure.

Ian Watson's *The Rooms of Paradise*, which provides a heading for this entire assemblage, is a movable metaphor for many things and a specimen of writing which makes me wonder whether the author might not have made an equally respected name for himself as a poet.

Philippa C. Maddern's *Ignorant of Magic* is as striking for its

images as its rendering of the play of forces on the characters' (and readers') minds. My only regret is that it was not longer.

*Collaborating:* Michael Bishop came upon the science fiction scene a few years ago, made his mark in a high place and continues to surpass it as time goes on. His characters are always interesting, his situations novel, the quality of his writing invariably excellent. Generalities, to be sure, but good ones when they are true—as would be difficult not to notice with this story.

Damien Broderick's *A Passage in Earth*, in addition to possessing an intriguing and engaging narrator, is one of those stories where things implied are as important as things stated, and the tone of the piece is such as to show that the author actually has a larger vision containing the events he has chosen to record here. To this extent, this story reminds me of some of the work of the late Cordwainer Smith, and I can only selfishly hope that he returns to this same universe, many times, to fetch back more pieces of that vision.

R. A. Lafferty's *Bequest of Wings* . . . No matter what I say about a R. A. Lafferty story I will somehow be wrong, because he puts so much into one. So I'll back off and play it safe to the extent of observing that his stories are always entertaining, provoking and impossible to anticipate. No exception here, either.

George Turner's *In a Petri Dish Upstairs* is a good, solid piece of action and extrapolation (there, I used that word), which provides a perfect terminal Scenic Point for a journey through such varied lands as these. He has studied, thought and written well. Love and hate, life and death, various conflicts within a possible future society . . . They are all here.

As to the company you are keeping, six of the twelve authors represented are Australians, three are US writers, two are British and one is Japanese. Science fiction has enjoyed world-wide currency for some years, and it is a mark of enlarged understanding and a sign of the continuing health of the *genre* when a first-rate collection can be composed of material from such geographically diverse sources. It is almost needless to say that the area is enriched thereby, save that in so saying we can also boast of our international constituency with the accompanying satisfaction of knowing that the impact of the future on the individual is not a matter of parochial concern.

So, if you have been sitting about waiting for a future shock

which somehow seems overdue, I suggest instead a visit to the paradigm factory in the head with a copy of this book in hand and immediate departure upon a journey along the points enumerated. You should meet someone very like yourself somewhere along the way.

ROGER ZELAZNY

*July 1978*

# CONTENTS

*FOR BRIAN,*
*IN CELEBRATION*

BRIAN ALDISS

# Indifference

The nearest civilised planet lay eighty of God's lightyears away as the church swung into orbit about Bormidoor.

The church computed itself a landing site and commenced descent. The great mesh of particles called space withdrew, rushed back like a tide before the banks of atmosphere. Inside the church, time started again, and the ache of human consciousness.

Every time a church moved through space, something was changed, to the farthest reaches of the web.

Night reigned. Bormidoor had no moon. Hurrying cloud permitted an occasional glimpse of stars. In this hemisphere there were stars to be seen; in the other, none or almost none. The church stood on a stretch of low-lying coast with its spire pointing to heaven. From its cabin a midnight ocean could be glimpsed, dark, with only an occasional glimmer betraying its restless motion. Ocean was Interfacial. The humans looked out at it occasionally as they went through their exercises and prayers, restoring themselves to life in preparation for the labours ahead.

When the pallor of dawn arrived, the humans left the church and stepped out upon unfamiliar soil. They bowed in unison towards the quarter of sky in which Creation had begun, repeating gestures of an age-old ritual.

There were three humans, the Erlauries, accompanied by a large doglike animal, a berund, which lumbered friskily about their

heels. In the throat of a great cloud piled above the ocean lay a chill spring of light. It lit their three faces. Their faces were identical. They were neuclones, sent to Bormidoor as missionaries for the dissemination of Theomanity.

During that first day, they did no work. They walked about the land and the dunes. They ventured down upon the beach to stand and regard the great sea that pounded the sand. They kept their cloaks from its spray. Only the berund ventured close enough to get splashed. Very few were the words they exchanged.

On the second morning, after their rituals were completed, they made a start upon the labours that they knew might take years. The timing of their arrival on Bormidoor had been carefully planned by savants of the Theomane Church back on Earth—savants who, under the laws of relativity, were in their graves by now. Although they had ample time for the completion of their task, that time was not infinite. Bormidoor was now past the perihelion of its long elliptical orbit about the sun, Dooriz; its northern hemisphere was enjoying full-blown summer. Ahead lay the long ripe decay of autumn and then a thousand Earth-years of winter as the planet laboured round its distant point of apogee. Before that infinite winter closed in, the Theoman centre would be finished and functioning, the neuclones would have gone away.

The summer days were coolish and wet. Bormidoor was a primitive planet, with little vegetation and no animal life; it was a world hostile to intelligence. It abounded in insects, a few species of which were as big as sea birds. They flew rejoicing while the bright years lasted.

Undeterred by climate, uncaring about the insects, the three humans went about their programme, consulting the church computer at every step. First they built about the church a large barnlike building of light monomolecular metals, so that the spire of the former rose up from the central point. Inside this barn they commenced to assemble machines.

When they had assembled and launched a stratokite, their power source was assured. The great foil wings of the kite rode 16 kilometres above them, beaming down all the energy they required for the present.

They assembled a robot factroid in the barn. The factroid built a land vehicle and an air vehicle. The chief neuclone rode off in the

land vehicle, the second took off in the air vehicle. The third stayed in the barn with the berund. The berund galumphed in small circles, catching insects.

Both of the new vehicles mapped the territory surrounding the landing site. Geological samples linked with aerial photographs gave a comprehensive picture of the terrain. Veins of metallic ores lay close to the surface only eleven kilometres from the site.

Mining equipment was driven to the site. Two of the neuclones worked there, day in, day out, keeping in touch with the church by radio. It was a hard, primitive way of obtaining metals; but they were on the very frontiers of the Church.

One bright morning the two miners left their foil hut to offer up their daily ritual. They had chosen a site by a river. The river followed a meandering course through a shallow sandy valley. A couple of bends away down-river a wooden boat with a sail was approaching. The cries of the men aboard told the clones that they had been seen. The two crouched by their machines, watching anxiously; they had no defences.

Before the boat was moored, armed men jumped ashore and marched up the bank.

The Erlauries were born not on Earth, but on Vladimir. Vladimir was one of the artificial zodiacal planets which specialised in the creation of cloned neuter families. Only the memory banks of the Church could tell how many identical members of the Erlaurie family there were.

At the age of five the Erlauries were designated to tasks according to their abilities. Even mass-produced objects vary from one another. The scrupulous psychic profiles taken of every neuclone enabled them to be delegated to life-work which fitted and enhanced their capacities.

After a period of field-work on a remote planet, the least efficient Erlauries were despatched to Reconstitution Centres, and the rest formed into groups of three. From now on, for the remainder of their lives, they would work as three-man teams. The life-span of the Erlauries had been determined before birth; since they were destined for missionary work out in the galaxy, most of their existence would be passed in space flight. They were accordingly given a middle-longevity, *gamma* on the Belov scale.

The team chosen for Bormidoor were Aprav, Nupor, and Ovits

Erlaurie. They were sent from Vladimir to Earth, where they spent a year in the Religious Academy of Korovsk on the Kola Peninsula. The Academy was a great stone building of many levels. Aprav, Nupor and Ovits were clad in rich monastic garb. For the first time in their lives, they wore fur-lined boots, ate non-synthetic food, listened to live music, and associated with the ancient non-cloned type of human being. They were grounded intensively in the religious sciences, Cosnizance, which formed the basis of the beliefs of the universal Theomane Church. Then they were despatched to the uninhabited planet of Bormidoor, on the rim of the known universe.

The leader of the marauders from the boat was a gaunt, hard man who stood a full head taller than his men. His face was composed of a few harsh planes. It was hairless. The pupils of his eyes were of such a light blue-grey that they appeared almost white. His manner, while quiet, suggested that he was accustomed to immediate obedience.

'Tie them up,' he ordered.

Aprav and Nupor offered no resistance. They were bound and secured to the supports of the shelter they had constructed for the mine.

The leader and his henchmen walked round the site before returning to his captives.

'Any more of you people here?'

'No!' As always, Aprav spoke for the Erlauries.

'Where's your base?'

'On the coast.'

The leader looked at his henchmen. 'As I said.' Turning back to Aprav, he said, 'We saw your ship come down from space. It's taken us a week of days to get here. Who are you and where are you from?'

While Aprav answered these questions simply, without fear or concealment, Nupor bowed his head. The leader's men, ten in number, prowled about the camp, opening crates, spilling contents from boxes.

'Enough.' The leader interrupted Aprav. 'No more of your damned religion. What do you think we're doing, living on this desert of a planet, if not to escape from Theomanity? But we'll not hurt you and it's certain you can't hurt us. All we want's some of

your equipment and maybe a few things else. Keep quiet and you'll come to no harm. We're not murderers, like your masters.'

All this, and the looting that followed, Nupor heard with his ears and watched with his eyes furtively scanning under lowered brows. Fear was in his heart, but the fear was banished as he saw a further person approaching from the direction of the boat.

It was a woman.

Nupor saw her through the fuzz of his eyebrows, watched her arrival between moving men, between coarse shrubs, behind posts and machinery.

Like the leader, she was tall. Something of the bleakness of his face was echoed in hers. Her skin was pale, her hair was long and dark, straggling about the lines of her neck. Her eyes were grey. Her lips were of a red Nupor had once glimpsed in the wing of a winter bird. She wore a tight-fitting blouse with a jerkin over it which revealed the outline of her breasts. Her skirt reached to mid-calf. On her feet were black boots.

Her expression was neutral, mysterious.

Nupor had never seen a woman before, except in pictures. He knew what she was, knew instinctively that she was non-cloned and belonged to the leader.

She came among the men, who gave way to her, and looked about.

'Earth clones?' she said interrogatively to the leader, and under his brows Nupor watched her lips move, glimpsed her teeth.

'Aye, so-called missionaries. Neuters, straight from the hive.'

'It's still buzzing, then.' She turned on the two bound humans a look of contempt and—perhaps pity, perhaps fear. Nupor caught it, and she caught his glance. Unable to face her eyes, he looked hastily at the ground.

She and the leader stood where they were, issuing the occasional instruction while the others worked. It took them an hour to amass what they wanted. They seized half of the food supplies, some tools, and the radio. These they loaded into the land vehicle. One of the men practised driving the vehicle. He could not grasp the simple principle of the drive; Aprav was untied to demonstrate it to him.

The thieves were ready to leave. One or two staggered towards the boat with their loot.

'Keep to this part of the world and we may not molest you

again,' said the leader, directing his white stare at them. As Aprav and Nupor bowed their heads, he turned, touched the woman's elbow, and they walked away, following the loaded vehicle.

That day and the next, Dooriz shone, the sky was free of cloud. Aprav decided that they must return on foot to the church to reorganise their limited resources before mining was resumed. Nupor could only agree.

The distance to the coast seemed almost impassable. For much of the way, the ground was marshy and treacherous. Large insects lived in the reeds which grew everywhere. Step by step, the Erlauries were assailed by giant flying things. They were forced to follow higher ground and, by the evening of the second day, they were lost.

They made camp for the night as best they could. The water in pools nearby was brackish, but they boiled and drank it. Nupor caught some hopping insects and prepared to grill them over a fire.

'We may die of eating those things,' said Aprav. 'Better to starve a little. Tomorrow we will be back at the church.'

'I see no guarantee of that,' replied Nupor. 'I will eat them if you will not. I feel weak and need nourishment.'

'You were always weak,' said Aprav.

'That's true. I'm sorry about it.'

'No reason to poison yourself,' said Aprav. He waited a moment to see if Nupor threw away the grilling insects. When Nupor merely crouched over the fire, Aprav rose and kicked the grill into the bushes.

Nupor made no protest. Secretly, he was glad of Aprav's action. The smell of the insects cooking nauseated him and, after Aprav's warning, he was scared to eat them in case they did prove poisonous.

'Let's pray, Nupor. The consciousness of God is all about us and we must raise it to a higher level to survive.'

Next dawn, they woke to find the world enveloped in fine mist. They rose. Aprav led, Nupor followed. They waded through a shallow pool, climbed two dunes, and there was the spire of their church, its solitude reinforced by the hollow pounding of the sea.

The camp was in a great muddle. The barn still stood about the church, but goods and equipment had been strewn everywhere. Of Ovits Erlaurie and the berund there was no sign.

Tracks running over the dunes indicated clearly what had

happened. The marauding gang—perhaps just the leader and his lady—had driven here in the stolen land vehicle and taken as much equipment as they could carry back to their boat.

Nupor stood in a kind of daze while Aprav marched about, exclaiming.

After the initial period of dismay, they began working in an orderly fashion as they had been trained to do. To be indifferent to circumstance was one of the articles of their creed. Circumstances were no more than the noise of cosmic consciousness.

By the time they had restored order and checked to see what was missing—mainly food and grain and seed of various kinds—they were exhausted. Only then did Aprav allow them to enter the church, remove their wet garments, and relax with a nourishing broth.

Whilst they were eating, Ovits and the berund appeared.

Ovits had a neat small face with the small nose and narrow mouth that characterised all the Erlauries. He was pale and wet; his dishevelled hair dripped down his cheeks. The great berund was also sodden. It came to Nupor and rested its chin on his lap, panting.

'Where were you?' asked Aprav, looking sternly at his fellow neuclone.

'Aprav, I was so frightened. I saw our vehicle approaching. Two strangers were in it, and one a female. In that moment, I believed you and Nupor must have been killed. Why did the savants of Cosnizance not warn us there were enemies on this globe? Of course I ran away, and Plovol came with me. We hid in the dunes. Will they come back?'

Aprav continued to sup his broth. Ovits and Nupor looked at him anxiously, awaiting his answer.

'Of course they will be back,' he said. 'They need machines for their ungodly purposes as we need them for our godly ones. They will return for the kite and the factroid, mark my words. We must fortify this place.'

In the period that followed, the three Erlauries worked all waking hours, indifferent to the elements.

They drew up a list of priorities. The original plan had been first to secure supplies of minerals and oil. Now their primary aim was to defend the perimeter.

After some argument, they agreed not to cannibalise their air

vehicle. They used it every day to fly over the camp and observe nearby territory, so that they would never be taken unawares again. By removing metal panels from the church, they collected material enough for a digger; the factroid had a programme for a digger, and so a digger was built.

Prolonged study of their home-made photographic map convinced them that they could best defend an area of some ten hectares, shaped like a crescent with its straight side bounded by the sea. The curve of the perimeter followed dunes and a river bank to the west and east, and a marshy pool to the south.

Metal stakes were driven into the pool, in a line running roughly parallel with the shoreline. The river was then made to flood into the pool until a lake was formed too deep to ford. The stakes just below the lake's surface made an obstacle which would wreck any boat.

With the aid of the digger, further excavations improved the height of the river bank. The dunes posed more of a defensive problem. Wood was lacking. The computer advised the planting of trees. From their pillaged horticultural store, the Erlauries retrieved seeds of a fast-maturing strain of Corsican pine. The seeds were planted along the headland, protected by netting and brush, and mediated by prayer.

As a stop-gap measure, the dunes were rigged with electrified wire. It was the only defensive weapon the church possessed.

Meanwhile, the agricultural programme went ahead. This was particularly urgent because their food supplies had been so depleted. Caprine genetic material was inserted into the wombcubator, and miniature goats were soon frisking about the stockade, consuming the harsh grasses of Bormidoor. Cereals and vegetables were planted. When the first paired leaves appeared green in rows above the soil the goats broke in and ate them all. More were planted.

Work continued in rain and fine. Between the hard physical world and the subatomic world of God's consciousness stood the human brain, God's lens. The three human brains occupied themselves with labour, and with prayer at dawn and dusk; Nupor thought of the woman with dark hair and red lips, but said nothing.

Perhaps prayer had its effect. Months passed. No intruders

appeared. The daily reconnaissance aloft revealed only the chequered brecklands of the planet.

Still their real task, the ordained command to build a self-controlled Theoman centre, could not be embarked on.

'We have to return to the mining camp,' said Aprav. 'Without sufficient metals, we cannot commence work on the centre.'

'We are in danger at the camp. Here, we are reasonably safe,' said Nupor. He heard the weakness in his own voice.

'Safety is not the first factor of importance. We must go back. Nupor, you and I will go as before. Ovits, you stay here with Plovol. Every morning, you will fly over us and see that we're safe.'

'Weapons. That's what we need,' Ovits said. 'Why were there no weapons in our supplies?'

'Shame,' said Nupor. 'Our task is the promotion of consciousness, not its extinction.' To make his clone-brother feel bad made him feel better.

Ovits cast his gaze to the dusty ground and did not reply.

When Aprav and Nupor returned to the mine, a season of bad weather set in. Their machines became bogged down and they could do nothing but wait in their flimsy shelter, sitting out the storms, watching the rain assail the distant river. To eke out their rations they caught the large jumping insects, which made a pleasant supplement to the diet when grilled. Nothing more was said about being poisoned.

When the weather improved, the neuclones returned to work.

They had been there for many days, and accumulated great piles of ores, when the air vehicle came over one morning, buzzed them, and rolled its wings three times. Aprav and Nupor climbed to the eminence above the mine. Far down the meandering river, a sail was visible, yellow against yellow.

'Here we have a weapon,' said Nupor. 'Our laser drills can be set up on the breast of this rise. We can direct them at anyone who comes and kill them.'

Aprav stared at him without expression.

'Now you are arguing for extinguishing consciousness.'

'If these marauders steal our mining equipment, we cannot establish a permanent Theoman consciousness. Isn't that true,

Aprav? Isn't Theoman consciousness of a higher order than the consciousness of this outlaw gang?'

Aprav said nothing, staring ahead for such a long while that Nupor grew restless; yet he dared not ask his question again. Finally, Aprav said, 'Would you have the stomach to turn our lasers on a non-cloned human?'

It was Nupor's turn to fall silent. He thought of the woman with the dark hair and lips of the red of a bird's underwing. 'You could do that,' he said at last.

And what was in Aprav's answering silence? he asked himself. Resentment, or just a brutish durance?

The boat appeared to make little progress. They stared at it until their eyesight blurred.

By evening, the boat was no nearer. They tried to keep watch turn and turn about during the night. Stars wheeled overhead and their eyelids drooped. Nupor fell asleep during the drab hours when it was his spell of watch.

He woke with Aprav's boot in his ribs. As he sat up, he saw that a chilly dawn was breaking. He clutched his pained side, putting on a look of injury.

'We could have been killed through your laziness.'

'You despise me, Aprav, don't you?'

'Get up. Time for prayer.' Aprav turned away.

The boat was nearer.

They set the machines to work and then lay watching the vessel for hours as it made its tardy approach. At last they decided that there was only one human on board, and that he must be sick. The air vehicle flew over, dipped its wings, and returned to the church. They stood up and went cautiously down to the river, Aprav leading.

The young man in the boat was called Tom. He was not so much sick as weak, having pulled through the worst of his illness. Two companions who had set out with him had both died of the plague which afflicted their settlement.

Tom told Aprav and Nupor that he had been sent by the leader to secure their assistance. After the raid on the church, when the party of marauders had returned to their settlement, disease had broken out. There were two dramatic deaths as they stepped off the boat. Soon, half the population had been struck down with

terrible fevers and ulcers all over their bodies. Many had died. The scourge was seen as a visitation, because of the robbing of the church.

The settlers sent Tom and two others to beg the neuclones to come with modern medicines and help cure the sick. Their goods would then be returned, they would be troubled no more. The name of the settlement was New Union, and the leader feared that many more deaths would cause it to disintegrate.

'How many people in New Union?' asked Nupor.

'Until the outbreak of this pestilence, we were two hundred and fifteen men, women and children.'

Nupor marvelled to himself. Women . . . all with black hair and red lips? Children? He had never seen a natural-born child. The idea was obscene and exciting.

They took Tom to the mine and fed him whilst discussing what should be done. Aprav brushed away Nupor's faltering suggestion that he should go to New Union.

'*You* must go with medicines, while Ovits and I work here,' said Aprav. 'We have enough ore to start smelting. We'll continue with the programme while you are away.'

'I can't go alone. Suppose it is a trap?'

'Don't be foolish, Nupor. You can tell that it is no trap by the condition of this man, Tom. It would give you the chance to see that woman again.'

Aprav's words made Nupor blush deep crimson, so deep that his cheeks smarted an hour afterwards. He had no idea that Aprav, whom he regarded as insensitive, had observed him so searchingly. To cover his confusion, he said, 'It is not part of our programme that we go on such a mission.'

Contemptuously, Aprav kept silence. To recover their essential equipment, particularly the land vehicle, and possibly to convert the population of the settlement to the Theomane Church, were praiseworthy goals, well within the terms of their objectives. The characteristically uneasy dumbness that lived between them was there again, as real as a wall. It was as if whoever spoke next, against the stiff breeze of silence, had lost a battle of wills.

'You must go, Aprav,' said Nupor. 'Not I.'

Aprav stood up. 'I'll go.'

Nupor blushed again, this time with regret that he had passed over such an opportunity. Children, women, lips as red as a bird's underwing . . .

Sometimes the weather was better, sometimes worse. Always, in the background, Ovits and Nupor were aware that the fluctuations in temperature had to be set against a slow decline. Bormidoor's orbit was taking it far away into the darkness; the summer would endure yet awhile, but, with increasing rapidity, winter approached. For the lifetimes of many men, Dooriz would be but a distant star. All would die. The atmosphere of the planet would fall as snow upon the land. Only the Theoman centre they were installing would survive, plugged into the warming mantle of the world.

Metal poured blazing from the furnace, was cooled, shaped according to the blueprint. Delicate parts were turned upon lathes, burnished. All was laborious labour. This was the way the Church liked things done. Not too much reliance on machines. Labour intensive: more brains: more brains, greater God. Humans were born only to labour and to worship. Nothing was easy. Men must be as hard as the universe to which they gave meaning. Endurance was the one great principle. God was good and he endured.

When things went wrong, it was in order to challenge the capacity for endurance.

The day before Ovits and Nupor were to harvest their first cereal crop, a great storm arose. They feared the church was about to blow over. The structure rocked when the gusts of wind were at their height, tearing in across a waste of ocean. Instead, the winds roused great tides which broke through the dunes. Most of the fortified area was inundated. The crop was washed away. Many of the goats were drowned, while others escaped and were lost. The young Corsican pines were mostly washed away.

When the storm was over, Nupor walked on the beach alone and looked at the turbulent grey sea. It cared not what it had done. It was Interfacial. For a moment he glimpsed God there, and flinched.

Ovits and Nupor set to work immediately to clear up the damage. They replanted, they caught and tethered some of the goats that survived. But the salt water spoiled the poor soil for many a long month, so that they had to break new ground for agriculture beyond their fortifications. They prayed and worked. The weather remained indifferent. Aprav did not return.

The boy Tom had proved too frail to return to New Union in

the boat. Aprav had sailed up the river to the settlement alone. When Tom was stronger, the two Erlauries tried to persuade him to help with the work. He had no talent for it. Instead, he sat all day by the river, angling, and brought them good fat fish for supper.

After prayers each night, before they slept, Nupor and Ovits educated Tom in theological history, hoping eventually to convert the lad to Theomanity.

'The difference between man and the animals preceding him was that man had a large brain. That brain told human beings that they had a purpose. What the purpose was had to be discovered. That's clear enough, isn't it?' Nupor said.

'I suppose so,' said Tom. He showed no interest, but apathy in most things was one of his notable talents.

'Two of the leading characteristics of the brain should have given humanity a clue as to the nature of the purpose. A profound religious sense marked his thought from the start. In all mankind's long history, rationalism and atheism have been aberrations.

'Mankind's earliest cave paintings show him making religion to assist the hunt. It also shows him using weapons. That was the start of science. A profound scientific sense also marks mankind's thought—although it has often been at war with the religious promptings. Those two characteristics had to be at odds, or there would have been no deep questioning. Mankind was going through its difficult childhood phase. You understand?'

'Oh yes.'

'By the time of mankind's first limited flights into space, it was generally understood that hydrogen was the basic building block of the universe. Then the idea was disseminated that consciousness might be even more basic to the universe than hydrogen. It seemed a mystical idea at first, and we don't know who were its first advocates—the astronauts themselves, possibly. They had been given the chance to see further than other men.'

'I'm tired, Nupor.' Tom yawned.

'Very well, Tom, let's talk more tomorrow evening.'

The lad's concentration span was short, but Nupor persevered. He talked again about the age of early space flight. He explained that, just as scientific and religious thought represented two different strands of approach to a spiritual life, so there were also two major approaches to politico-economic life, the capitalist and

communist ideologies whose rivalries pushed space flight into reality.

The capitalist system was old and easy-going. In the end it was overcome by the more stringent communist system in a series of wars, some openly, some almost secretly waged.

These wars were really attempts to establish the role of the individual with regard to the state. At the same time, research was continued into the nature of the human brain. Brilliant minds, both communist and capitalist, came to perceive that the brain had a dual function. 'The dual nature of man' was an old cliché. The dual nature of the brain was a striking new fact. It was a receiver of information, and hence a scientific instrument; it was also a religious instrument. The brain acts as an extremely complex amplifier of the subatomic, for only at subatomic levels can the mechanisms of intelligence and consciousness take place. Above the subatomic lies the great deterministic universe, with no place for consciousness. Below the subatomic lies the all-embracing cosmic consciousness we perceive as God. Throughout the universe, only the human brain—and to a much lesser extent animal brains—serves as a transmitter-receiver between the deterministic macrocosm and the all-pervasive world of God.

Such concepts were totally beyond Tom's comprehension. Although he knew very little, having lived all his eighteen years in the settlement on Bormidoor, he was far from unintelligent. But there was a sort of stubbornness in his character—in his very mind, it seemed—that prevented him from moving from premise to premise. Nupor swallowed his anger and continued the lessons, night after night.

This grandiose concept of the nature of the human brain, and hence of humanity and its role in the cosmos, was at first regarded with alarm. Many labelled it anthropocentric. But something happened which lent credence to the idea.

As space flight developed, and mankind reached towards planets beyond his own stellar system, no other intelligent beings were found. Man was the unique interpreter of God to the universe.

At this period, 'Man' meant 'Soviet mankind'. The communist system had triumphed, taking over the older capitalist system as that system crumbled under its own defects. The Earth entered into a long bleak period of history.

Yet the act of digesting the more liberal system inevitably

liberalised communism. The hidden mysticism of it burst forth. This new flowering was assisted by a perception of mankind's special purpose. The less doctrinaire of the world's new rulers began to understand that there was no solution to that vexed question of the role of the individual versus the state; but each individual contained God, and god-individuals could not be in conflict with a holy state.

'You understand all that, Tom? Science and religion became one, and politics became irrelevant for the first time in ages. The human brain was seen as the Interface between the physical world and the subatomic world of eternal consciousness, i.e. God. So the new universal religion, to which Ovits and I belong, Theomanity, was born.'

Tom nodded sleepily. 'Religion beat science in the end, right?'

'No, no. It was only through science that a true religion was achieved. Theomanity is both religion and science.' Nupor looked pained. Not all human brains were capable of sustaining consciousness. Or even conversation.

Despite continuous physical work, Nupor began to suffer from sleeplessness. Despair would drive him out of his bunk in the middle of the night. He would go to stare at the remorseless ocean, staring as unintelligible lights flashed far out in the deeps—phosphorescence or something trying to be born.

'Always, always I yearn for something I know not. Where are you, God, if you are within me? Why don't I feel you?'

He looked across the breakers at the great universe. He was blind, unable to sense God.

He felt a rage at Aprav, and at Aprav's absence. The fellow had been away far too long. If he had died in the New Union settlement, then damn him. If he had not died, then double-damn him, for he was neglecting his duties. He might be with the leader. Every day, Aprav's undeserving eyes might rest upon that woman with the lips of the red of the bird's wing. Why, he might even speak with her, perchance touch her sleeve. If she was still alive . . .

Ovits was no company. A dull empty clone, thought Nupor, self-punitively. Ovits did not work hard enough, Ovits appeared so thoroughly content with his lot. He accepted whatever befell without protest. The worst of it was, Tom obviously enjoyed Ovits' company, and shunned Nupor's.

Huh. Ovits. Ovits? Ovits. Ovits, one more flavourless computer bestowed name. Ovits . . .

One morning after prayers, after a worse bout of insomnia than ever, Nupor took Ovits aside. He spoke to him above the roar of the machines.

'Soon we shall start drilling the shaft and the chamber for the centre. I do not think that this is a suitable place for our shaft.'

'What do you mean?' Ovits asked the question without inflection.

Nupor indicated the muddle of their site, the factroid, the goats, the straggling crop of wheat, the machines which shaped metal. 'All this. I don't think that this is a suitable place at which to drill. We must establish the centre elsewhere.'

'It's where we chose.'

'It's where Aprav chose. Aprav made a mistake. It's more important to find a stable site than to be near water.'

'He isn't here to ask.'

'I know that. We must make our own decisions. Look, as winter descends on this planet, there are going to be storms such as you've never seen before. The whole climate of Bormidoor is going to change. It's going to get dark forever, and this place here on the coast is going to flood. If the centre was built here, it could be washed away in fifty years. Don't you find that just a bit depressing, Ovits?'

Ovits shrugged.

'It's nature, isn't it?'

'You mean, you're indifferent.'

Ovits shrugged again, turning to stare blankly across the area. 'We'll be gone by then.'

'Yes, and the Theoman centre will be gone too—washed away, all that we came here to achieve, washed away. Nothing will stand in this sandy soil.'

'What should we do?'

He trembled inwardly before he dared to bring out the words. 'We change the site. We move to higher ground and start again.'

It took a week of days before Ovits could agree to the plan. He said he would fly to the settlement and see what had happened to Aprav, but their programme did not allow for such excursions; nor did they know precisely where New Union was. In the end, he yielded to Nupor's will, submitting neither willingly nor

grudgingly to the prospect of months of extra work ahead.

Before they could lift the church, they had to dismantle the barn. They began one morning after prayers. Ovits was working on the roof of the building when he slipped. He clutched at the eaves and missed. Next moment, he was falling. He landed almost at Nupor's feet. Nupor seized him up, lifted the broken body, crying Ovits' name.

Ovits opened his eyes. He looked dreamily at Nupor and smiled, a pure smile free of anger or reproach, a smile of simple friendship for his clone-brother. Then he died.

The new camp was established above the mine, on an eminence which gave fine views of the river and the surrounding territory. This site would remain intact even when the entire landscape was blotted out by darkness and its attendant ice. The church lifted its spire to heaven. Nupor promised Tom everything he wanted, even an eventual passage back to Earth, even a cessation of lectures, if he would help work with the machines. Tom agreed with sulky grace, saying he had no alternative.

Their labours went slowly ahead once more. Nupor planted anew, set a simple machine to work at the job of protecting crops. He had a powerbike built in the factroid, on which he could run easily back and forth to the old site by the dunes. He brought the goats inland to a field which he surrounded by a metal fence. After a while, he started machines drilling down to the mantle, preparing the way for the centre.

The day came when he called Plovol into the church. The great animal bounded to his side. It had a thick white coat. There was something of the bear in it, something of the dog. It was intelligent and affectionate. On friendless Bormidoor, Plovol had been a good friend. With sorrow, Nupor slipped the hypodermic into its muscle. Plovol fell at his feet, unconscious. Its living body would be used to nurture the DNA from human brain cells in the freeze bank. It would remain on Bormidoor after the Erlauries had gone, after Dooriz had shrunk to a mere fistful of light.

'Why?' asked Tom.

'We leave a gigantic human brain here,' Nupor said. 'A new Interface between the physical universe and God. The time will come when every planet will be linked with God.'

'Are there that many berunds in the world?' asked Tom in astonishment.

The drilling was dangerous and took weeks. They worked slowly down to the desired temperature. If the brain was to remain in action over thousands of years—and that objective was the sole point of their labours on Bormidoor—then permanent supplies of heat were needed. It was not the Devil but God who enjoyed fire.

The wet weeks and the months passed.

When not tending the machines, Nupor and the lad established their food cycle. The goat meat was good; so were the first crops of potatoes and beans, and their first loaf of bread.

'There's no end to the work,' said Tom, munching at a crusty loaf.

'There's never been an end to man's work. Never. Never will be. This work is no worse than man has always endured. Only the cause has changed for the better.'

With pride, he thought that he had spoken almost like one of the theologians in the Religious Academy at Korovsk. He said reflectively to Tom, 'Even before space flight, there were men and women who dreamed that we would go out and fill the galaxy. But they could not imagine why we would do it. They thought of the great expansion in terms of conquest or trade, because that was what they understood in those days. Neither conquest nor trade is possible among the stars. But religion, Theomanity—among the stars is its true home. Only religion begets space flight.'

'Religion seems to beget work.'

Despite the death of Ovits, the new site was a success. Yet Nupor missed the ocean. When the shafts were drilled and lined, when the chamber above the shafts was drilled, when the room that was to house the brain was almost fabricated, Nupor decided that he would give himself the day off. The whim came on him; he fought with it but it won.

Ordering Tom to stay on guard, he made an excuse, mounted the powerbike, and headed for the coast. The sun shone. He reached the shore and ran along the sand.

An extraordinary feeling of freedom possessed him. The sensation that he longed for something he had never known remained with him, but today it was transformed into something positive; he perceived that the condition of wanting something was positive. He pulled off his stained clothes and—for the first time—flung himself into the waves that broke upon the beach.

The salty water came dancing up and embraced him.

He splashed and swam and laughed. Given the right company here how happy he could be. If God was inside him, God would also be happier.

Poor old God, imprisoned inside a neuclone.

The breakers finally exhausted him. Gasping, he ran up the beach to his clothes. Aprav stood there, fists on hips, watching.

Every day that the planet tunnelled its way towards apogee, the slow-burning antagonism between Aprav and Nupor grew. Tom was no buffer. Rather, in his dim way, he delighted at setting the two neuclones against each other.

Nupor assumed that Aprav hated him because he had changed the site; his surmise was reinforced by the way in which Aprav never referred to this deviation from the original plan. Aprav offered no explanation of why he had remained in New Union so long, beyond saying that he had tended the sick and converted some of them to the Theomane Church.

They worked side by side in an all-enveloping silence. The brain, nourished on what remained of Plovol, was installed in its special chamber.

'That's done,' said Tom, with evident relief. 'Do we all go home now?'

'Now comes the difficult bit. We teach it to think,' Aprav said.

As they worked with the computer to bring the brain to consciousness, severe storms began. The coast was inundated to a distance of several kilometres inland, but the new site was safe. Nupor said nothing.

Most of the work on the brain was done by the computer. Thought-instruction was too delicate a matter to be left to mere neuclone missionaries. The men stood by as, day by day, machines taught the brain to prattle. God's voice was as weak as an infant's. But this infant learned rapidly.

As Nupor trudged over to the church to fetch the next programme spool of material from the freeze, he happened to see Aprav climbing into the air vehicle. Shouting, he ran to the other man and clutched his arm.

'Where are you off to?'

'Another fifteen days and the programming of the brain is

complete. Then we have only to put it through its catechism and see that all is well. Soon we shall be off this world for good. I'm going to say goodbye to my friends in New Union.'

'What friends? What friends? How dare you have friends there? Don't go!'

Aprav waved his arm at the site. His voice was cold. 'This is all yours, not mine. You've made it yours. Get on with it.'

'I want to come with you, Aprav. We can leave the machines to work on their own. Please, Aprav.' He could not remember when he had said 'please' to Aprav before. He despised the note of pleading in his voice.

So evidently did Aprav. He gave Nupor a push in the chest; the unexpectedness of it as much as the force sent Nupor tumbling over backwards.

Aprav jumped into the pilot's seat. 'I'll remember you to the leader's lady when I see her.'

His system flooding with anger, Nupor shook his fist and yelled, 'Be back on time, Aprav, or I'm leaving the planet without you.'

'Oh, no, you're not! I've got the ignition rod!' Aprav's voice carried above the quiet throb of the engines. He waved cordially as the plane lifted. It circled above the site and flew inland.

After a while, Nupor picked himself up and brushed his clothes. He stood for a long while staring after the dwindling shape of the plane.

Tom came up behind him. 'Don't worry, Nupor. It's horrid in New Union. They're always starving in that dump.'

So unexpected was the word of comfort that Nupor turned and said bitterly, 'Yes, but at least they starve together, they live and breathe and speak and sleep together and touch each other.'

'Go there on your powerbike if you think that's so great. You've only got to follow the river. God'll help you, won't he? What's stopping you?'

Like the heat flowing from the ground, Nupor's anger erupted at last. Seizing up a wooden post from the ground, he swung it hard. It caught Tom across the ribs. Tom fell, staggered up, ran away howling.

Next morning, the powerbike was gone. Tom had taken it and his own advice.

The brain was immense and perfect. It spoke with Nupor.

'You have reason to feel pleased. You have fulfilled your task. Meritorious Nupor! Soon you will return to Earth and pass the rest of your days in comfort.'

'I don't honestly know how that will suit me. I don't want to seem ungrateful, but I may feel like a tool that has been laid aside.' He felt a bit of a fool, standing talking into a line of instruments and looking at the brain through a glass panel.

'We are all the tools of consciousness.'

At this, Nupor remained silent. He considered it a fatuous answer, while marvelling that he, Nupor, should hold such outrageous views.

'You wish to ask me something?'

'No. Yes.' He wanted to ask about the leader's lady in New Union, or, indeed, about ladies in general, but he did not know how to frame the question. Besides, what could a mere brain tell him? After a pause, he thought to camouflage his feelings and asked, 'I suppose you feel yourself in close contact with God, so perhaps you can tell me if he has existed eternally or only since the beginning of the universe. It was a question that used to bother us in early religious training.'

The brain said, 'The correct answer is neither that God has existed eternally, nor that he came into existence with the universe. God came into existence only when the human brain first began to interpret God into the physical world. He is still coming into being.'

'I see.' But it was surprising and needed some thinking over. 'What happens when he comes fully into being?'

'I can't see into the future.'

Leaving the brain, going back to sit by himself in the church, Nupor thought over what the brain had said. Not so much its meaning as the cool, indifferent way it had confessed its limitations. The thing was so big, it should be ashamed of not seeing into the future.

A period of wet weather followed. Nupor wondered what it would feel like to have friends and to know non-cloned women. He also wondered why God should remain so detestably mysterious if a part of him was in every human being. Eventually he was driven to ask the brain more questions.

'You say that God has not come fully into being yet, although the universe has existed for so many millions of millions of years. How could the universe come into existence without God? It makes no sense to talk about God unless we are speaking of the force that created our universe.'

The brain was silent. Presumably not thinking but simply existing. Then it spoke.

'You imagine you are in control of yourself. Yet the central "I" of your self has not yet formed properly. It needs time. Perhaps it will never form; then your life will be a failure. Why should the universe be a success? Did you ever think of that?'

Nupor swore. He was astonished to find he knew the words.

'You bloody brain, I've sweated my guts to make you. Answer my question.'

'I did answer your question, Nupor, Meritorious Nupor, but I will give you a second answer. Like your "I", God—the "I" of the universe—needs time. God is not properly formed yet or you would not have to labour on his behalf. Nor is the universe properly formed, contrary to what you believe. Both God and universe are process. When God and universe are finished, process is complete. Everything vanishes in a puff of smoke. Metaphorically speaking. I could cite the math.'

Nupor found himself swearing again. 'Stuff your math. What a rotten swindle it all sounds.'

His religious training kept him from doing anything about his anger.

He marched outside and let the rain beat over his head.

As he fed the goats, he thought that he would have to release them before he left the planet. They would live for many happy goat-generations before the cold killed them off. Perhaps they would multiply and provide food for the unfortunate heathens of New Union.

He wondered if those heathens would attempt to destroy the brain. But they were peaceful people after all, and too preoccupied with their own problems to bother with such a harmless—if irritating—object.

The goats nibbled timidly at his hand. They knew Nupor well, would come to nobody else. He wondered if they loved him. Nobody else did.

Except God.

'I love you,' he said to the goats, as they skipped about him in delight. It did not sound quite right. It was the first time in his life he had attempted the sentence aloud.

In the afternoon, he looked up and saw the air vehicle approaching. It progressed in swoops.

Nupor waved to it, and then felt ridiculous. He was meant to hate Aprav. If he hated him, how could he be glad to see him? Or was he glad to see him because Aprav brought the vital ignition rod?

It began to rain as the flier made a bad landing on the side of the hill. The raindrops were cold and hard against Nupor's cheek. He found himself running. Something was wrong.

But Aprav was smiling as he pushed up the transparent canopy.

'I've brought you back the ignition rod,' he said. His voice was husky. 'I've had a bit of trouble. They'll be coming—I should leave—'

'Aprav, let me help you! What's wrong?' He reached out a hand.

