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INFINITY FIVE

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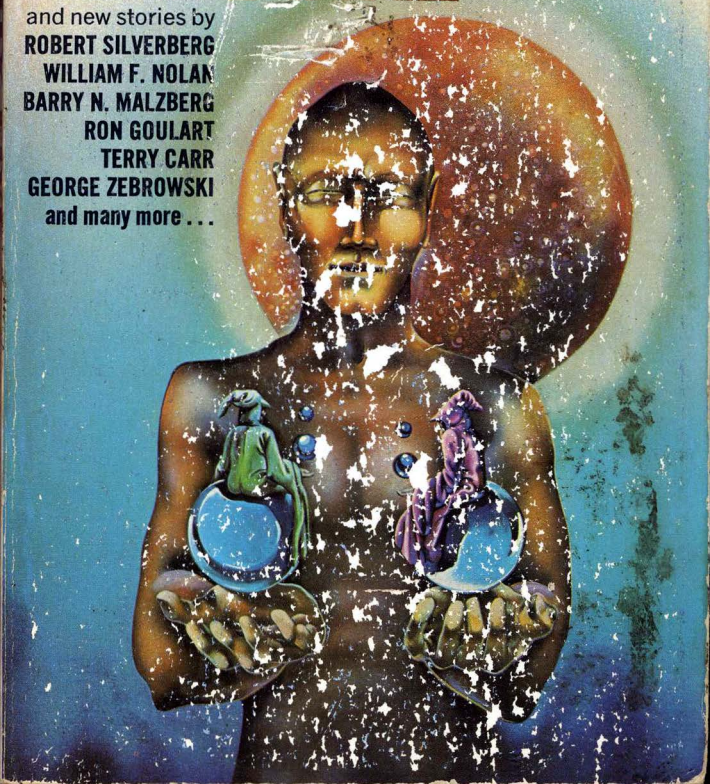

JOEL . . .

The cold finger touched his shoulder, as if testing his solidity. For a moment he was sure that the skeleton was touching him. However, when he leaped, he found that it was worse than that.

The creature took another step, raising its pale right hand. It had no face. Where its features should have been, there was only a smooth sheen of flesh: no eyes or nose or mouth, no hair on the oiled head.

It touched him with fingers so cold that they stung his wrist.

He drew back, sank to his knees. With his last bit of strength he raised his head and looked at the faceless man: **What have you done to me?**

from GRAYWORLD, by Dean R. Koontz

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EDITED BY **ROBERT HOSKINS**

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Introduction:

HOW TO BUILD TOMORROW

For the first time in history, a major share of the human race is concerned with the future of the planet, as well as for their own personal prospects for a lifetime of reasonable happiness. We have seen the results of uncontrolled consumerism, power consumption, the consumption of finite natural resources, and at last we realize that this cannot continue into our children's time—it must stop now, or our children will never know a time of their own.

A limited segment of the population has always been concerned—or perhaps enthralled—with the future: the science fiction readers. And when the world of science first made a great impact on public consciousnesses, with the explosion of the first atomic bomb, there was an upsurge in interest in the genre. Many of these new readers were members of the older generation, who wanted to see what other marvels and wonders these science nuts were hiding. And perhaps what they saw scared them, for there was a definite drop in reader interest about fifteen years ago. But now another new generation has come along, a generation that grew up to daily wonders to the point where nothing could astonish them—not even the feat of placing a man on the moon.

This new generation happened on science fiction early in life, in school libraries, perhaps, and through friends; they discovered J. R. R. Tolkien, and he prepared their minds for the more solid fantasies of STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND. They liked science fiction: they

preached it to their contemporaries. And once again the field of speculative fiction has grown strong, and even as a generic name, entered the language and the dictionaries. Readers of my generation who grew up on stf—for scientifiction, Hugo Gernsback's original created name for the genre—and s-f have never been quite comfortable with sci-fi, but apparently we'll never be able to chase it away. The very word has sprouted sub-variants, and even now a major old-line publisher is advertising a guaranteed new bestseller "poli-fi" novel—whereas twenty years ago that same house would have denied our very existence!