Aprav smiled a ghastly smile. 'Trouble over that lady—Nupor—'

He rose up and then fell forward. He slumped against the cockpit and did not move.

And Nupor thought. It's that disease again! He forced himself to touch Aprav, because the man had died—if he had died—with his name on his lips.

He hauled Aprav out of the vehicle. There was blood about Aprav's waist. He had received a stab-wound in the stomach. The way back must have been agony, but he had returned simply for Nupor's sake. The ignition rod was in his jacket pocket. Now Nupor could go home.

He went to let the goats loose.

There the story should end. Indeed, the important part of the story has ended. But I take the chance of finishing too the slender personal tale of Nupor Erlaurie.

I can no longer write of myself impersonally. I was never a real fulfilled person, but at least I still retain an 'I' before I go to join the universal consciousness, and I will end as I. I am Nupor. Meritorious Nupor . . .

I have my reward. I fulfilled my objectives. Now I live out my

remaining days in a Mission of Rest. There are heated corridors here. I sleep in a bunk in a dormitory with fifty other neuclones whose work is also done. I exercise in a courtyard protected by a dome from the black sky outside. I eat three meals of synthetic food a day, elbowed at table by my fellows.

We pray morning and evening, as we have done all our lives.

Outside is Mars. I was not lucky enough to finish up on Earth, but Mars' gravity is easier on an ailing heart. Days must be lighter on Bormidoor still than they are outside on Mars. A dull little planet, Mars, indifferent to life. Yet God is there, and still spreading throughout the universe, through mankind's dedication.

'He led a lonely life, mitigated by good behaviour and dedicated hard work . . .' That is what it says on the Church's citation which hangs by my bunk. I also have a picture there of a bird in flight. A terrestrial bird, of course—Mars supports no birds, nor even winged insects. A bird with a bright red dash under its wing.

No, inwardly the life of Nupor Erlaurie has not been the success it may appear from outside. I never managed to accept God in my heart. I see too clearly a three-fold Principle of Indifference operating on a personal level, on the level of the Church, and also on the universal cosmic level. Where the indifference started, I cannot say; I only know how it has spread. Perhaps it has spread from God.

If it has spread from God, then I have only one thought for those who come after me, and let them heed it. In recent centuries, mankind has become very close to God, or its concept of God. That's not enough. God is indifferent.

Remember this. If there is a God, then we must become morally better than He.

KEVIN McKAY

# Pie Row Joe

I don't wanta finish up in the cold, mate, so scuse me if I don't get up to shake 'ands.

I know what's wrong with you; I seen 'em bring you in with a busted leg, 'n I 'eard the doc and the nurses talkin' about you fallin' orf a tractor. I'm dyin' for a smoke—spose ya wouldn't 'ave one on ya? No—the big dame woulda taken em offa ya.

This ain't a bad 'ospital for a little country joint like this, 'cept for them two: the whoppin' big sheila like a white-painted paddle steamer, and the skinny dried-up little dame like a nole thistle ready to blow away, or burn up. Starchy 'n Husk, I call 'em. Got them names from the TV down the pub.

Bloody freezin' in 'ere. Ya'd think they'd 'ave a bit o' fire. You like fires? I do. Always 'ave done, ever since I can remember, even before I went to school. We 'ad wood fires in them days. My ole man usta cut 'is own firewood; usta put on big logs and stumps. I usta sit, watchin' 'em burn. They all made diffrunt pikshers like.

Big long logs, they go in grey colour, with long wavy cracks right down 'em. 'N at first, ya think they never gonna burn, cos the pale yella flame is breathin' over 'em, and nothin' 'appens. 'N then, grey smoke starts comin' out the cracks, and they start, real slow, sorta goin' black. 'N then little red glow worms starts creepin' over the surface, just like when a dry leaf starts to catch.

Y'ever start a camp fire out in the bush? with a handful uv dry leaves fer kindlin'? Ya start 'er up, 'n ya think she's not gonna go, but then them little red worms starts crawlin', and the wind huffs

on 'er and she flares and crackles, and ya say 'she's right now' and ya put on some bigger stuff.

Look—pay a-bloody-tention when a man's talkin' to ya. Stick ya bloody book away, 'n ya might learn somethin'. Wish I 'ad a smoke. Any'ow, I know where I can get one.

Them big logs, once they was really goin', they'd give orf grey smoke, and then clear bright yella flames. 'N then—pfft—a little pocket of gas or sumpin ud burst out, and send out a clear jet of flame, clean as anything ya ever see. But she wouldn't last, she'd die out, like the arse end o' one o' them moon rockets I seen on telly; then she'd fizzle. Like everything a man ever tries to do.

I done lotsa things in me time; I've worked up and down this river all me life. I've picked t'bacca up Myrtleford and t'maters at Shepparton; I've snatched grapes every summer year after year, on me knees in red dirt, with burnin' sun on me bare back and cuts all over me bloody 'ands. I've shore sheep up the Darling, till I never want to smell that stink o' sheep shit and wet wool again. They can shove their wool . . .

Y'ever see wool burnin'? It don't burn proper, like wood. Kind of comes up in black bubbles, and stinks, and crawls over itself like.

Got a cig? No, I ast ya that. 'N I told ya, taint polite to read when a man's talkin' to ya. What was I sayin'? Yeah, about fires.

Funny 'ow a log goes into the fireplace all of one piece like, but after she's burnt a bit she starts to cut up into little squares, like snake skin. Ya can watch them little bits, and they go grey outside, but in the cracks in between it's red as guts, like when ya butcher a bunny.

'N finally, she gets a crawly kinda grey ash all over, and ya start askin' yaself, will she fall this second? the next? the one after that? But she always beats ya; just when ya thinks she's never gonna fall, away she goes.

Up go the sparks, like the souls of all the inseks what ever lived in the wood when she was alive—termites, ants, grubs. Where do they go? Up the chimney, sure, but after that?

Bugger it, listen, willya? I'm tryin' to tell ya how to start a fire. You're like the young bucks up the pub, know every bloody thing. I gave up tryin' to watch TV after they put in the pool table. Man couldn't hear 'imself think for smart alecks yellin' and shoutin' out what shots they gonna play next—and then missin' 'em.

I seen Walter Lindrum play up The Cliffs once. You wouldn't even know who 'e was, mate. Only the best player 'Stralia ever 'ad, that's who—'e could play all these young sods on a break with both 'ands tied be'ind 'im.

Talkin' about 'ands, I can still shut me eyes and see Gerald's 'and the day that schoolteacher bastard 'it 'im. It was in the winter time, cos I remember we 'ad a fire in the classroom, and I was watchin' it, in between doin' me school work, 'cos I like fires. When I was real young, before I went to school, I usta go out in the bush and start me own fires.

When me old man went farmin', only land 'e could afford was way out in the never-nevers, where a bloody lizard couldn't live unless 'e 'ad 'is own lunch 'n waterbag. The ole man 'ad to clear the bush, with two 'orses. 'Nuther thing you wouldn't know nothin' about, 'cept 'ow it runs at Flemington. We 'ad two great big Clydesdales, Punch and Judy. 'Itch a chain to 'em, and the other end round a tree stump. Never 'ad to use the whip, just yell out to 'em, and they'd belly down and 'eave, 'n out she'd come clean as a whistle. We'd burn orf the small branches 'n keep the logs and big stumps fer firewood fer the winter. She could get real cold out there in that Mallee country.

You still listenin', mate? I'll go and get us both a smoke, when I finish what I wanta tell ya. Any'ow. . .

When I was three or four, the ole man was still clearin' the land. Much good it did 'im. Bloody sand country it was; only thing 'eld it together was the scrub what 'e was doin' 'is best to get rid of. When 'e took it all orf, and got the paddicks plowed, the first good breeze sent the topsoil airmail to Noo Zealand.

That Husk, the nurse, she's like a bloody dried-up thistle, all grey and skinny and prickly. I seen thistles like that out in the Mallee. In the middle of a paddick, one lousy little thistle, maybe only a foot 'igh, what stopped the grains o' sand when the wind blew, and built up a sand'ill three foot 'igh and six foot long downwind of itself.

I seen fences, mate, built on top o' one another. The first'd stop the sand, and evenchally get buried, then the poor bastard farmer'd afta build another, nailin' the new droppers to wotever was left stickin' up. 'N they reckoned it was wheat land!

Ever seen a fire in a paddick uv ripe wheat? She really goes; not much smoke then, mate, only whirls of orange-red fire, goin'

maybe forty miles a nour if there's a good wind be'ind 'er.

Any'ow, I was tellin' ya, I like fire. Before I went to school, and me dad and mum was busy on the farm, I usta go walkabout in the scrub. 'N I usta siddown and look at a patch of dry grass, and think 'ow nice it'd be if I 'ad a little fire, like. I didn't want it for warmth, y'understand, just wanted to look at 'er, 'n maybe play with 'er a bit.

'N a coupla times, or maybe more—I dunno, I'm talkin' about fifty year ago—I started some fires which burnt through into where the ole man was workin', or maybe towards the hut, cos I can remember 'im sayin' to me mum: 'Girl, I dunno where 'e gets them matches, but for Gawd's sake keep the things away from 'im, cos 'e is a pie row maniac.' 'N me mum said, 'I swear I have every match in this house in my apron pocket.'

Any'ow, I was tellin' ya about me friend Gerald. 'E was me best school mate, although I got along with the other kids alright, speshly when I usta start a bit uv a camp fire for em after school. We 'ad a real nice lady, Miss Sims, for a teacher. It was only a bit of a country school like, with little and big kids all mixed up together, but it was all OK till I was in sixth grade, when they sent Miss Sims orf to another school, and we copped this bastard Searce.

'E was a washed-out gingernut, hair like a dead fox, eyes like a dead codfish, eyelashes like dead fishes' bones.

'DISSIPLINE!' he says. 'That is what is needed here. When I come into the room, you all sit at attention' 'e says. 'Ow can ya *sit* at attention, mate? But 'e knew. When 'e come in, we was all sposed to sit upright, feet together, backs straight, eyes front, 'ands joined be'ind backs. 'N ya dare not look sideways, cos 'e 'ad this great big strap.

It was made, I reck'n, from draft 'orse 'arness—double-sided leather, with a packing piece in between, stitched all round, and weighin' about a pound and a 'alf. 'E always carried it, and 'e could be quicker on the draw than Tom Mix.

Me and me mate Gerry sat in the desk right next to the door. Like I told ya, I was writin' a bit, and lookin' at the fire, and thinkin' to meself 'I'll make that log bust in half NOW' when I look from the fire to dead in front of me, and there 'e is. Searce, the sod. Rubber soles, 'e wore, 'n sneaked round like a blackfella creepin' on plovers. Outa the corner of me eye I see all the other kids sit at attention, and so do I.

Poor ole Gerald, 'e was a good kid, 'e's still workin', con-she-enshus like. Got 'is left 'and 'oldin' down the left page of 'is ecker book, 'n the pen in 'is right 'and, and so wrapped up in what 'e's doin' that 'e wouldn't wake up if a dunny fell on 'im.

I dare not look up in case I meet them fish eyes. I stare straight in front at the leather buttons on the sports coat, and the end o' the strap stickin' outa the pocket. I think as hard as I can to Gerald: 'Wake up, mate, wake up!' but I never was any good at thinkin' at people. I'm frightened to give 'im a poke with me knee, cos Fisheyes can see me legs. So I sit like a statchoo, tryin' to think at Gerald. No good. That's one of the few things in me life, mate, that I'm sorry for.

Fisheyes stan's there for what seems like 'alf a nour. Then 'e slowly pulls out the strap, slowly, as if 'e's lickin' 'is chops. And BANG! 'e gets Gerald right acrost the back of the left hand.

Poor Gerry nilly shit 'imself. Up 'e jumps, and mita gorn through the ceilin' 'cept that 'is knees comes ker-runch up against the bottom of the desk. Back of 'is 'and goes white, and then red, and starts palpitatin'. 'N Fisheyes says, 'That's for not sitting to attention when I come in.'

Searce goes over to warm 'is arse at the fire. I knew 'e smoked, 'n kept a tin o' wax matches in 'is 'ip pocket, cos I'd seen 'em. 'N I thought: wouldn't it be beaut if 'is matches caught fire?

All uv a sudden 'e screamed, 'n jumped 'igher than Gerry, 'n grabbed at 'is pocket. I 'ope those bloody matches burned a foot into 'im. 'Is pants caught fire, and 'e whacked at 'em like a wheat lumper with a mouse up 'is leg.

Talkin' about legs, yours is bust in two places, I 'eard Starchy say. So I'll be outa 'ere afore you, mate. I'm only burnt a bit, that's all; be right as rain soon. I'll tell ya 'ow I come to be in 'ere if you'll put that book away. It's all bullshit any'ow.

Any'ow, as I was sayin', I'm burnt a bit. It was me own fault, so I gotta take me medicine.

I didn't leave meself a way out, see? That was me trouble. But 'e never shoulda sooled them dorgs onto me; that's when 'e really arst for it. 'E was worse than Starchy, 'n she's bad enough. What's more, even ya bed ain't ya own in this bloody 'orspital. I got outa mine a while ago, and bugger me, when I tries to get back in, there's some other joker in it!

I felt like goin' to 'ave a pee, see, 'n when I turn round and look

back, 'eres this other bastard in me bed. Real crook 'e 'is—looks like a roast duck. 'Is skin's nicely browned all over, 'e's got choobs stuck up 'is snout and other places, 'n Starchy 'n Husk is messin' round 'im like crows round a dead lamb.

'Strike me 'andsome' I says to meself, 'a man better go back or 'e'll finish up out in the cold' so I moved in again, and some'ow they got this other joker out.

Any'ow, what was I sayin'? Aw yeah, out.

That's 'ow I moved out uv school. Searce's pants were on fire, see, and 'e's jumpin' up and down like a frill-neck lizard. I 'adn't learnt then to keep me face closed, and I dunno 'ow 'e guessed, but 'e looked straight at me and picked me for settin' fire to the wax matches. 'E just went plain berserk, comin' at me with the strap up.

I raced fer the door 'n out I went, straight for 'ome. When I get there I kep' goin' into the scrub, but I 'ung around the edges of the bush to see what'd 'appen. Presently, up 'e comes in 'is 1928 Ford, 'n I could see 'im layin' down the law to me ole man.

'N I got to thinkin', what if 'is petrol tank 'sploded?

BLOOOOM! Fisheyes and the ole man are runnin' for their lives. Fisheyes walked orf, offa our property, me ole man come lookin' for me. 'Venchally, of course, 'e caught me.

'But 'e hit Gerry, Dad' I said. 'Fer nothin'. Nothin' a tall!'

'I believe you, son' me dad said. 'But you know I'm gonna hafta hit you for somethin'. You got this pie row mania, and I gotta try to cure it.' So 'e cut a four-foot len'th of whipstick Mallee, and 'e let me have it. That night I left, in the dark.

Soon as it gets a bit darker in 'ere, I'm gonna go 'n get a smoke, and I ain't forgot ya. Getcha one too. Smoke's a funny thing. Ever noticed 'ow, no matter what side of a camp fire ya sits on, the smoke always seems to come your way? One of the laws o' Nachur, I reckon. Wind's from the south, so ya sits on the south, and still ya cop it, because she goes and switches.

That's what buggered me. She switched from the north to the south, and I didn't leave meself no way out.

I did leave me mum a note. I said I loved 'er and dad, and I'd come back when the schoolteacher bizness died down. Well, ya know what they say 'bout good intentions. I never did get back there before me mum and dad died. I've seen the old 'omestead, but it's like what I told ya, mate, just all sand blowin'.

Any'ow, I was tellin' ya, camp fires. I've sat round thousands of

'em, Myrtleford to Renmark, Mildura to Bourke. I never carried matches; wasn't no need to. I c'd always rake up a few dry leaves 'n sticks, and think 'ow nice it'd be if I 'ad a little fire. 'N next thing ya know, there she was, cracklin' away like a beauty. Sometimes, even, if I was real tired, I wouldn't even bother to carry the bigger bits of wood; I'd just think 'em over to the fire, like.

'N sometimes, if I'd been on the booze and I was showin' orf, I'd do me little tricks for me mates, wantin' to show 'em how to start a camp fire, 'n bring some wood, without matches or sweat. But they was mostly dopey, they could never catch on to the way of it. Some of 'em knew the same words as me old man, and that's why they call me 'Pie Row Joe'.

Good mates, they was. I never 'urt nobody after that schoolteacher bastard, till just afore I got shoved in 'ere.

That Starchy can shove—she could push Jack Dempsey round. 'Turn Mister Burns over' she says. 'Mister Burns'—strike me lucky, that's me! I never been called that afore in me life. The doc is talkin' some garbage about critical loss of fluids. 'E could lose some 'imself, 'e's still wet be'ind the ear'oles.

I'm still cold. It was bloody hot that day. I was humpin' me swag, comin' down through Karamull. On the hoof, 'opin to 'itch'ike a bit, when I sees a short cut acrost the paddicks. I been there before, so I knows the owner is a bastard, and a lucky one at that. In the drought, when 'is neighbours was flat out like a lizard drinkin', every bloody thunderstorm, the only rain in it would fall on *his* paddicks, but 'e wouldn't help nobody.

But I didn't want nothin' from 'im. I was just takin' a short cut. 'Is wheat was four foot tall, and ripe, 'n Blind Freddy could see 'e was gonna get twenty bags to th'acre while the other poor sods wasn't even gonna get their seed back.

The road went a mile that way, and then a mile back, 'n all the time I could see the pub only two 'undred yards away acrost the crop. It was buh-luddy 'ot. 'Undred and twenty in the shade, cept there wasn't none, and a 'owlin' north wind right in me face. I was chewin' sand between me teeth, it was in me eyes, I was 'angin' onto me 'at, 'n them dry roley-poleys, big as sheep, was bowlin' along and stingin' me in the face like flyin' barb wire. I kep' thinkin' of a big cold beer, so I decides to risk it, through the fence.

Well, 'e'd ploughed a fire break right along the wire, so I does the right thing, I sticks to the break 'stead o' trampin' down the

ripe crop. Next thing I knows, 'e's yellin' 'Get to buggery outa there' and soolin' his bloody dorgs on to me. Bastards, they was, like 'im. Yellow, like dingoes, like Fisheyes' hair. So I runs, and scrambles through the other fence, and rips me last decent pair of strides.

The pub was just up the road, so I got a beer, and then some more. One led to another, like. Was just the day fer it—'undred and twenty, and red 'ot wind like a furnace blast, and dust and dirt and the sky fulla curlicue clouds.

Any'ow, where was I? Yeah, 'ow I got into 'orspital.

So, the sun went down, like a ball o' fire, 'n I got to thinkin': oo's that bastard to sool the dorgs on to me? Never done 'im no 'arm. Be nice if 'is wheat caught fire.

So I started back up the track, in the dark. Dark in 'ere; soon be safe to go and pinch some smokes, even if we cant find no booze.

Boy, was I boozed that night. I c'n just remember wheat paddicks each side of the gravel road, 'n scrub and dry grass between the wire fences right up to the edge of the gravel.

I leaned on the top wire of 'is north fence, 'n thought about a little fire. Only a little 'un. Lovely little yellow flames, lickin' round the bottoms of the wheat stalks. Next thing I knows, it's roarin' through the crop, yellow and red and orange and twistin' in the dark, with wriggly burnin' stalks flyin' up in the air and droppin' back ahead of the main fire to start new 'uns. 'N the north wind, still blowin' a red 'ot gale, right be'ind the lot.

Beautiful, she was. Beautiful, mate. You never seen nothin' so lovely.

'N the farmer's out there, like a madman, with a little squirt 'stinguisher on 'is back, 'n when that's done, with green boughs ripped offa the scrub trees beside the road.

'N I'm laughin'. Laughin' fit to kill.

Kill? I never meant to kill the sod. Jus' made a bit o' a mistake, that's all. 'N I know where I made it.

All uv a sudden I felt that the hot northerly had dropped. Died stone dead, it 'ad, and there was a smell like wet dirt, like maybe a few spots o' rain in the air. Just all kinda quiet for a minute, with this earthy smell, 'stead o' the stink o' burnin' grass. I knew what I'd forgot.

But I shoulda known it. The signs 'ad been there all day—the northerly, the curling-up long white clouds. There was gonna be a

cool change, with a roarin' southerly buster. 'N there I was, with dry grass, dry scrub 'n dry wheat all round me, and the fire on me wrong side. I starts to run, for me life.

I knew e-zackly where I was goin'. Back two 'undred yards along the road was a stormwater drain, a three-foot concrete pipe under the gravel. It 'ad white posts, so people wouldn't drive cars into it, and there was some kind o' notice board. If I was lucky, I might get to it. 'F I was real lucky, might even be water in it.

The wind shifted, bang! from north to south. The flames came back on theirselves; the wheat crackled and twisted in corkscrews of fire. The Mallee scrub along the sides of the road was lit up for two 'undred yards, red like, and balls uv burnin' wheat and roley-poleys like Catherine wheels was jumpin' the road, and startin' up flames on the other side. The tops of the trees was burnin', too.

A rabbit ran acrost the road. 'S fur was smokin'. 'S eyes was lit up, orange. They reckon rabbits can see backwards as well as forwards. What was you lookin' at then, little fella? Your past life? I never meant to get ya, pal.

I c'd see the signpost at the drain. 'Twas one of them stupid things the fire brigades puts up, ter try to stop people from startin' bushfires. It was white paint, shinin' orange; it said 'FIRE IS A GOOD SERVANT BUT A BAD MASTER.'

I was lookin' at it in a funny way, like, from face down in the gravel. The white paint was all bubblin' and blisterin', and so were me 'ands 'n arms.

So that's 'ow I come 'ere, and that's all I can remember, mate, till I woke up in this 'orspital. But I'll soon be out, be out afore you, pal. Getcha that smoke now. The doc keeps 'is in 'is desk. I don't like 'is brand—they're them brown things, like little cigars, like rolled-up used crap paper. But I'll getcha one.

I gets outa me bed. Bit wobbly on the old pins, like. I floats down the corridor, and I grabs one of the quack's smokes. I goes back to the ward, and bugger me! Starchy has done it again. The ole roast duck is back in me bloody bed.

'Bugger you, mate' I says. 'Move over.'

'E don't move; 'e's still got all this junk shoved up 'is snout, and what's more, 'e looks bloody near dead.

'OK' I says, 'I'm comin' back in' 'n so I do.

I think how it'd be (cos I got no matches, ya know) if this

stinkin' little cigar had a red end on it, glowing, like. 'N I take a draw.

Next thing I knows, the young joker with the busted leg is yellin' 'Nurse, nurse' 'n Starchy steams in with Husk in tow. 'His bed clothes are on fire!' the young fella yells. Sure enough, the ole roast duck has set me bed on fire, and Starchy makes a great thing of chuckin' water round. The silly old sod; some people just can't manage fire at all. Starchy pulls the choobs outa me nose, and draws the curtins round me bed.

I mean, the old roast duck's bed. So, whatta I care, any'ow? This joint is only for sick people. Sooner I'm outa 'ere, the better.

So I wander back down the corridor, out the front door. Over the other side of the road, there's some kind of barbecue or picnic, with camp fires 's far 's I can see. Lovely fires. They're chuckin' on big logs, 'n the coals are shinin' red and orange, 'n the flames are leapin' up towards 'eaven. There's lots of me old mates there.

'Come on, Joe' they're shoutin'. 'Over 'ere, mate!'

So, I starts to go acrost the road.

Then. Then. I sees two bastards I never wanted to lay eyes on again. Fisheyes the schoolteacher, and the Karamull farmer. Last time I seen 'im, 'e was rollin' in the dirt, tryin' to put out 'is burnin' clothes. But they was wool, and kept bubblin' and crawlin' like big black caterpillars.

Fisheyes 'n the farmer are wavin' their arms, too, for me to come over their way.

Be damned to 'em.

I'll see them in Hell first.

CHERRY WILDER

# The Falldown of Man

The coming of the human beings to our world, Torin, brought a great change in our lives. We arrived at Otolor Spring Fair one day after New Year and shuffled ourselves into a miserable booth on the Sing-Song Alley. On one side was an Ancient selling pouch-pipes . . . and demonstrating their curious tones . . . while on the other was a family of heavy-footed skippers, soused in tipsy mash. At the time it was all we could expect: Balkaveer was unrehearsed; we had had no new piece for a season and a half. He went off dressed in what passed for his best into the fair. Romm, the head dancer and scene change, disappeared too, probably to dip pockets. Tamiset and I decorated the booth and hurled ourselves into a bravura performance of *The Wanderings of Elbin*. Tamiset played and I recited and sang.

The show was well received. We were not surprised . . . players are never surprised by good fortune. We were in fact a very fine troupe and Balkaveer who wove the skeins and directed was very close to a genius. He spent his days tramping the roads of Torin but he hoped always, and confidently, for a big break.

Tam and I were pleased to have earned eating money. At the supper hour we shut the booth and bought food; we sat in the pleasant light of a candlecone and fed the ant-eater. No, it was not the famous Talking Ant-eater, this was its great-great-grandchild, a flecked grey that could pull a little cart and turn somersaults.

I sometimes had nasty suspicions when I looked at this lovable creature. Perhaps the episode with its talking ancestor had been the

high point of Balka's career, even if it had ended with the gagging of himself and his three elder sibs in the market round of the city of Tsagul before the assembled clansfolk and citizens. As it turned out his elders retired after paying the required fines and he left Voice-Throwing for the drama.

Presently Balka returned. He was preoccupied . . . flung off his wig, sat on the mat, stroked the ant-eater, gulped a mouthful of honeywater. He stretched out his arms to us with the fingers curled in the position which means 'giving bounty'.

'My dear friends,' he said, 'Jirineth, my fine fellow, Tamiset, my long-haired beauty, we are rich and famous. I have had an idea.'

I saw a flicker of impatience in Tam's lustrous eyes but we both stretched out our hands to him in the gesture 'receiving great gifts'. We loved Balkaveer . . . he was our chosen sib . . . we lived in a three family. He began to talk and he talked magnificently; his hands could tell the story of all worlds, his voice had the range of every creature on Torin. As he talked and told his idea Romm the dancer crept back with other dancers; players and musicians crowded silently into the small booth.

The idea that Balka had found was so crazy that even he would have been hard put to invent it. Yet the whole Spring Fair was ringing with the tale and we spoke to many persons who added something to the skein. A creature from another world had flown through the void and splashed down into a lake in the far north. It had been adopted by a mountain Five, had somehow cobbled up a flying machine with a magic engine, and had won the Great Air Race, called the Bird Clan.

Even without Balkaveer's embroidery we knew this was an idea which comes once in a great five of years. It had everything: topical interest, comic relief, an interesting setting . . . we had never danced a snow scene . . . and a touch of high life. Country audiences love to see grandees. There was a touch of political boldness: Balka did not overlook the gossip that said the Great Elder, Tiath Pentroy, was pursuing this High Flyer.

We were hardly concerned about whether or not the story was 'true'; players create their own truth. We live upon the mountains of legend and eat wild honey from the singing trees; sometimes it is all we have to eat. On this night Balkaveer fired our enthusiasm, signed up a company of twenty players and dancers on a co-operative skein, collected a credit from each one . . . if they had a

credit . . . and kept the details under wraps. He called a cast-on for the following day in the old hangar behind the pavilion on the Bird Clan airfield.

The company crept off, late at night, into the bright light of the far sun and the sleepy revelling of the day-after-New-Year. Only Rommunel remained and I saw that she was as anxious as I was to find the answer to one question. Which of us would play the High Flyer, the leading role. My rivalry with this muscle-bound springer had gone on for three seasons. Like all dancers she was eager to have speaking and singing parts although in my opinion she had as much voice as a tree-bear. She spoke just as harshly of my dancing talents and rehearsed me without mercy when she had the chance.

'Peace!' rumbled Balka, although no-one had uttered a word. 'Jirineth will play the creature from the void.'

'Privilege!' growled Romm.

'Dearest Rommunel,' said Balka in a voice of honey. 'The scenes will be the finest we have ever danced. You are needed to create them!'

'Last season I played Eenath the Spirit Warrior and managed all the scenes on both mats,' she said.

'Dear child,' said Balkaveer, 'we will be using three mats: two side rings and a raked centre!'

It took our breath away; we had never attempted such an elaborate production. Rommunel was silenced; she went off into the night to join her dancers.

'Sweet Balka,' said Tamiset, 'what is the name of the creature who fell down?'

'It has several names,' he said, 'some in Moruian, some in an outlandish tongue. I think we will call it *Man* . . . that is definitely one of its names.'

Man . . . man . . . we murmured it among ourselves. A good sound, not too exotic but with musical consonants. Before we slept we walked all three out of the booth and looked at the sky; the far sun was too bright for us to see many stars. We felt that particular lift, that mixture of hope and tension which goes with the beginning of a new piece.

As we stood in that small nowhere place on the brown grass among the backs of four tent booths a tall figure moved out of a patch of shadow. We drew closer together.

'Balkaveer . . .?'

The voice was inimitable, full of whispering resonance. He came forward and threw back the hood of a dark cloak that covered his professional nakedness and blue rags. We drew closer together still; this was Petsalee, Host of Spirits, a great leader among those extraordinary religious dancers the Twirlers. Between players and twirlers there was an uneasy truce; we despised them as creatures possessed, they despised us for learning by rote and having no soul. Petsalee was not possessed at this moment but he was still a frightening figure with his long brown skull-face.

'Too much honour,' murmured Balkaveer. 'How can we serve the Host of Spirits?'

'You will make a skein of the Devil from Hingstull Mountain?' asked Petsalee.

'Is it a devil?' I asked.

'By no means,' Petsalee smiled. 'Here, I have a skein for you . . . I have described it as best I could.'

'Many thanks!' Balkaveer took the skein. 'We will pay somewhat later . . .'

To our surprise Petsalee whistled and waved his hand, turning aside the offer of payment.

'Why do you do this?' asked Tamiset suddenly.

'I think you know, child,' replied Petsalee in a voice so matter of fact that he seemed like a new creature himself. He held out his gnarled hands and Tamiset stepped forward and held them.

'You will have the story told . . . for revenge!' she said.

'My companions were murdered by the Pentroy . . .' said Petsalee. 'Mooneen drowned by Nedlor and the others strangled . . . Yes! I will have vengeance!'

'But you will help us for other reasons,' said Tamiset.

'I see the pattern and must weave it into the work,' said Petsalee. 'You are a natural diviner, Tamiset.'

We watched, Balkaveer and I, and I divined a little jealousy in the pair of us. Petsalee was quick to soothe his audience; he drew from under his cloak a small gourd that fitted into the hollow of his hand. The outer surface was brown as it came from the tree, inside it was smeared with thick glittering metallic paint, like an ill-made mirror. It was a scrying-cup. Light welled up inside the gourd and we leaned forward expectantly: who can resist a fortune-teller?

Petsalee turned first to Balkaveer and seemed to be telling a conventional success story . . . a string of new works, riches and honour.

'A great storm,' murmured Petsalee, 'and those who walk in the storm. Do not play the Pentroy lands until the knots are untied.'

He turned to me and stared into my eyes over the glittering rim of the cup.

'You are of the half-blood, Jirineth!'

'Yes!' I whispered scornfully, 'My mother's partner was not an artist, more's the pity!'

I had never required honour or benefit from my close connection with the Dohtroy clan, though Balkaveer claimed that blood must tell and I often acted the grandee.

'Do not scorn clan Dohtroy,' said Petsalee. 'Good fortune lies in the west. Four birds have flown from the sea and you will see your own face.'

He left me with this pretty riddle and turned to Tamiset.

'You will find a treasure when hope is gone. It is a long trail by sea and land.'

'Will we see you again, Petsalee?' she asked.

'No, but you will think of me.'

This was the augury for our new venture and from the first everything went well. Our pick-up troupe of dancers matched like a family; the songs and speeches flowed from Balka's knotting fingers as fast as we could remember them. There was loose silver in Otolor after the Fair and Balka quickly had a Net, a string of backers ready to invest a few credits.

The piece took shape in eight dance-scenes, four song dialogues, five set pieces and a finale, played concurrently to make eleven scenes in all. The opening was particularly fine: Rommunel's setting of the mountain and the falling snow has never been bettered. She devised bands of flax held across the play-mats and dotted here and there with natural clippings of white wool. As the dancers manipulated these bands the effect of snowfall was uncanny . . . I have seen an audience shiver and freeze in the heat of summer afternoons on the Datse. She danced the mountain herself in vast draperies of black, white and orange which she moved very skilfully, and two trusted assistants danced in the blue centre cloth for the lake. Tamiset played and sang the wind and the darkness and the whole effect was most beautiful and most convincing.

Balkaveer, who usually undertook rustic comedy, trained Orthune and Old Calstoro to accompany him on the right-hand mat as the mountain Five. He had considered actually fielding five players but this was expensive literalism: if two or three persons are presented as a Five then the audience see Five . . . it is a convention and we made use of it.

Slowly the Five approached the lake in the snow; the Vessel appeared on the left mat and was wheeled to the front of the churning blue lake waters. There was thunder, wind, lightning . . . orange silk flashing from the mountain . . . then silence. A muffled sound came from within the mysterious silvered pod of the Vessel; the Five drew back in attitudes of terrified but hopeful expectation. Then the lid flew open and out leaped Man, clad from head to foot in a suit of birdwing blue. Sensation!

The finest effects, of course, contain serendipity. The lid of my precious Vessel stuck on about the second try and I gave vent to the muffled cries . . . Balkaveer kept it in. The eerie sounds from under the lid were most effective.

I played Man in a half mask with round blue eyes; it was generally agreed that this was the main physical peculiarity of the newcomer. I had a good speech and song dialogue with the Five in which they told of their lives and I told of my home beyond the stars. At first Man spoke in a strange tongue then it learned Moruian with the aid of a magic medicine which it carried in a blue vial. In one scene the Ancient of the Five tried this medicine and straightaway began to speak a strange Man-speech.

Peril was threatened in succeeding scenes as the Five travelled on the river Troon. Tamiset in the spring boots which she used so well played the Highness Ti Garr . . . as near as we dared to the name and nickname of the Great Elder . . . who was determined to have Man for its collection of art objects. Tamiset was a frightening figure, robed all in black to a width of twelve cloth yards and balancing a frame that made her seven feet tall. Her grandee mask was one we had used for the wandering of Elbin Tsatroy refurbished with brilliants. Ti Garr did not capture Man . . . in fact the Highness failed to recognise Man disguised as a weaver . . . but it seized the silver Vessel.

Balkaveer, who was never slow to draw conclusions, still could not discover where Man and its Five had obtained the flying machine they used at the Bird Clan Air Race. In a burst of

inspiration he had them build it according to Man's instructions. The penultimate scenes were of this race and were set entirely in the sky over the airfield. We introduced no fewer than six models of various craft, each one the size of a box harp and carried on long flexible poles. It is a technique we borrowed from another company who had toured an entertainment called *Antho and his improved Flying Machine*. We brought our version to greater technical perfection; the handlers, robed in white to make them invisible, flew their craft with impossible skill. The sky was another triumph for Rommunel who excelled as a wild head of cloud. The excitement of the race usually brought the audience to its feet, cheering loudly, and thus encouraged the entire company into the finale.

The dancers performed changes of season on the side mats while in the centre Man and its Five were decorated for winning the Air Race. A new era of peace and prosperity for the land of Torin was freely prophesied. A semi-chorus was followed by a chorus, a grand chorus and a chain dance. The ant-eater pulled on a cart with dried fruit and favours which the Five threw to the crowd. We paid heed to the warning of Petsalee: we left the Pentroy lands in a hired barge and opened in the market place of Linlor thirty days after New Year. The production was entitled *The Falldown of Man.*

It is hard to recall those first performances but the success was more than we had bargained for. We played forty times in Linlor town and five times more at the Wentroy villa beyond the town. As spring wore into summer we acquired transport nets and wheeled carts, even a palanquin for Balkaveer, and proceeded south-west to the Temple of Windrock for the Festival of the Four Winds. We went on west to the river Datse playing a few impossibly remote market towns on the way and gratefully hired barges again. It was the last time we ever walked with this production; after that it was luxurious water travel all the way. At one time Balka thought seriously of hiring balloons for the cast but the time schedules of sky travel are too uncertain.

We travelled north up the Datse to the very borders of the Pentroy land; it was here we heard unexpected news of the strangers, Man and his three sibs. A bird boat met us on the river with this astonishing tale: the Man family had flown from the islands in an even larger Vessel. Balkaveer was deeply downcast.

'Time has caught up with us!' he said. 'There goes our beloved play, children.'

As we approached the landing stage of the next town, the town Five and the citizens were waiting. They were most eager for us to give them *The Falldown of Man* . . . to them it seemed wonderfully topical. So it was wherever we went: the real history of the Strangers only whetted the appetites of ordinary persons for our play.

What can one say of a player's life? It is a yarn spun in a dream. When we sailed to the far west and played before the Flax People we saw the desert covered with yellow sand flowers, a sight that comes once in a great five of years. Wintering on the delta of the Troon Tamiset bore and pouched a child but it died long before its showing. Balkaveer was never idle; between times he wrote a simple piece, *The Family Fair*, which began a whole new weft of rustic plays that were more than rough comedy and tripping threads. The players' maxim that success improves the character was shown everywhere; Rommunel became much more bearable. By Gavan on the salt haven the ant-eater was run over by a cart and we were too sad to get ourselves another.

I remember the first occasion on which we played Tsagul. There is a special pitch beyond the town in a large public park: it is the Old Tsatroy Palace. It is valued by players because it is in effect an indoor pitch and can be used at night. I sometimes think *The Falldown of Man* played best in the flickering torchlight against the curtain walls of that grey courtyard. We played the palace for forty days and on the last night there were grandees in the lattice galleries.

After the performance a vassal came calling me by name. I walked out into the courtyard and there he stood alone: Orn Margan Dohtroy, the Peacemaker, a solid, paunchy figure, dressed with self-conscious austerity.

'Jirineth . . .?'

'Highness!'

The barrier between us was not one of use and custom but my own pride, which I had from my mother. Orn Margan was past middle age, my mother Deljirin was long dead; for the first time I tried to see some trace of the young grandee who had so loved the beautiful player. He had always been prepared to raise me as his child but the lot of half-bloods in clan families is unhappy. If the

mother can take and rear her child in the usual way all is well but sometimes the 'common' mothers are vassals or servants without resource. Children of the half-blood grow up between nobility and vassalage; I had escaped this fate.

Now Orn Margan came and humbled himself before me; it was time for me to make peace with the Peacemaker. I bent my head and interweaved my fingers in the obeisance one makes to a family member in great houses. He stepped forward and brushed my shoulders with his hands as he gave me a family blessing.

We walked about in the courtyard talking of the play he had just seen. Orn Margan had an unusual suggestion; it had long been his wish to install a permanent company of players at the palace under his patronage. We could remain as long as we wished and play winter seasons. I saw the advantages of this plan but I could do no more than promise to consult Balkaveer and the rest of the company.

Before we parted the old grandee described the close view he had had of Man itself . . . he sketched its odd rolling gait and tried for the timbre of its deep resonant voice. I was impressed and incorporated some of this in my performance. Perhaps there was a little of the player in Orn Margan Dohtroy after all. I saw the reverse of the position for the first time: the child of a clan mother is a grandee, come wind or weather. It is a thousand times more difficult for a grandee to brush off the clinging threads of clan discipline than it is for any half-blood.

The show went on. We travelled to Rintoul and would have played in the Wentroy skyhouse but the influence of Tiath Gargan, the old Hanging Judge, was too strong. We never glimpsed the Great Elder of course but we met another, almost as frightening. We were unloading our barge in a quiet backwater of the city canals when a young dancer came to Balkaveer and whispered about Pentroy vassals on the wharf. And an old scribe who carried a whip.

Balkaveer did not understand but I was shuddering. We peered out of the deck tent and there it stood: thin, grey, deadly . . . Ammur Ningan, High Steward of the Pentroy, calmly finding fault with our inventory. The warning was enough; we took ship to the east again, to the salt haven. Rommunel was out for half a season with a pulled muscle; I broke my arm and played in a blue sling. We rehearsed diligently in winter and early spring and

introduced many refinements. There has never been a company so well-fed and well-shod as ours; common players called us The Leatherboots. Our repertoire changed but the demand for *The Falldown of Man* never decreased.

At a return season in Forr, the largest town on the Datse, an Ancient came after one performance leading a child about three years shown, a thin wisp, all eyes. This was the waif of two players, a juggler and a singer, who had died of fever the winter past; the Ancient could hardly care for it.

I was reaching for a handful of credits when I saw Tamiset from the corner of my eye. She knelt down in the dust of the courtyard and held out her hands. Balkaveer bustled out from behind the work-screen and I flicked him with my girdle to make him silent. The child came to Tamiset with a light dancing step and said its name: Vantelar.

We laughed with delight. This proud three-sound name was borrowed from the most ancient thread in the history of the players of Torin. Vantelar was the legendary singer from the time of the clan wars. Now the child had come to our family and we knew a thread that should not be broken. Vantelar has been our joy from that time: she sings like a bird and dances like the wind and gives promise of great beauty.

Yet there were one or two scraps of Petsalee's prophecy to be fulfilled. We wintered in Tsagul, at the palace, but did not play again until the spring. The Collector, who takes credits after the first five scenes and again after the performance, came to us one night and said:

'There are a party of maskers out there who applaud in a strange way . . .'

'How's that?' asked Balkaveer. 'How can one applaud except by slapping one's buttocks or stamping feet?'

'They clap their hands together!'

I felt a thrill of fear; I was on my mettle from that instant. The whole company played up well; the players' mind power was working. I hung about behind the screens after the show and emerged at last into the courtyard where I had spoken with Orn Margan. The four maskers stood making conversation with Balkaveer and a crowd of players, but now the masks were off. I came forward in my blue suit and a tall figure, dressed more or less as a Moruian came forward to greet me.

There was the walk; not exactly a rolling gait but stiff, as if all the muscles and joints were too tight. I hardly dared take a step myself unless I started to imitate the walk. There was the height and breadth. The planes of the face were obscured by a fantastic growth of black curly hair, a beard we would not dare show in a play. This was Man; this was Scott Gale, who had landed on Hingstull Mountain. I stared at Man and Man, at last, stared back at me with fine glittering blue eyes.

There was no doubt that he was grinning broadly. I could not keep a smile off my face. We stared, we smiled, we laughed aloud . . . that voice, could I get the ring of it? . . . we clapped shoulders and clasped hands.

'Forgive me!' I said at last. 'Forgive me, Man, for looking nothing like you!'

'Jirineth,' said Scott Gale, 'I only wish that I could leap so high . . .'

It was a strange experience; we walked together through the night courtyard and I felt that the ghosts of all the players of Torin were gathering to watch. There stood Man's three companions, every bit as strange as himself. There was the older male, nicknamed Sam Deg because of his short temper, a burly figure with a grizzled chin beard. There was Karen-Ru whose true name is unpronounceable but means something like dark or black: a female with a fall of streaked blonde hair for all the world like that of a Moruian child. Strangest of all there was Leesa, tall, thin, black-skinned; her eyes were fine and dark; one could imagine that in her own world she might be considered beautiful. With them was that other legendary creature, the young Moruian Dorn, plain, strong-faced, mountain-bred, who acted as their speaker if they wanted for words.

We stood for some time, the players and the strangers; we waved hands a good deal and exchanged many civilities. Balkaveer, never at a loss, presented the Man family with favours: kites, perfume skeins, wooden charms . . . the things which Vantelar, our dear child, threw to the audience during the finale. Presently the strangers took their leave.

'The voices,' whispered Balka, 'Great North Wind, the voices . . .'

'I am sure they can sing,' said Tamiset.

'Time has caught up with us!' I intoned carefully.

'Bravo!' cried Rommunel. 'That is the sound of Man's voice!'

'You see? Nothing is impossible for a player!' said Balkaveer.

So we played at the palace for many days more and Balkaveer, quick to take advantage, sent to Dorn the Scribe requesting tales and plays from the stranger's home world. Nothing was sent for some time but as we went up the Datse at summer's end a large package came with a food boat after us. It was a box of skeins and writings.

The newcomers were apologetic: none of them, they said, were players or students of the written word or the drama. For all that, the box contained some marvellous strange things which Balkaveer pored over for years to come; he could use very little of the material but it inspired him. There were players beyond the stars, it seemed, and their lives not unlike our own. Their words lived. Some of these pieces, reduced now to a bare outline and a few maxims, had been composed more than a great five of years past.

There was a savage violence in the skeins and a good deal of off-world tradition that might have been highly indecent on our play mats. Passion and bloodshed and revenge for fathers dead . . . weird stuff. Magic and talking animals and wars among the stars. 'A scholar sells his soul to the Evil Spirit of the World . . .' It was all too harsh. 'A young grandee is raised in the forest by wild animals.' Interesting; perhaps a comedy; to dance a forest is always amusing.

Balkaveer was stirred by one unpromising old piece with a storm and a grandee who had foolishly divided its inheritance. He stripped away much that could not be understood and made one of his greatest skeins: *Leer and Her Children* will play for many years. Its strength is in the storm and the old grandee wandering with her Luck upon the plain.

So we were preparing to come south again as autumn came to the mountains when the news came that Tiath Avran Pentroy had died, as became a Great Elder, in his palace at Rintoul. Time had caught up with us at last. We sailed down river half in mourning like the rest of Torin. The power of clan Pentroy was broken; there were rumours of change; when the spring came, everyone said, the world would be new-made.

Word came suddenly from the city Five of Otolor. Would the company of Balkaveer be so gracious as to winter in Otolor and prepare for the Spring Fair and a tour of the Pentroy lands? The

Net of backers who had been so amply repaid for their original investment were eager to see that great piece *The Falldown of Man*.

There was nothing for it but to rejoice and refurbish the old skein. We sailed to Tsagul and took a fine new ship to bear us to Rintoul and the mouth of the Troon. Our spirits were high; we sat on the deck of the ship during the little darkness before the rising of the far sun, Tamiset, Balkaveer, Jirineth. The child Vantelar slept in her hammock beside us. All around the company of players were murmuring softly; old scraps of song, soft laughter rode on the night wind.

We spoke of Otolor and looked at the stars and each one of us thought of that night years past when Petsalee, the Twirler, looked into his scrying-cup.

'What a world we live in,' sighed Tamiset. 'Here we can look upon such a mighty wonder as these four beings from a strange world and turn them into a play and the guests at a play. I wonder if we have changed them more than they have changed us? Yet the whole of Torin will be changed because one grandee has died.'

'It is not so simple,' said Balkaveer. 'Ordinary folk, even players, know little of the drama that has been played out between these newcomers and the powers of Torin.'

'Ah, but remember the words of that old Man skein,' I said, teasing. 'Life only imitates art. "All the world is a play-mat and all the people in the world merely players." '

'True,' said Balkaveer, 'very true. I could not have put it better myself.'

## SAKYŌ KOMATSU

# The Savage Mouth

*Translated by Judith Merril*

*No reason at all.*

Why should there be a reason? People want to find reasons for everything, but the truth of things can never be explained. All of existence: why *is* it as it is? why just this way and no other?

That kind of reason, no one would ever be able to explain . . .

Seething with anger, he stood looking out of the window, gritting his teeth. Some days, suddenly, this fury overwhelmed him, suffusing the very centre of his being: a violent irrational urge to destruction which could never be explained to anyone. He jerked the curtain closed: breathing hard he stiffened his shoulders and moved back to the inner room.

The world we live in is worthless, absurd. Staying alive is an absurdly worthless thing. Above all, this worthless character—myself—is quite intolerably absurd.

*Why so absurd—?*

'Why?' There it was again.

Worthless, absurd, simply *because* absurd and worthless. Everything—prosperity, science, love, sex, livelihood, sophisticated people—nature, earth, the universe—all disgustingly filthy, frustratingly foolish. Therefore—

*No.* Not 'therefore' at all, but *anyhow, I'm actually going to do it.*

*I will do it.* Rubbing a kink out of his shoulder, he cried out silently: *I really will.*

Of course, this would be just as idiotic as anything else—indeed, among assorted stupidities, maybe the stupidest of all? But at least there was a bit of *bite* to it—a taste of sharpness. Perhaps the result of a touch of madness at the core of the meticulously detailed scheme? Maybe so, but at least—

*What I'm going to do now would certainly never have been tried by anyone in his right mind!*

Destroy the world? How many tens of thousands of people throughout history must have cherished *that* fantasy! This was nothing so banal. His anger would never be quenched by anything so absurd. *The flames within me are fanned by a truly noble desperation . . .*

Entering the inner room, he locked the door, turned on the light. *Now*—the thought brought a glitter to his eye—*now it begins.*

The room shone in cool light. In one corner were an electric range and oven; a gas burner; a slicer; large and small frying pans; an assortment of kitchen knives; and a kitchen cabinet stocked with all kinds of sauces and relishes and vegetables. Next to them was an automated operating table, fully programmed and equipped to perform any kind of surgery ever done on the human body—even in the biggest hospitals, no matter how complex or difficult. And next to that, a supply of prosthetics: arms, legs, every available variety of ultra-modern artificial organ.

Everything was ready. It had taken him a full month to work out the plans in detail, another month to get all the necessary equipment set up. By his reckoning, it would take a little more than one additional month until he was all done.

*Right, then—let's get started.*

Removing his trousers, he mounted the operating table, attached monitoring electrodes at several points on his body, and switched on the videotape.

*It begins—*

With a dramatic gesture he picked up the syringe lying on the stand next to the operating table, checked the pressure gauge, adjusted the setting—a little high, since this was the first shot—and injected a local anaesthetic into his right thigh.

In about five minutes, all sensation was gone from the leg, and he switched on the automatic operating machine. Buzzing and

humming of machinery; tell-tale lights blinking on and off; his body jerked back reflexively as several extensions emerged from an arm of the shining black machine.

Clamps projecting from the table secured the leg at shank and ankle. A steel claw holding a disinfectant gauze pad came slowly down onto the thigh joint.

The electric scalpel sliced silkily through the skin, cauterising as it went; there was hardly any blood. Cutting the muscle tissue . . . exposing the large artery . . . clamping-off with forceps . . . ligation . . . cutting and treating the contracting muscle surface . . . The buzzing rotary saw was soon whirring toward the exposed femur. It hit the bone; his eyes blinked shut at the shock.

There was almost no vibration. The diamond embedded in the ultra-high-speed saw made only the faintest rubbing noise as it sliced through bone, simultaneously treating the cut surface with a mixture of potent enzymes. In exactly six minutes his right leg had been cleanly severed from the joint.

Wiping his sweat-soaked face gently with gauze, the machine handed him a glass of medicine. He drank it down in a single gulp and drew a deep breath. His pulse was racing; more and more sweat came pouring out. But there was almost no blood lost, and no sensation of anything like pain. The nerve treatments had worked very well. No blood transfusion would be needed. He inhaled a bit of oxygen to ease his dizziness.

His right leg, separated from his body, lay sprawled on the table where it had dropped. A contracted circle of pink muscle tissue surrounded by yellow fat, with red-black marrow at the centre of the white bone, was visible through a tightly-wrapped clear plastic dressing. There was almost no bleeding. He stared at the hairy *thing* with its protruding kneecap, and was almost overcome with a fit of hysterical laughter. But there was no time now for laughing: there was more still to be done.

He rested only long enough to recover his energy, then issued instructions for the next part of the job.

The machine extruded a steel arm, picked up an artificial leg and set it in place against the cut surface; the unbandaged treated flesh was already healing. The signal terminal of the artificial synapse centre was connected to a nerve sheath drawn out from the cut surface. Finally, the structural support was firmly attached to the

remaining thigh bone with straps and a special bonding agent. *Finished.* He tried bending the new leg cautiously.

*So far, so good.* He stood up gingerly: It made him dizzy and shaky but he was able to stand and walk slowly. The artificial leg was made out of some kind of lightweight metal that produced a tinny sound when it moved. *All right—good enough*—He'd be using a wheelchair most of the time.

He lifted his own right leg off the top of the table. It was so heavy he was almost staggering. Inside himself, he was once again seized with a paroxysm of savage laughter. *All my life I've been dragging all this weight around.* How many kilos had he liberated himself from by cutting off this support?

'All right,' he muttered to himself, still giggling. 'Enough. Now to drain the blood . . .'

Carrying the heavy joint over to the workbench he stripped off the plastic wrap and hung the leg from the ceiling by the ankle, squeezing it through his hands to start the blood dripping from the cut end.

Later, washing it in the sink, with the hairs plastered down by the water, it looked more like the leg of a giant frog than any other king of animal. He stared at the sole of the foot poking grotesquely over the edge of the stainless steel sink.

*My leg.* Protruding kneecap, hard-to-fit high instep, toes infested with athlete's foot—*That's my leg!* And he was finally completely carried away, bent double in an uncontrollable spasm of poisonous laughter. *At last there will be an end to that damned persistent athlete's foot . . .*

Time to get ready for the cooking.

He used the big slicer to cut the leg in two at the knee, then began stripping off the skin with a sharp butcher's knife. The thigh-bone was thick with delicious-looking meat. *Of course: it's the ham.* The tendons were stiff; he was covered with sweat as he worked the hand-slicer, quickly piling up large chunks of meat surrounded by muscle membrane. He put chunks of shinmeat to simmer in a big pot filled with boiling hot water, bay leaf, cloves, celery, onions, fennel, saffron, peppercorns and other spices and savoury vegetables. The foot he threw out, keeping only the meat scraped out of the arch. The ham he sliced up for steak, rubbing in salt and pepper and plenty of tenderiser.

*Will I have the courage to eat it?* he asked himself suddenly. Tough lumps always stuck in that spot in his throat. Would he really be able to stomach it?

He clenched his teeth, oozing oily sweat. *I will eat.* It was no different from the way human beings had always cooked and eaten other intelligent mammals: cows and sheep, those gentle, innocent, sad-eyed grass eaters. Primitive man even ate his own kind; some groups had practised cannibalism right up to modern times. Killing an animal *in order to eat*—perhaps there was some justification for that. Other carnivores had to kill to live too. But human beings . . .

Since the day they came into existence, through all of human history, how many billions of their fellows had people killed *without even eating them*? Compared to that, this was positively innocent! *I'm not going to kill anyone else. I'm not going to slaughter miserable animals. This way, what I myself eat is my own meat.* What other food could be so guiltless?

The oil in the frying pan was beginning to crackle. With shaking hands he grasped a great piece of meat, hesitated, hurled it in. Crackling fat began to flood the air with savoury smells. Still trembling, he was gripping the arms of the wheelchair so hard he almost snapped them.

*All right. I am a pig.* Or rather, human beings are much worse than pigs: filthier, nastier. *Inside myself there is a part that is less-than-pig, and a 'noble' part endlessly angry and ashamed at being less-than-pig.* That 'noble' part was going to eat the 'less-than-pig' part. What was there to fear in that?

The crisply browned slice of meat sizzled on the plate. He smeared mustard over it, applied lemon and butter, poured gravy on top of that. When he made to use the knife, his hand was dancing so that it set the plate to clattering. Streaming with sweat, he gripped the knife with all his strength, sliced, jabbed the fork, and carried *It* fearfully into his mouth.

On the third day, he amputated the left leg. This one, just as it was, shinbone and all, he skewered and smeared liberally with butter, then roasted it on the rotisserie in the big oven. He was fearless by now. He had discovered himself to be surprisingly delicious: with that discovery, a mixture of anger and madness rooted itself firmly in his heart.

After the first week, things got more difficult. He had to amputate the lower half of his body.

On the toilet installed in the wheelchair, he experienced the delights of defecation for the last time in this world. As he ejected, he guffawed.

*Look at this mess! What I am now excreting is my own self, stored up in my own bowels and turned to shit!* Perhaps this was the ultimate act of self-contempt—or might it be the utmost in self-glorification?

The gluteus maximus was the most delicious of all.

With everything from the hips down gone, the last usefulness of the artificial legs was also gone, but he left them in place for the time being. Now that it was time for the internal organs, he consulted the machine's electronic brain: 'When I have eaten the intestines, will I still have an appetite?'

'It will be quite all right,' was the reply.

He discarded the large intestines, put the small intestines into a stew with vegetables, and used the duodenum to make sausages. He replaced the liver and kidneys with artificial organs, then ate the originals in a sauté. The stomach he set aside until later, preserved in a plastic container filled with nutritive fluids.

At the end of the third week, he exchanged his heart and lungs for artificial organs, and at last ate his own pulsing heart, fried in thin slices: a deed beyond even the imaginations of the priests of the Aztec sacrificial rituals.

By the time he made a meal of his own stomach—soaked in soy sauce, with garlic and red pepper—he had come to understand clearly that *people are quite capable of eating with no need for food.*

In the wide range of varied and exotic products people used for food, how many had been discovered out of curiosity, and not from hunger at all? Even when their curiosity is satisfied, humans will eat the most unimaginable things, *as long as there was anger.* In a fit of fury, eating the flesh of one's own kind can be like crushing a glass with one's teeth . . .

The well-springs of appetite lie in the savage impulse for aggression: killing-and-eating, crushing-and-crunching, swallowing-and-absorbing—*that is the savage mouth.*

By now, the end of his throat was connected only to a disposal

tube. Nourishment for the remaining body tissues was poured directly into the blood from a container of nutritive fluids; endocrine functions were maintained with the help of artificial organs.

By the end of the month, both arms were completely eaten; the only part that remained was from the neck up. And by the fortieth day, almost all the muscles of the face had been eaten as well: the lips alone were left to chew with the assistance of attached springs. Only one eyeball remained; the other had been sucked and chewed.

What sat there now, mounted on a labyrinthian mechanism of pipes and tubes, was the living skull alone: in that skull, only mouth and brain survived.

No . . .

Even now, an arm of the machine was peeling off the scalp, taking a saw to the top of the skull and removing it cleanly.

Sprinkling salt and pepper and lemon on the trembling exposed cerebrum, in the act of scooping up a great spoonful—*My brain,* thought the cerebrum-that-was-he. *How can I taste such a thing? Can a man live to savour the taste of his own brain-jelly?*

The spoon punctured the ashy-hued brain. No pain—there is no sensation in the cerebral cortex. But by the time the arm of the machine scooped up that pale mushy paste and carried it to the skull's mouth, and the mouth lapped it up to swallow, 'taste' was no longer recognisable.

'Homicide,' the Inspector told the reporters crowded into the entrance-way as he came out of the room. 'And what's more, an almost unprecedentedly brutal and degenerate crime. The criminal is probably a medically knowledgeable psychopath. Looks like an attempt at some sort of insane experiment—the body was taken apart limb from limb, and hooked up to all kinds of artificial organs . . .'

The Inspector disposed of the press and went back into the room, wiping his face from exhaustion.

The detective came over from the incinerator and eyed him questioningly. 'The tapes are burned,' he said, 'but—why are you calling it murder?'

'For the sake of maintaining peace and order.' The Inspector took a deep breath. 'Declare it murder—conduct an official

investigation—and leave it shrouded in mystery. This case—releasing the facts as they are in this case—it goes against all reason! You can't make ordinary decent citizens look into the pits of madness and self-destruction hidden away at the bottom of some people's minds. If we did such a thing—if we carelessly exposed people to a glimpse of the savage beast lurking inside—well, you can be sure someone else would try to follow this guy's example. These kind of people—*there's no way to know what they're capable of* . . .

'If the general public was suddenly made aware of something like this, people would begin to lose confidence in their own behaviour—they'd start probing and peering at the blackness inside their own souls. They'd get entirely out of their depths—completely out of control!

'You see, what is at the root of human existence is *madness*—the blind aggressive compulsion that lies in wait at the heart of all animals. If people become conscious of this—if really large numbers of people start expressing that madness under slogans like *existential liberation* and *do your own thing*—we're done for! It's the end of human civilisation. No matter what kind of law or force or order we try to work with, it'll get completely out of control!

'People tearing themselves apart, killing each other, wrecking, destroying—the symptoms are already beginning to show up—this one commits suicide by swallowing fused dynamite—that one pours gasoline and sets himself on fire—another starts screwing in the middle of the city in broad daylight. When there is nothing more reasonable left to attack, the caged animal starts to destroy his own sanity—'

'Yaa-a-a!'

The young detective screamed and jumped back from the rotting skull. He had been about to remove the foul-smelling spoon still held between the lips when the skull sank its teeth into his finger, nipping off a pinch of meat from the tip.

'Be careful,' said the Inspector wearily. 'The foundation of all animal life is a great starving swallowing savage mouth . . .'

The skull, with its naked brain, its one remaining eye beginning to come loose, and strong springs replacing its vanished muscles, was now slowly crumpling and chewing the scrap of meat between its swollen tongue and sturdy teeth.

DAVID LAKE

# Re-deem the Time

When Ambrose Livermore designed his Time Machine, he bethought him of the advantages both of mobility and of camouflage, and therefore built his apparatus into the bodywork of a second-hand Volkswagen. Anyone looking in at the windows, such as an inquisitive traffic policeman, would have taken the thing for an ordinary 'bug' with a large metal trunk on the back seat. The large metal trunk contained the workings of the Time Machine; the front seat and the dashboard looked almost normal, and the car could still function as a car.

When all things were ready, one cold afternoon in 1984, Ambrose got into the front seat and drove from his little laboratory in Forminster to a deserted field on a South English hill. A white chalk track led him to the spot he had chosen; further along there was an ancient British hill fort, but not one that was ever visited by tourists. And this gloomy October day there was no one at all to be ruffled by his extraordinary departure. Applying the handbrake, he looked about him; and at last he smiled.

Ambrose did not often smile, for he was a convinced pessimist. He had seen the way the world was going for some time, and in his opinion it was not going well. Energy crisis was followed by energy crisis, and little war by little or not-so-little war, and always the great nations became further locked into their unending arms race. Sooner or later, the big bang was coming; and he wanted out. Luckily, he now had the means for getting out . . .

Briefly, he wished that general time travel were a real

possibility. One could then go back to the Good Old Days—say, before 1914. One could *keep* hopping back, living 1913 over and over and over again . . . Only of course the Good Old Days weren't really all that good; one would miss all sorts of modern comforts; and besides, the thing was impossible anyway. Backward time travel was utterly illogical, you could shoot your grandfather and so on. No: his own work had opened up the escape route, the only escape route, the one that led into the *future*. There were no illogicalities involved in that, since everyone travels into the future at all times. The Livermore Accelerator merely speeded up a natural process—speeded it up amazingly, of course, but . . .

But there it was. He would hop forward a century or so, in the hope of evading imminent doom. Surely the crash must come well before that, and by 2100, say, they'd be recovering . . .

Ambrose took a deep breath, and pressed the red lever that projected below the dashboard.

The sensation was bewildering. He had done it before, of course, behind locked doors in the laboratory, but only for a subjective second or two, little jumps of a couple of hours. Now years were flashing by . . . Literally flashing! There was a blinding light, and the ghostly landscape seemed to tremble. Shaken, he looked at his dials. Not even the end of the century . . . and yet, that must have been It. The Big Bang, the War. His forebodings had been entirely right . . .

He steadied himself, his fingers gripping the lever. The landscape seemed to be rippling and flowing, but there were no more explosive flashes. As he approached 2100, he eased the red lever towards him, slowing down, and now he saw things more clearly. The general outline of the hills and the plain below were not greatly altered, but at night there were very few lights showing. Forminster from up here used to be a bright electric blaze, but now it was no more than a faint flickering glimmer. He smiled grimly. Civilisation had been set back, all right! Probably they were short of power: you can't get electricity from nothing. But, what luck! This countryside hadn't been badly hit by bombs or lasers, and there were still small towns or at least villages dotted about. Yes, he would certainly emerge here and try his luck . . .

Now for immediate problems. As he slowed to a crawl, he saw that the surface of this hillside meadow had dropped by a few centimetres. No worry about that, it was better than a rise! And a

hundred metres away a wood had sprung up, a sparse copse of beeches that were rapidly unleaving. It looked deserted, too. A perfect place to hide the car while he reconnoitred. As October 2100 ticked away, he pulled the lever firmly back, and stopped.

The car dropped as though it had just gone over a bump in a road. It fell those few centimetres, and shuddered to complete stillness. He had done it!

Almost, you might think, nothing had changed, apart from that wood. The same downs, the same cold cloudy autumn afternoon. Somewhere in the distance he heard the baa of a sheep. It was a comfortingly ordinary sound; even though, come to think of it, there had been no sheep in these parts in 1984.

Ambrose smiled (that was becoming a new habit). Then he drove the car deep into the wood.

The village of Ethanton still lay at the foot of the hill. He had driven through it several times in the old days, looking for a safe site for his great evasion: it had then been a crumbling old place, half deserted, its population of course drifting away to Forminster or London, half its cottages converted into desperate would-be tourist-trap tea-rooms. There had been a railway-station a couple of miles off until the economic crisis of 1981; when that had gone, the last flickering vitality had seemed to forsake the place. But now—

Now, to his surprise, Ethanton seemed to be flourishing. There were new cottages along the road. At least, they were new in the sense that they had not been here in the 1980s; otherwise he'd have said they were old. Certainly they were old in style, being mostly of dull red brick with slate roofs, and one even displayed black oak beams and thatch. That one, certainly, had the raw look of recent construction: he peered at it, expecting a sign saying TEAS—but it wasn't there, and indeed the whole front of the house had that shut-in appearance of a genuine cottage. For that matter, there was nothing on this road to suggest tourism: not a single parked car, nor a motor cycle. And the road itself, which led after a dozen kilometres to Formister—it had deteriorated. It was no longer smooth tarmac: it was paved through the village with some lumpy stuff that suggested cobblestones.

He moved cautiously on into the High Street, and came opposite the Green Dragon Inn. And here he was struck motionless with surprise.

It was not much after four o'clock, and yet there was a small crowd of men milling about the inn, some nursing tankards as they sat on the benches outside. The whole dusky scene was feebly brightened by an oil lamp swinging over the main inn doorway; there was a lamp-post on the pavement nearby, but that was not functioning, and indeed three or four workmen seemed to be doing something to it while the village policeman looked on. The clothes of all these people struck Ambrose as curiously antiquated; one drinker in particular boasted a high collar that might have been in the height of fashion in the 1900s. There were no motor-cars anywhere along the street, though there was one odd-looking bicycle leaning against the inn wall, and beyond the lamp-post stood a parked horse carriage complete with coachman and harnessed horse.

As Ambrose gazed at the scene, so the scene began to gaze at him. In particular the policeman stiffened, left the workmen at the lamp-post, and strode over towards him.

Ambrose braced himself. He had anticipated some difficulties, and now he fingered the gun in his trouser pocket. But that was the last resort. He had done his best to make himself inconspicuous: in a pair of nondescript old trousers and a dark grey jersey he thought he might not be too unsuitably dressed for England in 2100. And he had to make contact somehow.

The policeman halted directly before him, surveying Ambrose through the half-gloom. Then he touched his fingers to his tall blue helmet.

'Beg pardon, zur,' he said, in the broadest of broad bumpkin accents, 'but would yew be a stranger in these parrts, zur?' The dialect was more or less appropriate to this county, but almost stagily exaggerated, and in details stagily uncertain, as though the policeman had worked hard to study his role, but still hadn't got it quite right. 'Be you a stranger gen'leman, zur?' he repeated.

'Well—yes,' stammered Ambrose. 'As a matter of fact, I am. I—I was strolling up the hill up there when I had a bit of an accident. Branch of a tree fell on me—nothing serious, but it dazed me, and I don't remember very well—'

Suddenly the policeman's hand shot forward and he seized Ambrose by the shirt collar. Normally when this sort of thing happens, the piece of garment in question is used only for leverage; but strangely now the hand of authority began holding the shirt

collar up to the light, and feeling its texture between its large fingers.

'What, what—' spluttered Ambrose.

'Ar, I thought as much!' exclaimed the policeman grimly. 'One o' them Anaky fellers, you be. Well, m'lad, you'll come along o' me.'

Ambrose clawed for his gun, but the policeman saw the move and grabbed his wrist. By now the workmen had come up, and they joined in the fun, too. Ambrose was seized by half a dozen heavy hands, he was pulled off his feet, and the next moment the policeman had the gun and was flourishing it, to exclamations of 'Ho, yes! One o' *them*, he be! 'Old 'im, me lads—'e's a bleedin' Anaky, 'e is!'

Suddenly there was a new voice. 'Now, now, constable: what exactly is going on here?'

Higher Authority had arrived.

Ambrose was marched into a small back room of the Green Dragon, where he was guarded by the policeman, and interrogated by the gentleman who had taken charge of the proceedings.

Dr Leathey had a trim brown beard, intelligent blue eyes, and a kindly expression; like Ambrose, he seemed in his early thirties. He was dressed very neatly in a dark suit, high collar and tie of pre-World-War-I vintage. The room where he conducted his investigation was dimly lit by candles and an oil lamp, and boasted in one corner a grandfather clock. There was something about that clock that specially bothered Ambrose, but at present naturally he couldn't give his mind to that.

'So, Mr Livermore,' said Leathey, 'you claim loss of memory. That is droll! Loss of memory is no crime whatever, on the contrary, it is extremely virtuous. But I am afraid amnesia will not explain the semi-synthetic texture of your clothing, nor the forbidden make of your automatic pistol. Now really, Mr Livermore, you had better come clean. If I were to hand you on to the County authorities it might go hard with you, but here in Ethanton *I* am the authorities: I am the JP, the doctor, and the specialist in these matters, and I have certain discretionary powers . . . Come, let us get one thing clear, at least: where do you come from?'

'From—from Forminster,' stammered Ambrose.

Leathey and the policeman exchanged glances. Leathey sighed and nodded. 'Mr Livermore, that is practically an admission of guilt, you know.'

'Eh?' said Ambrose.

'Come, why pretend? You must know that for the past sixty years that town has been officially re-christened Backminster—for obvious reasons. A shibboleth, Mr Livermore, a shibboleth! Forminster, indeed! I put it to you, Mr Livermore—you are a BA.'

'PhD, actually,' murmured Ambrose. 'In Physics.'

'PhD?' muttered Leathey dubiously. 'Oh, well, I suppose that's still permitted; I must look up my annals, but I believe those letters of yours are still within the letter of the law. So—*Dr* Livermore, I presume? Quite an intellectual. But really, this is surprising! Do you really come from Backminster?'

'Yes,' said Ambrose, sulkily. He glanced past Leathey at the grandfather clock, and hated it. 'Yes, I did come from—er—Backminster; but that was some time ago.'

'Many years ago?'

'Yes.'

'Curiouser and curiouser,' said Leathey, with a little laugh. Then he seemed to turn serious. 'Dr Livermore, I rather like you. You are an intelligent man, I think, and certainly a gentleman, and that counts for something these days—and of course will count for even more by and by. If you will confess and submit to purgation, you might well become a useful citizen again. You might indeed become a power for good in the land—a perditor, or a chronic healer like myself. Will you submit, Dr Livermore, and let me help you?'

A disarmed prisoner has very little choice when faced with such a proposition. Ambrose thought for about half a second, and then said Yes.

Leathey rose. 'Good. I knew you would see reason. But let us continue these conversations in more agreeable surroundings. Simkins,' he said, addressing the constable, 'I shall take Dr Livermore to my own house, and I will be answerable for his security till tomorrow.'

Then they were escorting him from the inn to the horse carriage, which turned out to be Leathey's private conveyance. As they passed, Ambrose noticed that the workmen, by the light of swinging oil lanterns, were carrying off the lamp-post which they

had uprooted from the pavement. It wouldn't be much loss, he thought: it was a very old-fashioned looking lamp-post.

Suddenly, with a kind of horror, it came to him what had been wrong with that grandfather clock in the inn parlour. Its hands had been pointing to somewhere around seven oclock—several hours wrong; and they had been moving anti-clockwise.

In other words—*backwards.*

As the brougham gathered speed and rattled over the cobblestones, Ambrose leant toward Leathey, who sat opposite. 'What year is this?' he breathed.

'1900,' said Leathey calmly. 'What year did you think it was?'

Ambrose was too overcome to reply. He slumped back with a groan.

Dr Leathey was evidently a well-to-do bachelor; his house was large, stone-built and ivy-covered, and was staffed by several men and maid servants. These people found Ambrose a bedroom, laid him out a nightshirt, and in general saw to his comforts. A valet explained that in the morning, if he wished, he would shave him—'You being, I understand sir, not quite up to handling a razor yourself.' Ambrose soon got the point: safety razors did not exist, so he, as a prisoner, could not be trusted with such a lethal weapon as an old cut-throat blade.

The manservant made him change his clothes completely. Luckily, Ambrose was about Leathey's height and build, so an old suit of the master's fitted him quite well. The high starched collar was damnably uncomfortable; but at last he was presentable, and was ushered in to dinner.

He was Leathey's sole guest. 'Let's not talk now,' said his host, smiling. 'Afterwards, sir, afterwards . . .'

It was a very good dinner, of a somewhat old-fashioned English kind. The vegetables and the beef were fresh and succulent, and there was a very good 1904 Burgundy. Leathey made a joke about that.

'Glad the URN don't object to wines of the future, within reason. I suppose you might say four years isn't Blatant. But I like my stuff just a *little* mellow.'

Ambrose gazed at him and at the bottle in a sort of stupor. Then suddenly he saw the point, and nearly choked on his roast beef.

'Drink some water,' said Leathey kindly. 'That's better. You know, Dr Livermore, you are the strangest Anachronic criminal it

has been my lot ever to run across. Mostly they're hardened, bitter, knowing—you're not. And therefore I have good hopes of you. But before we get to the heart of the matter, let me get you to admit one thing. We live well, don't we, we of the Acceptance? Do you see anything wrong with this village, or this house, or this dinner, anything sordid or unwholesome?'

'No—' began Ambrose, 'but—'

'There you are, my dear feller. The whole world is coming round to seeing how comfortably one can live this way. As that great old reactionary Talleyrand once said, it's only the *ancien régime* that really understands the *douceur de vie*. You BAs are only a tiny minority. The proof of the pudding—ah, talk of the devil! Here it comes now, the pudding. I'm sure you'll like it. It's a genuine old English suet, carefully researched—'

'But it's all insane!' cried Ambrose. Forgetting his manners, he pointed with his fork. 'That clock on the side-board—why is it showing four o'clock and going backwards?'

'My goodness,' said Leathey, looking astonished. 'You really must have amnesia. Protest is one thing, stark ignorance another. You really don't *know*?'

'No!'

After the meal, Leathey took him to his study, which was fitted with half-empty bookshelves and a huge black wall-safe. Over the safe was hung a painting in a rather academic 18th century style, showing some sort of goddess enfolded in clouds; between that and the safe an oaken scroll bore the florid inscription: 'She comes! she comes!' Leathey waved Ambrose to a comfortable arm-chair, and offered him a cigar.

'No? Cigars will still be all right for quite some time, you know, And separate smoking-rooms for gentlemen's houses are not yet compulsory. I do my best to get these things right, you know. All right, now: let's begin . . .'

Ambrose leant forward. 'Tell me, *please*: are we really in the year 1900?'

'Of course,' smiled Leathey.

'But—but we can't be. Reverse time travel is a stark impossibility—!'

'Time travel?' Leathey's eyebrows shot up; then he laughed. 'Ah, I see you're well read, Dr Livermore.' He got up, and took from a shelf near the safe a slim hard-covered volume. '*The Time*

*Machine*,' he murmured. 'Dear Mr Wells! We'll only have him for another five years, alas, and then—into the big safe with him! Freud went this year, and *he* was no loss, but one will miss dear old science fiction. Well, *officially*.' He brought his head close to Ambrose, and gave a confiding chuckle. 'We are acting for the best, you know; but if you join us, there are—compensations. Behind closed doors, with blinds drawn, I can assure you, Dr Livermore, there's no harm in *us* occasionally reading cancelled books. And you can't lick us, you know, so why don't you—Pardon me; you get my meaning, but I believe that's a cancelled phrase in this country. I must learn to avoid it.'

Ambrose gulped. 'I am going mad—'

'No, you *are* mad. I am here to make you sane.'

'You are not really living backwards,' said Ambrose. 'Dammit, you don't take food *out* of your mouths, your carriages don't move in reverse, and yet—. Hey, *what was last year*?'

'1901. And next year will be 1899, of course. Today is the 1st of March, and tomorrow will be 28th February, since 1900 is not a leap year.'

'Of course!' echoed Ambrose hysterically. 'And yet the yellow leaves on the trees show that it's autumn, and— How did this insanity happen? I really do have complete amnesia, you know. In my day time was added, not subtracted—'

'In your day?' said Leathey, frowning. 'What are you, Rip Van Winkle? Well, it may help you to emerge from your delusion if I give you a sketch of what has happened since the Treaty—'

'What treaty?'

'There you go again . . . Well, to start with, after the Last War and the Time of Confusion, it became obvious to the surviving civilised peoples of the world that the game was up: the game of Progress, I mean. The earth was in ruins, its minerals exhausted, most of the great cities devastated. If we were to try to go that way again, it would be madness. Besides, we couldn't do it even if we wanted to: there was so little left, almost no fossil fuels, no minerals, no uranium even. We couldn't even keep going at the rate we'd become accustomed to. There was only one thing for it—to return to a simpler way of life. Well, we could do that in one of two ways: by a controlled descent, or by struggle, resistance, and collapse. Luckily, all the leading nations chose control. It was in 2016, by the old Forward Count, that the Treaty was signed by

the United Regressive Nations. And forthwith that year was renamed 1984, Backward Count; and the next year 1983, and so on.'

'So we really *are* in 2100,' said Ambrose, breathing a sigh of relief.

Leathey fixed him with a severe look. 'No, we really are in 1900, Backward Count,' he said. 'It is only you Blatant Anachronics who call it 2100. And, by God, we are *making* it be 1900! We are removing all the extravagant anachronic wasters of energy—this very day you saw my men getting rid of the last gas-lamp in the village—and so it will go on. It is all very carefully programmed, all over the world. One thing makes our plans very easy, of course—we know exactly *when* to forbid each piece of technology, and when to replace it with its functional predecessor. Our Ten Thousand Year Plan will make all Progressive planning of the bad old days look very silly indeed.'

'Ten Thou—' began Ambrose, staring. 'You're mad! Stark, raving mad! You don't really intend to revert all the way—to the Stone Age!'

'But we do,' said Leathey gently. 'Metals won't last for ever. And agriculture has to go too, in the end—even with the best of care, at last it destroys the soil. But not to worry. Polished stone is very useful stuff, believe me, and one can learn to hunt . . . By then of course the population should be down to very reasonable limits. Oh, I know there are some heretics even among our Regressive establishment who think we'll be able to call a halt well before that, but they are simply over-optimistic fools.'

'There must be a way out,' said Ambrose, 'there *has* to be—'

'There is no way out.' Leathey laughed bitterly now. 'Believe me, I know how you feel. I, too—we all have our moments of rebellion. If only, one thinks, if only the Progressives had handled things differently! When the earth was theirs, and the fullness thereof, and the planets were within their grasp! You know, you can pin-point their fatal error, you can place their ultimate pusillanimity within a few years of the Old Count. It was during the Forward 1970s, when they had reached the Moon, and then—decided that space travel was 'utter bilge', as one leading light of an earlier time put it. If they had gone on, if they had only gone on *then*—why, we would now have all the metals and minerals of the asteroids, all the wealth of the heavens. Perhaps by now we would have reached the stars . . . and then we could have laughed at the

decline of one little planet called Earth. But no: *they* saw no immediate profit in space travel. So they went back, and turned their rockets—not into ploughshares, but into nuclear missiles. Now we haven't the resources to get back into space even if you Anachronics were to take over the world tomorrow. We are tied to Earth for ever—and to the earth, therefore, we must return. Dust to dust.'

'But—the *books*,' cried Ambrose, waving at the half-empty shelves. 'Why are you destroying *knowledge*?'

'Because it's too painful. Why keep reminders of what might have been? It is far, far better to make do with the dwindling literature suitable to our way of life, and not aspire to things that are for ever beyond our reach. We ate of that apple once—now, steadily, we are spitting it out. And in the end we shall return to Paradise.'

'A paradise of hunter-gatherers?' said Ambrose sarcastically.

'Why not? That is the *natural* human condition. Hunter-gatherers can be very happy folks, you know—much happier than agricultural labourers. Hard work is wildly unnatural for humans.' Leathey stood up, yawned, and smiled. 'Well, so it will be. Back to the womb of the great mindless Mother. In our end is our beginning (I hope that's not a cancelled phrase). I'm glad, of course, that the beginning won't come in my time—I would miss all these creature and mental comforts.' And he waved at his books. 'Now, Dr Livermore, it's been a hard day, and the little oblivion calls—I suggest you should sleep on what I've been telling you.'

The next morning after breakfast Dr Leathey gave Ambrose a medical examination, paying particular attention to his head. After several minutes, he shrugged.

'Not a trace of the slightest contusion. And yet you still have this complete amnesia?'

'Yes,' said Ambrose.

'I am afraid I find it hard to accept your story. Don't try to shield your associates, Dr Livermore: I know there must be a cell of yours, probably in London. If you confess, I can promise lenient treatment—'

At that moment came an interruption. The maid brought the message that Simkins the policeman was at the door.

'And, sir,' she said, her eyes goggling, 'he's got a Thing with him sir! I never saw—'

'What sort of Thing, Alice?' said Leathey, getting up.

'A thing on wheels, sir. A sort of an 'orseless carriage . . .'

'Let's go and see it,' said Leathey, smiling gently.

'May—may I come too?' stammered Ambrose. He had a frightful presentiment . . .