Now the newer generation has reached adulthood, and our specialized field of speculative fiction—which many of us once had to hide from disapproving parental eyes—has become completely respectable. Writers that once were relegated to the cheapest pulp thriller magazines, even beyond their maturity as writers, now are paraded proudly in the most respectable journals. The field of science fiction has come a long way in the thirty-five years since John Campbell first decided, as a twenty-seven-year-old visionary, that he could work wonders in the field of wonder. Our success today is a tribute to Campbell, who first showed us that we really could build a better tomorrow.

—*Robert Hoskins*

This is a look into the soul of all science fiction readers, and writers, and perhaps even editors . . .

The Science Fiction Hall of Fame

Robert Silverberg

The look in his remote gray eyes was haunted, terrified, beaten, as he came running in from the Projectorium. His shoulders were slumped; I had never before seen him betray the slightest surrender to despair, but now I was chilled by the completeness of his capitulation. With a shaking hand he thrust at me a slender yellow data slip, marked in red with the arcane symbols of cosmic computation. "No use," he muttered. "There's absolutely no use trying to fight any longer!"

"You mean—"

"Tonight," he said huskily, "the universe irrevocably enters the penumbra of the null point!"

• • •

The day Armstrong and Aldrin stepped out onto the surface of the Moon—it was Sunday, July 20, 1969, remember?—I stayed home, planning to watch the whole thing on television. But it happened that I met an interesting woman at Leon and Helene's party the night before, and she came home with me. Her name is gone

from my mind, if I ever knew it, but I remember how she looked: long soft golden hair, heart-shaped face with prominent ruddy cheeks, gentle gray-blue eyes, plump breasts, slender legs. I remember, too, how she wandered around my apartment, studying the crowded shelves of old paperbacks and magazines. "You're really into sci-fi, aren't you?" she said at last. And laughed and said, "I guess this must be your big weekend, then! Wow, the Moon!" But it was all a big joke to her, that men should be cavorting around up there when there was still so much work left to do on Earth. We had a shower and I made lunch and we settled down in front of the set to wait for the men to come out of their module, and—very easily, without a sense of transition—we found ourselves starting to screw, and it went on and on, one of those impossible impersonal mechanical screws in which body grinds against body for centuries, no feeling, no excitement, and as I rocked rhythmically on top of her, unable either to come or to quit, I heard Walter Cronkite telling the world that the module hatch was opening. I wanted to break free of her so I could watch, but she clawed at my back. With a distinct effort I pulled myself up on my elbows, pivoted the upper part of my body so I had a view of the screen, and waited for the ecstasy to hit me. Just as the first wavery image of an upside-down spaceman came into view on that ladder, she moaned and bucked her hips wildly and went into a frenzied climax. I felt nothing. Nothing. Eventually she left, and I showered and had a snack and watched the replay of the moonwalk on the eleven o'clock news. And still I felt nothing.

• • •

"What is the answer?" said Gertrude Stein, about to die. Alice B. Toklas remained silent. "In that case," Miss Stein went on, "what is the question?"

• • •

Extract from *History of the Imperium*, Koeckert and Hallis, 3rd edition (revised):

> The galactic empire was organized 190 standard universal centuries ago by the joint, simultaneous, and unanimous resolution of the governing bodies of eleven hundred worlds. By the present day the hegemony of the empire has spread to thirteen galactic sectors and embraces many thousands of planets, all of which entered the empire willingly and gladly. To remain outside the empire is to confess civic insanity, for the Imperium is unquestionably regarded throughout the cosmos as the most wholly sane construct ever created by the sentient mind. The decision-making processes of the Imperium are invariably determined by recourse to the Hermosillo Equations, which provide unambiguous and incontrovertibly rational guidance in any question of public policy. Thus the many worlds of the empire form a single coherent unit, as perfectly interrelated socially, politically, and economically as its component worlds are interrelated by the workings of the universal laws of gravitation.