'I'd rather you did. Perhaps you can throw some light on this Thing.'

And so, on the drive before the doctor's house, Ambrose beheld it. It was his rather special Volkswagen all right, with the policeman and several yokels standing by it—and, horror of horrors, one yokel *in* it, in the driver's seat!

Constable Simkins was explaining. 'We found this 'ere motor-brougham, sir, up t'wards the Old Camp, in Half-Acre Wood. Jemmy 'ere knew summat about the things . . .'

Jemmy, from the driver's seat, leaned out and grinned. 'Used ter be a chauffer back in old 1910, sir, an' I soon worked the workin's out. Nice little bus she is, too, but mighty queer in some ways. Wot's this little red lever, I want ter know—'

Ambrose screamed, and instantly was clutching the man by the shoulders and upper arms.

'Ah, so it *is* yours,' said Leathey, shaking his head. 'Naughty, naughty, Dr Livermore! A Blatant Anachronism if ever there was one, I'm afraid. That model's been forbidden for all of my lifetime, I think.'

Ambrose was sweating. 'Get—get him out of here!' he choked. 'He could do terrible damage . . .'

'All right Jemmy,' said Leathey easily, 'don't touch anything else. You've done very well up to now: Now, just get out.'

As Jemmy emerged, Ambrose leapt. Before anyone could stop him, he was into the front seat of the car, and jamming down the red lever.

The world grew dim.

For quite some (subjective) time, Ambrose was shaking with the remains of his fright, his hand jammed down hard on the red lever. Then as he recovered control of himself, he realised that he was soaring into the future at maximum speed. At this rate, he'd be going on for thousands of years . . . Well, that might not be too bad. Leave that insane Regressive 'civilisation' well behind.

He eased up on the lever. Where was he now, nearly two thousand years on? It must be quite safe now. Regression would

surely have broken down long ago of its own insanity, and the world must be back on the path of moderate progress; chastened no doubt, wisely cautious, climbing slowly but surely . . . That might be a very good world to live in. Now, what did it look like?

Rural: very rural. The village had disappeared. Below him was a flat green, and around that clumps of great trees, broken in one place by a path; along that way in the distance he glimpsed a neat-roofed building, low pitched like a classical villa. Over the trees rose the bare green downs, apparently unchanged except at the old British camp. There the skyline was broken by wooden frameworks. Skeletons of huts? Perhaps they were excavating. Ah, archaeology! That, and villas, certainly indicated civilised values. And right below the car's wheels—it was half a metre down, but that wouldn't matter—that green was flat as a lawn. Doubtless this was parkland. A good, safe spot to emerge . . .

He jerked over the red lever, and was falling. The car struck the green surface—

But it struck with a splat. There was a bubbling, a sliding . . .

Suddenly, with horror, he knew it. That greenness was not a lawn, but a weed-covered mere. And he and his Time-car were rapidly sinking into it.

He tore open a door and the stinking water embraced him.

He got out of the pond somehow, and when at last he stood on dry land, people had appeared from the direction of the house, which was not after all a stone-built villa but an erection of wood and thatch, rather sketchily painted. The people were half a dozen barefoot folk dressed in skins, and they jabbered at him in some utterly foreign tongue. Some of the men were fingering long spears. And, as he looked back over the green slime, he saw that his Time Machine had sunk without trace into that weedy womb.

The savage men were in process of taking him prisoner, and he was submitting in listless despair, when a newcomer appeared on the scene. This was an elderly man of a certain presence, escorted by a couple of swordsmen, and dressed in a clean white woollen robe. He stared at Ambrose, then interrogated him in that strange tongue.

Ambrose jabbered helplessly.

'Hospes,' said the man suddenly, 'profuge aut naufrage squalide, loqueris-ne linguam Latinam . . .?'

And so Ambrose discovered that Latin was spoken in this age,

by some of the people at least. Luckily, he himself had a reading knowledge of Latin, and now he began to make himself brokenly understood. He was also even better able to follow what the wool-draped gentleman was saying. His name was Obliorix, and he was the local magistrate of the tribe, its guide, philosopher, delegate to some federation or other—and protector of the Druids.

'I see that you have met with some accident, stranger,' said Obliorix, wrinkling his nose, 'and yet, beneath your mire and slime, what extraordinary garments! Bracae might pass, but that is no sort of authorised mantle, and those boots on your feet . . .' He looked grim. 'Could it be that you are a Resister of the Will of Chronos? A belated *Christian*?'

A madness came upon Ambrose then. 'Domine,' he cried, laughing hysterically, 'what year is this?'

'Unus ante Christum,' said Obliorix seriously. '1 BC. And therefore, since last year it is decreed by the United Tribes that all Christians shall be put to death, not as misbelievers but as anachronisms. The Druids on the Hill keep their wicker-work cages constantly supplied with logs and oil—you may see them from here—so I fear me, stranger, if you are a Christian, I cannot save you. To the pyre you must go.'

'I—I am not a Christian,' said Ambrose truthfully but weakly. He was doubled up with helpless laughter. '1 BC,' he repeated, '1 BC!'

'And next year will be 2,' said Obliorix. 'What is so funny about that? Truly, it will be a relief in future to number the years by addition.' He began to smile. 'I like you, absurd stranger. Since you are not a Christian, I think I will make you my jester, for laughter begets laughter. What, will you never stop braying?'

And so Ambrose became at first Chief Jester to Obliorix, magistrate of the tribe of the Oblivisces in southern Britannia; but later he went on to greater things. As Ambrosius Aeternus, he grew to be a respected member of the tribe, and on the death of Obliorix he succeeded to the magistracy and the United Tribes delegateship. In 20 BC he went as envoy to the Roman Governor of Gaul, who, of course, was gradually unbuilding Roman towns for the great withdrawal that would take place in the 50s. And throughout his long and restful lifetime, Ambrose would from time to time break out into helpless laughter, so that he became known in Britannia as Ambrosius the Merry.

It was an added joke that, when he was able to persuade the Oblivisces to drag a certain weedy pond, the Time Machine proved to be rusted beyond repair, and only good to be beaten into spear-points. But for that Ambrose cared nothing; for in any case, what use was a Time Machine which only progressed backwards into history?

And besides, he told himself, he knew what lay in that direction; and he didn't want to get there any faster.

GENE WOLFE

# Our Neighbour

## by David Copperfield

Some earlier sketches of mine having been received with some slight approbation by the public, my good friend the Editor has asked me, for the benefit of the previously named influential group, to prefix this sketch with some explanation of the means by which the affecting circumstances here related reached my attention—a thing I would not otherwise undertake to do, the relation being of so commonplace a nature that only my esteemed friend's request could embolden me to inflict it on my readers.

I am lately married, and dwell with my dear wife Dora and a single servant in a beautiful little house. It fronts upon a beautiful road; and on the other side of the beautiful road stands another beautiful house—not as beautiful as ours, perhaps, but somewhat larger. As certain of my indulgent readers may know, I am engaged in the business of reporting the debates of Parliament for a morning newspaper; but when I am not recording predictions that never come to pass, professions that are never fulfilled, and explanations that are only meant to mystify, I busy myself with tales of my own, things no more false, and much more innocent, than those I must often report as fact. My desk is in the parlour, where the light from the mullioned window renders writing easy and pleasant. That same window provides me with an excellent view of our road—when I care to use it—and of all the carriages and wagons, and travellers on foot and on horse.

There is danger in such a window, and particularly to one like myself, whose trade it is to scribble down the doings of mankind.

One wants a character—very well, a suitable one will soon pass by . . . Then it is time for tea, which Dora and her dog Jip bring in, together with an hour and a half of conversation. I was sinking into just this ooze of difficulty, chewing on my pen and staring out of the window, and wondering—without daring to look at my watch—if it were not time for my two afternoon visitors, when I noticed a lean and shabby young fellow lounging against my gate and staring (as it appeared to me) at the traffic in the street with far more concentration than myself.

Of course, that was the end of passer-by watching for me. From that time forward, for the better part of an hour, I watched *him*—and those who passed before him only incidentally. By the time my darling Dora had entered with her little blue delft pot in its cozy, and the biscuits, and the bread spread with fish-paste and butter, I was quite certain that the fellow had no interest whatsoever in the carters and peddlers and porters and costermongers passing up and down our street, however fascinating this gentry seemed to me. He was looking instead, I felt certain, at the house opposite; amd was only vexed when a wagonload of old furniture or one of those useful but wildly misnamed vehicles called hansoms blocked his view of it.

Now this was a more serious matter. I had not the least idea who our neighbour might be, and no desire to know. But I conceived a responsibility to him based on our recent propinquity. In an excess of intimate spirit, I supposed the watcher might have been dispatched by some sinister enemy to spy on him, or might mean to rob his house. Thus, as soon as my darling Dora was gone; leaving (as her custom is) what remained of the tea things behind her, I went outside, where, laying a firm hand on the fellow's shoulder, I invited him in.

He came willingly enough, and seemed bemused rather than dismayed. 'Sir,' said I, 'you must give me your name. There's nothing else for it.'

'Tom Tipsing,' said he; and he gave me his hand as well. It was a large hand, and rather soft, but it had the small callous upon the index finger that betrays those who wield a pen by night and day. I know that callous well, for I bear it myself. 'You are a clerk,' said I.

'Of Lincolns Inn,' said he.

And now, dear reader, it is time, almost, for me to bow out of this story, which I have already encumbered far too long. Suffice it

to say that my visitor was tall and thin and not more than three-and-twenty; that he had ink-stains on his waistcoat, and a round, smiling face; and that though I discharged him as innocent when he explained to me the origin of his interest in my neighbour, yet he returned thereafter to share a late tea with Dora and me, and recount his adventures.

I have already alluded to Tom's employment. He was an articled clerk. I shall not mention it again—or at least, no more than is necessary. Suffice it to say that it required long hours of tedious work, and left him just enough money for the maintenance of what he chose to call a suite of rooms, in a tumble-down building near Oldham Stairs. It was there that he repaired when he left me at last. He found a ragged old woman awaiting him, and asked her in.

'This is good of you, Master Thomas,' she said when she had seated herself in Tom's second-best chair. 'For an old body like myself. There's not many young people that would do it. Do you think I'm mad? I own that suspicion occurs to me sometimes—particular bad, it is, just before I sleeps. For how could a living man contrive such a thing?'

'You're sound as a nut,' Tom told her stoutly, 'and will be until the day you die.'

'Have you learnt aught?'

Tom shook his head.

'Another day wasted then. Had he no one in?'

'Four visitors,' Tom told her. He wore a long, snuff-coloured bodycoat, and was unbuttoning it as he spoke. 'A poor woman with a child, a City merchant, and a gentleman of the legal profession—his name is Brass, I know, for he comes to our offices sometimes.'

'Could you ask him what he did there?' the old woman inquired eagerly.

Tom shook his head. 'I doubt that he would speak to me on the street.'

'He's rich?'

'Very rich.' Tom's round cheeks, red from the chill without, seemed to wax redder still. He seated himself opposite the old woman, and leaned towards her, rubbing his hands. 'There's money in the law, Mrs Nedels. Heaps of it. Why, some of these cases drag on for fifty years. A hundred years!'

'I know, Master Tom.'

'One or two good ones—that's all a fellow requires, once he has passed the bar. You may see me riding in my carriage yet.'

'I hope and pray so. Master Thomas, I think we must question some of them.'

'The poor ones you mean,' said Tom. 'It would be a rash action, Mrs Nedels.'

Outside, the light had nearly faded; but the last of it fell on the old woman's hands, picking at her skirt. 'We can't ask the rich, Master Thomas—they don't even tell the truth to each other, for all I hear. And think of all the time you've spent, and nothing to show for it.'

'Is Jenny telling us everything that passed while she was there?'

'I do think so,' said the old woman. 'She's not a truthful girl—I know that for all she's my own daughter. But I believe she's been truthful about that. And she never touched a drop, I swear, for a fortnight after she left that house. It's all back again now; but that fortnight was the happiest of my life. Never touched it, and said she didn't want it, she didn't know why. And him? The servants won't even let me talk to him. I took what we had, and bought flowers—oh, I've told you all this.' She had begun to rock back and forth in her chair, with an excitement that was strange to see in one so old and sere.

'That's all right,' Tom told her.

'You don't know what it is to go looking after a daughter at night—hoping to find her asleep under a bench in some cellar, and nothing worse. You don't know, Master Thomas. The butler, he wouldn't even allow me to bring them in—the flowers, I mean. Daisies they were, chiefly; I had them from a friend in Covent Garden Market. He took them from me.' She sighed. 'I'll go now, though, and let you sleep. You must be tired after watching all day. Will you follow one of the poor ones next time, though, and ask questions of her? Promise me?'

'If the chance allows,' Tom said. He got up to open the door for the old woman. When she had gone, he took a rusty match box from his waistcoat pocket and struck a light to kindle the room's one lamp. An open law-book lay on the table before it; for his supper he applied himself to that and a pipe of tobacco.

For three days, his employment kept Tom's eye from my neighbour's door; but on the fourth he was back again, leaning on

my gatepost. Winter was setting in, and the weather had turned dark as well as chill. For an hour or more his stoicism went unrewarded—then, like a shower of gold, the rich came. Four equipages, one after another, drew up to the door that had been the object of his faithful scrutiny. Then it began to rain—one of our fine, cold autumn rains. He knocked on my door hoping for shelter (so he told us later) but Dora and I had gone a-visiting, and Mary Anne, our 'ordinary', would not admit him. She reported afterward that he had said something about a poor man coming; she thought that he meant himself, but I by that time knew enough of the mystery that engaged him to understand that he referred to the destitute person whom he expected to see admitted to my neighbour's house, together with the wealthy callers.

Tom was just leaving my premises, as it would happen, when he was accosted by my neighbour himself. He had never seen the man before, but he knew his name (which was Dr McApple) from inquiries he had made of the tradesmen; and his appearance from the testimony of Mrs Nedel's daughter Jenny—a tall, sharp-faced, hollow-cheeked old man, with snapping black eyes. He wore a fine hat, Tom said, but had a square of oilcloth draped over it to keep off the rain; so that he looked like a Spanish *duenna* in a play.

'Sir!' this Dr McApple called out, as if Tom were a furlong off instead of a foot away. 'Sir, what do you here?'

'Why,' said Tom, who thought himself discovered, 'I came to call on my acquaintance Mr Copperfield, but I find him not at home.'

'So?' Dr McApple stepped back and seemed to examine the unfortunate clerk as though he intended to buy him. 'May I ask your business, sir, and place of lodging?'

'My business *here*,' Tom said, having recovered somewhat from the initial shock of near discovery, 'I have already told you. I have rooms at Number 27 Perry Lane—near Oldham Stairs; you may inquire for me there.' And with that he turned and made as if to go.

'Wait!' the old man cried. 'You might almost do yourself—sir, would you engage to find a pauper for me? I would pay a pound—that is,' he added hastily, 'ten shillings to you, and ten to him.'

Tom's first impulse was to accept this offer; but he reflected that too quick an agreement might awaken the Scottish doctor's suspicions. 'I am a gentleman, sir,' he said, 'and gentlemen do not act for shillings. If you wish me to do as you ask, it must be for a

guinea. But if your purposes are philanthropic, explain them to me; then should I approve, I'll be your confederate for nothing.'

'My friend,' Dr McApple said, 'they are the most philanthropic in the world; but I cannot explain them to you.'

'What,' said Tom, 'must charity be hid?'

'At times it must. You will find me a poor man, you say for a guinea. It is not a fair price, but I must accept—I had a beggar engaged to come, but it would appear that he has been detained, and my servant, who performs these offices for me, is on holiday. I cannot desert my guests, or be seen bringing such into my house, so I must ask help of you. A woman will suit me as well as a man, but no better. Bring who you will, but whomever you bring must be sober or nearly, and no Bedlamite. And destitute, you understand. They'll have a good meal with me—you may tell them that. But be swift; you have no more than an hour, and, sir, it would be to our benefit if the thing were done in less.'

Tom nodded and made off through the rain. His first thought was to fetch Mrs Nedels herself, though he was by no means certain that he could find her and return with her in an hour's time. He had gone but a few streets over, however, when he saw just such a person as Dr McApple seemed to require. He was tall, but much stooped; and as he was using his coat to cover what appeared to be a large box carried around his neck by a strap, his sodden shirt, clinging to his body, showed ribs as distinct and unpadded as the pickets of a fence. Tom approached him, and the poor fellow's face brightened for a moment as he saw him.

'Birds, sir?' said he. 'Would you care to buy a bird, young sir? It will sing in your room even when it's as dark as this out. They makes a fine gift to a young lady.'

'Birds?' asked Tom, for he did not at first quite understand what was meant.

'Wrens!' said the birdman. 'Robins and larks too. Just point out the chap you want, and I'll have him out for you quick as a wink.' He drew his coat away from the box he carried, and Tom saw that there were indeed eight or ten damp, ruffle-feathered birds of various kinds inside, too tired and discouraged to flutter. 'And I've a little basket wove that you can take the chap home in,' the coatless man continued, 'though you must have a cage for him once you get him there.'

'I don't want one of your birds—' began Tom.

'Very well, sir. Perhaps some other time.'

'But I can put you in the way to earn ten shillings very easily. That's as much as five of your birds cost, isn't it?'

'Well, sir,' the birdman said, 'More normal—if you take my meaning—I gets three of them. Howsoever, because of the rain and all, I would take two. But that's just to you, sir, special like.'

'But you'd rather have ten, wouldn't you? Come along. You'll get a good meal to boot.'

Tom took a step in the direction of Dr McApple's house, and the birdman followed him, limping. 'Please, sir, what am I to do?'

'No heavy work, I promise you.'

'Ah,' said the birdman, 'that's well. I've got this timber leg, sir, and I can't do it. I would if I could, and that's the truth.'

'You seem to get along pretty well,' said Tom.

'It's not as bad as you would think, sir, for one that's took off just below the hip,' said the birdman. He fell silent after this philosophical observation; and because Tom did not wish to encourage further questions, he was silent as well.

It seemed odd to Tom to knock on the door he had watched so long; but he was eager to get out of the rain, and pounded violently. The birdman stood a pace or two behind him, tugging at his hat (Tom said) and looking doubtful. Dr McApple himself let them in, paying no attention to Tom, but a great deal to the birdman, whom he shook most heartily by the hand, and directed to the kitchen, where he declared the cook had a meal waiting for him.

When the birdman was gone, he turned to Tom. 'There is a debt owing between us, sir,' he said, 'that I will settle now,' (handing Tom two half-sovereigns and a shilling), 'following which, I must ask you to leave.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Tom, and took the money. Then, seeing Dr McApple turn away while his hand was still on the knob, he made a show of opening and closing the door, and stepped—exceedingly softly and silently, he says—behind the hall tree.

For five minutes he remained there, hearing nothing and rather tickled about the nose by a greatcoat with a long nap. Then, venturing to peer out, he perceived that the doctor and his guests had assembled in a drawing room opening off the hall. Tiptoe he made his way to a spot near the entrance to this room, from whence he could hear all that was said.

'It is very good of you, gentlemen, to assist me with my investigations.' This was Dr McApple.

'No, no. Not at all.' So said several voices; and another: 'You are acquiring an outstanding reputation, Doctor. An acquaintance of mine in the City, Mr Breedlove, has told me he considers you the only worthy successor to the great Franz Joseph Gall.'

'Hardly,' said the doctor. 'Though I thank ye both kindly. But now we have finished your readings, I should like to demonstrate a second science to ye—that of Mesmerism.'

There was an excited murmur.

'Or as others may call it,' continued Dr McApple, 'animal magnetism. In phrenology we deal with what I may call the most concrete of mental phenomena—the skull itself.'

'Concrete—that's good,' said a jolly voice. 'No wonder they call us hard-headed businessmen.' 'Be quiet, Parsons, and let the doctor speak—we can hear you anytime.'

'As I was saying, we deal with the skull itself. Certain areas of the brain are responsible for specific mental qualities—humour, justice, judgment, temperance, strength of will, and the like. By palpating the skull, we can determine the development of these qualities in the individual under examination—just as I have done with you gentlemen. The elements of phrenology are now well established; the only thing left for researchers like myself is the resolution of apparent conflicts, the cases in which we find that a man's behaviour does not correspond in all respects to what his skull tells us it should be.'

'Your science is not perfected, then, I take it,' said the jolly voice.

'No. It sometimes occurs that a combination of other qualities may serve to stifle one that appears well developed.'

'I see. You said Waterford here was good-natured. But it might be that the bumps of argumentativeness and all-around obstinacy are so perfectly developed that no one would ever know it.'

There was half a minute of general laughter; then the doctor said, 'Something like that, yes,' and a new voice asked, 'But what about Mesmerism? I think we all understand phrenology well enough, thanks to the trouble you have put yourself to on our behalf.'

'It stands at the opposite pole,' declared Dr McApple, 'as I have already indicated. It is said to rely on the magnetic manipulation of impalpable ethers, and even that is dubious. But it can produce

startling—though often short-lived—effects. You gentlemen have all been grist for one set of experiments, so I will not ask ye to volunteer yourselves for another—particularly since magnetic subjects seldom recall the experience afterward. There is a poor wretch in my kitchen whom I shall examine in your presence instead, allowing ye, as some small payment for the patience ye have shown me, to see how Mesmerism can be used as we have already used phrenology—to gauge the human qualities.'

As the doctor finished speaking, there came the tinkle of a bell, and Tom, guessing correctly that this was a signal to the cook indicating that the birdman was to be brought to the drawing room, made haste to conceal himself behind the clothes tree again. In a few seconds he heard the sound of footsteps—the thumping of the birdman's wooden leg, and the stolid tread of another. When the birdman had entered the drawing room, and the cook's steps had returned once more in the direction from whence they had come, Tom crept out again, and took up his old post near the drawing room door.

One of the visitors was saying: 'How can you be certain the trance is complete?'

'Watch.'

For a moment, as Tom said afterward, the room was quiet as a church. Then there came a collective gasp of amazement, and someone asked: 'Didn't that hurt him?'

'He feels nothing,' said Dr McApple. 'Now, John, you are bleeding, and it may get on my carpet. I want you to stop it.'

There was silence again, until one of the men who had spoken earlier said, 'Astonishing!'

'In the trance state, ye see, even bodily functions that are involuntary in the normal course of things can be brought under the control of the magnetic operator. In this same way, we can learn the whole history of the poor man's life—all with a veracity we could not be certain of were it not for the condition we have induced in him.'

'Will it take long?'

'I think not. That is another reason, ye understand, for employing a pauper as our subject—such poor people's lives can be compressed into a simple narrative.'

There was a pause; then Dr McApple said: 'John, I want you to tell these fine gentlemen the first thing you can remember, and

then the next thing, and so on, until the present moment.'

'That's Mother,' (the birdman sounded sleepy, Tom thought, but not much different from the way he had on the street otherwise). 'She took in washin', you know. I used to play in the water round her feet while she did it, and once I got hold of the soap and went to eat it, and she took it away—which perplexed me at the time, so I believe I cried. She had relatives in the country, I think, though I don't know who they were. We used to go to see them when I was small, her carrying me part way. Sometimes we got a ride on a donkey cart goin' home—possible they give her somethin' to it, or possible it was them drivin'; I don't know. Then when I was a big boy of six or seven I went to work in the rope-walk. 'Twasn't an apprenticeship properly, for there was none to be served; but there was twenty or thirty of us boys, and some women too, combin' hemp. It was hard on the hands; you could always tell those that was newly come to it by the claret on their fingers—ruddy-mittens was what they called us. There was a boy there that was from Somerset that everyone made a guy of for not talkin' proper. But I liked him and I used to set by him, and it was him that taught me how to lime the birds.

'We were goin' to make a lark pie, was what we said, when we'd caught enough. Only we never did. I misdoubt we had the coppers to buy flour for the crust if we had. But he showed me how to mix the lime, and the way to take the little chaps off without harming them when they were glued in it.

'After a time I couldn't stand the work no more, so I ran home to Mother; only she was gone, and no one couldn't tell me where. It may be that I never did come to the right house—I was just a little lad, you know. However that may be, I never saw her after. It's my hope she married well—possible a butcher, for she often spoke of marryin' a butcher or a sausage maker, having a liking for those trades, as she said, for they knew you couldn't never get all the stains from their aprons, and didn't demand it. Then she might have sent for me when she'd have reconciled the master to it, but I'd have been gone by then. But of course as a lad I never thought on all that—it never so much as entered my head. Instead I met another boy that was goin' to 'list as a powder-boy; so I 'listed too, on the *Swiftsure*.

'It all went well enough for me after that, except one time when I was a young man and decided I'd stay on in Spain, havin' tooken

a liking to some people there. My captain got wind of that and sent eight marines after me, and I was flogged on four ships for it, and lucky to have lived. Then I lost my leg—wasn't shot off like you might think, 'twas mashed when the slings broke and a gun fell on it.

'So that was the end of sailorin' for me. I'm a man what doesn't know his letters, but I'd have said I knew a lot . . . Why I could manage most any sort of boat in any weather you please, and make rope or tie all kinds of knots you might wish, or mend sail, or do carpenter's work. I can load a gun, too, and fire it off, and before I got this spar limb I was a good hand for layin' aloft. But the only thing that has been of any service to me lately was what that Somerset boy taught—liming birds.

'I make my lime and carries it far enough out of the town to catch them (main hard that is, for it makes my stump sore), then brings them back and sells them as I can. Today was bad, the weather bein' so chill and wet. There's a place you can sleep in for threepence, but there's another I like better for seven; and then I needed somethin' to buy somethin' for my birds with. Grain is good enough for some, but there's others that requires a smatterin' of meat. I can buy catsmeat for ha'pence, but that's no help if I don't have ha'pence.'

Dr McApple said, 'Do you know where you are now?'

'In a gentleman's house.'

'And how old are you?'

'That I don't know for certain; but by my way of reckonin', rising fifty years.'

'Have you ever wished to be young again, John?'

'Oh, aye. I suspose we all want that, one time or another.'

'You are going to get your wish. You are mistaken, you see, about your age. You are still only a boy—do you understand?'

'Aye aye, sir.'

'A small boy.'

'Yes, sir.'

'In fact, it is the day you came home from the rope-walk, looking for your mother. It is that very minute. You are knocking at the door of your old home.'

Tom said he held his breath when he heard this, for he didn't know what would happen. For half a heartbeat or so, nothing did. Then he heard three knocks, tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . spaced a long

time apart, and a voice that might have been a child's say, 'Mama? Mama?'

Tap . . . tap.

'Mama? Mama, are you in there? Mama? Mama, let me in.' (The tapping continuing all this time.)

One of the visitors said: 'By heavens, he's beginning to weep. This is quite amazing, Doctor.'

'MAMA!'

'How long will he remain like this?'

'For hours, unless I order him to desist.'

'It's Johnny, Mama! Sir, please, sir, have you seen my mother? Do you know if she is to home?'

'He won't become violent, will he?'

'It's very unlikely.'

'Sir, please, sir, does she live here still?'

'I think we had better go. Are you coming, Parsons?'

The tapping continued, but Tom did not wait to hear more of it. He was on the point of secreting himself once more behind the hall tree, when he considered that as the guests took their departure they would also take their coats, leaving him revealed like the naked trunk of a beech in autumn. There was no other place in which he might conceal himself; he was about to throw open the door and run for it, when the first of the guests stepped into the corridor.

Tom would still have decamped even then, but a bit of a law case he had recently read, in which flight was adduced in court as evidence of guilt, came into his head and convinced him that it might be better to stay. He had, after all, entered the house in its owner's employ, and he could argue, if need be, that he had never been directly dismissed, and had remained in the hope of being of further service.

With this in mind, he opened the door, and assisted the gentlemen with their coats, and otherwise acted as it might be expected a major-domo would. He saw the old Scottish doctor's face harden when he saw him, but he said nothing, and Tom contrived to ignore him.

When the last of the guests had gone, the doctor himself went to the door and shut it. 'You've rain upon your cheeks,' said he.

'I suppose I do,' responded Tom.

'Possibly your eyes have been watering from the wind.'

'That may be. May I ask where my birdman is?'

'Sleeping now. I take it you were listening to us.'

'I was, yes.'

'It did him no harm, you may be sure. And he will remember naught when he wakes.'

'You think that I am a pryer and a spy,' said Tom, 'and I don't blame you for it. But I am a friend to the mother of a girl you have used as you used that unfortunate man tonight; it is at her instigation that I have taken the liberties I have today.'

'Did this girl suffer by coming here?' Dr McApple inquired. His frown had lightened somewhat.

'No, sir. She was greatly benefited—at least, for a time.'

'I recall the girl. I made a suggestion I felt would be to her improvement while she was in the trance state. Can you tell me how long it remained effectual?'

'A fortnight, I believe.'

'That is longer than most. I attempt to help these people when I can, though that is not my real business.'

'May I be so bold,' said Tom, greatly daring, 'as to ask what your real business may be?'

'Pity.' The doctor's frown was entirely dispersed by this time, an expression of deep sadness having replaced it. 'It is my theory that an area just here—' he reached up, and before Tom could object, touched the left side of his head, above and behind the ear, 'controls pity of the sort that persons of wealth might be expected to feel toward the destitute.'

'I see,' said Tom. 'Then you are trying to match that exhibited, with the degree of development found there in wealthy individuals.'

'No, sir,' replied the doctor. 'Rather, I am attempting to determine why, no matter what the apparent development, the quality itself appears not to exist.'

After that, he said no more; but turned on his heel, leaving Tom standing alone in the hall—from whence he came, in time, to recount his adventures to Dora and me.

IAN WATSON

# The Rooms of Paradise

1

Something went terribly wrong with my rebirth. There's no doubt about it now, thirty days into the new life. Somehow the categories of time and space are cross-wired in my infant brain. Duration of days and extension in space have interchanged, and I read the world awry. How else can I explain what is happening to me—thirty *rooms* as I am into this seemingly endless building . . .

If synaesthesia is the word for confusion of the five senses—so that the colour yellow sounds like a gongbeat, or a vinegary taste rubs the tongue with sandpaper—what is the name for this terrible malaise? Syndimensionality?

Perhaps Fitzgerald's Syndrome, after my own name? To the discoverer belongs the honour of naming, they say . . . But how do I communicate this discovery? Where and when do I communicate it—when 'where' is 'when', and 'when' is 'where'? If I'd crashlanded alone on an unknown and empty planet, what use would there be in christening it 'Fitzgerald's World'? I may as well settle for Syndimensionality.

But why? Why did it happen?

I'd followed all the prescribed meditation patterns to scaffold my mind against the shock of sudden awakening in this blank putty infant body. I'd practised self-enhancement and ego-strengthening, gestalt-awareness and psychic integration. (Indeed, it's to this heightened mental discipline that I owe my ability to remain sane and observant under these vastly altered, unpredicted circumstances.) And it all went off, in the main, as I'd been led to

believe. My seventy-year-old body was wheeled by the service-robot into the isolation chamber. (I'd had a mild heart attack, and could have had a new heart, surely; yet my body was obviously passing its prime. Why linger longer? *Why risk it?*)

Isolation, then: no living being could be near me now, no man or woman, bird or beast, insect or plant. The chamber itself was surrounded by a great electrified Faraday Cage of copper coils, to keep at bay the vital radiations of other life, lest the life field of any other living thing interfere with mine at the moment of Change-over. I would be robot-tended in isolation for seven days after Change-over while I 'firmed' my new self—a generous enough safety margin.

The robot was a stainless steel drum rolling on silent rubber wheels, with two flexible arms and a variety of nozzles, teats, hidden drawers and trays. As it manoeuvred my naked body underneath the scanner, I brooded on the details of the scanning process and what it would shortly do to the *me-ness* that is my individuality, my unique pattern, or if you prefer it, my soul . . .

(You? Where are *you*? Is there any 'you' observing me as I pass from room to room, from day to day? By the end of another week will you have come up with the formula for freeing me from this crazy progression? If so, I suppose you shall have the honour of christening my syndrome. You're welcome to it.)

'Rebirth,' explained Astralsurgeon Dr Manzoni, 'was an outgrowth from early matter transmission failures . . .'

'Yes, yes,' said I, impatient to pass the portal into the Institute and begin preparing for Change-over. In my next life, I decided, I wouldn't concern myself with business affairs in the least. I would be a pentathlete, competing in the sports of the five worlds, letting the physical side of my nature bloom. I would inherit handsomely enough from myself after the thirty per cent levy to the Institute for rebirth and fostering to the age of five, legal majority for the reborn; and I was looking forward to those first five years as a paradise regained of play and exuberant imagination. The Institute has much to offer the young reborn, to amuse the years of early growth: a thousand and one nights and days of tapesimulated fairyland, not to mention all the bodybuilding amenities of playgrounds and shoreline.

'It's necessary to remind you,' my Astralsurgeon said gently,

'just as it will be necessary for you to remind yourself who you are, to recall your old existence in the new body. Don't take any of it for granted, Mr Fitzgerald. We need you to understand what will happen to you perfectly. Haste only hinders you.'

So I relaxed. Actually, there were quite a few details I'd forgotten or didn't know.

Dr Manzoni was tall and silver-haired, with a long thoroughbred nose on which were balanced, of all things, spectacles. I wondered whether these were simply a personal affectation or whether they served some other, professional purpose. Whether, perhaps, those lenses rendered my life field—my very soul—visible to him, so that this interview was conducted not with ageing flesh and blood but with the essential energy pattern of Robert Fitzgerald . . .

The room itself was Islamic in design, with receding planes of symmetry in mosaic and tile, and pastel-toned. It bespoke permanence within change, the regeneration of forms, pattern, gentleness. The window—a stone grille of hexagons and star shapes—opened on the blue Mediterranean lapping Tunisian sands. Naked boys and girls were romping there under the patient eye of an attendant dressed in the lilac, phoenix-crested robe of the Institute. Those were reborn ones, almost ready to leave and resume their adult lives again. Or new lives entirely, I reminded myself. Or new ones. Whatever they chose.

How carefree was their play! Yet patient too, savouring the future . . . Not rushing madly into deep waters. How delightful it would be when sexuality came round again. I imagined myself briefly as some girl-child a hundred years old, with all the knowledge of an old lady, yielding to her first choice of lover in the second life . . . Well, I would not be a girl, of course; but sexual fulfilment obviously came earlier to a reborn girl than to a boy.

Patience. I listened to Manzoni.

Rebirth was a spin-off from matter transmission which had proved, in the event, wildly expensive as a means of shifting anything from A to B, if A was any further than a few metres from B. So the dream of hopping instantaneously around the globe from booth to booth had soon evaporated. However, it evaporated for another reason too: in all the early tests with live animals, only dead bodies arrived at B.

The vibrational scanning method converted mass into energy,

back again into mass, almost instantaneously. (For all atoms vibrate to a tune; the 'symphony', the manifold fugue, may be a chair—or a rose or a human being.) Yet in that instant, when mass was entirely patterns of energy, the mass could be shunted to another, nearby location in resonance with the scanning beam. A paperweight or a pencil shifted position, intact; but a mouse or a beetle arrived intact, yet lifeless.

It transpired that a ghost was left in the scanner: a pattern which did not reconvert into mass, since it had not strictly speaking been mass in the first place—though it had been present. A method of capturing souls had been found.

Before long, the researchers found they could reattach this 'astral' pattern to the body, retransmitted back from B to A. The perfected method nowadays is to capture the astral pattern—the bioplasmoid soul, with all its memories and thoughts, beliefs and desires—on brief 'hold', while the old body is shunted a few metres sideways into cremation (so that there's no resonant envelope of old familiar flesh around to pull the soul) then to shunt in the *tabula rasa* of a dummy body, android flesh grown at an accelerated rate *in vitro* from one's own DNA under the constant focus of one's Kirlian aura field recorded on entering the Institute and constantly updated. In a very real sense one is simply re-entering at a much earlier stage. The bioplasmoid soul adjusts to its smaller envelope with relative ease.

'The soul, after all, has a hunger for the flesh,' smiled Dr Manzoni.

I thought of the two vivid young reborns who had been at the exit-party I held in Amsterdam before flying down here to this shoreline south of Sfax. Tonio Andreson and Julia-Maria Geizenstein were only eight and nine years old metabolically, and such a sparkling, witty couple. They were in love with life and with each other (though touchingly they could do little about this yet). We admired them with friendly, tender anticipation of greater happiness to come. They would honeymoon, they hinted, out by the rings of Saturn. They were every fairy tale come true. I was, I realise, half in love with Julia-Maria myself.

Outside, a stork was flapping its white way towards its nest atop a spike of Roman ruin invaded by the sands. Appropriate!

I nodded and asked appropriate questions. And so I entered the Institute, to learn the disciplines of rebirth.

So, a few weeks later, I lay alone and naked under the scanner.

A sudden lurch . . . A tearing sensation, as of a bandage being torn free from deep inside myself: from inside my heart and lungs and belly.

I plummeted down a deep well into darkness, at the bottom of which was suddenly brilliance, reflection, identity: *myself.*

And I was lying where I'd been lying before, except that the chamber seemed much larger. It blurred; my eyes weren't properly adjusted to it. I cried out my first breath.

My tongue explored a toothless mouth. I was a thing of rubber; muscles were hardly there yet, to be commanded. My hand flapped across my face. Then I relaxed.

It would have been nice to hear the voice of Dr Manzoni greeting me by intercom. I would rather have liked some congratulations. But no voice said anything. I did need privacy to stabilise myself, to grow firm. I concentrated on this, till I slept.

When I woke, I was in another room: an amorphous, aquarium-like cube of opaque green glass tiles. The service-robot stood by the cot I now lay in. It fed me warm milk and washed me and blew me dry and wrapped flannel round my midriff, then retired to a corner. My body-idea of myself still slopped out far beyond the boundaries of my shape. Phantom arms and legs hung over the sides of the cot. I felt a little like a plucked, trussed chicken, lopped and trimmed. But I accepted this gladly—gradually reeling in my body-idea to the new, reduced dimensions. Likewise I gladly accepted my sudden incontinence; and the silence and isolation.

I slept, I woke, I sucked milk, I meditated. After a long while the indirect lighting, which came from nowhere in particular but was simply present, began to dim. Night-time. Again I slept.

When I woke up again to false daylight, to my surprise my cot was in another windowless room, this one chequered red and green.

So it has gone on ever since for thirty days—through thirty rooms. I read rooms as days now; they must stand for days. Turning my head one way, I see the door to tomorrow's room standing slightly ajar; the other way I see the door to yesterday shut tight. I think it's that way round, but it's always night and I'm asleep or very drowsy when the robot wheels me through the door.

Green room, red room, golden room; tile, brick, plastic—always different yet identical in their emptiness, their indirect lighting, the absence of windows.

I suppose I must seem autistic or psychotic to an outside observer, exhibiting a total failure of response. They must be all around me now that the first seven days are long past: Dr Manzoni, my psychic integration tutor Mme Matsuyama, the Institute Administrator Radwan Hussainy, the nurses, worrying, trying to reach me. But I persist in seeing only another impossible new room, empty apart from my attendant robot.

Syndimensionality: time and space have twisted . . . Yet I live, I breathe, I suck liquids, I flex my little fists, I squeak (still struggling to fit the words around my tongue), I look this way and that attentively. All memories of the old life are intact.

'Where are you all? Show yourselves, dammit!'

I cry, then stop myself crying. Be firm, soul of Robert Fitzgerald, reborn man!

On. On.

## 2

I am five hundred rooms old now, give or take a few: a teetering toddler—precocious enough, though that's only to be expected since I've been through this all before. My service-robot, dumb waiter supreme, still feeds me—solids now, as well as liquids—and washes me down and cleans up my messes. (Where does it get all the food and drink from? Where does it send the messes to? Hyperspace? In what dimension of experience is this happening?) My cot got left behind a few rooms back, and now I sleep anywhere—a feral child. Today's room is rococo, with ranks of gilded plaster *putti* to support the ceiling . . .

Every night the robot moves me on to the next room in its flexible arms, cradling me. Yet really it's a very neutral thing; there's no sense of menace, or camaraderie, about it. I'm not tempted to call it Fred or Charlie.

And today, in full 'daylight' and of my own free will, I toddle to the door that stands ajar, heave it open and stumble through into tomorrow's room. It's a larger room than previous ones, an empty Moorish Alhambra. The dumb waiter follows me. Behind, as

though drawn magnetically by its metal rump, the door shuts quietly and finally with a faint tick like the hand of a clock moving on. When I toddle back and try to push it open, there's no way.

On I toddle into the next room—a huge mock-igloo. The box of tricks rolls after me, the door clicks shut. And on into the next, the next, the next. Egyptian tomb, Greek temple, and log cabin. Click, click, click.

So this is possible. Suppose, on the other hand, I refuse to move on?

I stay put. I stay and stay. The light dims and brightens at boring day-long intervals five times in succession. I breakfast, lunch and dine a total of fourteen times in that log cabin. On the fifth night, having stockpiled as much sleep as I can during the day, I sit up in the darkness like some tot hooked on midnight TV, watching even when the set is off. When I'm almost nodding off, my dumb waiter rolls over and lifts me gently. Time has caught up with me. Time to move on. I kick and squirm, but into the next dark room it bears me bodily; the door clicks shut.

Next night, I try even more vigorous evasive manoeuvres, dashing and ducking and rolling in the darkness. But it shepherds me; it corners me with ease. Onward I'm borne.

What is at the end? Is there some final room housing God seated in judgement, God the big hotelier?

Or will there be a mirror, wherein I see myself approaching, old man by the time I reach it, having entirely recapitulated my life like some absurd spoof on ontogenesis: I who cheated that final room of life by rebirth?

Am I only a reflection of my soul, a secondary ghost trapped in the circuits of the astral scanner? I beat on the walls with my toddler's fists. 'Let me out!' Does some red light blink on a scanner console in the dimension of Tunisia?

Perhaps I am the true soul, doomed to wander these rooms for as long as the android flesh—of which I inhabit the meta-physical analogue over here—lives out its whole new life over there, possessed of an analogue soul, a mere reflection of me? Is this true of all reborns? Perhaps my dumb waiter is a kind of *corpus callosum* of the soul: a bridge linking one soul-hemisphere amusing itself on Earth with this other soul-hemisphere which is myself and is stored in Purgatory. (And what if Robert Fitzgerald over there enjoys his second life so much that he opts to be reborn yet again . . .?) Is there

any way of communicating across this bridge? I've tried words; my waiter is truly deaf and dumb. Shall I rap out morse code on its metal flanks? SOS—*Save Our Soul.* Shall I stuff a message up its cleaning nozzle? Written with what? On what? Blood and skin? For a while Monte Cristo-like fantasies of escape, or at least of message smuggling, flourish—then wither away. I am here; and the only way is forward.

Forward, then, as far as my toddler's legs will carry me!

How many rooms can I travel in a day? Fifty? A hundred?

Alas, when I have toddled through twenty different rooms (Byzantine, Art Deco, geodesic dome . . .) I realise that my robot is no longer following. It lurks, two rooms back. Two doors stand open, though not the third behind; that's shut tight. Which makes me anxious in case a door suddenly shuts in my face, cutting me off from my source of food and drink. I shall have to go back and try to figure out the reason for its inertness.

*The door won't let me pass.* Invisible elastic holds me back, a soft resistance growing firm as steel the harder I shove against it.

I have to wait.

And wait.

Comes night, I lie down to sleep, thirsty.

Comes another day, and still my dumb waiter stays where it is. Comes night, and some time during it, while I hunch around my hollow belly, throat dry as sticks, the robot rolls forward into the room next door; for it's there in the morning, and the door beyond has shut.

There it stays, out of reach, through the next awful day till night falls when it rolls in beside me at last to feed and succour me in the dark.

If I had toddled on a few rooms further, unawares . . . Can a soul starve? Can it die of thirst? Here, apparently it can. So I am limited to ranging no further than eighteen rooms ahead . . .

Oh rat in the maze, how soon do you learn the rules? This is a maze that only has one route, though, and that route is straight ahead. The rules here relate to finding one's way through time.

As though to keep me occupied, furniture appears—at first sparingly but then, as my body puts on a growth spurt of its own over the next few hundred rooms, with increasing frequency. Before long, rooms are handsomely and even lavishly furnished:

with chairs and bureaux, tables and cabinets, chaise-longues and sofas, chests of drawers, armchairs and the occasional glorious bed . . .

Even so, all chests and cupboards and desks are empty, not even lined with so much as a sheet of old newspaper. Bookcases hold no books. No paintings or prints hang on the walls—there are no representations of an outside world. Nor are there any clocks.

Could the rooms get *too* crowded? This idea sparks off another: now that the rooms contain something, I can interfere with them! Tugging open the door from the 19th century salon I'm currently in, I discover a gorgeous Shinto temple interior beyond: in vermilion, black and gold, with green *tatami* matting, a coiling silver dragon on the ceiling, lions painted round the walls, and huge metal vases standing about holding tall metal lotus blossoms. I select a light lyre-back chair of ebonised wood from the 19th century and try to shove it through into the Shinto temple. No way can I do it. Invisible elastic thrusts the chair back. Not me, just the chair. Passing through the doorway myself, I try to drag the chair after me. Impossible. The chair only belongs in one room; it only exists in one.

Does it cease to exist, once I have passed on and the door has shut? Is it transmuted and recycled into a stool or part of a sofa further ahead? The problem of *rules* is beginning to obsess me, generating a sort of perverse thrill in the midst of my predicament. If there are rules, and if I can learn them . . .

The dumb waiter lifts the lyre-back chair aside and follows me through into Shinto-land; the door clicks shut. Farewell, chair.

A library! Complete with library steps with leather treads.

All the books are dummies, five and ten-volume blocks of leather-bound, gold-tooled dummies. Enraged, I toss them upon the carpet. Ashamed of myself, I restore them tidily a little later.

At least the spines bear titles—the first words that I've seen in years. Here we have *A History of Silesis*. Here, *Mr Jorrocks' Jaunts and Jollities* by R. M. Surtees. Sallust's *Jugurthine War* and Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* . . .

Maybe, in a later room, when I'm supposed to be able to read (by the age of six or seven, say) books will have words in them? How damnably frustrating that'll be, if I can't carry them from one room to the next!

Onward, onward. I am the Wanderer, homeless in this never ending home, a nomad with nowhere to pitch my tent for longer than a day.

I brood on the great journeys of the past; on Marco Polo setting off for Cathay. From Venice, was it? Just imagine the problem of interpreters in those early days before world languages existed. Imagine his having to hire yet another new interpreter at every new language boundary. Imagine his arrival at the court of the Great Khan with a huge retinue of interpreters of a hundred nationalities and the Khan's greeting passing back along that vast recursion, translated out of Chinese into Mongol into Manchu into Tibetan into Nepalese into Indian tongues innumerable into Farsi . . . eventually into Bulgarian, Serbian, and finally into Marco's native Italian so that he can at last comprehend, simply: 'Hullo there.' Oh chain of interpreters, oh chain of rooms. What did I do to deserve this? Was it the *hubris* of seeking another life? Perhaps if I pray, I may be let out?

Onward, onward.

I'm bigger and stronger now, strong enough to shove my dumb waiter about. One day, bearing in mind my brush with starvation many hundreds of rooms ago, I wheel it through the doorway into the next room. The door duly clicks shut. I propel the robot through another room and another room. I reach the magic number eighteen; I transcend it. Hilariously I shove the dumb equipment through twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two; still the doors click shut behind us.

Now a pause, for safety's sake, in case a door clicks open in the night and my robot rolls hindwards again, leaving me high and dry. But that doesn't happen. The ground I have gained remains mine.

Tomorrow, I negotiate sixty rooms.

The day after, though, chambers grow vast. Rooms become endless halls lined with chairs, their carpets stretching off into the distance. Soon it's a mad rush to reach the next door by dusk. I am Achilles of the wounded heel, chasing the victorious tortoise. I slow down, exhausted. It seems that I'm being taught the concept of infinity.

Is that because I shunned the prospect of eternity?

As if to reward this insight, appears next day an oasis: a full-size indoor swimming pool complete with slide and springboard. I walk all round it, warily, on the lookout for something lurking in the water, some shark or octopus. But no, there's nothing but water in the pool; still, clear water. Slipping in at the shallow end, I soon relearn the art. I swim one breadth, then another, before I stretch out tired on the side.

Is this . . . a baptism?

For a few days I camp by the pool, since I'm still way ahead of schedule, delighted by this amenity—then gradually repelled by the wet, cool blankness.

The following room—the huge hall of a castle with baronial chairs, a long oak table and eerie suits of armour—is punishingly hot. A hint of Hell?

This little boy treks on, through more temperate, ordinary rooms. Pool and hot castle were simply random fluctuations. In infinity, I suppose anything can happen once, or even an infinite number of times. Even the impossible.

Can an infinite series of events ever come to an end? Can there be no number greater than *n*? An *n* of rooms . . . Oh ghost of Cantor, help me. I am lost in a transfinite set—this suite of rooms.

But it had a beginning, and there has been change and growth since then, as witness the arrival of furniture. And when I rushed my waiter hectically forward, didn't my environment stretch itself after my first day's gains to check me? So it responds; it reacts to me. Since it permits me to live—by generating such an immensity of rooms to house me day by day—isn't it fair to say that it is actually benign? Rather than malevolent or merely neutral? Surely a vast effort is involved in sustaining my existence—so vast perhaps that no energy is left over for added frills such as real books or paintings, windows or views. If it can only provide one dimension of movement—namely forwards—maybe that's the most it can provide, the alternative being . . . what? a frozen stasis? with no way to move, nowhere to move to? This place certainly does not imprison me, when it urges me to move onward, ever onward. Can one really be a prisoner, in an infinite prison?

A deep sense of joy begins to stir in me. I exist. Room for my existence is provided: *that* is the meaning. Even though I tried to make my soul mechanical, I am provided for. Surely it is a mere

machine-soul that is in the reborns, however vivid and superb their new lives seem. God is not cheated. For *our* sake He will not let us cheat with souls. Though I bankrupt myself in His eyes, I am here on soul-welfare, guaranteed this minimum income and security.

God did not wind the world up in the beginning, so that it should run on and on automatically. Rather let us say He *recreates* it afresh every moment in the fourth dimension of time, which is therefore the dimension of creation. Here in this endless hostelry outside of time—in eternity—linear space becomes the dimension of creation instead; instead of each new day, each new room comes into being to sustain my soul's existence. Pockets of new space are constantly added instead of new increments of time.

Gladly I press on now, entering each new room freely at nightfall and staying in the appointed room all day long with no wish to rush vainly and prematurely ahead.

Though I wonder what lies beyond these walls, at right angles to the one direction I can travel day by day? Is it mere nothingness—or the face of God? I still would like to know. Will there ever be a window?

A window there is! But not the kind of window I expected. It isn't *in* any of the rooms. No, it's in myself—it's in my sleep at night.

Strange, but I do not seem to have dreamt till now . . .

Till I wake up in a dream tonight, well aware that it is a dream and that I'm really lying asleep on a stately, padded chaise-longue in one of God's rooms, yet vividly present *at the same time* on a Tunisian beach—the selfsame beach that I watched through that stone grille window of hexagons and stars long ago. Only, now I am one of the naked children myself. We are all reborn, and playing together on the sands, watched over by a lilac-robed woman whose name, I know perfectly well, is Odette.

So wonderful: the sun, the sea, the shore! Grains of sand trickle through my fingers; I sift a seashell from the soft yellow grit. White foam edges the water. A lizard scampers. There's laughter, giggling, and voices.

My friends' names are: Andrea, Juno, Yukio, Michel, Sven. I know them all intimately. We've been reborn and reared together. Right now I'm saying to Andrea:

'—We are like shells, with the echo of the sea in them; little

rooms that contained soft, flexible life that rotted away. We are the purified shape of that life, and the echo is the music of our souls—'

I surprise myself. Have I chosen to become poet rather than pentathlete? Or has my long stay over here in the rooms spiritualised my emotions over there?

No, actually I am playing at seduction, years in advance of any possible performance; and Andrea is pleasantly teased by it. Our juvenile libidos caress one another. I am, I realise, in love with her. As is she, with me. How courteously we court, naked tots on the Tunisian shore: happy Heloise and anticipative Abelard, awaiting my ungelding and meanwhile making a game of it.

My tongue continues turning pretty words, while I listen in astonishment to myself. My limbs act out a delightful yet irrelevant charade. My lips kiss hers chastely. We perform a hopping, sand-scuffling little dance, a sort of parody gavotte with a dune for a dance floor.

I know it's a dream—a lucid dream in which I am wide awake. Yet it is also real. It is actually happening on that Tunisian strand. We are there together, Andrea and I!

The next night, and every night for weeks I join the same unfolding living dream. The moment I fall asleep over here, I wake up over there. For sleeping and waking hours in the two worlds coincide perfectly but oppositely. Morpheus in the Underworld, I am there as we stroll through the Institute gardens, holding hands. I am there as we make our plans; for we're both wildly rich—our investments have prospered during our years of minority. Soon we will be off to Mars to power-ski the dunes of Hellespont, anticipating our adult physique by wearing cybersuits. I am there till I fall asleep at night in bed with Andrea, holding her chastely. Yet all the time I am asleep and aware of the fact.

What pain if she's there within herself too, the Andrea soul, unable to communicate from her own after-death dimension, while we both gaily play the game of life. What pain if she too is awake in her own dream, and like me cannot say a word about it.

What greater pain if she isn't awake at all, but still locked away!

I fantasise that I can break through the ritual of the dream.

'Andrea, I'm asleep!' I cry. 'I'm on some after-death plane, in an Elizabethan room of massive oak beams and flagons and silver gilt Livery pots. There's an open iron casket with the most incredibly complicated locks all across the inside of the lid and nothing inside

it, and a gnarled oak coffer that's empty too. I'm sleeping on top of that. Hard bedding, tonight! It's been room after room ever since I was reborn: hundreds, thousands of them, all without windows or words or people in them. That's where I really am. Are you trapped in rooms too, while all this goes on?' (Gesturing at the Mediterranean and the humps of the Institute behind well-spaced palm trees.)

She stops and stares, open-mouthed. Suddenly *she knows.*

Alternatively: she smiles, 'Welcome. This is the secret we all share. Now you know it too.'

Neither event takes place. The dream is inexorable. It ploughs on with remorseless gaiety towards nightfall back in the Institute, where I fall asleep . . . to awaken promptly to this hard coffer lid, to another enclosed day. My dumb waiter serves breakfast. I defecate in a corner. Its nozzle cleans the floor.

In the evening I step through into a sterile, functionally designed office, windowless (for the window is within me), with an empty desk, empty filing cabinets, and a dead intercom.

Tonight's dream spans my penultimate day at the Institute, for my discharge has been approaching rapidly. I call in to see Dr Manzoni, visibly older now, to say goodbye. (Andrea will be discharged six weeks later than me. I shall wait for her not far away in the Club Méditerranée village, *La Douce*, on the lotus island of Djerba.)

I lavish thanks upon the good doctor . . . while my other, mute mouth aches to cry out, 'Manzoni! This isn't how it really is! Not for any of us, I swear. It never has been. God—whatever He is . . . the metaprogrammer of reality—He holds us all in store, while we caper through the second life, merry as puppies. We're held in separate rooms, great chains of them, on and on forever, to teach us infinity and eternity. But alone, always *alone*, because we're still alive even though we're really dead. We're alive *and* dead—both! This reborn life's a mockery. If the mock life wasn't being dreamt, the rooms could open up . . . to the wonder, to the truth.'

None of this does he hear. My lips merely burble thanks. I leave him, and seek out the Bursar to see to my assets.

Had I woken up to this dream in the beginning, I understand that I'd have been wild to burst through the window into the puppet drama I'm enacting over there. (Would I even have realised which reality was the more authentic?) Now, not so. Life is simply

a huge simulation—a drama set on a stage that is recreated every moment—sustained by the dreams of the soul; when the body dies, the soul awakens. Had I woken earlier—had the window appeared before—I could never have accepted this.

Tomorrow night, as I sleep in a four-poster bed in the cool high stone room of a castle, I kiss Andrea *au revoir* at the Institute and board the helicopter which will speed me south to Djerba . . .

3

How delightful is Djerba: the scent of orange groves, the white beehive houses (*menzels*, they call them), the bazaars and Roman ruins, the sponge fishers, the flocks of flamingos. Naturally I yearn for Andrea to join me, but in no way do I let this yearning spoil the pleasures of the present moment, nor would she wish such a thing.

What my psychic integration tutor, the lovely Hiroko Matsuyama, told me about dreams is quite true: dreams are my life now, consequently the need to compensate for what is missing in life is far less these days. In common with all reborns, I hardly seem to dream at all, or promptly forget what I do dream. Dissatisfactions have been washed away by rebirth. *Now* is all.

Yet there was one dream, recurring around the age of one to three months, which came back again the other night just before I quit the Institute: a dream of being fastened up in an endless succession of windowless rooms. When I told Mme Matsuyama at the time she said this was *the* common—one might even say archetypal—dream with reborns, and about the only noteworthy one. It was an obvious psychic symbol of 'rebirth trauma'—for instead of being convulsively expelled, as from the mother's womb at first-birth, one is locked up instead in isolation in a womb-room for rebirth. The physical limitations of the early months encourage this symbolism. As soon as the infant body became more mobile, the notion of enclosure would fade. As indeed it did—as though I lost sight of myself passing through door after door and getting nowhere—for about then the world really began opening up; at the same time I was judged 'firm' enough for really thrilling sensory tapes to amuse my leisure hours: dragon-chases, maiden-rescues, the whole promised fairyland. My imminent 'expulsion' from the Institute summoned up the dream

once more. Subconsciously, I must have been slightly anxious—and wanted to stay! But only once. Nights are nirvana time again.

Today, I think I shall arrange a flight inland to Blidet, to power-ski the high white dunes . . .

How refreshed I awake in my private bungalow this morning in *Djerba la Douce*. My window looks out upon the huge swimming pool of the Club. A tall slim negress poises naked on the diving board. She leaps, she twists in a backward somersault, she cuts the turquoise water cleanly. What a great sight to wake to, ebony lady.

From now on, I (and that's *we*, as soon as Andrea gets here) will be waking in room after room with ever more enchanting views, in chalets, lodges, pressure cabins, undersea hotels, space stations, methane skimmers—around the Earth, on Luna and Mars, out by Jupiter and Saturn. There'll be glories to be seen through every window when we wake, wonders that it'll take us all our second lives to explore.

PHILIPPA C. MADDERN

# Ignorant of Magic

Surely if I close my eyes, the hall and all the people will melt back into the bright cacophony in my mind, and then I won't have to answer the question. I can't answer it, I don't know who my parents were, or what they were like, or anything about them. Nothing. Nothing.

Open your eyes. The hall is still in place, Darian still beside me, waiting for a reply. He says again, laughing, 'Tell me, who were your parents?'

His hand, dark, with silver rings on each finger, catches my eye. It pushes the crystal goblet towards me, and at its touch the level of red wine rises smoothly in the cup. Concentrate on the small problem: how does he do that? Unless it is all hallucination.

An answer, a clear, small neat mental image, appears suddenly in my head. Snatch at it.

'My father was a knight, and my mother a lady; but I, their eldest daughter, sat spinning in the hall one midsummer eve, and heard the horns blowing on the hills. I dropped my distaff and ran out to see, and so was carried off to live here in Faery.'

There (thankfulness), the words are spoken and out of the mess of my mind, and just in time before the pleasant sharp image twists, tears apart—

'Good,' says Darian gravely. Then he and the whole hall full of guests break out into shouts of laughter. The sounds bounce and crash terrifyingly between the green pillars.

The image has rearranged itself, falling into place in my mind with kaleidoscopic precision. Try again.

'My father was a physicist, my mother was a scientific philosopher, and Rob and I were on a team working on transtemporal experiments . . .'

No better. This one stretches and splits into stupidity, my father's face grinning, distorted, from the display of a calculator or the slit of a visor—

They are taking no notice anyway. Someone is chanting:

'Twelve spears of cold iron
In a shining circle standing
Guarded the gateway there.
"Come forth!" we cried, but cowardly
He . . .'

Darian says, 'You do not drink, Time-traveller.'

Take the glass—no, the goblet—and hold it to your lips. Take your time, arrange the question carefully. It should sound like this:

'You imply that our experiment in transtemporal displacement was a success.'

No use. The words parade out of my mouth with infuriating coquetry.

'Am I then in truth a time-traveller?'

Darian tilts his head back and laughs and laughs; the jewels on his forehead wink and giggle in sympathy. He says at last, 'Alas, Jehanne, I am not a Christian as you once were, so how am I to swear to the truth?'

My hand tips wine into my mouth. Swallow. For a moment, the spinning images steady themselves; castle, distaff, swords, crucifixes, all left behind; regret, but wholeness.

I drink again.

In Faery, the stars are always in the sky, but brighter at night. They never change position.

Think; what were the stars like before?

A rush of ideas jostles out at me. Nine spheres turn around each other, we collect energy from the sun, and data from all the others, singing as they swing around, in pulses as the light comes to little space-station Z6, the primum mobile—

Stop, hold your head as the ideas fight, clashing and bumping brutally around the sides of the skull. You should never have left the ideas out.

Darian's voice: 'Greetings Lady. Why do you walk alone and sorrowful?'

Now that is an easy question, soothing, dragging an inevitable answer with it, so that without thought I can say, 'I sorrow for the home from which you called me.'

Darian says, 'Yet the call is as sweet as ever, is it not?' He gestures gracefully with one hand, and for a moment it seems that a delicate tracery of silver horn notes springs out of the air at the very edge of hearing, and then fades again.

I'm lost, what is the right answer now? Think, don't panic, quickly.

When I look up, someone else has joined us. A girl is walking on the other side of Darian, in a long green gown, with her dark plait of hair falling loosely over one shoulder, and her face turned slightly towards me. I open my mouth to say something, but she starts to speak at the same time.

'Why was I called here?'

So she is another one. I listen hard.

'Your beauty, mirrored in the floor of the Seeing Fountain in the royal palace, so struck the Prince that he sent out the call, and so you came.'

The girl stares a moment, then bows her head. I watch the green folds of my gown swishing gently and rhythmically just ahead of each of my footsteps.

At last, she says, 'Then where is the Prince?'

'The Prince is at the war, Lady.'

War. That is a word I have heard, I know. I say suddenly, 'It was on Earth news, a terrorist group exploded a nuclear device near Paris, just yesterday.'

The three of us walk on slowly, deliberately. As my left foot comes forward, the other girl's right one does. Her right arm moves in time with my left. We are symmetrical. My words fade and break in the open air. They have no meaning. 'Earth-just-that-was-ter-or-plod-nu-vice.' Gibberish.

The girl puts a hand up and plays with her plait for a moment, before twitching it over her shoulder so that it hangs straight and heavy down her back. She says, 'How can you talk of war? What do you know of fighting, who feast and dream your lives away?'

Resentment. The silver binding in my plait felt cold to the touch, and when I threw it back, it dragged heavily at my head.

Darian is patient. 'Yet you know, Lady, that your own world fights us. Do you think that we do not fight back? As for the rest—

we cannot spend our lives in anything, because we are immortal, and living is no expense for us; and dreams are what we live in, as water is for fish. How would you have us not fight?' When we do not answer, he adds, 'Believe me, our battles are no less bitter for being bloodless.'

The dusk is quiet and all-embracing. By now, the other girl appears only as a vague shape, a glimpse of a face turning towards Darian, with the mouth opening silently. I say, 'And do you win these bloodless battles of yours?'

'No,' says Darian, but he smiles at me.

'None?'

'In your human time, yes, some. We defend ourselves, we push back the frontiers. But it means nothing in the end. The world is not ours, and we will have to leave it some day.'

'Then you are not immortal.'

It is so dark now that I can only see Darian's face as a faint reflection of the starlight. All the people of Faery seem to shine a little in the night. I cannot see the other girl at all. Darian's voice sounds cold in the dark, but he says, still patiently, 'I said that we would leave the world, not that we will die. We do not change, but the world does. It dies and renews itself every minute. And when the world has changed so much that it cannot contain us, then we will go. But we will not change.'

I can feel his words strike into a familiar track in my brain, setting up a niggle of academic interest. 'If you don't change at all —what would the cell structure be? You wouldn't have any DNA or RNA—'

Instantly there is a torrential rush of ideas; biomechanics, computers, growth charts, hydroponics, all the philosophy and methodology needed to examine Darian, set up experiments, determine his metabolism and structure.

The moon shone suddenly out of the clear sky, as it does in Faery. I had a moment's vision of the other girl standing opposite me with her face slack and blank; then in the space where she had been there was nothing but moonlight on the grass. Darian was alone, staring at me with vivid hatred breaking out on his face. He spoke some words, incomprehensible, and the moon snuffed out again in a turmoil of clouds. Great sheets of cold rain came driving towards me, lashing my hair in stinging streaks across my face, tangling my gown in dense wet folds around my legs. Branches

claw at me from the darkness (but we were in a treeless valley); when I tried to run the wind caught me like a hand and knocked me into the ground.

I had a dream, and in the dream I knew who I was. My name was Jan, and I lived in a space colony out from Earth, and I loved a man called Rob, and we worked together on a team project on trans-temporal experiments. There were quite a few teams working on the same thing, some from other space stations. It was a matter of some professional pride as to who should carry out the first successful transfer with human subjects. We thought we were the furthest advanced; enough to send volunteers out and bring them back with minimal risk. Wishful thinking. No, not that; we had a basis of mathematical calculations as precise as we could make them. But we were perhaps too ready to be pleased by our data. We all volunteered for the test transfer, as a matter of course. In the end, we picked a short list of equally qualified people, and Rob and I were chosen by final random ballot.

It was a good dream.

But it was nothing but a dream. I know that. When I woke up, I was lying on grass in warm twilight. The Queen sat beside me, her silver ash staff laid on the ground between us. She was playing a lute, and singing softly at the same time; it was the music that had woken me. She broke off singing to say, 'You have slept well.'

Yes, I have slept till my mind is clear. She plays on, making complex unending music. The melodies on the instrument are strange, alien. The one she is singing is less so, indeed it is almost recognisable. It stirs up memories, so that they come seeping and thickening into my mind like air in an airlock, or like fog into the castle rooms on autumn days when the pennons hung limp on the tower, and all the tapers burned with haloes round them in the evenings; and Sir Reynart from the next fief would ride over sometimes to spend some days talking over old battles and estate management with my father, and bring his son Robert with him; and drops of moisture spat in the great fire in the hall; and all the flames flickered so that my mother and I, in the solar, could hardly see to sew or spin; and stone walls were cold to the touch. Lifetime, year-time, summer harvest, spring sowing, court day, muster day, hearing mass from my father's clerk, making salves, praying

prayers, working tapestry, playing chess, spinning, spinning, spinning till the silver horns called—

I know the song. It is a spring carol. I start to sing with the Queen, but my voice is too heavy and chancy, a mortal voice hindering the cool perfect immortal one. The Queen stops and laughs and puts aside her lute.

After many days, I have found out the secret. It is quite easy. My mind has settled like a cupful of wine into lees and clear liquid. The lees are bitter and muddy, and impossible to throw out before the good wine is gone. But you need never know they are there—no one need know—as long as you drink only from the clear wine, use only the one mind.

The Queen says to me, 'Did you dream well, Jehanne?' waving her silver staff like a cat's tail. I say 'Yes'; to tell her the truth would make her angry. She smiles at me. Darian talks to me of the time beyond time, when the Faery will be gone from the world, and I will have to go with them. He watches me, as if taunting me. I smile, and ask when it will be, and he tells me gently that 'when' is a word for mortals.

It is easy. It is easy.

The call was so clumsy, so ugly, that I hardly wanted to come here to the Hill Springs. And now I am here, what am I to do? This man who has walked nine times about the wellstone and sprinkled the herbs in the water is not the right one. He is not an esquire, let alone a knight; and though he is dressed in clothes such as the nuns of the priory near my home used to give to beggars, he is not a prince in the making. His hair is cropped short to the skull, as if it has been shaved once; his face looks tired and sick. He is so thin that his bones stand out like knives under his yellowish skin.

I ask, 'Who are you to come to Faery ground?'

He stares at me blankly for some time. Then his face flinches, and he says, 'Me? Oh I'm the Half-wit, didn't you know?' He closes his eyes, shakes his head, and turns to go. I turn away too, disappointed.

Something worries me. I have seen his face before, but it was much different. He wore a white tunic then, and his head was properly shaven, with light beads of sweat forming on his face. He was bending over—

'Hydroponics. We were working together on quota in hydroponics.' My own voice sounds strange to me.

I have never seen someone turn so quickly, or look so joyful, for a moment, as he. 'Jan,' he says, 'Oh Jan.'

We stand one on either side of the springs, alone, uncertain, each doubting the other. But I do know him, and he calls me by a right name. Slowly, slowly, my mind turns, balances, repositions itself, one side up and the other down.

'What happened? The experiment—'

'It must have been a success, but why didn't we stay together? Where have you been?'

'Oh . . . back there.' (Where is Faery from here?) 'How did you find me?'

'There's a magician in the village. At least, he says he's a magician, I don't know about that, but he's a paranoiac for sure. I was asking everyone I could about you—I couldn't make most of them understand—he knows a bit of Latin, and he said this was a way to find lost people. Stupid, but I thought . . .' His voice trails to an ashamed halt. I can see that he has been desperate.

'Well, it did find me.'

Pause.

'Yes.'

'Empirical reinforcement.' We both suddenly double up with laughter.

The conversation meanders on, often in trivialities. It is silly, I know it is Rob, but every few minutes he looks briefly like a stranger, and I want to go away, back to the moon and the thick green grass and Darian's mockery. Rob looks at me as if he dare not either believe or disbelieve that I am who I am.

He knows so little that it is frightening. For instance, he has a dog cringing round him, a little shivering snarling mongrel, with bare patches of mange on its back, and the end of an old bone in its mouth. I say something lightly about 'the dog'. Rob looks as bewildered as if the word were in a foreign language.

'The dog.' (I point).

'Dog?' he repeats blankly. Then 'Oh—is that a dog?'

'Yes of course.'

He grins nervously. 'Then they sure doctored up the pictures they showed us.'

Pause. He is right, too. Now he says it, I can remember the films

of 'dog' in Earth Studies, showing large shiny proud-headed beasts bounding easily over the ground. I look back at the dog at his feet; it is exactly like all the miserable strays that used to hang round the castle to filch scraps. Dog. Dog. Double image.

In the twilight, the spring begins to run faster, calling me home. I can see its waters rising.

'I must go now.'

Again, that look of utter bewilderment; Rob has not noticed the working out of the charm.

'But you can't. We have to go back, when they induce the force-field, the rest of the team, if we aren't together—'

Already his voice is distorted and faint. It is no use trying to hold a dying spell. I have only time to say, 'Come again, and I will be here,' before the spring wells up hugely, sweeps us apart, drowns the places where we stood, turns itself into an ocean with a white beach, on which I walk, searching for shells.

The wind blows cold and steady from the sea, and my hands are laden with shells. The harsh ridges on the backs of the shells hurt my hands; but the inside of each shell is full of faint rainbows.

Darian and another lord—Owan, I think—come towards me.

'Where have you been, to gather so many sea-shells?' says Darian, indicating the empty sands with a wave of his hand. He waits to see me unable to answer. 'Stay there,' he says. He takes the shells from me, and hands some to Owan. Together, they arrange them in a neat rectangle around my feet. Pretty. At a word from Owan, each shell quivers, buds, grows a thin gold stem. The stems grow steadily up to head height. They do not pause to flower; instead, each one angles itself neatly to join with the others over my head. I take a step; the cage moves. I run, and it runs with me. When I stop, it halts in the same instant. I put out a hand to the bars. They are immovable.

They have put me to walk in a deep quiet valley. A stream as clear as glass slides through the thick grass, and in it, white lilies nod and circle endlessly to the flow of the water incessantly. There are animals here, lions, hares, deer, and once a unicorn, silent and quick. But they are the only quick things. Everything else is slow, bright, sleepy.

I wish my mind would sleep too. I wish it would not grind out jagged fragments of mad images from each day's clear grain,

fleeting pictures of houses in the sky and shaven-headed people.

There are some good times. Walking in the dawn with the attendant beasts, I cannot remember anything else. It ceases to matter what Rob is, what trans-something is, whether I ever sat spinning in a castle hall. The grass is long and green, there are tall trees with quiet leaves drooping, the white lilies circle in the stream for ever.

Rob called me back again, out of the mindless valley, to talk with him across the Hill Springs. He looked worse than before—starved, shaggy, with a long bruise-and-cut mark across his cheek-bone. He said, with no greeting, 'Jan, come here.'

'No.' I was bewildered by the sudden change from my quiet valley.

'Come over *here*.'

'No.'

His voice rose angrily. 'You have to. You know we have to be together for when we return.'

'I can't.'

'You can. Don't be stupid.'

'I can't.'

He shouted at me in sudden fury. 'God damn you, you can, stop saying that, you stand there and you'd rather kill us both than take one step over a bloody little stream, you fool, you're a stupid—'

'I can't come.'

'STOP IT!' he shouted, and stopped himself.

Pause. I didn't want to stay.

I said, 'I can't come to you any more than you can come to me.'

'Please come. Please.'

I shook my head. 'Can you come to me?' It seemed so obvious to me that I thought he would not try. I forgot that he does not see the limits. He said, 'All right, I will.' He stepped on to the curb stone.

The air thickened and crackled; the water heaved suddenly, and boiled up dark red and sticky. I don't know what Rob saw, but he snatched his foot off the stone, and cried out sharply 'Jan? Jan, where are you?'

'Here.' The air and water had cleared instantly.

'Then what can we do?' he said wretchedly.

It was all wrong. A rescuer should know what to do, even if he does not know how to carry it out. I could only say, 'You must rescue me from Faery.'

Rob hardly seemed interested. He sat down on the ground, and said idly, 'That's what the magician said. Before he decided I was a tool of the devil, and had me stoned out of the village.' He touched the cut on his face, and winced.

'What else did he say?'

Rob was picking lichen off the stones and throwing it fragment by fragment into the spring. He said, still detached, 'If I tell you, will you stay?'

'Maybe.'

Rob shrugged. 'He said something about a midsummer ride, and where I'd have to be so that you'd pass me, and what you'd look like. He made it sound as if it was terribly easy to pick out one person from hundreds of people on horseback and go and drag them off. Real child's play. And all in the dark, too.'

'Not child's play; heroes' work. What else did he say?'

He was not listening. His hand had gone back to his cheek and he said, 'They warned us we'd probably be outcast, remember? But they thought we'd be together.'

'What else did the magician say?'

'Do you remember that historian when we went over to Z13 for Phys. Training? She got so angry with us she said we shouldn't be going at all.'

It made no sense. The only important thing to me was to hear the magician's words; yet unwillingly I felt my mind begin to tangle, begin to coil among images of a holocube, a table, coffee-mugs, a chunky dark woman in Earth style clothes talking angrily and fluently, emphasising points with her hands.

I heard myself say, 'She came up from one of the Unis—Wisconsin.'

'That's right,' said Rob, pleased. 'I wonder if she was right?'

I couldn't remember what she said. It was no use, anyway. I said again, 'What else did the magician say?'

'You asked her what evidence she had that everything was linked into causal chains. You said that even if changing one thing had some effect, that was no reason why changing anything in the past would have a total effect. But she didn't listen, she just kept on saying that we might get back and find everything altered because of what we did.'

Pause.

'Of course, she wasn't a mathematician,' said Rob, recalling old arguments; then, 'I hope she was wrong.'

I said, 'Rob, listen; you must rescue me.'

He looked round quickly, jerked out of his own world. 'How?'

'As the magician said. Do you remember what he said?'

Obedient and sad, Rob repeated, 'He told me to hide myself and wait till you came past on the midsummer ride. He told me what you'd look like. He said to pull you off your horse and hold you till the Faery folk gave you up. That's all.' He added, after a moment's silence, 'He's mad.'

'He is right. That is how it is done, if the costs are met.'

Again, Rob looked at me blankly. He knew nothing about the costs, the risks; and time was running away in the constant current of the springs. Rob said suddenly, 'That training centre at Z13. We could have one as good at home. It was only put there originally because they're bigger than us, but those new simulators are quite small. We could fit them in.'

I could not let myself think what he was thinking. I turned away from the old comfortable visions of simulators, coffee-mugs, researchers. I said, 'It is a hard thing. They will turn me in your arms to many things—a lion, a bear, a fish, a snake, a burning brand. You must hold me through them all; if you drop me, I shall be lost.'

For a moment, I thought Rob understood. He said calmly, 'Then I won't drop you.' But immediately his face grew uncertain again, and he said, 'But it won't work.'

'It will. Do you remember the wise women in your father's village who found lost children? It is the same thing.'

I knew as soon as I said it that it was wrong. There was a Robert who told me about the wise woman, who frightened me when I was a little girl with tales of goblins and werewolves. But this is a different one. He doesn't know the things the other told Jehanne.

Flakes of pictures floated in my mind of simulators and horses and knights and historians. I could only say, 'It will work.'

'Perhaps,' said Rob bitterly.

'It will.'

The rising stream caught us as we quarrelled.

The valley, or cage, or whatever it is, will not hold my mind steady at all now. Gold bars of thought keep shooting up to skewer my brain. There is something I am afraid of, but it is difficult to hold on to it, think what it is.

Think. Now you are of the Faery, and when they go from the world, you will go too. But Rob is not, so he will stay. No, wrong, Rob will go too, but not . . . then where? Rob and Darian fight long battles. Darian flicks his spear out with graceful precision; Rob falls back, spreadeagled, bleeding. Calm-faced, Rob pushes a button; Darian disappears. They do it again and again in my mind, I cannot stop them.

Think. If you want to stay with Rob . . .

In that case there is nothing for me to do. It is Rob's task to take us both out of Faery. Then why does it worry me?. The rescuers always know the way.

Or maybe we should have known before the transit that there were two worlds to go back to? But that is impossible, it is Jehanne who knows of both Faery and the castle world, not Jan, not Rob.

Start again. Perhaps it is the double images that hurt, that taste harsh in the mouth. Lion walks snarling to himself, with the dawn turning his mane and teeth red. Lion lies asleep on a film. Bear is huge, like a shaggy tower, with paws to crush you in a second. Bear—is bear the picture of a big brown animal balanced ludicrously on its rump, front paws holding back ones? There were too many pictures, camel, yak, giraffe, bison, kangaroo—how can I remember them all? Bear's claws. I saw a pedlar killed by his dancing bear once. It went mad, and my father ordered it to be shot, but I did not see that—only the heavy strike of the paws and the dead pedlar. Bear kills man kills bear. Darian kills Rob kills Darian kills Rob kills Darian.

The lion stands beside me, purring. I have the sense of waking up from thought with someone's words echoing in my ears; time, line, ride, something like that?

The lion says, purring, 'Jehanne, it is time. We make ready for the midsummer ride.'

It is Darian's voice. All around me the cavalcade flickers into sight. The lion stands up, colours and lines run together a moment, and Darian stands there, bowing his tawny head to me. To my right, a glimpse of antlers and red-deer colour turns, as I face it, to Owan, in russet clothes and a gold crown. The unicorn is slower, wavering and collapsing in on itself gracefully, like water; only the horn stays solid, to become the Queen's ash-wand when the rearrangement is complete. Fantastic illusionism.

It is no surprise to turn back and find a white pony standing

ready for me to ride. Everything is always in order, except my mind.

Darian says, 'You were not ready. Did you not see us, Jehanne?' Well-trained now, my mouth responds lightly, 'Were you there to be seen?' I hate my answer. I must get away from these people; this time, Rob must take me out to the proper time. I can see time in my mind, shrivelling away to nothing in the flame of a burning brand.

Outside, the ride goes on, across lands which I saw in reverse from the highest tower in the castle; they told me it was dangerous ground, to stay away from it.

Some of the knights in the ride sing, and others joust, or pretend to. Their horses rear and caracole, their weapons seem to pass through one another's bodies and out again harmlessly.

Animals begin to dance round the time-bonfire in my head.

I knew Rob would be there, but still the shout and snatch takes me by surprise. I want to fight off the hands that drag me from the horse, let me go, let me go back.

Horse goes, mind goes, self goes. I want meat, rough under the tongue, and warm grass to lie in afterwards. Drag at the hands in the mane, roar.

Flick, timefire, change.

The man beat me to make me dance, tugged the chain till the ring made my nose bleed. Kill him. Kill, swipe, kill him.

Flick, time-change.

Choking in the air, leap, let me back to the cool blue-green brown mud weeds flowing, leap water, leap, dying—

Flick, change.

Earth mind. Twist against the hand, bite at it, paralyse it. Smell of man is heavy and evil on the fork of the tongue. Whip back and forth, push all the muscles. Bite.

Flick, cha—

There is a moment of perfect balance. Five minds, snake, fish, lion, bear, Jehanne, range themselves in equal segments round the centre of my thought; there is a sixth segment waiting where time burns away in a torch-flame. But here, in the centre (such a small space to be occupied by what was once a whole mind), are computers, space stations, stars and hydroponics, and the fear growing and spreading that Rob might drop me, lose me.

We knew nothing about magic.

MICHAEL BISHOP

# Collaborating

How does it feel to be a two-headed man? Better, how does it feel to be two men with one body? Maybe we can tell you. We're writing this—though it's I, Robert, who am up at the moment—because we've been commissioned to tell you what it's like living inside the same skin another human being inhabits and because we have to have our say.