• • •

Perhaps I spend too much time on other planets and in remote galaxies. It's an embarrassing addiction, this science fiction. (Horrible jingle! It jangles in my brain like an idiot's singsong chant.) Look at my bookshelves: hundreds of well-worn paperbacks, arranged alphabetically by authors, Aschenbach-Barger-Capwell-De Soto-

Friedrich, all the greats of the genre out to Waldman and Zenger. The collection of magazines, every issue of everything back to the summer of 1953, a complete run of *Nova*, most issues of *Deep Space*, a thick file of *Tomorrow*. I suppose some of those magazines are quite rare now, though I've never looked closely into the feverish world of the s-f collector. I simply accumulate the publications I buy at the newsstand, never throwing any of them away. How could I part with them? Slices of my past, those magazines, those books. I can give dates to changes in my spirit, alterations in my consciousness, merely by picking up an old magazine and reflecting on the associations it evokes. This issue showing the ropy-armed purple monster: it went on sale the month I discovered sex. This issue, cover painting of exploding spaceships: I read it my first month in college, by way of relief from Aquinas and Plato. Mileposts, landmarks, waterlines. An embarrassing addiction. My friends are good-humored about it. They think science fiction is a literature for children—God knows, they may be right—and they indulge my fancy for it in an affectionate way, giving me some fat anthology for Christmas, leaving a stack of current magazines on my desk while I'm out to lunch. But they wonder about me. Sometimes I wonder too. At the age of 34 should I still be able to react with such boyish enthusiasm to, say, Capwell's Solar League novels or Waldman's "Mindleech" series? What is there about the present that drives me so obsessively toward the future? The gray and vacant present, the tantalizing, inaccessible future.

* * *

His eyes were glittering with irrepressible excitement as he handed her the gleaming yellow dome that was the thought-transference helmet. "Put it on," he said tenderly.

"I'm afraid, Riik."

"Don't be. What's there to fear?"

"Myself. The real me. I'll be wide open, Riik. I fear what you may see in me what it may do to you, to *us*—"

"Is it so ugly inside you?" he asked.

"Sometimes I think so."

"Sometimes everybody thinks that about himself, Juun. It's the old neurotic self-hatred welling up, the garbage that we can't escape until we're totally sane. You'll find that kind of stuff in me, too, once we have the helmets on. Ignore it. It isn't real. It isn't going to be a determining factor in our lives."

"Do you love me, Riik?"

"The helmet will answer that better than I can."

"All right. All right." She smiled nervously. Then, with exaggerated care, she lifted the helmet, put it in place, adjusted it, smoothed a vagrant golden curl back under the helmet's rim. He nodded and donned his own.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready."

"Now!"

He threw the switch. Their minds surged toward one another.

Then—

Oneness!

* * *

My mind is cluttered with other men's fantasies: robots, androids, starships, giant computers, predatory energy globes, false messiahs, real messiahs, visitors from distant worlds, time machines, gravity repellers. Punch my buttons and I offer you parables from the works of Hartzell of Marcus, appropriate philosophical gems borrowed from the collected editorial utterances of David Coughlin, or concepts dredged from my meditations on De Soto. I am a walking mass of second-hand

imagination. I am the flesh-and-blood personification of the Science Fiction Hall of Fame.

* * *

"At last," cried Professor Khologoltz triumphantly. "The machine is finished! The last solenoid is installed! Feed power, Hagley. Feed power! Now we will have the Answer we have sought for so many years!"

He gestured to his assistant, who gradually brought the great computer throbbingly to life. A subtle, barely perceptible glow of energy pervaded the air: the neutrino flux that the master equations had predicted. In the amphitheater adjoining the laboratory, ten thousand people sat tensely frozen. All about the world, millions more, linked by satellite relay, waited with similar intensity. The professor nodded. Another gesture, and Hagley, with a grand flourish, fed the question tape—programmed under the supervision of a corps of multispan-trained philosophers—into the gaping maw of the input slot.

"The meaning of life," murmured Khologoltz. "The solution to the ultimate riddle. In just another moment it will be in our hands."