I'm Robert. My brother's name is James. Our adoptive surname is Self—without contrivance on our part, even if this name seems to mock the circumstances of our life. James and I call our body The Monster. Who owns The Monster is a question that has occupied a good deal of our time, by virtue of a straitjacketing necessity. On more than one occasion The Monster has nearly killed us, but now we have pretty much domesticated it.

James Self. Robert Self. And The Monster.

It's quite late. James, who sits on the right side of our shoulders, has long since nodded away, giving control to me. My brother has subdued The Monster more effectively than I, however. When he's up, we move with a catlike agility I can never manage. Although our muscle tone and stamina are excellent, when I'm up The Monster shudders under my steering, and shambles, and shifts anatomical gears I didn't even know we possessed. At six foot three I am a hulking man, whereas James at six foot four—he's taller through the temples than I—is a graceful one. And we share the same body.

As a result, James often overmasters me during the day: I feel,

then, like a sharp-witted invalid going the rounds in the arms of a kindly quarterback. Late at night, though, with James down in sleep and The Monster arranged propitiatingly on a leather lounge chair, even I can savour the animal potential of our limbs, the warmth of a good wine in our maw, the tingle of a privately resolvable sexual stirring. The Monster can be lived with.

But I'm leaping ahead. Let me tell you how we got this way, and what we look forward to, and why we persevere.

James and I were born in a southeastern state in 1951. (Gemini is our birth sign, though neither of us credits astrology.) A breech delivery, we've been told. I suppose we aligned ourselves buttocks first because we didn't know how to determine precedence at the opposite end. We were taken with forceps, and the emergence of James and Robert together, two perfect infant heads groggy from the general anesthetic they'd given our mother, made the obstetrics team draw back into a white huddle from which it regarded us with fear, scepticism, awe, incredulity. How could anyone have expected this? A two-headed infant has only one heartbeat to measure, and there'd been no X-rays.

We were spirited away from the delivery room before our mother could recover and ask about us. The presiding physician, Dr Larimer Self, then decreed that she would be told her child was stillborn. Self destroyed hospital records of the birth, swore his staff to silence, and gave my biological father, an itinerant labourer following the peach and cotton crops, a recommendation for a job in Texas. Thus, our obstetrician became our father. And our real parents were lost to us forever.

Larimer Self was an autocrat—but a sentimental one. He raised James and me in virtual isolation in a small community seventeen miles from the tri-county hospital where we'd been born. He gave us into the daytime care of a black woman named Velma Bymer. We grew up in a two-storey house surrounded by holly bushes, crape myrtle, nandin, and pecan trees. Two or three months ago, after attaining a notoriety or infamy you may already be aware of, we severed all connections with the outside world and returned to this big, eighty-year-old house. Neither Robert nor I know when we will choose to leave it again; it's the only real home we've ever had.

Velma was too old to wet-nurse us, and a bachelor woman besides, but she bottle-fed us in her arms, careful to alternate

feedings between Robert's head and mine since we could not both take formula at once. She was forty-six when we came into her care, and from the beginning she looked upon us not as a snakish curse for her own barrenness, but as a holy charge. A guerdon for her piety. My memories of her focus on her raw-boned, purple hands and a voice like sweet water flowing over rocks. James says he remembers her instead for a smell like damp cotton mixed up with the odour of slowly baking bran rolls. Today Velma drives to Wilson & Cathet's for her groceries in a little blue Fiat and sits evenings in her tiny one-room house with the Bible open on her lap. She won't move from that house—but she does come over on Thursday afternoons to play checkers with James.

Larimer Self taught us how to read, do mathematics, and reconcile our disagreements through rapid, on-the-spot bargaining. Now and again he took a strop to The Monster.

Most children have no real concept of 'sharing' until well after three. James and I, with help from our stepfather, reached an earlier accommodation. We had to. If we wanted The Monster to work for us at all we had to subordinate self and co-operate in the manipulation of legs, arms, hands. Otherwise we did a Vitus dance, or spasmed like an epileptic, or crumpled into trembling stillness. Although I wrote earlier that James often 'overmasters' me, I didn't mean to imply that his motor control is stronger than mine, merely better, and that I sometimes voluntarily give him my up time for activities like walking, lifting, toting, anything primarily physical. As children we were the same. We could neutralise each other's strengths, but we couldn't—except in rare instances of fatigue or inattention—impose our will on the other. And so at six or seven months, maybe even earlier, we began to learn how to share our first toy: the baby animal under our necks. We became that organisational anomaly, a team with two captains.

Let me emphasise this: James and I don't have a psychic link, or a telepathic hookup, or even a wholly trustworthy line to each other's emotions. It's true that when I'm depressed James is frequently depressed, too; that when I'm exhilarated or euphoric James is the same. And why not? A number of feelings have biochemical determinants as well as psychological ones, and the biochemical state of Robert Self is pretty much the biochemical state of James Self. When James drinks, I get drunk. When I take

smoke into our lungs, after a moment's delay James may well do the coughing. But we can't read each other's thoughts, and my brother—as I believe he could well say of me, too—can be as unpredictable as an utter stranger. By design or necessity we share many things, but our personalities and our thoughts are our own.

It's probably a little like being married, even down to the matter of sex. Usually our purely physical urges coincide, but one can put himself in a mental frame either welcoming or denying the satisfaction of that urge, whereupon, like husband and wife, James and Robert must negotiate. Of course, in our case the matter can be incredibly more complex than this. Legislation before congress, I suppose you could call some of our floor fights. But on this subject I yield to James, whose province the complexities are.

All right. What does being 'up' mean if neither James nor I happen to be strong enough to seize The Monster's instrument panel and march it around to a goose step of our own? It means that whoever's up has almost absolute motor control, that whoever's down has willingly relinquished this power. Both James and I can give up motor control and remain fully aware of the world; we can—and do—engage in cognitive activity and, since our speech centres aren't affected, communicate our ideas. This ability has something Eastern and yogic about it, I'm sure, but we have developed it without recourse to gurus or meditation.

How, then, do we decide who's to be up, who's to be down? Well, it's a 'you first, Alphonse'/'after you, Gaston' matter, I'm afraid, and the only thing to be said in its favour is that it works. Finally, if either of us is sleeping, the other is automatically up.* The Monster gets only three or four hours of uninterrupted rest a night, but that, we have decided, is the price a monster must pay to preserve the sanity of its masters.

Of course there are always those who think that James and I are the monster. Many feel this way. Except for nearly two years in the national limelight, when we didn't know what the hell we were doing, we have spent our life trying to prove these people wrong. We are human beings, James and I, despite the unconscionable trick played on us in our mother's womb, and we want everybody to know it.

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*This state can be complicated, however. James dreams with such intensity that The Monster thrashes out with barely restrainable, subterranean vehemence. Not always, but often enough.

Come, Monster. Come under my hand. Goodbrother's asleep, it's seven o'clock in the a.m., and you've had at least three long hours of shut-eye, all four lids fluttering like window shades in gusty May! Three hours! So come under my hand, Monster, and let's see what we can add to this.

*There are those who think that James and I are the monster.*

O considerate brother, stopping where I can take off with a tail wind, even if The Monster is a little sluggish on the runway this morning. Robert is the man to be up, though; he's the one who taps this tipritter with the most authority, even if I am the high-hurdle man on our team. (He certainly wouldn't be mixing metaphors like this, goodbrother Robert.) Our editor wants both of us to contribute, however, and dissecting our monsterhood might be a good place for James to begin. Just let Robert snooze while you take my dictation, Monster, that's all I ask.

Yes. Many do see us as a monster. And somewhere in his introductory notes my goodbrother puts his hand to his mouth and whispers in an aside, 'James is taller than me.' Well, that's true—I am. You see, Robert and I aren't identical twins. (I'm better looking than Robert.) (And taller.) This means that a different genetic template was responsible for each goodbrother's face and features, and, in the words of a local shopkeeper, 'That Just Don't Happen.' The chromosomes must have got twisted, the genes multiplied and scrambled, and a monster set loose on the helical stairway of the nucleotides. What we are, I'm afraid, is a sort of double mutant . . . That's right, you hear me clearly: a mutant.

M.U.T.A.N.T.

I hope you haven't panicked and run off to Bolivia. Mutants are scary, yes—but usually because they don't work very well or fit together like they ought. A lot of mutations, whether fruit flies or sheep, are stillborn, dead to begin with. Others die later. The odds don't favour creatures with abbreviated limbs and heads without skull caps. Should your code get bollixed, about the best you can hope for is an aristocratic sixth finger, one more pinky to lift away from your tea cup. And everybody's seen those movies where radiation has turned picnicking ants or happy-go-lucky grasshoppers into ogres as big as frigates. Those are *mutants*, you know.

And two-headed men?

Well, in the popular media they're usually a step below your

bona fide mutant, surgical freaks skulking through swamps, axe at the ready, both bottom lips adrool. Or, if the culprit *is* radiation—an after-the-bomb comeuppance for mankind's vanity—one of the heads is a lump capable only of going 'la la, la la' and repeating whatever the supposedly normal head says. Or else the two heads are equally dumb and carry on like an Abbott and Costello comedy team, bumping noggins and singing duets. Capital crimes, all these gambits. Ha ha.

No one identifies with a two-headed man.

If you dare suggest that the subject has its serious side, bingo, the word they drop on you is—'morbid'. Others in the avoidance arsenal? Try 'Grotesque.' 'Diseased.' 'Gruesome.' 'Pathological.' 'Perverse.' Or even this: '*poly*perverse.' But 'morbid' is the mortar shell they lob in to break off serious discussion and the fragments corkscrew through you until even you are aghast at your depravity. People wonder why you don't kill yourselves at first awareness of your hideousness. And you can only wince and slink away, a morbid silver trail behind you. Like snail slime.

Can you imagine, then, what it's like being a (so-called) two-headed man in Monocephalic America? Robert and I may well be the ultimate minority. Robert and I and The Monster, the three of us together.

Last year in St Augustine, Florida, at the Ripley's museum, on tour with an Atlanta publicist, my brother and I saw a two-headed calf.

Stuffed. One head blind and misshapen, lolling away from the sighted head. A mutant, preserved for the delight and edification of tourists to the Oldest City in the USA. Huzza huzza.

In the crowded display room in front of this specimen our party halted. Silence snapped down like a guillotine blade. What were the Selfs going to do now, everyone wondered. Do you suppose we've offended them? Aw, don't worry about it, they knew what they were getting into. Yeah, but—

Sez I to brother, 'This is a Bolshevik calf, Robert. The calf is undoubtedly no marcher in the procession of natural creatures. It's a Soviet sew-up. They did it to Man's Best Friend and now they've done it to a potential bearer of Nature's Most Perfect Food. Here's the proof of it, goodbrother, right here in America's Oldest City.'

'Tsk, tsk,' sez Robert. He sez that rather well.

'And how many Social Security numbers do you suppose our

officialdom gave this calf before it succumbed? How many times did they let this moo-cow manqué inscribe in the local voting register?'

'This *commie* calf?'

'Affirmative.'

'Oh, two, certainly. If it's a Soviet sew-up, James, it probably weaselled its rights from both the Social Security apparatus and the voting registrar. Whereas we—'

'Upright American citizens.'

'Aye,' sez Robert. 'Whereas we are but a single person in the eyes of the State.'

'Except for purposes of taxation,' sez I.

'Except for purposes of taxation,' Robert echoes. 'Though it is given to us to file a joint return.'

We can do Abbott and Costello, too, you see. Larry Blackman, the writer, publicist, and 'talent handler,' wheezed significantly, moved in, and herded our party to a glass case full of partially addressed envelopes that—believe it or not—had nevertheless been delivered to the Ripley museum. One envelope had arrived safely with only a rip (!) in its cover as a clue to its intended destination.

'From rip to Zip,' sez I, 'and service has gotten worse.'

Blackman coughed, chuckled, and tried to keep Robert from glancing over our shoulder at that goddamn calf. I still don't know if he ever understood just how bad he'd screwed up.

That night in our motel room Robert hung his head forward and wept. We were wracked with sobs. Pretty soon The Monster had ole smartass Jamebo doing it, too, just as if we were nine years old again and crying for Velma after burning a strawberry on our knobbly knee. James and Robert Self, in a Howard Johnson's outside St Augustine, sobbing in an anvil chorus of bafflement . . . I only bring this up because the episode occurred toward the end of our association with Blackman and because our editor wanted a bit of 'psychology' in this collaborative effort.

There it is, then: a little psychology. Make of it what you will.

Up, Monster! Get ye from this desk without awakening Robert and I'll feed ye cold peaches from the Frigidaire. Upon our shared life and my own particular palate, I will.

*People wonder why you didn't kill yourselves at first awareness of your hideousness.*

(James is reading over our chest as I write, happy that I've begun by quoting him. Quid pro quo, I say: tit for tat.)

Sex and death. Death and sex. Our contract calls upon us to write about these things, but James has merely touched on the one while altogether avoiding the other. Maybe he wishes to leave the harvesting of morbidities to me. Could that possibly be it?

('You've seen right through me, goodbrother,' replies James.)

Leaving aside the weighty matter of taxes, then, let's talk about death and sex . . . No, let's narrow our subject to death. I still have hopes that James will spare me a recounting of a side of our life I've allowed him, by default, to direct. James?

('Okay, Robert. Done.')

Very well. The case is this: When James dies, I will die. When I die, James will die. Coronary thrombosis. Cancer of the lungs. Starvation. Food poisoning. Electrocution. Snakebite. Defenestration. Anything fatally injurious to the body does us both in —two personalities are blotted out at one blow. The Monster dies, taking us with it. The last convulsion, the final laugh, belongs to the creature we will have spent our lives training to our wills. Well, maybe we owe it that much.

You may, however, be wondering: Isn't it possible that James or Robert could suffer a lethal blow without causing his brother's death? A tumour? An embolism? An aneurysm? A bullet wound? Yes, that might happen. But the physical shock to The Monster, the poisoning of our bloodstream, the emotional and psychological repercussions for the surviving Self would probably bring about the other's death as a matter of course. We are not Siamese twins, James and I, to be separated with a scalpel or a medical laser and then sent on our individual ways, each of us less a man than before. Our ways have never been separate, and never will be, and yet we don't find ourselves hideous simply because the fact of our interdependence has been cast in an inescapable anatomical metaphor. Just the opposite, perhaps.

At the beginning of our assault on the World of Entertainment two years ago (and, yes, we still receive daily inquiries from carnivals and circuses, both American and European), we made an appearance on the *Midnight Chatter*. This was Blackman's doing, a means of introducing us to the public without resorting to loudspeakers and illustrated posters. We were very lucky to get the booking, he told us, and it was easy to see that Blackman felt he'd pulled off a major show-business coup.

James and I came on at the tail end of a Wednesday's evening show, behind segments featuring the psychologist Dr Irving Brothers, the playwright Kentucky Mann, and the actress Victoria Pate. When we finally came out from the backstage dressing-rooms, to no musical accompaniment at all, the audience boggled and then timidly began to applaud. (James says he heard someone exclaim 'Holy cow!' over the less than robust clapping, but I can't confirm this.) *Midnight Chatter*'s host, Tommy Carver, greeted us with boyish innocence, as if we were the Pope.

'I know you must, uh, turn heads where you go, Mr Self,' he began, gulping theatrically and tapping an unsharpened pencil on his desk. 'Uh, *Misters* Self, that is. But what is it—I mean, what question really disturbs you the most, turns you off to the attention you must attract?'

'That one,' James said. 'That's the one.'

The audience boggled again, not so much at this lame witticism as at the fact that we'd actually spoken. A woman in the front row snickered.

'Okay,' Carver said, doing a shaking-off-the-roundhouse bit with his head, 'I deserved that. What's your biggest personal worry, then? I mean, is it something common to all of us or something, uh, peculiar to just you?' That *peculiar* drew a few more snickers.

'My biggest worry,' James said, 'is that Robert will try to murder me by committing suicide.'

The audience, catching on, laughed at this. Carver was looking amused and startled at once—the studio monitor had him isolated in a close-up and he kept throwing coy glances at the camera.

'Why would Robert here—that's not a criminal face, after all—want to murder you?'

'He thinks I've been beating his time with his girl.'

Over renewed studio laughter Carver continued to play his straight-man's role. 'Now is *that* true, Robert?' I must have been looking fidgety or distraught—he wanted to pull me into the exchange.

'Of course it isn't,' James said. 'If he's got a date, I keep my eyes closed. I don't want to embarrass anybody.'

It went like that right up to a commercial for dog food, Larry Blackman had written the routine for us, and James had practised it so that he could drop in the laugh-lines even if the right questions weren't asked. It was all a matter, said Blackman, of manipulating

the material. The *Midnight Chatter*'s booking agent had expected us to be a 'people guest' rather than a performer—one whose appeal lies in what he is rather than the image he projects. But Blackman said we could be both, James the comedian, me the sincere human expert on our predicament. Blackman's casting was adequate, I suppose; it was the script that was at heart gangrenous. Each head a half. The audience liked the half it had seen.

('He's coming back to the subject now, folks,' James says. 'See if he doesn't.')

After the English sheepdog had wolfed down his rations, I said, 'Earlier James told you he was afraid I'd murder him by committing suicide—'

'Yeah. That took us all back a bit.'

'Well, the truth is, James and I *have* discussed killing ourselves.'

'Seriously?' Carver leaned back in his chair and opened his jacket.

'Very seriously. Because it's impossible for us to operate independently of each other. If I were to take an overdose of amphetamines, for instance, it would be *our* stomach they pumped.'

Carver gazed over his desk at our midsection. 'Yeah. I see what you mean.'

'Or if James grew despondent and took advantage of his up time to slash our wrists, it would be both of us who bled to death. One's suicide is the other's murder, you see.'

'The perfect crime,' offered Victoria Pate.

'No,' I replied, 'because the act is its own punishment. James and I understand that very well. That's why we've made a pact to the effect that neither of us will attempt suicide until we've made a pact to do it together.'

'You've made a pact to make a suicide pact?'

'Right,' James said. 'We're blood brothers that way. And that's how we expect to die.'

Carver buttoned his jacket and ran a finger around the inside of his collar. 'Not terribly soon, I hope. I don't believe this crowd is up for that sort of *Midnight Chatter* first.'

'Oh, no,' I assured him. 'We're not expecting to take any action for several more years yet. But who knows? Circumstances will certainly dictate what we do, eventually.'

Afterwards viewers inundated the studio switchboard with

calls. Negative reaction to our remarks on suicide ran higher than questions about how the cameramen had 'done it.' Although Blackman congratulated us both heartily, The Monster didn't sleep very well that night.

*'He thinks I've been beating his time with his girl.'*

Well, strange types scuttled after us while Blackman was running interference for Robert and James Self. The Monster devoured them, just as if they were dog food. When it wasn't exhausted. We gave them stereophonic sweet nothings and the nightmares they couldn't have by themselves. Robert, for my and The Monster's sakes, didn't say nay. He indulged us. He never carped. Which has led to resentments on both sides, the right and the left. We've talked about these.

Before leaving town for parts north, west, and glittering, Robert and I were briefly engaged to be married. And not to each other. She was four years older than us. She worked in the front office of the local power company, at a desk you could reach only by weaving through a staggered lot of electric ranges, dishwashers, and hot-water heaters, most of them white, a few avocado.

We usually mail in our bill payments, or ask Velma to take them if she's going uptown—but this time, since our monthly charges had been fluctuating unpredictably and we couldn't ring through on the phone, I drove us across the two-lane into our business district. (Robert doesn't have a licence.) Our future fiancée—I'm going to call her X—was patiently explaining to a group of housewives and day labourers the rate hike recently approved by the Public Service Commission, the consumer rebates ordered by the PSC for the previous year's disallowed fuel tax, and the summer rates soon to go into effect. Her voice was quavering a little. Through the door behind her desk we could see two grown men huddling out of harm's way, the storeroom light off.

(Robert wants to know, 'Are you going to turn this into a How-We-Rescued-the-Maiden-from-the-Dragon story?')

('Fuck off,' I tell him.)

(Robert would probably like The Monster to shrug his indifference to my rebuke—but I'm the one who's up now and I'm going to finish this blood-sucking reminiscence.)

Our appearance in the power company office had its usual impact. We, uh, turned heads. Three or four people moved away

from the payments desk, a couple of others pretended—not very successfully—that we weren't there at all, and an old man in overalls stared. A woman we'd met once in Wilson & Cathet's said, 'Good morning, Mr Self,' and dragged a child of indeterminate sex into the street behind her.

X pushed herself up from her chair and stood at her desk with her head hanging between her rigid supporting arms. 'Oh, shit,' she whispered. 'This is too much.'

'We'll come back when you're feeling better,' a biddy in curlers said stiffly. The whole crew ambled out, even the man in overalls, his cheeks a shiny knot because of the chewing tobacco hidden there. Nobody used the aisle we were standing in to exit by.

The telephone rang. X took it off the hook, hefted it as if it were a truncheon, and looked at Robert and me without a jot of surprise.

'This number isn't working,' she said into the receiver. 'It's out of order.' And she hung up.

On her desk beside the telephone I saw a battered paperback copy of *The Thorn Birds*. But X hadn't been able to read much that morning.

'Don't be alarmed,' I said. X didn't look alarmed. 'We're a lion tamer,' I went on. 'That's the head I stick into their mouths.'

'Ha ha,' Robert said.

A beginning. The game didn't last long, though. After we first invited her, X came over to Larimer Self's old house—*our* old house—nearly every night for a month, and she proved to be interested in us, both Robert and me, in ways that our little freak-show groupies never had any conception of. They came later, though, and maybe Robert and I didn't then recognise what an uncommon woman this hip and straightforward X really was. She regarded us as people, X did.

We would sit in our candle-lit living room listening to the Incredible String Band sing 'Douglas Traherne Harding,' among others, and talking about old movies. (The candles weren't for romance; they were to spite, with X's full approval, the power company.) In the kitchen, The Monster, mindless, baked us chocolate-chip cookies and gave its burned fingers to Robert or me to suck. Back in the living room, all of us chewing cookies, we talked like a cage full of gibbering monkeys, and laughed giddily, and finally ended up getting serious enough to discuss serious

things like jobs and goals and long-dreamt-of tomorrows. But Robert and I let X do most of the talking and watched her in rapt mystification and surrender.

One evening, aware of our silence, she suddenly stopped and came over to us and kissed us both on our foreheads. Then, having led The Monster gently up the stairs, she showed it how to co-ordinate its untutored mechanical rhythms with those of a different but complementary sort of creature. Until then, it had been a virgin.

And the sentient Selfs? Well, Robert, as he put it, was 'charmed, really charmed.' Me, I was glazed over and strung out with a whole complex of feelings that most people regard as symptomatic of romantic love. How the hell could Robert be merely—I think I'm going to be sick—'charmed'?

('The bitterness again?')

('Well, goodbrother, we knew it would happen. Didn't we?')

We discussed X, rationally and otherwise. She was from Ohio, and she had come to our town by way of a coastal resort where she had worked as a night-clerk in a motel. The Arab oil embargo had taken that job away from her, she figured, but she had come inland with true resilience and captured another with our power company—on the basis of a college diploma, a folder of recommendations, and the snow job she'd done on old Grey Bates, her boss. She flattered Robert and me, though, by telling us that we were the only people in town she could be herself with. I think she meant it, too, and I'm pretty certain that Robert also believed her. If he's changed his mind of late, it's only because he has to justify his own subsequent vacillation and sabotage.

('James, damn you—!')

('All right. All right.')

About two weeks after X first started coming to our house in the evenings Robert and I reached an agreement. We asked her to marry us. Both of us. All three of us. There was no other way.

She didn't say yes. She didn't say no. She said she'd have to think about it, and both Robert and I backed off to keep from crowding her. Later, after we'd somehow managed to get past the awkwardness of the marriage proposal, X leaned forward and asked us how we supported ourselves. It was something we'd never talked about before.

'Why do you ask?' Robert snapped. He began to grind his

molars—that kind of sound gets conducted through the bones.

'It's Larimer's money,' I interjected. 'So much a month from the bank. And the house and grounds are paid for.'

'Why do you ask?' Robert again demanded.

'I'm worried about you,' X said. 'Is Larimer's money going to last forever? Because you two don't *do* anything that I'm aware of, and I've always been uptight about people who don't make their own way. I've always supported myself, you see, and that's how I am. And I don't want to be uptight about my—well, my husbands.'

Robert had flushed. It was affecting me, too—I could feel the heat rising in my face. 'No,' Robert said. 'Larimer's legacy to us won't last forever.'

X was wearing flowered shorts and a halter. She had her clean bare feet on the dirty upholstery of our divan. The flesh around her navel was pleated enticingly.

'Do you think I want your money, Rob? I don't want your money. I'm just afraid you may be regarding marriage to me as a panacea for all your problems. It's not, you know. There's a world that has to be lived in. You have to make your way in it for yourselves, married or not. Otherwise it's impossible to be happy. Don't you see? Marriage isn't just a string of party evenings, fellows.'

'We know,' I said.

'I suppose you do,' X acknowledged readily enough. 'Well, I do, too. I was married in Dayton. For six years.'

'That doesn't matter to us. Does it, goodbrother?'

Robert swallowed. It was pretty clear he wished that business about Dayton had come out before, if only between the clicks of our record changer. 'No,' he said gamely. 'It doesn't matter.'

'*One light*,' the Incredible String Band sang: '*the light that is one though the lamps be many*.'

'Listen,' X said earnestly. 'If you have any idea what I'm talking about, maybe I *will* marry you. And I'll go anywhere you want to go to find the other keys to your happiness. I just need a little time to think.'

I forget who was up just then, Robert or me. Maybe neither of us. Who cares? The Monster trucked us across the room with the clear intention of devouring X on the dirty divan. The moment seemed sweet, even if the setting wasn't, and I was close to tears

thinking that Robert and I were practically *engaged* to this decent and compassionate woman.

But The Monster failed us that night. Even though X received the three of us as her lover, The Monster wasn't able to perform and I knew with absolute certainty that its failure was Robert's fault.

'I'll marry you,' X whispered consolingly. 'There'll be other nights, other times. Sometimes this happens.'

We *were* engaged! This fact, that evening, didn't rouse The Monster to a fever pitch of gentle passion—but me, at least, it greatly comforted. And on several successive evenings, as Robert apparently tried to acquiesce in our mutual good fortune, The Monster was as good as new again: I began to envision a home in the country, a job as a power company lineman, and, God help me, children in whose childish features it might be possible to see something of all three of us.

('A bevy of bicephalic urchins? Or were you going to shoot for a Cerberus at every single birth?')

('Robert, damn you, *shut up*!')

And then, without warning, Robert once again began sabotaging The Monster's poignant attempts to make it with X. Although capable of regarding its malfunctioning as a temporary phenomenon, X was also smart enough to realise that something serious underlay it. Sex? For the last week that Robert and I knew her, there wasn't any. I didn't mind that. What I minded was the knowledge that my own brother was using his power—a purely *negative* sort of power—to betray the both of us. I don't really believe that I've gotten over his betrayal yet. Maybe I never will.

So that's the sex part, goodbrother. As far as I'm concerned, that's the sex part. You did the death. I did the sex. And we were both undone by what you did and didn't do in both arenas. At least that's how I see it . . . I had intended to finish this—but to hell with it, Robert. You finish it. It's your baby. Take it.

All right. We've engaged in so many recriminations over this matter that our every argument and counterargument is annotated. That we didn't marry X is probably my fault. Put aside the wisdom or the folly of our even hoping to marry—for in the end we didn't. We haven't. And the fault is mine.

You can strike that 'probably' I use up there.

James once joked—he hasn't joked much about this affair—that I got 'cold foot.' After all, he was willing, The Monster was amenable, it was only goodbrother Robert who was weak. Perhaps. I only know that after our proposal I could never summon the same enthusiasm for X's visits as I had before. I can remember her saying, 'You two don't *do* anything that I'm aware of, and I've always been uptight about people who don't make their own way.' I'll always believe there was something smug and condescending—not to say downright insensitive—in this observation. And, in her desire to know how we had managed to support ourselves, something grasping and feral. She had a surface frankness under which her ulteriority bobbed like a tethered mine, and James never could see the danger.

('Bullshit. Utter bullshit.')

('Do you want this back, Mr Self? It's yours if you want it.')

(James stares out of the window at our Japanese yew.)

X was alerted to my disenchantment by The Monster's failure to perform. Even though she persevered for a time in the apparent hope that James would eventually win me over, she was as alert as a finch. She knew that I had gone sour on our relationship. Our conversations began to turn on questions like 'Want another drink?' and 'How'd it go today?' The Monster sweated.

Finally, on the last evening, X looked at me and said: 'You don't really want us to marry, do you, Robert? You're afraid of what might happen. Even in the cause of your own possible happiness, you don't want to take any risks.'

It was put up or shut up. 'No,' I told her: 'I don't want us to marry. And the only thing I'm afraid of is what you might do to James and me by trying to impose your inequitable love on us in an opportunistic marriage.'

'*Opportunistic*?' She made her voice sound properly disbelieving.

'James and I are going to make a great deal of money. We don't have to depend on Larimer's legacy. And you knew that the moment you saw us, didn't you?'

X shook her head. 'Do you really think, Rob, that I'd marry'—here she chose her words very carefully—'two-men-with-one-body in order to improve my own financial situation?'

'People have undergone sex changes for no better reason.'

'That's speculation,' she said. 'I don't believe it.'

James, his head averted from mine, was absolutely silent. I couldn't even hear him breathing.

X shifted on the divan. She looked at me piercingly, as if conspicuous directness would persuade me of her sincerity: 'Rob, aren't you simply afraid that somehow I'll come between you and James?'

'That's impossible,' I answered.

'I know it is. That's why you're being unreasonable to even assume it could happen.'

'Who assumed such a thing?' I demanded. 'But I do know this—you'll never be able to love us both equally, will you? You'll never be able to bestow your heart's affection on me as you bestow it on James.'

She looked at the ceiling, exhaled showily, then stood up and crossed to the chair in which The Monster was sitting. She kissed me on the bridge of my nose, turned immediately to James and favoured him with a similar benediction.

'I would have tried,' she said. 'Bye, fellas.'

James kept his head averted, and The Monster shook with a vehemence that would have bewildered me had I not understood how sorely I had disappointed my brother—even in attempting to save us both from a situation that had very nearly exploded in our faces.

X didn't come back again, and I wouldn't let James phone her. Three days after our final goodbye, clouds rolled in from the Gulf and it rained as if in memory of Noah. During the thunderstorm our electricity went out. It didn't come back on all that day. A day later it was still out. The freezer compartment in our refrigerator began to defrost.

James called the power company. X wasn't there, much to my relief. Bates told us that she had given notice the day before and walked out into the rain without her paycheck. He couldn't understand why our power should be off if we had paid our bills as conscientiously as we said. Never mind, though, he'd see to it that we got our lights back. The whole episode was tangible confirmation of X's pettiness.

It wasn't long after she had left that I finally persuaded James to let me write to Larry Blackman in Atlanta. We came out of seclusion. As X might have cattily put it, we finally got around to *doing* something. With a hokey comedy routine and the magic of our inborn uniqueness we threw ourselves into the national spotlight and made money hand over fist. James was so clever and co-operative that I allowed him to feed The Monster whenever the

opportunity arose, and there were times, I have to admit, when I thought that neither it nor James was capable of being sated. But not once did I fail to indulge them. Not once—

All right. That's enough, goodbrother. I know you have some feelings. I saw you in that Howard Johnson's in St Augustine. I remember how you cried when Charles Laughton fell off the cathedral of Notre Dame. And when King Kong plummetted from the Empire State Building. And when the creature from 20,000 fathoms was electrocuted under the roller coaster on Coney Island. And when I suggested to you at the end of our last road tour that maybe it was time to make the pact that we had so long ago agreed to make one day. You weren't ready, you said. And I am unable by the rules of both love and decency to make that pact and carry out its articles without your approval. Have I unilaterally rejected your veto? No. No, I haven't.

So have a little pity.

Midnight. James has long since nodded away, giving control to me. Velma called this afternoon. She says she'll be over tomorrow afternoon for checkers. That seemed to perk James up a little. But I'm hoping to get him back on the road before this month is out. Activity's the best thing for him now—the best thing for both of us. I'm sure he'll eventually realise that.

Lights out.

I brush my lips against my brother's sleeping cheek.

DAMIEN BRODERICK

# A Passage in Earth

I grew her in a pod, and she was my sweetling, my darling, the best baby I ever made. The big collapsicle field was shut down by then, on our last slowing skid back to Earth, which might explain why she didn't come out raddled like the earlier tries. Or maybe it was love, for I put that child together with doting devotion, blended her nucleotides with the passion of an *haute cuisine* autocrat. Delicious enough, yes, yes, to be gobbled down on the spot. But that's Shaun's diction, concupiscent and lipsmacking, lustful-eyed and carnivorous, and she was never meant for Shaun. Not my Mahala, bright birdsong for the ear's ravishment of austere Shem.

Which is being gallows smartass after the fact, of course. When I started growing Mahala I knew she'd be my benediction to an altered Earth, spinning sixteen solar years ahead and to one side of our cruddy battered prow. But the details were up for grabs. You can't trust humans to sit still, even when they're riding an *e* exponent rollercoaster. I knew they'd have changed in ten thousand years, Mahala's distant genetic cousins, but I certainly didn't guess then that they'd have done the demi-god thing: wound up strutting out their own archetypes. Maybe (in the limit, as we analytic types say) it was inevitable.

'Cloth Mother,' she asked when she was eight, smartass herself, 'will I have a prince to love when we get there?'

I stopped cuddling and tried to sound stern.

'Fiddle-faddle, long shanks. This is a vessel of the People's Anarchy and I'll have no backsliding on *my* bridge.'

She did that thing with her nose which everyone except a parent considers sickeningly cute, and went mercurial eight-year-old scornful. 'It would be *nice* to have a prince, Captain, and if you're going to go Hard-Wire on me I think it's purely a *shame*.' The little beast had got to H in the biography matrix and kept mixing Freud up with Harlow, largely to get a rise out of me (see what I mean?). When she was sixteen and stepping out on Earth, Mahala was innocent and bashful, if she felt like it, as peach blossom, but at eight she just powered away like a savage with every joule of the five sigmas of savvy I'd woven into her nucleic acids.

We came down without much noise but with fine star-bursts of fiery light to the Versailles they'd made of temperate Earth. They'd forgotten about us, as predicted, having long since shed interest in the rest of the universe. There's no game to compete in drawing power with immersion in the archetypes. I ferreted out the way of it and congratulated myself cordially on my forethought in having prepared my pretty spanner to throw into their dreary stock repertoire of byzantine elaboration. Then I shot back up to orbit without opening the front door—while Mahala blinked in surprise at her mirror, getting her hair ready—and there I mused for a while.

'We'll nip in the back way.'

'All right,' she nodded without complaint, trusting me. She was a generous, utterly beautiful young woman, and I loved her far too much to toss her into the lap of some whirligig god prince. (Shaun was ruling at that time, but I didn't much like the looks of Shem either. Both of them needed a good hefty boot in the tail.)

I decided to give a wide berth to all their stupefying crystal towers and grandiose pleasure domes and deer-browsed ecological pastures, the chocolate-box stuff. On the other hand I wasn't just being perverse; there was no percentage in squatting down on the Gobi desert (they'd left it alone) and twiddling our thumbs. I needed a place with a measure of natural hostility but not wholly denuded of people.

This time we snuck in over the new South Pole and I dropped us inconspicuously in a mess of crowberries and bilberries on the basalt crags of Heimaey Island, near the remains of the Whorled City of Vestmannaeyjar. The big magnetic polarity flip-flop had been in the offing when I'd left Earth, and the massive soft-iron

spirals of Vestmannaeyjar were nearing completion. Obviously it hadn't worked. I guessed that those gritty argumentative utopians who'd built my vessel had been zilched when the ozone layer blew off.

It was crazy cold, just the same. Plate spread had ripped Iceland up somewhat, and the geysers boiled heartily in new locations, but snow was in the air and ice on the ground. We'd frightened a mob of reindeer and there was quite an amount of filthy exhausted complaint coming from the grubby exhausted locals who'd been herding them into a sort of rudimentary corral outside a mean little village whose construction might well have antedated the Vikings. There was a coarse lilt to their obscenity, as befitted poets and scientists down on their luck, and I knew I'd come to the right place. I bundled my dear pet up in thermal undies and synthetic furs and sent her out to find true love.

Mahala hesitated on the top step and looked doubtfully back at my warm, food-scented interior.

'Last stop, sweetheart,' I told her. 'All out.' It broke my heart, of course, but you have to see these things in perspective. I induced a warm current in her coffee-brown cheek, for a parting kiss, and wrapped her in a long tight pulse for a hug. 'Good luck, my darling. Now don't fret,' for her lashes shone with tears, 'I'll keep watch. Off you go, Mahala, the real people are waiting for you.' They were, too, shin-deep in slush, gawping and gaping and muttering scornful couplets to one another to keep their nerve up.

'Who shall I ask for?' she said in a small appalled voice, staring down at their red-tipped faces.

'It's simple, honeybun. You must look for your beloved, the most miserable of men.'

I thought she was going to bolt back in but she just stood there for a time blinking slowly, her throat moving in the shadow of the furs. Then, 'Oh, shit,' she said, and went gracefully down the icy steps to meet the outcasts.

Did Mahala believe I'd be able to keep her under observation wherever she went? I don't know. She had trust in me, of that I'm certain. But I had never told her about the hefty cloned neural net I kept fed and watered, welded behind a bulkhead, flesh of her flesh, supine and mindless but resonating to her awareness and consciousness. My own sensory electrodes were anchored all

through the net, so I was able to monitor Mahala (and, though for ethical motives I'd never done it, evoke ideas in her brain) at any distance on the planet's surface. So I pursued many billion thises and thats while she slogged through the snow to their rocky shacks and kept a small but sufficient part of myself tuned to her adventures. If anyone were brutish enough to lay a finger on my baby without her permission I'd zap him hard enough to fry his balls.

As it happened, the only animosity Mahala met was sour and envious looks from some of the outcast women, but she had even them charmed fast enough. She seems so fragile, and was demure with the men, and the information she offered freely was meat and drink to this community. None of them had been as far off-planet as the moon. Mahala herself, of course, had not been with me to the edge of the universe but I'd provided her with a liberal education.

'Actually I've just eaten lunch,' she told them, but they seemed so disappointed (and at least one grey old bag so close to a resurgence of snoot) that she smiled nicely and ate their reindeer milk curd with glistening bilberries and mango from the greenhouse. The men whose beasts we'd put the wind up sat with her at the long bench and chewed with gusto on roast steaks, tossing bones to gigantic gentle dogs with far more hair than manners. Mahala declined the meat.

'The quasars *are* intelligent?' asked a biologist, a gaunt lined woman with intent eyes.

'Much more than that,' Mahala said, putting her empty bowl aside. 'They're ever so old, and very wise.'

Triumphantly smiling, the biologist cried: 'I knew it! For centuries I've been telling that asshole Kerala—'

There was hubbub; one of the herders seized Mahala's wrist with unreflective eagerness. (I did not kill him. My jealousy is under perfect rational control.) 'Could you communicate with them? What did they tell you?'

For a moment she allowed his grip, before drawing her hand away. I detected the ambivalent shock of alternating current: never before had she known a human touch.

'Of course, I wasn't born then. But They spoke to the vessel, to the Holistic Cybersystem Executive. I don't think sh'he wanted to come home after that, but They told shim it was sher duty.'

Silence, abruptly, was total. Wind whined about the broken

walls. The herder cracked his knuckles, looking at the rough grain of the table. He said: 'Child, what did They convey to the cybersystem?'

'Well the main thing, I guess, was the secret of the universe.'

Everyone stared at her, and I could sense the ion balance tremble in the room. They had all been exiled here from the courts and great places of the world because asking questions about large enigmas had gone out of fashion when Shem was deposed. The air shivered with intellectual greed.

'Tell us,' a faint shriek. So she did. Arctic twilight (or was it now Antarctic?) draped the windows, and logs fed the fire. A dog nosed closer to the hearth and began to snore. People sighed as she spoke, and snorted in angry disbelief when treasured hypotheses tumbled with the logs into the flames, and were shushed by their fellows. Mead and spirits went into glasses and down throats, and I had to make some minor adjustments to Mahala's hypothalamus to prevent her getting completely sloshed. She loved the attention from this lot, grotty as they were; there might be no princes among them but they all had brains like razors (even the poets) and Mahala had always been a bright kid.

When she finished, a young pregnant mathematician heaved herself up from her cushions near the heat and eased in next to my own baby. 'You're saying that the entire universe is a single matter-wave, weaving backwards and forwards through spacetime from one singularity to the other? *One* elementary particle only?'

Mahala nodded, and sipped at her mead. 'Exactly, Belina, a smeared standing wave. The state vector collapsed, specifying this particular reality, when It sort of opened Its eye and, well, regarded Itself with approval. Do you mind if *I* ask a question now?'