An ominous rumbling sound came from the depths of the mighty thinking machine. And then—

* * *

My recurring nightmare: a beam of dense emerald light penetrates my bedroom and lifts me with an irresistible force from my bed. I float through the window and hover high above the city. A zone of blackness engulfs me and I find myself transported to an endless onyx-walled tunnel-like hallway. I am alone. I wait; and nothing happens, and after an interminable length of

time I begin to walk forward, keeping close to the left side of the hall. I am aware now that towering cone-shaped beings with saucer-sized orange eyes and rubbery bodies are gliding past me on the right, paying no attention to me. I walk for days. Finally the hallway splits: nine identical tunnels confront me. Randomly I choose the leftmost one. It is just like the last, except that the beings moving toward me now are animated purple starfish, rough-skinned, many-tentacled, a glove of pale white fire glowing at their cores. Days again. I feel no hunger, no fatigue; I just go marching on. The tunnel forks once more. Seventeen options this time. I choose the rightmost branch. No change in the texture of the tunnel—smooth as always, glossy, bright with an inexplicable inner radiance—but now the beings flowing past me are spherical, translucent, paramecioid things filled with churning misty organs. On to the next forking place. And on. And on. Fork after fork, choice after choice, nothing the same, nothing ever different. I keep walking. On. On. On. I walk forever. I never leave the tunnel.

* * *

What's the purpose of life, anyway? Who if anybody put us here, and why? Is the whole cosmos merely a gigantic accident? Or was there a conscious and determined Prime Cause? What about free will: do we have any, or are we only acting out the dictates of some unimaginable, unalterable program that was stencilled into the fabric of reality a billion billion years ago?

Big resonant questions. The kind an adolescent asks, when he first begins to wrestle with the nature of the universe. What am I doing brooding over such stuff at my age? Who am I fooling?

* * *

This is the place. I have reached the center of the universe, where all vortices meet, where everything is tranquil, the zone of stormlessness. I drift becalmed, moving in a shallow orbit. This is ultimate peace. This is the edge of union with the All. In my tranquility I experience a vision of the brawling, tempestuous universe that surrounds me. In every quadrant there are wars, quarrels, conspiracies, murders, air crashes, frictional losses, dimming suns, transfers of energy, colliding planets, a multitude of entropic interchanges. But here everything is perfectly still. Here is where I wish to be.

Yes! If only I could remain forever!

How, though? There's no way. Already I feel the tug of inexorable forces, and I have only just arrived. There is no everlasting peace. We constantly rocket past that miraculous center toward one zone of turbulence or another, driven always toward the periphery, driven, driven, helpless. I am drawn away from the place of peace. I spin wildly. The centrifuge of ego keeps me churning. Let me go back! Let me go! Let me lose myself in that place at the heart of the tumbling galaxies!

• • •

Never to die. That's part of the attraction. To live in a thousand civilizations yet to come, to see the future millennia unfold, to participate vicariously in the ultimate evolution of mankind—how to achieve all that, except through these books and magazines? That's what they give me: life eternal and a cosmic perspective. At any rate they give it to me from one page to the next.

• • •

The signal sped across the black bowl of night, picked up again and again by ultrawave repeater stations that kicked it to higher energy states. A thousand trembling

laser nodes were converted to vapor in order to hasten the message to the galactic communications center on Manipool VI, where the Emperor awaited news of the revolt. Through the data dome at last the story tumbled. Worlds aflame! Millions dead! The talismans of the Imperium trampled upon!

"We have no choice," said the Emperor calmly. "Destroy the entire Rigel system at once."

• • •

The problem that arises when you try to regard science fiction as adult literature is that it's doubly removed from our "real" concerns. Ordinary mainstream fiction, your Faulkner and Dostoievsky and Hemingway, is by definition made-up stuff—the first remove. But at least it derives directly from experience, from contemplation of the empirical world of tangible daily phenomena. And so, while we are able to accept *The Possessed*, say, as an abstract thing, a verbal object, a construct of nouns and verbs and adjectives and adverbs, and while we can take it purely as a story, an aggregation of incidents and conversations and expository passages describing invented individuals and events, we can also *make use of it* as a guide to a certain aspect of Russian nineteenth-century sensibility and as a key to pre-revolutionary radical thought. That is, it is of the nature of an historical artifact, a legacy of its own era, with real and identifiable extra-literary values. Because it simulates actual people moving within a plausible and comprehensible real-world human situation, we can draw information from Dostoievsky's book that could conceivably aid us in understanding our own lives. What about science fiction, though, dealing with unreal situations set in places that do not exist and in eras that have not yet occurred? Can we take the adventures of Captain Zap in the eightieth century as a blueprint for self-discovery? Can we accept

the collision of stellar federations in the Andromeda Nebula as an interpretation of the relationship of the United States and the Soviet Union circa 1950? I suppose we can, provided we can accept a science-fiction story on a rarefied metaphorical level, as a set of symbolic structures generated in some way by the author's real-world experience. But it's much easier to hang in there with Captain Zap on his own level, for the sheer gaudy fun of it. And that's kiddie stuff.

Therefore we have two possible evaluations of science fiction:

—That it is simple-minded escape literature, lacking relevance to daily life and useful only as self-contained diversion.

—That its value is subtle and elusive, accessible only to those capable and willing to penetrate the experiential substructure concealed by those broad metaphors of galactic empires and supernormal powers.

I oscillate between the two attitudes. Sometimes I embrace both simultaneously. That's a trick I learned from science fiction, incidentally: "multispan logic," it was called in Zenger's famous novel *The Mind Plateau.* It took his hero twenty years of ascetic study in the cloisters of the Brothers of Aldebaran to master the trick. I've accomplished it in twenty years of reading *Nova* and *Deep Space* and *Solar Quarterly.* Yes: multispan logic. Yes. The art of embracing contradictory theses. Maybe "dynamic schizophrenia" would be a more expressive term, I don't know.

* * *

Is this the center? Am I there? I doubt it. Will I know it when I reach it, or will I deny it as I frequently do, will I say, *What else is there, where else should I look?*

* * *

The alien was a repellent thing, all lines and angles, its tendrils quivering menacingly, its slit-wide eyes revealing a somber bloodshot curiosity. Mortenson was unable to focus clearly on the creature; it kept slipping off at the edges into some other plane of being, an odd rippling effect that he found morbidly disquieting. It was no more than fifty meters from him now, and advancing steadily. When it gets to within ten meters, he thought, I'm going to blast it no matter what.

Five steps more; then an eerie metamorphosis. In place of this thing of harsh angular threat there stood a beaming, happy Golkon! The plump little creature waved its chubby tentacles and cooed a gleeful greeting!

"I am love," the Golkon declared. "I am the bringer of happiness! I welcome you to this world, dear friend!"

* * *

What do I fear? I fear the future. I fear the infinite possibilities that lie ahead. They fascinate and terrify me. I never thought I would admit that, even to myself. But what other interpretation can I place on my dream? That multitude of tunnels, that infinity of strange beings, all drifting toward me as I walk on and on? The emodiment of my basic fear. Hence my compulsive reading of science fiction: I crave road-signs, I want a map of the territory that I must enter. That we all must enter. Yet the maps themselves are frightening. Perhaps I should look backward instead. It would be less terrifying to read historical novels. Yet I feed on these fantasies that obsess and frighten me. I derive energy from them. If I renounced them, what would nourish me?

* * *

The blood-collectors were out tonight, roving in thirsty packs across the blasted land. From the stone-walled

safety of his cell he could hear them baying, could hear also the terrible cries of the victims, the old women, the straggling children. Four, five nights a week, now, the fanged monsters broke loose and went marauding, and each night there were fewer humans left to hold back the tide. That was bad enough, but there was worse: his own craving. How much longer could he keep himself locked up in here? How long before he too was out there, prowling, questing for blood?