'My god. My god.' Belina closed her eyes and placed her hands on her bulging uterus. 'Mahala, what can we possibly tell *you*?'

My baby glanced around the rapt table, at all of them, shyly, and said: 'How can I find the most miserable man in the world?'

In the incredulous interval, Nigel's serrated laugh caused her to jump. He was one of the poets, dissolute and haggard, with irises the colour of the polar sky at noon. 'We can tell you where the bastard is, my lovely, but not how to find him.'

'But I must find him,' cried Mahala in alarm. 'He is my beloved!'

There was a lot of confusion for a while, the scientists not having

the faintest clue what was afoot and the poets seeing instantly and not liking it, each moiety trying to shout the other down, and my dove bursting into pissed tears in the midst of it. Nigel muscled in at once and led her aside to the fire, speaking into her ear.

'I don't know why you want him, when you could go to the high places and find your welcome in Shaun's plump bed—or stay here with us, and share mine—but I'll tell you where you have to go. Maybe your big metal friend up there on the hill can get you in to him.' And he told her where the Prisoner was held: the whole world's most wretched creature, bitter in defeat, ancient in the cycle of victory and loss and now at the nadir of his fortunes: yes, the lord Shem, patron and betrayer of knowledge, incarcerated in his brother's fastness at the centre of the world.

I hadn't expected Mahala back on board quite so soon, if at all, if ever; the advice They'd given was heuristic, not a point-by-point flowchart. I'd shut the habitation environment down to standby. Shucking off her furs in my soft yellow light Mahala shivered, dazed by the booze, the wind belling outside, her expectation.

'Come right in, darling,' I said. 'I'll make you a mug of hot chocolate.' I nuzzled her broad nose and got a flowered filmy thing for her to wear and popped her into bed, and by the time she was asleep I'd lifted in a sub-orbital parabola, heading for daylight and old gloomypuss.

As she slept I wrought that small miracle which I saw was necessary, touching her brimming ovaries and releasing a single egg, prepared her womb for its nurturance. This much I had expected to come about in the course of nature; now I understood the urgency of our passage in Earth. And I was filled with a dread I put down to a parent's pre-nuptial jitters.

We fell without sound across the lush grasslands of the drained Med, across the early spring thaw-brawling rivers plunging through that immense canyon, hovered finally above his place of bondage: Aethalia, a fist thrust from the ancient seabed. I settled at the peak of Monte Capanne and gazed down with my magnified vision on the shabby roofs of his villa, old San Martino, restored a hundred times by the look of it and a hundred times gone again into decay. In the ample grounds male birds of paradise scratched and strutted, wing plumes like segments shaved from the golden apples of the sun, their chubby bodies emerald in the morning

light. Drab females scurried in the long shadows of heraldic topiary wild with seed, dragons bristling beards, cancerous lions, the slower shrubs still brown and scrawny. Nobody cared. I waited until Mahala had woken, draped her this time for the milder air and the breathless hope of her love in cloth insubstantial and translucent as ectoplasm, tucked tight beneath her lovely breasts and flowing like a comet's veil behind, and I gave her a glass of milk and sent her off down a path I cleared through the dead vines and brambles to the villa.

She passed through the dusty portrait-hung hallways without hindrance, her heart pumping fast, me interposing between the dreadful tools of mayhem his captors had contrived. Charges shorted like rainbows. I'm swift and I'm powerful and I know more than they did (for they had never hung enraptured under the torrential glory of Those Who watch from the rim of the universe), so she was safe from the inanimate, no matter how terrible.

Entering the final sanctum, the air itself tugged at her like the surface of a fluid, a meniscus. Her garments floated, pressed the firm shape of her body for an instant like wet clinging muslin, floated again. Shem stared at her with constricted eyes from his escritoire at the centre of a room of spiteful mirrors (every surface hard, curved, brilliant as mercury, throwing his infinite images and, now, hers), his left hand slowly lowering a quill cut from a pinion of the dazzling birds outdoors, his right hidden at his lap. With a voice like some old industrial mechanism he told her: 'It is too soon. Nobody is here. Go away.' But his hidden hand jerked in a spasm.

'I'm Mahala,' she said, poised on one foot, baffled by the repetitions of light and the million dark retreating icons, and then, focusing: 'Oh! Oh you poor man, what have they done to you?'

Shem, black as obsidian (observe, yes, of his absent marmoreal twin), rose to his shackled feet and leaned towards her across the polished desk. His strong left fingers crushed the pen; his withered right arm flopped. The skew of his spine was not deformity but adjustment to the ruined spindle which was his left leg below the knee. Beneath his flaring nostrils (broader than hers, and flatter) the notched, botched curve of his harelip writhed.

'It is my own doing,' he said. 'It is the punishment I inflict upon myself, in failure.' His speech appalled her. Tenderness opened

within her heart. 'Our specialists diagnose a carnifying psychosomatic conversion. They cannot decide if it is precipitated by shame or guilt.' He laughed horribly. 'Bone and nervous tissue melt into flesh. It'll get worse before it gets better. I can live in the knowledge that when his thousand years is up my father Shaun shall sit here witnessing *his* body rot.' He strained toward her, muscles bunching uselessly against the shackles at his feet, hands scattering the sheets of vellum. In puzzlement he glared at her. 'Or do I mean by brother Shaun? My son?' He lifted the escritoire and slammed it shatteringly against the mirrored floor; the floor failed to shatter. 'Are you really here, then, girl? Come closer, let me touch you. It is—not—' he ground in agony, palatals blurred and lost, '—*time*!'

Tremulously, she crossed the blinding floor and caressed his maimed face. He shuddered, right claw contracting.

'I seek the most miserable man in the world, for he is promised to me as my beloved.'

'Jesus,' Shem said. He turned his dark cheek into the curve of her hand. 'You've come to the right place.'

'Your poor feet!' Mahala cried, stooping, her breasts falling forward to his voracious gaze. With the knowledge I had given her she touched the shackles here and here and they fell from Shem's feet. He reeled, crashed, tore then like an animal at her garments and his own, while she looked up in pain and absolute incomprehension into his grotesque mad face, her love turning back like a poisoned barb to enter her body and burst her heart, and his seed gushing like flame into her womb. Mahala, my baby, my gift to those who had made me, did not cry out. In her shock and betrayal she convulsed like a deer slain for sport, while his seed coursed within her secret places to the ripe, waiting egg, and the breath blocked in her throat like ice.

I watched her ravishment in a rage violent as madness. I stormed within my metal prison. For ten million millionths of a second the Earth hung at the balance of oblivion. In my grief I activated the collapsicle fields; the ship, for a nanosecond, crashed into infinite density and sucked at the world. For that period the world convulsed with Mahala's hurt. Monuments shivered and broke. The pleasure domes of the high places split, cracked, yawned. Oceans heaved; birds fell stunned from opaque air. Then my grief attained perspective. I shut off the fields and took the walls of the

villa San Martino in my grasp and hammered them to a vibration of titanic speech.

'Shem, once lord of this Earth, what hast thou done? For thy foul work this day, man, thou art curst. Stand back from the woman Mahala lest I smite thee into unending agonies.'

My baby got to her feet as the man drew back to his knees, to his hands. All her lovely things were torn and smeared; she pulled them about her. Great sobs broke within Shem's chest, tears flooded from her eyes. He rose, staring at his multiple selves, wiping the tears away as they fell with his perfect right hand, standing straight on his straight legs, opening without cry or whimper his curved, sculpted lips. He could not elude her image in the silver walls. Sinking to the elegant chair he allowed his beautiful face to drop onto folded arms, and there Mahala left him to his belated, wracking remorse as she walked painfully away from that place and stumbled up the hill to my useless, bitter ministrations.

She did not tell Shaun that she was pregnant, and nobody in that lustrous, sterile city asked. The handsome people took her up as a bauble, the season's premier diversion. Masques, balls, prodigies of cloud-sculpture in her honour enzymatically illuminated: you name it. Her misery was deemed decorous. Remorseless in their appetite for frivolous titbits from my voyage across the universe in an optional black hole, they expressed a marked indifference for anything of substance. The lord Shaun was not himself stupid, precisely, yet he saw himself as a practical man, in love with mighty engines whose gizzards he delegated to underlings, a man born for conquest (but so too had Shem viewed himself, and would again), manfully dedicated to gaming and hunting. So predictable; I hung in that lonely orbit to which I'd removed myself and seethed with boredom. In feminine moods I knitted booties. At other times I raged anew and vowed vengeance. Mahala, meanwhile, ate lightly of their pastries but put on weight. She maintained her reserve and her chastity, to the veiled derision (and covert gratitude) of the court's ladies.

When her confinement was near Mahala made her announcement, to a minor flurry of astonishment, and suffered no lack of commentary arch, wry, languid, sardonic and scornfully droll.

'Are you hermaphroditic, then, my dear?' inquired Maureen

O'Darlene de Raylene y McYamamoto, a porcelain matron nimble enough in the raising of her own skirts. 'We've heard no faintest whisper of gentlemen at your bedchamber, and surely you were alone in the vastnesses of space?'

Mahala regarded her coolly. Her ankles were swelling and an anguish of perplexed love frayed her nerves.

'The children have a father, Madam.'

'More than one little piccaninny? How delicious.'

Mistress Maureen O'D. drifted away to the needless shade of a huge-leafed tree. The babies struggled, kicking, and my own darling child pressed her locked fingers on the drum of her belly. In the open compound Shaun and the hearties of his entourage were superintending the harness for their day's hunt. Autumn was well along, bright enough but smoky; soon the ground would be too cold for the vast gastropods. One of the fine men, chivvying his mount with an excess of vigour, slipped in a trace of the great snail's mucus and went arse over tit, to the raucous glee of his colleagues. The beast's behemoth head swung down and its forward tentacles extruded, eyes moist and sad. The fellow's swagger-stick came up in a brutal stinging slash, and the snail recoiled into its richly textured shell. For all the mass it mounts on its mutated vertebral bracing, *Helix horribilis* is a timorous animal. Handlers came out shouting and cursing. The snail's master stalked off to restore his splendour, and Mahala watched from her isolation as the animal slowly came about and glided away, ten metres of damp leather and armour-plating skimming as many centimetres of glistening slime.

Shaun was waiting at her elbow as she withdrew.

'Fine creatures, aren't they, my dear? Won't you change your mind and ride to the hunt? The experience is exhilarating—nothing like it!—and I promise you it's smooth as silk, can't possibly harm your . . . condition.'

'My lord, I do not approve the way you treat the animals—these snails, and those you hunt. Besides, there is always the chance, no matter how remote, of an accident.' Somewhere, fallen leaves were roasting in a fire, sweet to her flaring nostrils. And decision came upon her, crystalline, unheralded. Mahala touched the gloved wrist of the tall pale man and looked directly into his eyes, into a gaze equal to that poet's on the cold southern island. 'The babies are your brother's children.'

There was no motion in his body. At last he said:

'Shem's heirs?'

'Yes.'

'Impossible.' Then, 'Do you understand? Now I must have you destroyed. If there is any chance,' said he, fully conscious of irony, 'no matter how remote . . .'

'My babies and I are safe,' Mahala said with composure. 'We have the protection of the cybersystem.'

In fury, he lashed his open hand across her face. 'You stupid gravid bitch!' I waited, poised to kill him, and knew I *must* not, not yet, if ever. Wormwood. I watched as he stood there, regal in his martial kilts, as he spoke at once through his devices to men and machines deployed across the tamed globe.

I watched as he looked into the image of that empty mirrored room.

He took Mahala through a hushed, distraught throng to his throne room and showed her the millennial history which was there. She was not afraid. My darling child knew (and I knew she knew, through the anchored neural net which was part and not part of her) that she had stepped beyond history, beyond myth, into that dislocation which ends an age and sees another born. The babies kicked and kicked. Soon her labour would begin.

'Ten thousand years!' Shaun roared. Yes, now he was roaring, now it was coming home to him authentically. The tapestries and friezes seemed to shake to his wrath. 'A cycle fixed in eternity! Do you imagine that I rejoice through all those days of my thousand years of exile, through my mutilation and the envy which gnaws at my entrails? Is it easy to share this throne with my other self, with my father, my brother, my son Shem? It is *not* easy. I tell you it is not. But it is the way the world must be, it is ordained, it is *duty*, goddamn it, you swollen sow witch.'

Tones shrilled the air, lights pulsed, phantom figures came and departed without physical presence. Shaun's machines were hunting, scouring the earth.

'Besides,' he told her, his face mottled like bloody marble, 'the thing is impossible. You have allowed his escape, but he cannot be the father of your bastards.'

He was here, an apparition told him. And later here, said another. There is furtive mobilisation of men and weapons, reported a third. Nausea afflicted Mahala; panting, she found a chaise and lowered herself to its comfort, lifting her tired legs. Contractions began. She called out to me, silently, and I dropped

from orbit like a bomb to wait for her demand.

The interstellar vessel hovers above the palace, a phantom informed the lord of the world. We cannot bring it down. We advise caution with respect to the woman. Midwives are standing by in the anteroom. Her time is close at hand. He brushed them aside, insensate, prowling electronic corridors for his enemy brother.

'This is *why* it is impossible,' he explained in tight, bitten words. 'He is sterile, as am I. It is a consequence of our joint nature.' He took her jaw in the grip of his fingers. I began to burn through the roof and the defences of the palace, careful not to damage the art. If he started getting really rough I had faster techniques at my disposal.

'We are like the snails you viewed with such disdain today in the compound—bred to a purpose, monstrosities outside and above nature, yes, but the end of our line. Our seed is defunct. I have had a million women; their wombs have never quickened. Woman, I say you are a *liar*.'

The lord Shem has begun his march, the shades cried in panicky voices. His war machines are bearing down on us, and we are caught unprepared.

'The babies are Shem's,' Mahala stated quietly.

A spasm shook her, then, and she cried out. Fluids broke upon the ancient stone paving. I peeled open the Michelangelo ceiling above them and lifted her into my waiting body.

There was blood, tearing, a gonging in the earth too profound for human ears. Blood there was, and lacerated flesh, and the lamentation of orphans. Shem came into the high places mounted on a giant lizard, his hands blazing with hot blue flames. Shaun stood atop his burning palace, in the stinking confusion, and his shields dazzled like the sun's face. I hung above it all, at the moon's orbit, and wondered at the terrible duty I had discharged. I longed for the balm of Those Who burned without conflagration, there in the frozen darks at the occlusion of space.

The babies howled.

Mahala, my child, held them to her swollen breasts, hugged them to her, and wept with love and grief.

The twins are girls. I saw to that.

R. A. LAFFERTY

# Bequest of Wings

'Do you have to play that damned wind-harp in here every evening?' Potter Firmholder complained to his skinny daughter.

'I don't, no. I'm not here every evening, dear Potter,' the daughter Angela said. 'You yourself say that I'm never here. Oh, Potter, I need seven hundred and twenty dollars for a pinion-pick for this harp. It does save the pinion bones, you know.'

'Oh, Skinny Angel, you could get a gold pick for that,' said Peggy Firmholder, her mother.

'Well, of course it will be gold,' Angela said. 'Should I have a pot-metal pick when all the other kids have gold ones?'

'You must think money grows in the clouds,' Potter grumbled. 'You young people have got to come down to Earth.'

'Potter Firmholder, give the child the money!' Peggy said. 'Everything has gone up.'

'It's the things that have gone up unnaturally that disrupt me,' Potter still complained. 'Here, Angel, here's the money. I'm sorry I was cranky. What, off again? You'd better eat something before you go.'

'I'll catch something on the wing,' Angela said. She swept out with the wind-harp and the money, and it was plain that she was on her way to Cloudy Joe's Drug Store. Cloudy Joe had gold picks for wind-harps. He had 'wing-glo' wash. He had struts and canvas and tar, and white condor feathers, and pinion wires, and airplane glue; even food and drink and tapes and magazines, and cloud-moss, and wax-bug candles, everything that one might want.

'I don't like her hanging around Cloudy Joe's Drug Store so much,' Potter Firmholder told his wife. 'There's something a little bit wrong with that place.'

'When you were that age, you hung around Ace Whizz-Bang's Tavern,' Peggy said. 'And, Potter, there was more than a little bit wrong with *that* place. Cloudy Joe's is a cult spot.'

'So is Ace Whizz-Bang's,' said Potter. *Used* to hang around Ace Whizz-Bang's? Potter still did. It was better than Cloudy Joe's Drug Store with all those high-flying young people crowding into it.

'I don't even know how Cloudy Joe's stays there,' Potter said. 'It's against all common-sense rules.'

'Oh, Potter, I've explained it to you a dozen times, and so has Angela,' Peggy said. 'It's held up there by the new mathematics, by a Fortean Vector Value. Between the Euclidean and the Einsteinian universes there are thin intrusions known as the Fortean Universe. And Fortean Universe Vectors are strong enough to hold almost anything up, if they don't have to hold it up too far. Yeah, that's the patter for it, but I don't know what holds such places up either. They weren't up there before people discovered those vector values. Would they fall down again if people forgot the vectors? Poor Angela's getting more and more fearful as the time runs out on all of it. They're just allowed six weeks of it after full sprout, and the time's nearly up. Young people have a very hard time of it nowadays; the "lightest and brightest" of them do anyhow.'

'Bat-wings, bat-wings!' jeered Ace Whizz-Bang as some of the Bat-Wing gang swooped by his front door. 'Do you know, 'Mealyous, bat wings used to be cited against the old Natural Selection theory.' (They called Potter Firmholder 'Mealyous at Ace Whizz-Bang's and at other places.) 'For a great evolutionary change to come about, it was argued, there had to be some advantage offered at every step on the way to that change, or how would the change be carried through? But where was the every-step advantage when a mousy rodent was growing wings and turning into a bat? Where was the advantage during those several million years when the changing thing wasn't wing enough to fly with and was too elongated and spread in the fingers to be used as a hand or a foot or a claw? It couldn't be walked on. It couldn't be

manipulated. It couldn't be flown with. Why have it for a million years then? But now the main arguments against Natural Selection are that it didn't happen, and that there just isn't time to wait for it in a busy world.'

'And the main arguments against Sudden Mutation are that it *does* happen, and that there just isn't time to get used to it even in a fast-moving world,' 'Mealyous Firmholder said. 'It's hard on the young people, the high-flyers of them, and it's hard on their parents too. It was once said that the great menace hanging over mankind was the mushroom cloud. I suppose that wasn't true, since nobody really paid any attention to it. But now the greatest menace hanging over these lightest and brightest of the young people is the bolt-cutter. And they just can't avoid paying attention to it.'

'Aye, they live on the sky-brink for a while, and then they fall off it,' Ace Whizz-Bang said. 'I was too old for it. It hadn't appeared yet in my youth (Oh, I guess there were a dozen or so cases in California), so my youth had to be complicated by lesser things. Even today you will seldom see a "stubby" who's more than twenty-eight or thirty years old. And the older uncropped ones are still younger than that. They get ungainly and crash-prone and they die within five years of their escaping the bolt-cutter. Now even the flyers say that they're not supposed to escape it. They say that their failures are bringing the full thing nearer every day.'

'It's easy enough to set them down as trivial and flighty,' Firmholder said. 'Of course they are. They are young and ignorant, and extravagant in their views. But they seem to have a genuinely beautiful and thrilling mystique.'

'Fragile though,' Whizz-Bang said. 'It's pathetic really. And it'll be traumatic to them in later life likely, though none of the afflicted ones have had a later life yet. There's only two things we can do about it. We can live with the sorrowful situation, or we can destroy the "lightest and the brightest" of the children as soon as they can be spotted.'

'They're hard to spot before they're about fifteen years old and start to sprout,' Firmholder said. 'And a person rather hates to kill his fifteen year old son or daughter, whatever the logic of the situation.'

'Nah, that wouldn't bother me very much,' Ace Whizz-Bang said. 'A bunch of pupa-stage punks is what they are. One good

thing about it all though, you can really make bar glasses shine with that "wing-glo" wash they've brought out.'

Well, Angela Firmholder grew pale and wan during the crisis weeks.

'Aren't you rather overdoing the "touch of death" role, Angie,' her father tried to josh her once, to lift her out of her sadness. But Angela burst into tears and flew off.

'You shouldn't have said that, Potter,' Peggy told him. 'It's so terrible a thing for children of that age.'

'Oh, I know it, I know it, Peg. I was just trying to jolly her a little bit. When we were young people, we were motorcycle nuts, and we loved the speed and noise. Now they go so much faster, but they're not half as noisy about it.'

'It must be horrible to be clipped,' Peggy said, 'and to be a "stubby" and a "nubby" for the rest of one's short life. They have to continue in such clumsiness of hands with only a little improvement. And they lose their beauty of voice and are adept at so few things. And it's only the lightest and the brightest who are afflicted so far. All their lives they will seem awkward, even to those more awkward and slow-witted ones who never were light and bright.'

'I still wish that she wouldn't hang around Cloudy Joe's Drug Store so much.'

'Leave it alone, Potter, and leave her alone. Cloudy Joe's is a cult place, and their cult is all they have to sustain them during the metamorphical horror.'

'Well, I wish she'd agree to have it done in a hospital where it's clean.'

'No, Potter, no. That would be uncult.'

Those lightest and brightest of the young people did have remarkably beautiful voices during the weeks of their affliction. And the wind-harps that they played upon had a full and gusty sound. The cult songs that they sang had trivial words and tunes, but their renditions were superb. It was like honey from Heaven when those sounds drifted down. They were airy songs, sky songs, soaring songs, pinnacle songs. There was a complexity to their music that wasn't to be found in even the worst of the Rocks and Grocks.

The 'brightest' liked to perch on high pinnacles, on towers, on spires, on eagle cliffs. They held their bright and sparkling congresses in these places and in places even higher, such as Cloudy Joe's Drug Store on its Fortean sky-lodge.

A 'flight' of young people was mutually supporting in the terrible spiritual and physical crises that the members were passing through. Whatever shame was in their condition was at least shared shame for members of a flight. Most of the suicides of the 'brightest' young people were of lone eagles, not of 'flight' members.

Together, the shame of eating insects and cicadas, and even small birds caught on the wing, was a mitigated shame. The appetite for these things was as relentless as it was sudden. Eat them they must, and it was better that they eat them together.

The physical clumsiness of the brightest could not be overcome singly, but in group it could be partly overcome. No afflicted person could bring his own fingers together, could bring his two hands together. But two persons might bring their now elongated thumbs together for manipulation or handling, or might bring the knobs of their pinion bones together. Tools were devised (the pinion-pick for playing the wind-harp was only one of them) to slip over the ends of the pinion bones in order to push or hook or grasp.

Working together, the young people could assemble bat-wings out of struts and canvas plastered with tar, or bird-wings out of plastihedelion fibre and feathers. It didn't take very much manufactured equipment, slipped over newly deformed hands and arms and shoulders, to achieve conquest of the unaccustomed environment.

There was cult culture in this, cult music, achingly close cult friendships and companionships, courtships that were almost magic, and exaltation in the higher air.

There came an incredible chestiness to the young men of the afflicted cults, and an incredible breastiness to the young women. The wing-beat muscles had developed superbly. And so had the winged voices. Their song was absolutely extraordinary, as was the orchestration of their wind-harps. Sheet music for most of this superb body of melody can be had at Cloudy Joe's Drug Store, and at other such places around the world. There is one of them in every sky.

Angela Firmholder was at one of those 'high-places' in the twilight meeting with other young and soaring personalities who made up her 'flight'. Carolyn Bushbaby, Rod Murdock, Peter Kingfeather, Alice Tombigbee, Clyde Boggles, Hester Hilltop! They were fellow adventurers in the furthest biological adventure since the primordial clay stretched itself and breathed. They were companions of Air and Earth. They were friends and lovers. Ah, soaring and swooping in the early darkness! It was poignant that it could last only six weeks.

'It is a damnable, contagious, crippling arthritis, and it is no other thing,' Doctor Hexbird had written in *Today's Future*. 'It strikes only adolescents of a highly sensitive and a highly talented nature. The "Lightest and Brightest" designation is as much truth as poetry, but it is a tragic truth. It is the flower of the younger generation that is stricken with this dreaded and painful, and sometimes fatal sickness.

'The fingers and hands become so elongated and splayed that they can no longer be used for human hands. They cannot grasp, they cannot manipulate. It would almost be better if the hands were chopped off completely. What must be chopped off, however, are two outlaw growths on each side, two very long bone spurs called the greater and the lesser pinion bones. These new spur-bones change the whole deportment of the victim; this is the reason that they must be removed after they have become hard bone. They can be cut with bone-saws, but in unapproved and cultic operations they are cut with bolt-cutters. Then these bones must be pulled out of the flesh for their entire length. This bloody laying-open of breast and shoulders and neck and arms and back to get the long bones out is a traumatic horror. The thirty per cent mortality in these cultic operations is outrageous.

'After the two giant bone-spurs are removed, the pain of the unusual arthritis will often disappear. There is no way that the length of the hand and finger bones can be reduced, but the hands can regain a slight bit of their agility. They can never be fully human hands after such a deformity, but they can be used a little bit.

'When the two pinion-spurs have come to their full length, and just before they must be removed, it is possible for the

victims, by the use of a few slight strut-like and wing-like attachments, to fly.'

'We might expect even a sudden mutation, if so far-reaching as this (a flightless species acquiring flight) to take from three million to twelve million years. Now that we are actually observing it, we find that the period is much shorter than that. The whole cycle is about sixty days in the individual; possibly it will be sixty years in the species (this to include second-stage and third-stage development also). It has come too swiftly for the individual or group personality to adjust to it fully as yet. There are cases of unhappiness and death. And the physical retreat from its implications (the retreat should disappear in the second or third stage of the mutation) is incomplete and unpleasant and very often fatal.

'Why do the "lightest and the brightest" of these mutated flyers accept the cropping of their wings and their frequent deaths? They accept it because it is necessary for the mutation. The complete flyers will not descend physically from these "brightest". These will not have any descent. And yet the mutation could not be completed without their trail-blazing and destruction. There is a biological imperative here, but its mechanism is still not clear.

'Ah, it is a great privilege to live in the time of an actual, major, rapid mutation.' So wrote Dr Rudolph Redstern in *Tomorrow's Flight*.

'With cloud-grown mosses for my bed,
And wax-bug candles at my head.'

That was part of the instructions that Angela Firmholder wrote for her parents, in case of her death. And she added explanation in prose:

'The cloud-moss may be had in thirty kilo bales (one bale of it will make up into a nice death-bed) at Cloudy Joe's Drug Store, for fifty dollars a kilo. It is the real moss that grows on the shady side of clouds, and it is the softest moss there is.

'The wax candles are to be made from the waxen insects that we catch and eat in flight. Some of the more enterprising people catch them against their own deaths, and to sell. I have been a lazy flyer and I did not provide for myself, so you must buy them. I want

three of these wax candles, from fat-bugs, from wax-bugs, and from rush-bugs. They are for sale at Cloudy Joe's Drug Store for six hundred dollars a candle. I know that you will not begrudge me these for my last rites.

'I expect to die from the clipping. I don't much want to live on as a "stubby" or a "nubby", but I will if that is ordained for me. The clipping is the case and the law now. Soon there will be other cases and other laws. The big thing is almost here, and the destruction of a few of us early flyers prepare the way for it. In half a century all the people will fly, without device and without shame, and without pain or torturous effort.

'Rod Murdock, who is my first sky-companion, will clip my pinion bones with the ritual bolt-cutters. Then all the members of my flight will lay me over and remove these newest of bones, the pinions. And then a new member will take my place in the "flight". Then I will be brought here, for the death of a flyer, or for the life of a "nubby". But I will not be ashamed in any case.

'People will not need hands when they are grown to full flight and to full flight custom. We will not need anything manufactured, not even wind-harps. When the days of fullness arrive, our distal feathers will sound like wind-harps.'

'What I think,' said Ace Whizz-Bang, 'is that before the end of this century there will be two kinds of people. The "lightest and the brightest" will have become bird-people complete. I say, let them go. Let them be birds. To me, there was always something a little bit too-much about those lightest and brightest anyhow.

'And the other kind of people will be ourselves, the old people. We will be somewhat improved by getting rid of the flighty element in ourselves, and we will be ready to tackle another million years of it. Say, 'Mealy, there's six of those flying kids coming down over your house right now, and it looks like they're carrying your daughter between them. Was this the day she was supposed to be cropped?'

'This was the day, Whizz-Bang. Oh, my poor skinny Angela!' Firmholder cried, and he hurried the half block to his home.

'Potter Famealyous Firmholder,' said loving wife Peggy. 'They're bringing her in now. Is she not beautiful?'

'Beautiful,' breathed Potter. 'Oh, the poor creature!'

The young 'flight' people brought Angela down and laid her on

the cloud-moss bed. She was white with fright and pain, and red with blood. But she smiled.

Somebody brought a display of pinnacle roses from Cloudy Joe's Drug Store. Somebody lit the wax-bug candles.

'Oh, my poor skinny angel,' Peggy Firmholder mourned her daughter.

There was the musical tone of distal feathers ruffling in the wind of a long swoop downwards. They sounded ever so much like wind-harps.

'Oh, how cult!' cried Peggy.

GEORGE TURNER

# In a Petri Dish Upstairs

1

When, some fifty years after the Plagues and The Collapse, Alastair Dunwoodie put the first Solar Power Station into synchronous orbit over Melbourne Town—that is, some 38,000 kilometres above it—no warning angel tapped his shoulder to whisper, 'You have created a fresh culture and rung the knell of an old one.'

It would have been told to mind its own celestial business. With solar power now gathered by the immense space mirrors and microbeamed to Earth for network distribution, the Golden Age was appreciably closer. With a Station in Heaven, all was right with the world.

Remarkably soon there were seventeen Power Stations in orbit above strategic distribution points around the world, sufficient for the needs of a planet no longer crawling with the famined, resource-consuming life of the Twentieth Century. The Plagues and The Collapse and yet less pleasant events had thinned the problem.

Dunwoodie was a builder, not a creator; his ideas had been mooted in the 1970s, some eighty years before, but had not come to fruition when The Collapse intervened. It was, however, notable that even in those days, when social studies of crowding and isolation had been to the fore, nobody seemed to have considered what changes might occur among the first people to live out their lives in a steel cylinder in space.

And not for a further eighty years after the launching did the

Custodian of Public Safety of Melbourne Town begin to consider it—when, for the first time in three generations, an Orbiter proposed to visit Earth. When he had arrived at the vagueness of a possible decision, he visited the Mayor.

'Do you mean to give a civic reception for this brat?'

The Mayor of Melbourne Town was unenthusiastic. 'It's an event, of sorts. A reception will let Orbiter vanity preen while it keeps the Town's society belles from claiming they weren't allowed to meet him. I hear he's a good looking lad.'

The Custodian seemed uninterested in that.

The Mayor asked at last, 'But why? After three generations they send a youngster—nineteen, I believe—to visit. What do they want? Why a boy?'

'A boy on a man's errand, you think?'

The Mayor's expression asked, *Why are you wasting my time?* and he waited for explanation.

The Custodian went at it obliquely. 'The Global Ethic,' he said, 'the Ethic of Non-Interference—do you ever question it?'

The Mayor was a very young man, the Custodian an old and dangerously experienced one. The Mayor went sharply on guard but his expression remained as bland as his answer: 'Why should I? It works.'

The Custodian's authority outweighed the Mayor's—Mayoral duties were social rather than gubernatorial—but he had no overt power to punish. But advancement could be blocked or privilege curtailed without open defiance of the Ethic as it operated on Departmental levels.

The Custodian surprised him. 'You should, James; you should question continuously. Particularly morals, conventions, habits, regulations—and ethics. The older and more ingrained, the more questionable.'

Stiffly, 'Those are matters for Global League delegates.'

The Custodian grinned like a friendly skull. 'You needn't be so damned careful; I want your help, not your scalp. Review some facts.' He flicked a raised finger. 'First: the Power Stations as originally flown were rotated about the long axis to afford peripheral gravity.' Another finger. 'Second: when the final Stations were flown, the seventeen formed themselves into the Orbital League.' Third finger. 'Then they made unreasonable

demands for luxuries, surplus wealth, cultural artifacts and civic privilege under threat of throttling down the power beams. That was seventy years back.'

'School is a year or two behind me,' said the Mayor coldly, 'but basic history remains familiar.'

'I'm selecting facts, not lecturing.' Fourth finger. 'So the Global Council of the time authorised use of a remote-action energy blind, a—call it a weapon—whose existence had not been publicly known. The Orbiters threatened our microbeams, so *we* blinded the internal power systems of Station One from a single projector in Melbourne Town. After a week of staling air, falling temperature and fouling water they cried quits and—' fifth finger '—the Orbital League has made no such further error since.'

'So for once the Ethic was ignored.'

'Oh, but it wasn't. We took suitable action, harming no one seriously, to preserve the status quo. That was all.'

The Mayor said, 'It was *not* all. The Stations had been earning extra revenue with their null-g factories—perfect ball bearings, perfectly formed crystals and so on. Earth stopped buying, limiting Orbiter income to the Power Charter allocation. That was reprisal and un-Ethical.'

'Earth protected herself against wealthy Stations accumulating the means of further blackmail.'

The Mayor was contemptuous. 'Semantic drivel.'

'It was a Council decision. Do you dispute it?'

'Yes,' said the Mayor and waited for an axe to fall.

'Good, good, good! So you see, the bloody Ethic means whatever you need it to mean.'

The Mayor retained caution. 'Most realise that, privately. Still, it works.'

'Because *laissez faire* has become part of our cultural mentality. But what of the cultural mentality Upstairs?'

'Well, we know they have developed non-Terrene conventions and behaviour. There's been little physical contact since they cut themselves off.'

'Quite so.'

Silence dragged while the Mayor wondered had he said more than he knew. What the Orbiters had done was to stop the rotation of the Stations and give themselves over to a null-g existence. When you thought of it, why not? To live in utter physical

freedom, to fly, to leap, to glide, to dispose for ever of the burden of the body . . . the wonder was that they had waited so long to grasp delight.

It followed that the first generation born in space was cut off from Earth. Once muscle structure and metabolism had settled into null-g conditions, exposure to gravity became inconceivable, possibly disastrous . . . ahh!

'This young man, this Peter Marrian—how will he deal with weight? Power-assist harness?'

'I must tell you about that,' said the Custodian. 'You'll be fascinated . . .'

The no-nonsense Orbiters preserved no fairy tales from their Earthly heritage but they had formulated a few austere anecdotes for the very young. One concerned a super-virile Orbiter who married a Terrene heiress and brought her home to live in orbit.

Peter heard the tale when he was not quite three and already absorbing Orbiter lore with a mind the commune nurses noted, in their giggly fashion, as destined for Upper Crust privilege.

'—then, when he'd defeated all the schemes of the rich girl's wicked father, he joined with her in a church as they do Downstairs. Then he brought her to the Station with all her riches and the Commune Fathers awarded him such extra privileges that he lived happily ever after.'

It did not occur to him then (or later, for that matter) to ask how *she* lived ever after. His interest was in the early part of the story, which told how the young Orbiter became big and powerful in order to face the monstrous Terrene weapon, Gravity. Now, how was that accomplished?

He spat at the nurses who said he would understand when he was older. They had no idea, for they were only thirdwomen and not educated beyond their needs, and such rearing facilities did not then exist. But soon would.

Such facilities, *all* facilities, cost money. The Commune's only money-wealth was the cynically limited income derived from the Power Charter, kept at a 'reasonable minimum'. The Orbiters were welcome to pride and null-g freedom—at a suitably cheap rate.

The first generation had tried blackmail and learned a rapid lesson.

The second generation had reasoned that conditions were humiliating rather than unbearable—and in fact provided much which Earth could not—and could be endured until better opportunity offered. The important thing was to acquire money with which to buy—well, facilities.

By the third generation the Commune Fathers had grown longer sighted and the first cheese-paringly sequestered funds were being transformed into a huge centrifuge at about the time young Peter asked his question. Cutting gravity and so cutting culturally loose from Earth had been a fine gesture but there could be advantage in a squad of Orbiters who could move comfortably on Earth's surface. And recommencing rotation was out of the question for the older folk.

'I hate it!'—shrieked and repeated to exhaustion—was the reaction of Peter, aged four, to his first experience of the centrifuge. Even the fiddling 0.2 g was outrage to a physique which had come to terms with mass and inertia but knew nothing of weight, nor wished to.

On the second day, after a bout of desperate clinging to the doorgrip, he was allowed out after ten minutes, bellowing, while the thirdwomen giggled at his aggressiveness. It would be a useful trait in the future planned for him.

After a fortnight of systematic lengthening of his daily accustomisation—allowing internal organs to realign gently to a vertically weighted structure—increase of the g factor began. His rages evolved into arrogant self-confidence as the psychlinicians worked with cold devotion on the boy's emotional fabric.

At age six he lived most of his day in the centrifuge, a series of belts round the internal circumference of the Station and large enough to accommodate a considerable cadre now that a method had been established. With his weight at 0.5 g (he was the only one as yet on the fastest belt) he looked forward, under psychological prodding, to greater conquests. Signs of muscular shape, as distinct from subcutaneous muscular structure, were discernible.

The Commune Fathers allotted him the personal name of 'Marrian'—a joke of sorts, and their first mistake.

'Since the Orbiters set aside wedlock and the family system, second names have been allotted on a descriptive basis, focusing on job or personal attributes. What does Marrian describe?'

The Mayor had been, as promised, fascinated by the facts but more intrigued by the Custodian's possession of them. 'I'm sure I don't know, and I know even less how you came by this knowledge. You have excellent informants.'

'If you mean spies,' the Custodian said comfortably, 'say spies. I haven't any really. Only shuttle pilots and a few delivery agents visit the Stations, but their tattle and observations add up to this and that.'

'So they penetrated the nurseries to learn bedtime stories and discovered the centrifuge nobody else knows about—and didn't, er, *tattle* even to their best friends?'

'Well, they told *me*.'

'They thought bedtime stories worth a custodial report, these most unofficial agents?'

'Perhaps I should admit to some literary licence in fleshing out the picture.' The Mayor, played with, shrugged and was silent. 'Am I so inept? Must I tell the truth?'

Administrative secrets can be slippery, but curiosity had carried the Mayor too far for retreat. 'It would help,' he said coldly and the Custodian's instant grin warned him that he shared the pool with a shark.

'The Power Stations talk to each other. I listen. I don't hear deadly secrets, for they aren't stupid. Only occasional indiscretions and errors come my way. It has taken fifteen years to form a picture from scraps.'

'They talk in clear?'

'By line of sight laser.'

The Mayor saw appalling involvements opening but the hook was in his jaws. 'Transceivers would be shielded, and you can't tap into a laser beam undetected.'

'Who can't?'

It was not really a shock, only one more privacy violated by nameless men. The Custodian offered a spinoff comment: 'The intention of the Ethic is preserved by continuous distortion of the letter.'

'Semantics!' But the repetition was half hearted.

'The price of language. Now you know some secrets. There's a price on those also.'

'Which I pay at once?'

'There is an action to be taken and I must not be implicated.

Public Safety must not seem interested in Orbiter affairs. Less obvious people are needed—like those uniformless couriers of yours who fix giddy-gossipy eyes on Town affairs and keep you informed of the social fluxes you so gently do not seem to guide.'

The Mayor said uncomfortably, 'I rarely interfere—'

'But how could you? The Ethic, the Ethic! But I want to share your knowledge of everything Peter Marrian does on Earth and every word he speaks here.'

'My boys aren't equipped—'

'They will be. Sensitised clothing and sound crystals at the roots of the hair. They'll be walking audio-cameras.'

'This is all you want?'

'For the moment.'

There it was, the—no, not 'veiled threat', but . . . that phrase the pre-Collapsers had used . . . the 'rain check' taken out on him. 'Am I to know what we are looking for?'

'The reason for Peter Marrian's visit.'

A part of the Mayor's very considerable intelligence had been worrying at the question since first mention of the name and had reached a conclusion. He thought, In for a credit in for a bust, and said, 'But we know that, don't we?'

The Custodian smiled, at last like a man rather than a skull. 'We do?'

'The Orbiters, if what formal communication we have with them is a reliable guide, have developed lazy habits of speech. They drop unnecessary final consonants, like g and f and h—sendin, mysel, strengt. Peter Marrian's name refers to his job, but has been misunderstood. Peter Marrying.'

The Custodian laughed like a madman. 'Do you imagine they'd waste resources preparing a brat to come Downstairs to get married? They don't even recognise marriage.'

'But we do. And isn't that the whole point of the bedtime story?'

The Custodian calmed abruptly. 'You'll do. It took me several years to realise that. The reason for it all?'

'Money. If you can't earn it, marry it. All Orbiter property is, I believe, communal.'

'Good, good. And so?'

'This visit is, perhaps, exploratory, perhaps the opening move in an Orbiter campaign for . . .' He trailed off. 'For what?'

The Custodian stood to go. 'That is what I asked the Global

Council to consider. They are still considering. Meanwhile it is up to you and I to see that Peter Marryin, however often best man, is never the groom.'