* * *

When I went to the newsstand at lunchtime to pick up the latest issue of *Tomorrow*, I found the first number of a new magazine: *Worlds of Wonder*. That startled me. It must be nine or ten years since anybody risked bringing out a new s-f title. We have our handful of long-established standbys, most of them founded in the 1930's and even the 1920's, which seem to be going to go on forever; but the failure of nearly all the younger magazines in the 1950's was so emphatic that I suppose I came to assume there never again would be any new titles. Yet here is *Worlds of Wonder*, out today. There's nothing extraordinary about it. Except for the name it might very well be *Deep Space* or *Solar*. The format is the usual one, the size of *The Reader's Digest*. The cover painting, unsurprisingly, is by Greenstone. The stories are by Aschenbach, Marcus, and some lesser names. The editor is Roy Schaefer, whom I remember as a competent but unspectacular writer in the 1950's and 1960's. I suppose I should be pleased that I'll have six more issues a year to keep me amused. In fact I feel vaguely threatened, as though the tunnel of my dreams has sprouted an unexpected new fork.

* * *

The time machine hangs before me in the laboratory, a glittering golden ovoid suspended in ebony struts. Richards and Halleck smile nervously as I approach it. This, after all, is the climax of our years of research, and so much emotion rides on the success of the voyage I am about to take that every moment now seems freighted with heavy symbolic import. Our experiments with rats and rabbits seemed successful; but how can we know what it is to travel in time until a human being has made the journey?

All right. I enter the machine. Crisply we crackle instructions to one another across the intercom. Setting? Fifth of May, 2500 A.D.—a jump of nearly three and a half centuries. Power level? Energy feed? Go. Go. Dislocation circuit activated? Yes. All systems go. Bon voyage!

The control panel goes crazy. Dials spin. Lights flash. Everything's zapping at once. I plunge forward in time, going, going, going!

When everything is calm again I commence the emergence routines. The time capsule must be opened just so, unhurriedly. My hands tremble in anticipation of the strange new world that awaits me. A thousand hypotheses tumble through my brain. At last the hatch opens. "Hello," says Richards. "Hi there," Halleck says. We are still in the laboratory.

"I don't understand," I say. "My meters show definite temporal transfer."

"There was," says Richards. "You went forward to 2500 A.D., as planned. But you're still here."

"Where?"

"*Here.*"

Halleck laughs. "You know what happened, Mike? You *did* travel in time. You jumped forward three hundred and whatever years. But you brought the whole present along with you. You pulled our own time into the future. It's like tugging a doughnut through its own hole. You see? Our work is *kaput*, Mike. We've got our

answer. The present is always with us, no matter how far out we go."

* * *

Once about five years ago I took some acid, a little purple pill that a friend of mine mailed me from New Mexico. I had read a good deal about the psychedelics and I wasn't at all afraid: eager, in fact, hungry for the experience. I was going to float up into the cosmos and embrace it all. I was going to become a part of the nebulas and the supernovas, and they were going to become part of me; or rather, I would at last come to recognize that we had been part of each other all along. In other words, I imagined that LSD would be like an input of five hundred s-f novels all at once: a mindblowing charge of imagery, emotion, strangeness, and transport to incredible unknowable places. The drug took about an hour to hit me. I saw the walls begin to flow and billow, and cascades of light streamed from the ceiling. Time became jumbled and I thought three hours had gone by, but it was only about twenty minutes. Holly was with me. "What are you feeling?" she asked. "Is it mystical?" She asked a lot of questions like that. "I don't know," I said. "It's very pretty, but I just don't know." The drug wore off in about seven hours, but my nervous system was keyed up and lights kept exploding behind my eyes when I tried to go to sleep. So I sat up all night and read Marcus' *Starflame* novels, both of them, before dawn.

* * *

There is no galactic empire. There never will be any galactic empire. All is chaos. Everything is random. Galactic empires are puerile power-fantasies. Do I truly believe this? If not, why do I say it? Do I enjoy bringing myself down?

* * *

"Look over there!" the mutant whispered. Carter looked. An entire corner of the room had disappeared—melted away, as though it had been erased. Carter could see the street outside, the traffic, the building across the way. "Over there!" the mutant said. "Look!" The chair was gone. "Look!" The ceiling vanished. "Look! Look! Look!" Carter's head whirled. Everything was going, vanishing at the command of the inexorable golden-eyed mutant. "Do you see the stars?" the mutant asked. He snapped his fingers. "No!" Carter cried. "Don't!" Too late. The stars also were gone.