## 2

It was unfortunately true that the Custodian's information derived mainly from Orbiter indiscretions and errors. Much escaped him entirely; much was filled in only after the affair was over.

He did not know, for instance, that Peter Marryin's face was not wholly his own. Orbiter technicians, observing the TV shows of Melbourne Town's entertainment idols (whom they despised utterly) with special attention to those who brought the young grovelling in ill-concealed sexual hysteria, spent two years designing the face; surgeons spent a further two creating it. The result was coldly calculated to turn the heads and raise the blood pressures of a prognosticated 90 per cent of Melbourne Town females between the ages of thirteen and thirty—a carnally desirable young lout with something for everybody and a dedication to its use.

Such thoroughness would have scared the Custodial wits out of him, more so if he had realised that the target had been narrowed to this one city on Earth.

Peter should have gone to Earth when he was eighteen, in that era an ideal age for a beginner at wiving, but the Commune Fathers were a committee and had fallen into the committee traps of indecision, vacillation and name calling without in nearly twelve months selecting a plump enough fly for their spider.

There were too many possibilities. One of the more disastrous outcomes of the planetary Ethic of Non-Interference had seen economic expertise, enhanced by psychelectronics, carve obese fortunes out of the re-industrialised planet; young heiresses were available in a wealthy world where small families were still the cautious habit of a species which had once already come within an ace of starving itself to death.

The Commune bickerings had ended with the death of old Festus Grant, right under their feet, in Melbourne Town. In wonderment they totalled the fabulous holdings—Rare Metals Research, Lunar Constructions, Ecological Rehabilitation and

Exploitation, Monopole Ramjets, Mini-Shuttles Corporation, Sol-Atmos Research and Reclamation and more, more, more—The list rang louder bells for them than all the Jesus Cult cathedrals in history.

And all—all—all went to Claire Grant, only child of the dead widower.

The haste with which they groomed, briefed and despatched the casually confident Peter was worse than indecent; it was comic and contemptible. And thorough.

At nineteen the boy had all of the traditional Orbiter contempt for Earthworms, amplified by the hundreds of teleplays he had been forced to watch in order to become familiar with customs, speech idioms and etiquette. (He still did not really understand their drama; third generation Orbiters were unable to comprehend the preoccupations and philosophies of people not reared in a steel tube.) He had also an instilled awareness of being a cultural hero in embryo, the bedtime-story-boy who lived happily ever after in a swagger of privilege.

By Terrene standards he was paranoid (by Orbiter standards arrogant) but had been coached in adapting his responses to an Earthworm norm. The coaching, brilliant in its fashion, allowed insufficiently for unpredictable encounters (encounters were rarely unpredictable in an Orbiter tube) and the shuttle was scarcely spaceborne before his furies stirred to Earthworm insolence.

The pilot was a jokey type, all bonhomie and loud mouth, saying, 'You'll find old Earth heavy going, feller,' and laughing madly at his obscure pun based on an idiom not in use Upstairs—one which sounded to Peter like a mannerless criticism. And: 'Watch the women, boy! They'll *weight* for you to *fall* for them. Get it? *Weight* for you to—'

'I get it, thank you. Now mind your own damn business and watch your disgustin tongue.'

'Hey, now!'

The co-pilot dug him in the ribs to shut him up and grinned sympathetically at Peter, who interpreted the grin as zoological observation of the freak from Upstairs and returned a glare of rage. The co-pilot shrugged, adding fuel to a conviction of insulting pity.

The fool at the landing field, who mocked his strength by

offering to carry his luggage, was saved from assault only by a memory of teleplays showing the planetary obsession with menialism—free intelligences actually *offering* service! He relinquished the bags with contempt and began to focus his accelerating dislike for things Terrene on the unfortunate girl he had been reared to meet. *She* was responsible for the shame and insult he must bear in the course of duty.

In his anger he forgot even his irrational fear that Earth gravity would be mysteriously different from his experience in the centrifuge—that 'real' weight would be something else. By the time he noticed that it was not he had calmed sufficiently to go through the mental balancing routine laid down for him by the Orbiter psychlinicians.

It was an excellent routine, devised by men who knew more about his mind than he ever could. By evening he was ready—'debonair' was the word he favoured—to face the Reception at the Town Hall, the first in line of the haunts of the rich bitches. The Grant had better be there; he was not in dawdling mood.

It was the Mayor, now, who sat in the Custodian's office; the audio-crystals and the transcripts Englished from them were politically too touchy to risk outside a secured area. The tape they had heard had been prepared from a crystal lodged at the root of a hair on the head of a shuttle co-pilot. How the Mayor had achieved that, far outside his sphere of authority, the Custodian had the good taste not to ask; he was certain that this young man would go far and successfully.

'An unpleasant little shit,' he said.

The Mayor (who, if age were the only factor, could have been the Custodian's great-grandson) was beginning to feel at home with the old exhibitionist. 'I think that the Orbiters are what we have made them.'

'Yes. Be properly glum about it.'

'If he looks like bringing off a marriage—'

The Custodian said harshly, 'He won't.'

'But if?'

'Very well—if?'

'We might engineer small events, derogatory to his self-esteem, to push him past his restraints, allow him to erupt in public scenes which will make him socially unacceptable. Then we could look

down our official noses and send him back Upstairs with a complaint of his behaviour.'

The Custodian laughed and asked, 'Are you ambitious?'

'In two years I will be thirty and no longer eligible for minor civil office. If I am not selected for a further Supervisory career I must fall back on commerce. The last Mayor of Melbourne Town is now a factory hand. This youth-decade in Social Administration can be a trap for the unprepared.'

'I wouldn't worry too much.'

They understood each other exactly.

But they did not understand Orbiters at all. Deny how they might, they shared in the recesses of their minds the common opinion that Orbiters were peculiar, backward and hardly to be taken seriously. In a perilously easygoing culture the problems of underdogs—their sense of grievance and drive, not for equality but for revenge—were little comprehended on realistic levels.

Nor did either understand the drive for achievement latent in a moneyed nonentity. They had thought, when assessing the field, that Peter would certainly be snatched up by the glamour crowd, and little Cinderella Claire lost in the crush.

## 3

The hall was crowded. Not, of course, that one cared a damn for the barbarian Orbiters or their peculiar tribalisms, but one was justified in observing a Social Curiosity.

Amongst the crowd Festus Grant's daughter was strung taut, breathless at her own projected daring, at what she intended to do tonight. When this ball was over she would be the envy of the smart set, even a centre of scandal, but for once she would have shone as 'the girl who dared'.

She was a social nobody and knew it. She would, at age nineteen in a year's time, attain her majority and control of the greatest fortune in Australasia, but that meant nothing to the Pleasured Classes; after a certain number of millions money became an environment rather than a possession and simple quantity no ground for eminence.

That she was intelligent, good hearted and socially more willing than able counted not at all against her plain features, washed-out

eyes and too-plump figure. The physical defects could have been surgically corrected but among the Pleasured Classes this was Not Done; the struggling masses might falsify and pretend but One Was Above That.

Worse, she lacked taste. She was wickedly overdressed—with too much jewellery, a too blatantly fantastic hair arrangement, a dress too brightly red and too ornate and—and without the subtlety of choice which could subtract and adjust and transform her into what she wished to be.

All she had was useless money. She was accustomed to the attentions of men who pursued her prospects rather than herself and, as one who could buy any number of husbands, despised men who could be bought.

She danced with one of them to pass the time. *He* would not appear until just before the Protocol Dance, the fourth. While the eager young man found her unresponsive, in her mind she rehearsed her move. As the richest heiress present (and this was a point of etiquette wherein money *did* count) she would automatically take place next to the Lady Mayoress and be the second person presented. If *He* had been married, some wealthy matron would have been in the place of opportunity; it paid to know the rules and to be prepared to use them.

Colour and sound died as the orchestrator left the keyboard, and she rid herself of the eager young man.

When at last *He* arrived—he was anticlimactic.

Secretly she had hoped against commonsense for something strange, exotic (so, secretly, had they all), an outworld fantastication of dress, an oddity of manner or unexpectedness of appearance—

—anything but the too-ordinary pale and slender young man, in commonplace Terrene attire, who hesitated at the door as if taken with yokel surprise at the spectacle of Melbourne Town's Pleasured Class frozen in the half-bow and half-curtsy of welcoming protocol, then came uncertainly down the hall, guided by the traditional Visitor's Escort of Police Controller and Aide, whose dress uniforms outshone him utterly.

He was a mistake, a nothing. Her scandalous resolution lapsed; he was not worth it.

Then he came close. The escort fell back as he halted the correct four paces from the Mayor. At least, she thought, he had been

coached in the observances. The Mayor stepped forward and the Orbiter lifted his face to the light.

Disappointment vanished before the most vitally handsome man she had ever seen. He was the epitome, the gathering, the expression of every media star and public idol who had ever roused her fantasies. He was The Orbiter—unearthly.

She scarcely heard the formal exchange; she ached to have done with it and with the visitor's formal round of the floor with the Lady Mayoress, so that she . . .

Peter bowed to the Lady Mayoress as the introduction was made, but the matron did not offer her arm.

They talked.

With the orchestrator's hands poised, waiting, over the keys—they talked.

Claire was furious. The woman was waiving the protocol of the first dance. Orbiters might be socially backward, but this was diplomatic insult.

Then the Mayoress took a pace back, terminating the exchange, and still the orchestrator waited on the Mayor's signal.

Claire saw a faint uncertainty in the Orbiter's fixed smile and knew that this was the moment. A public prank became an act of rescue.

She stepped quickly forward and he, perceiving the movement, half turned to her. She made the formal half-curtsy, knew she did it awkwardly and cared not a damn for that, and asked with a clarity that shivered to the doors of the hall,

'May I request the Protocol Dance?'

There was a stillness. She saw fury on the Mayor's face, instantly veiled. She sensed rather than heard an intake of half a thousand breaths—and realised the meaning of the disregarded dance, the substitution of formal chat. Gently the Protocol Dance had been passed over in consideration of a visitor who in a weightless community could never have learned the Viennese waltz.

Through the petrification of her shame she heard the voice that could have charmed demons: 'Why, thank you,' and felt the slender fingers take hers. Lifted from the curtsy, she gazed into the smile that had been sculpted for her to gaze into. He said, 'I shall be charmed, Miss Grant.' But it was she who was charmed that unbelievably he knew her name, and it was she who triumphed over Mayor and Mayoress, escort and orchestrator and all the

Pleasured Class as he added, 'I have taken delight in learnin your ballroom antics.'

While he cursed the Freudian slip behind his plastic smile she treasured it as the needed oddity, the otherworldliness that made him truly a visitor to Earth.

If Claire Grant and Peter Marryin made a less than graceful couple, the swishing of tongues outmanoeuvred was balm to the ugly duckling's waltzing ego.

Sensitised areas on the couriers' jackets did not make the best of cameras. Subject to crumpling and difficult to aim with accuracy, two of them yet caught Claire's expression at different times during the ball.

'She's in an enchantment,' said the Mayor.

'She's on heat,' said the Custodian, to whom romance had suddenly become a dirty word. 'He's had brat's luck.'

'Or good preparation.'

'Meaning what?'

The Mayor ran back through the audio tapes. 'This.'

Peter's voice murmured in midair, 'Ugly ducklin? What is that? You have charm.'

'You don't mean that.' She was coy, ecstatic, flirtatious and pleading all at once. ('Thank sanity we don't stay young,' the Custodian muttered.)

Peter's ghostvoice said, 'I do mean it. Men appreciate charm in a woman.'

'They appreciate money in a woman.'

'I don' understan you.'

'You don't understand money?'

'Intellectually I do, but not as an attraction. We don' use money Upstairs.'

Then he talked of other things as though money were of no interest.

'Neat,' the Custodian agreed. 'Made his point and left it at that. Even stuck to the truth.'

'But not to the truth behind the truth. He has been very well prepared.'

'Fortunately, so have we.'

The Custodian was wrong about that. On his fourth day on Earth

Peter Marryin proposed to the infatuated, richest girl in Melbourne Town, was accepted by her and married to her (with housekeeper and maid for witnesses) by public data-record plug-in, a terminal of which was, quite naturally, located in her late father's study.

Capture and consolidation took something under fifteen minutes, whereas the Custodian had relied on an Engagement, a Round of Gaiety and a Splendid Society Wedding for time in which to generate a dozen subtle interferences. Against Peter's precision and speed no bugging system could do more than record the outwitting of science and power.

The Mayor was silently amused at the old man's raging against defeat. The backward barbarians Upstairs had foreseen opposition and surveillance and designed a lightning campaign to outflank both. He began to respect the barbarians.

But the old man stamped and raved in gutter language that stripped away the cool superiority of his public persona. It was altogether too humanising. Embarrassing.

The Mayor raised his voice to drown the performance. 'She's under age. The marriage can be annulled.'

The Custodian snarled at him, 'Only if her guardians demand it. Do you think they give a damn while they control the money in trust?'

'There might be means to persuade one of them—'

The Custodian calmed suddenly. 'All right, you're trying. But we can't do it. Undue influence? Try and prove it! Even the newscasts are squalling "the starstruck love story" a bare hour after the event, telling the world romance is alive and throbbing. Public opinion will see interference as bias against Orbiters. Nobody gives a damn for Orbiters but everybody loves lovers, and bias will be elevated into accusations of racialism or exoticism or some bloody pejorative coinage. And if interference were traced to me—' He shuddered.

And certainly not to me, thought the Mayor, who now had an assured future to protect.

The 'starstruck lovers' honeymooned brilliantly around the Earth for a month before Mr and Mrs Peter Marryin left for the Power Station.

A structure two thousand metres long and five hundred in

diameter, floating below a battery of thousand-metre solar mirrors, is immense by any standard, but nothing looks big in space until you are close enough to be dwarfed and awed. Dwarfed and awed Claire Marryin surely was, gasping at her beautiful husband's ambience of marvels.

She had never been in space. (After all, who had, save those whose work took them there? Nobody would *need* the stars for generations yet.) So she played with null-g, bruising herself a little and laughing at her own clumsiness, while Peter fumed and was darling enough not to show it. When the shuttle entered the vast lock in the Station's anal plate (they actually called it that, she found, with a smothered laugh) she calmed down and set herself to be a stately matron of eighteen, worthy of a wonderful man.

From the passage opening on the interior of the Station they came quite suddenly—he guiding her, at times a little roughly, because Orbiters made their topology connective at any angle instead of in terms of up and down—to a platform from which was displayed the whole panorama of the Power Station.

She looked along a huge tube whose walls were chequered with little square boxes which she only slowly recognised as dwellings, grouped around larger boxes which were community buildings and surrounded by neat squares and circles of lush green. In the gravitational centre of the tube hung a great disc whose visible face seemed to be nearly all window glass and which occupied perhaps a third of the inner diameter. But it was nearly a thousand metres distant and did not at a glance seem so big, any more than the boxes two hundred metres below and above—*around, away*—seemed large enough for dwellings.

She clapped her hands and cried out, 'It's like a toyland!'

'Toylan!' On his face an expression she had not seen there before—anger, revulsion, contempt—slipped into bleak control. He said stiffly, 'Your toylan is the home of a fine an proud people,' and led her to the conveyor belt while she held back tears for her stupidity. Then it seemed he remembered that these were new and fabulous sights for her and set himself to be kind, and within minutes she was asking shy questions, trying not to have them foolish ones.

'The disc? The factory, we call it. It's empty.'

She asked timidly, 'But why?' and thought he considered carefully before he answered.

'It was part of the original Station, a complex for the manufacture of artifacs which could be perfecly formed only in

null-g conditions. But the Station grew too rich for the comfort of Earth an an embargo was placed on our goods. The factories have stood empty for more than seventy years.'

'But that's unfair!'

'Yes!' The one word, with again the blank look of emotion repressed.

So there was a tiny cloud of resentment of her Earth. Best to ignore, allow it time to disperse. There was much to exclaim at here; for instance, she had not expected moving streetways, with railings. There were, in fact, railings everywhere. Strange for dwellers in free fall, free flight.

'There are free jump areas,' he told her, 'above roof level. There people may break their bones as they please. Once you take off you can' slow down or change direction, an in collision no weight doesn' mean no inertia. So in public places you ride an hang on, for the sake of others.'

There was a touch of explanation-to-the-child-mind about that, and some impatience as he said, 'I suppose you busy Terrenes don' think about such things.'

Her loving tongue babbled, 'Why should we, dear? It isn't our way of life.'

She did not know she had just told a paranoid hero that Orbiter affairs were not considered interesting. Or that were it not for her nearing nineteenth birthday and the Grant industrial holdings he could have wished her dead. The stupid, yammering bitch!

The Station observed a twenty-four hour routine for metabolic stability, and that 'night' Peter played host. Claire understood that social customs must alter and evolve in a closed community and that personal contacts might come uneasily until she found her niche, but the function left her bewildered.

The 'party' was held on the lawns surrounding their 'house'—their living-box—like a green pool. The box itself existed for privacy; in the weatherless Station life was conducted in public.

There was nothing for her to do. A fleshy, shapeless woman appeared, requisitioned by Peter, to prepare snack dishes, and Claire's attempts to talk to her were balked upon grunted variations of 'I'm only thirdwoman an don' know those things,' making it plain that she was there to work and wanted only to get on with it.

What was a thirdwoman? A junior wife? But the Orbiters did not marry. They had some manner of temporary liaison for early child care but she, Claire, was uniquely the only *wife* on the Station. She could not question this clod but later must ask Peter.

At eight o'clock the major lights dimmed throughout the tube. Streetlamps remained and some freefloating clusters of coloured globes and rods and planes that she found restful to watch. The Orbiters' artificial night had its own soft charm.

Nothing else did. The guests arrived in male and female groups, never mixed. They congratulated Peter on his bride—and hesitated over the word or pronounced it with a sly grin or could not recall it until reminded. They seemed to regard the marriage as a triumphant joke.

After they had congratulated Peter they stared uninhibitedly at her. When Peter introduced them, most seemed not to know what to say to her; the men in particular seemed resentful at being expected to make conversation at all.

Even the women, grouped together and apart from the men, seemed interested in her only as an exotic display piece. And well, she thought, might they stare! Plain on Earth, here she was a beauty. These shapeless females, all flesh and rounded tubes of muscleless limb, were like talking grubs. She swore she would exercise, go daily to the centrifuge and *never* let herself fall victim to null-g.

The men were as bad as their women, pipestem roly-polys; Peter alone looked like a real human being. And even he, she thought with a touch of dispirited spite, was no physical match for a real Terrene man.

Perhaps in her isolation and disappointment she had drunk too much, and had become afraid of vertigo in weightlessness, for she showed no more than a dumb resentment when a massive pudding of a woman dragged her into a disapproving group to hiss at her, 'Stop tryin to talk to the men. Sexes mix in private!'

Even Peter seemed only occasionally to recall her presence. The 'party' dragged interminably and she did not remember going to bed.

She woke to a hangover and a furious Peter dressing with compressed lips. She scarcely believed she heard him mutter, 'Drunken bitch!'

Over coffee she gathered courage to ask what a thirdwoman

might be and he snapped at her, 'A bloody servan, trained for that an nothin else.'

The words were plain but she did not understand the threat in his eyes.

He said, 'I'm goin out. Stay here. Don' leave the house. I'll be an hour.'

Desolate and uncomprehending, she drifted through the living-box, with its neatness, its compactness, its accessories to comfortable living. To efficient living, she amended; the Orbiters were not a comfortable people. She recalled the ill manners of last night, the resentment scarcely repressed, the smiles that were silent laughter.

And was suddenly afraid. And as suddenly more afraid that it was too late for that.

Peter returned within the hour, in more cheerful mood, ready to kiss and play. She responded with silly relief, as if a smile could cancel ill-will already delivered. He had 'pulled strings', he told her, made an arrangement which only her special circumstances could justify.

'The Psychlinic will take you immediately.'

She fled from his arms, too affronted for fear. 'I'm not ill, Peter!'

'No, no!' He laughed, soothing and conciliating and as handsome as all hell and temptation. 'It's a teachin group. It isn fair to toss you unprepared into our ways and customs so I've arranged an implant, a rundown of all the special social conditions, etiquettes, things you need to know so as not to stub a social toe every time you step out.'

She cried a soft 'O-oh!' for a gift without price. Much of her education had been by psycho-implant and she knew what was involved. He had given her a ticket to painless knowledge she would have been months in achieving.

And a man who could command the time of a Psychlinic was no mean husband.

The clinic was absurdly old fashioned, its 'chair' a cocoon of electrodes and leads and handles to be gripped and precision clamps and heaven knew what else. On Earth the whole thing was done with a single helmet and a hypodermic.

Perhaps her amusement showed, for the Psychlinician explained, in a tone stiff with non-apology, that the Station used its

original equipment, that there was no money for new models from Downstairs.

Claire said with her friendliest smile, 'Then I shall buy it for you,' and sat herself firmly in his ancient chair.

An unreadable expression came and went as he said, 'Why, I'm sure you will.'

It might be their mode of thanks, but it lacked gratitude. She felt a mild numbness in her thighs, shifted slightly to ease it and realised that the whole buttock was losing sensation.

In sudden, frightened anger she cried out, 'You've used a penetrant narcotic! In the chair seat!'

He said bluntly, 'Yes,' and winced as her voice rose to screaming pitch.

'That's treatment for dangerous criminals and violent lunatics. I'm not—I'm not—'

He said forcefully, 'Sit back an shut up!'

And, since that was the nature of the drug, she obeyed. In the few minutes of mental freedom left her she peered into hellmouth.

What they did with her occupied several days. They fed her the acclimatisation material, of course, since she was to dwell here permanently and not be a clumsy nuisance. Then came the establishing of submissive reactions, no simple job on a mind accustomed to freedoms which to the Orbiters seemed sheer anarchy. Only then could they begin the deep probing necessary to planning the personality split. When that was done they designed and imprinted the controlled schizophrenic balance that could be tipped either way with proper triggering. It was necessary that a superficially 'normal' personality be available if Melbourne Town should sènd an envoy who would demand to talk with her when the inevitable questions came to be asked.

Aside from that, the Psychlinic found her a fascinating study; relaxation viewing of Terrene teleplays had not prepared them for the revealed truths of Earthworm culture.

'Effete and decaden,' said the Chief, 'floatin over realities and never seein them. Gravity or no gravity, it's we who are the strong. *We* are the human future.'

4

On her nineteenth birthday a healthy and self-possessed, if unwontedly serious Claire Marryin contacted her guardians by

visiphone and made her wishes known. They argued against the control of immense wealth being taken out of Terrene hands; they pleaded, stormed and stalled until she threatened to settle the matter by simple deed of transfer. She behaved throughout with polite but weary stubbornness.

The Commune Fathers of Power Station One became the administrators of the Grant interests.

'That,' noted the Mayor, 'makes them owners of just eight and one quarter per cent of Melbourne Town and unhealthily concerned in mining estate and development from Mars to the solar corona.'

'It was expected,' said the Custodian, 'but what will they do with it? We know better now than to guess at Orbital thinking.'

What they did was unexpected in its naivety. They tried to play the market. They not only lost a great deal of money but wreaked some small havoc with those lesser Grant holdings they chose for their experiments in finance.

'Economic stability is threatened,' said the Custodian, with a perfectly straight face. 'It is time to return their visit.'

5

The seventeen Spokesmen of the seventeen Station Commune Councils were in session on Station One when a delivery receivals clerk chattered over intercom that the Custodian of Public Safety of Melbourne Town was in the anal corridor and demanding entry.

'How large is his party?'

'He is alone, Alastair Father.'

'Delay him five minutes, then escort him here yoursel.'

'Yes, Alastair Father.' The clerk returned to the corridor where the lean and lined and very patrician old man took his ease without benefit of handhold, as to the manner born. In a Terrene that seemed obscurely insolent, as did the silent waiting for the clerk to speak.

'I am to escort you to the Father, but firs there are matters I mus atten to. I won' be—'

The Custodian delivered arrogance with a polite smile. 'I am sure you have nothing more important on your hands than my visit.'

The clerk said, 'That's as may be,' and turned towards his office.

*Snotty Downstairs bastard!* Orbiter insularity overcame him. 'Stationhans don' take orders from Terrenes.'

'Pity,' said the Custodian equably. The clerk withdrew, wondering was that a subtle Terrene threat.

Alastair First Father, who had been Alastair Dunwoodie, swept them out of the room like children. Before his immense prestige the communards made no attempt to argue but sought invisibility in the nearest dwellings. All, that is, save the inevitable youngest-promoted, still inclined to display intransigence rather than sense.

'Refuse him! Sen him about his business!'

'He is about his business.' The First Father urged him towards the door. 'It is too soon to invite reprisals, an I am curious to see Charles again.'

'Charles! You know him?'

'We were friens once. Now, go!'

The youngest-promoted went, bemusedly reckoning the Father's age.

*Were* friens? It was an uncommonly wistful thought for Alastair. And now? Loyalties had come between. He punched an intercom number and said, 'There's a Terrene envoy here. Prepare Claire Thirdwoman.'

The Chief Psychlinician despatched his Physical Training Authority, Peter Marryin, to the hydroponic garden where the girl would be making the daily harvest of fruit and vegetables, a faintly stupid smile on her face. She was plump now, and losing shape, but seemed contented enough; it had been necessary to repress most of her emotional reaction-strength in order not to blur the edges between personalities by creating a too-obtrusive secondary.

The code phrase which brought her original persona to life was cruel to the point of obscenity but served its purpose of reaching deep into the preconscious. Peter, who had never conceived of her as more than a means to an end, gave no thought to brutality and outrage as he said distinctly into her ear, 'Peter Marryin loves Claire Grant.'

The young Charles had worked in space and knew the rules of null-g movement, and the old Charles had wisely spent fifty hours in the shuttles reconditioning himself before facing Alastair. He would not lose face through physical incompetence.

He even managed to inject a hint of swagger into his slide-and-shuffle entry into the Council Hall where the old man stood alone at the head of the long table with its—yes, seventeen chairs. All present and correct—then hurriedly got rid of while impudent clerk obstructed.

He said, 'You're showing your age, Alastair,' and gave his skull grin. 'Old as God and no doubt twice as crafty.'

Alastair flowed to greet him in a movement which seemed to glide him, upright, down the length of the room, making Charles's swagger mere bumptiousness, and held out his hand. 'Well, ol frien!'

The Custodian returned the grip gently and allowed himself a bare sentence of old affection: 'I have always remembered you, Alastair.' Then, as they measured each other with uncertain and wary smiles, 'I bring not peace but a sword.'

Alastair, too, had been a Cultist in the old days. 'To set man agains his father an daughter agains her mother? Not on the Stations, Charles. Our conception of relationships does not allow inernecine frictions.'

'Not Terrene against Orbiter, those brothers on Earth and in Heaven?'

'The chance of brotherhood is gone by.'

As simply as that the lines of battle were drawn.

They sat at the table, using the bodybelts that allowed movement and gesture without reactive floating, and the Custodian launched his attack directly.

'The Governance of Australasia suggests—' he laid the lightest of stresses on the verb, '—that a Committee of Advice be appointed to guide your financial handling of the Grant holdings.'

'There are no Grant holdins. I suppose you mean the Orbital League holdins brought to the Communes by Claire Third-woman.'

So the whole League was in it; not really news. The final words penetrated less swiftly, then shockingly.

'Thirdwoman! Alastair, that's slavery!'

The First Father smiled thinly. 'What could she be good for but manual labour an childbearin? Your children of wealth learn nothin useful to an Orbiter. I assure you she is not discontented.'

'I want to see her!'

'You shall.'

'Good.' *Some double dealing there? Be watchful.* 'Now, the holdings—'

'No Committee of Advice, Charles!'

'You're amateurs. You'll go broke.'

'Our economists are learnin. We buy expert advice now from Earth. Terrene's have little that can' be bought, includin allegiance.'

'I know damned well what you buy. I also know that your first attempts to deal in millions caused a minor recession in Melbourne Town. If you succeed in bringing down the whole Grant empire there'll be economic chaos.'

'We aren' stupid.'

'But you are inexperienced. We must protect ourselves.'

'No Committee, Charles!'

'It is already set up.'

'*Un*set it. We won' obey it.' The Custodian's expression gave him pause. 'The Ethic, Charles! You can' interfere.' The skull grin threatened to engulf him. '*What have you done, Charles?*'

As the declaration of love unlocked the sleeping persona, Claire burst from within herself like an emerging butterfly. Life flooded her face; her lips parted and smiled, her spoiling body straightened and she looked into her lover's eyes with an instant's joy that faded into apprehension and loathing.

He had seen it all before, was turning away when she asked, 'What do they want now?' and answered over his shoulder, 'Firs Father wans you. There's a Terrene envoy here.'

Envoy! Hope was immediately quenched. No envoy could free her. In a moment they would give her the injection and tell her what to say and do and there she would be, gabbling that she was happy and had no desire to leave the Station, that everyone was so kind and that she had fulfilment here such as Earth could never offer and more and more gushing, lying rubbish.

She asked, 'Why should I bother?'

'What?'

'What's the use? I don't want to see him, to tell force-fed lies and build myself more unhappiness.'

He faced her furiously. 'Listen, girl! You're an Orbiter and what Firs Father says, you do.'

In the rare periods of personality release, such as the visiphone

communications with bankers and enquiring relatives, her hatred had been born in the schizophrenic hell of the submission drugs. During the long weeks of thirdwoman regression her subconscious mind had been conjuring powers of viciousness the little Claire Grant could never have roused from her psyche. Now, in these moments of hyper-euphoria, between the awakening and the drugging, she was uniquely herself, undrugged and unregressed—a creature of misery and rage.

She said, with a menace he did not hear because in his thinking it could not be there, 'Don't talk to me like that.'

'Come on; don' waste my time.'

She goaded, 'Your time is nothing to me.'

'Bitch!' He put out a grasping hand and she struck it away, hissing, 'Don't touch me, you filth!'

It was stunning. No woman spoke to a man like that, *no* woman. Nor would a man dare use such words to Peter the Culture Hero. And she had struck his hand! Outraged self-love rose like a scald in the throat and his fingers hooked into claws.

She said, making sure of him, 'If you touch me I'll kill you.'

She needed to kill someone, and who better than the man who had married for her money the girl who despised fortune hunters? As his hands reached for her she casually took one in hers, dragged the arm straight and kicked him in the elbow, breaking it to the obbligato of his screaming. It was easy. Orbiters knew little about aggression or defence; both were difficult or embarrassingly ludicrous in null-g.

The screaming unleashed joy in her and she knew that she *would* kill him. Others in the street had heard him and heads were turning but they could not save him. She, Claire Thirdwoman, slave, dupe and Earthworm, was about to murder the Culture Hero before their eyes.

They could not realise how simple it was for her. A year of null-g had made her competent in the leaps and anglings of free fall, and her Earthworm musculature made it possible for her to achieve take-off speeds and endure landing collisions no Orbiter could match. Even her centrifuge-reared 'husband' was not her equal.

She caught his arm and he shrieked again, and hooked her foot under the moving-way guide rail. Figures now leapt towards her, too late. Taking him by wrist and smashed elbow she flung him, howling, against the wall of a dwelling twenty metres away. He hit it face forward, sprawling like a spider, and she launched herself

after him, turning in mid-air to strike with her feet at his spine, and heard it crack.

She had her moment of murderer's ecstasy, sexual, blood-deep, complete. Let the surgeons and biochemists revive and rebuild him (as they would), but she had cleansed herself of shame and hatred.

Then reaction set in and with a crippling weariness of spirit she turned to defend herself . . .

'Done?' the Custodian echoed. 'I have set up a Committee of Advice. Nothing else.'

'Unacceptable.'

'But there are, of course, alternatives.'

'Which are?'

'One is that you should re-assign the League holdings to Claire Grant and return her to Earth.'

The First Father laughed, but uneasily because the breath-taking impudence of the demand spoke of threat behind threat. 'You're out of your min.'

'We can take the money from you, you know.'

'Not by way of Claire. She gave it to us. I feel you will have a record, verbal and written, of the whole transaction.'

'I have, Alastair. And an expert psychological report on her speech and behaviour patterns during the exchanges with her administrators, showing a ninety per cent certainty that she was under submission drugs. I can recommend that the Marketing Court freeze your assets while the transfer is re-examined.'

'You can' prove druggin.'

'You don't deny it?'

'Or admit it.'

The Custodian felt less regret for that old friendship. Neither was the same man he had been eighty years ago, and both were centenarians, patterns of biochemistry and geriatric technique, with interests and loyalties eight decades divergent. He found himself caring not a damn for Alastair's needs so long as Melbourne Town survived. The perilous honesty of chauvinism at least left him unrepentant of hard hitting.

'You'd have to kill the girl to prevent me getting the truth. Would you do that, Alastair?'

The First Father's smile was deep winter. 'No. I don' wan the Global Council puttin a military prize crew aboard my Station.'

They came from all sides, angling up towards her. Almost lethargically she struck with her feet at the first comer, a squealing firstwoman spitting anti-Terrene rage, and used her mass to change direction and clutch at the jump-halting rail on a dwelling roof. The rest fell into a confusion of collisions and reachings for any anchored mass. Their babbling anger and shock sounded ridiculous; they lived such ordered lives that in emergency they flapped and fluttered. If they caught her they would kick and hit and pinch and threaten but in the end she would still be thirdwoman in the hydroponic garden. And Peter reconstructed. And nothing changed.

Then why not let them take her? There was no freedom.

For an instant, looking upward, she saw where, five hundred metres away across the diameter of the cylinder, final freedom lay, and reflexively launched herself towards it.

At once she knew she had been stupid, that it was better to live. There could always be the unexpected, the reversal of fortune. In panic she began to struggle, but what Peter had told her was true: once in free fall you cannot stop or slow down or change direction.

Her launch had been deadly accurate, a simple straight line with no gravity-fed trajectory for miscalculation.

The end of Claire Thirdwoman, crying and clawing for the inaccessible sides, was entry into the twenty-metre maw of the Station disposal unit, the vast mouth that could swallow machine complexes or obsolescent building units without the need for laborious dismemberment. She died at once as the heat units sensed her, felt nothing as the grinders shredded her contemptuously in a spurt of gears and in seconds was a mist of molecules expanding into invisibility in pressureless space.

## 6

In a right little, tight little island in the sky there is small precedent for announcing the neo-death of a local hero and the dissolution of his killer. Inexperience blurted out the news breathlessly in front of the Earthworm stranger.

For the second time during the affair the Custodian exploded in ranting fury, cursing Orbiter and Terrene stupidity alike, reducing himself to manic gutter level, until he saw that the First Father

watched him with the bleak care of a duellist who sees advantage.

He checked himself abruptly. In an access of intuition, even some residual affection, he pondered the needs and frustrations the Orbiters had brought on themselves when they sought the pastures of heaven by casting away weight.

He said, 'We need truth, Alastair, both of us. Neither was ready to move; now we must.'

The First Father bowed his head. Concealing a smile? At any event, he made no attempt to argue. In minutes the Custodian knew all he needed, including the business of the League meeting his advent had dispersed—the secret buying of weapons, offensive and defensive, from men on the five continents Downstairs who would sell honour, history and the future for money.

That was bad enough. Worse was that the First Father did not fear him.

Feeling all his years, he sat down with the other old man—friend, enemy and gameplayer—to plan a fresh tomorrow.

Emotion subsided; perspectives revived; Claire's death became a tactical weapon each sought to grasp. They circled, testing defences, until a confident Alastair made the first lunge.

'Charles, you can no more risk investigation of this affair than I can.'

The Custodian sighed inwardly. It had been, he supposed, inevitable that Alastair, despite his remoteness from the social psychology of the Earthworm, should recognise that.

Still, he must try. '*You* certainly cannot. Your League is no danger to Terrene culture yet, but this last year holds the proof that you will be. Some day. Even soon.' He added easily, 'You will be stopped, of course.'

Too late; that hand was already lost. 'How, Charles? How will Earth explain retributive action a secon time? Attemp it and I, *I*, will tell the story of how Claire Marryin died. I will tell the trut, all the trut. And your Earthworms will discover how their precious Ethic has created a poverty-stricken ghetto in the sky, but one that intens to kick the Ethic to pieces rather than continue as the unseen slaveys of some Victorian servan quarters in the attic Upstairs. Revenge on us may be swif but public scrutiny of the Ethic *and* of its manipulators will be pitiless. It will be the end of the Ethic.'

The Custodian had seen from the beginning that he was caught. It was not easy even to go down fighting. He said lightly, 'But

everybody questions the Ethic in his heart. It is an elaboration of good manners, pointless in essence but providing a permanent framework of behaviour for discussion without bloodshed.'

Alastair laughed at him. 'It mus be one of the great jokes of history that Earth has based its firs planetary culture on good manners, then created an offshoot with none. An a better joke that the collapse of a lie nobody believes in could plunge you into cultural anarchy. All your international relationships balance on it. You won' take the risk.'

Of course he, and Earth, would not. Bluntness now would serve as well as anything. 'What do you want?'

'To be rid of you.'

That was unexpected; he said nothing at all but waited for Alastair to continue.

'You can' blow us out of the sky. Too un-Ethical and too revealin. But you can pay us to go away. And we'll go.' He grinned with sudden savagery. 'Like the classic barbarians on the Imperial borders.'

That was staggering. The Custodian groped for words, any words to stall for thought. 'The power supplies—'

'Automated platforms to replace the Stations. The plans are ready. Ten years from keel to full operation.'

That was worth a sour laugh in return. 'We've had automation plans of our own for the past twenty years. The problem has been what to do with you. Now you tell me you'll go away. Where to? Let me guess at your view of the matter.'

He ruminated.

Alastair said, 'There's somethin you should see. Come along.'

They floated out of the hall to a moving-way which carried them up the curve of the hull, through little nests of the living-boxes and the lawns and gardens in their patterns of cultivated brilliance. All growing things were a passion of Orbiters. Their natural art form, perhaps? They could have chosen more coldly and worse.

He said, 'I think I have it. The basic need was money. First for armaments in case Earth did indeed become provoked into violence by the demands you would some day make. Second for *material* to implement whatever design you have in mind. Behind this is a determination to cut loose from Earth once and for all. The cultures have diverged to the point where neither understands the

other or needs the other. Cultures which don't understand each other despise each other, have no use for each other, no matter how they pretend otherwise. Am I doing well?'

'Very well.'

They left the moving-way and Alastair opened a door. Inside was nothing at all, an empty room.

'Total isolation breeds its own neuroses, Charles. Our psychologists set up this room years ago. People come here to soothe their tensions, pacify their resentments, defuse their aggressions.'

He touched switches; the room became black dark. A slit twenty metres wide glimmered faintly in the floor, opened like a vast eye, and gazed at the stars.

The Custodian understood only vaguely. 'The galaxy means little to me, but for you it has come to have psychological significance. Is this where you will go?'

'Eventually. Not yet. It is a long dream.'

'And now?'

'Firs, Jupiter. You can pay us to mine the satellites and the atmosphere.'

The Custodian knew he should have foreseen it but the politician in him asked, 'Why should we?'

'Because in a century or so you will have another population-an-resources crisis Downstairs, and you can use somebody to prepare the alternatives for you. By then we will be wealthy enough an self-sufficien to engage the universe on our own terms. There are eighty thousan people in the Stations now; we mus plan for a million. Ten Mother Islands and a hundred minin scows for a start. The resources out there will cover your nex dozen population explosions; you'll find us a good bargain. And what remains of the Ethic can seek virtue in Non-Interference with our cultural destiny.'

'The impudence of it all is breathtaking. All I need do is lay the idea before the Global Council and they'll collapse like cards before your diplomatic acumen. It will need more than a silver tongue to sway them.'

'Let the Ethic sway them!'

The Custodian swallowed a sound like a smothered laugh. 'Blackmail, Alastair!'

'But mos Ethical, Charles, within the Terrene meanin of the

word. By the way, did you know that the original twentieth century intention in suggestin space platforms was to establish free colonies in space?'

'Was it indeed?'

'Indeed. I have always said that we learned nothin from the Collapse. We've simply taken a little longer to arrive where they wished to go anyway.'

Several hours later, when the Custodian was preparing to return home, the First Father glanced fortuitously overhead to where, across the diameter, a disposal gang loaded a day's garbage into the vent, and felt a twinge of guilt.

The Custodian, following his gaze, wondered aloud if everything was recycled.

'Not quite everythin.'

'No? Oh, yes, of course, that—Tragic business; tragic . . .' He was busy formulating his approach to the Global Council.

7

The version retailed to the Mayor was perhaps a little slanted. He was impressed. 'You know, we'll be well rid of them.'

'For the time being.'

The Mayor's eyebrows rose.

'Nothing ends, James. Alastair First Father is quite aware that as Lords of the Solar System one day they'll come home again—as barbarians at the ancient gates. But you and I won't be around to worry over that.'

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