* * *

Sometimes I slip into what I consider the science-fiction experience in everyday life. I mean, I can be sitting at my desk typing a report, or standing in the subway train waiting for the long grinding sweaty ride to end, when I feel a buzz, a rush, an upward movement of the soul similar to what I felt the time I took acid, and suddenly I see myself in an entirely new perspective—as a visitor from some other time, some other place, isolated in a world of alien beings known as Earth. Everything seems unfamiliar and baffling. I get that sense of doubleness, of *deja vu*, as though I have read about this subway in some science-fiction novel, as though I have seen this office described in a fantasy story, far away, long ago. The real world thus becomes something science-fictional to me for twenty or thirty seconds at a stretch. The textures slide; the fabric strains. Sometimes, when that has happened to me, I think it's more exciting than having a fantasy world become "real" as I read. And sometimes I think I'm coming apart.

* * *

While we were sleeping there had been tragedy aboard our mighty starship. Our captain, our leader, our guide for two full generations, had been murdered in his bed! "Let me see it again!" I insisted, and Timothy held out the hologram. Yes! No doubt of it! I could see the bloodstains in his thick white hair, I could see the frozen mask of anguish on his strong-featured face. Dead! The captain was dead! "What now?" I asked. "What will happen?"

"The civil war has already started on E Deck," Timothy said.

* * *

Perhaps what I really fear is not so much a dizzying multiplicity of futures but rather the absence of futures. When I end, will the universe end? Nothingness, emptiness, the void that awaits us all, the tunnel that leads not to everywhere but to nowhere—is that the only destination? If it is, is there any reason to feel fear? Why should I fear it? Nothingness is peace. Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee. That's Hemingway. He felt the nada pressing in on all sides. Hemingway never wrote a word of science fiction. Eventually he delivered himself cheerfully to the great nada with a shotgun blast.

* * *

My friend Leon reminds me in some ways of Henry Darkdawn in De Soto's classic *"Cosmos"* trilogy. (If I said he reminded me of Stephen Dedalus or Raskolnikov or Julien Sorel, you would naturally need no further de-

scriptions to know what I mean, but Henry Darkdawn is probably outside your range of literary experience. The De Soto trilogy deals with the formation, expansion, and decay of a quasi-religious movement spanning several galaxies in the years 30,000 to 35,000 A.D., and Darkdawn is a charismatic prophet, human but immortal or at any rate extraordinarily long-lived, who combines within himself the functions of Moses, Jesus, and St. Paul: seer, intermediary with higher powers, organizer, leader, and, ultimately, martyr.) What makes the series so beautiful is the way De Soto gets inside Darkdawn's character, so that he's not merely a distant bas-relief—The Prophet—but a warm, breathing human being. That is, you see him warts and all—a sophisticated concept for science fiction, which tends to run heavily to marble statues in place of living protagonists.

Leon, of course, is unlikely ever to found a galaxy-spanning cult, but he has much of the intensity that I associate with Darkdawn. Oddly, he's quite tall—six feet two, I'd say—and has conventional good looks; people of his type don't generally run to high inner voltage, I've observed. But despite his natural physical advantages something must have compressed and redirected Leon's soul when he was young, because he's a brooder, a dreamer, a fire-breather, always coming up with visionary plans for reorganizing our office, stuff like that. He's the one who usually leaves s-f magazines on my desk as gifts, but he's also the one who pokes the most fun at me for reading what he considers to be trash. You see his contradictory nature right there. He's shy and aggressive, tough and vulnerable, confident and uncertain, the whole crazy human mix, everything right up front.

Last Tuesday I had dinner at his house. I often go there. His wife Helene is a superb cook. She and I had an affair five years ago that lasted about six months. Leon knew about it after the third meeting, but he never has said a word to me. Judging by Helene's desperate

ardor, she and Leon must not have a very good sexual relationship; when she was in bed with me she seemed to want everything at once, every position, every kind of sensation, as though she had been deprived much too long. Possibly Leon was pleased that I was taking some of the sexual pressure off him, and has silently regretted that I no longer sleep with his wife. (I ended the affair because she was drawing too much energy from me and because I was having difficulties meeting Leon's frank, open gaze.)

Last Tuesday just before dinner Helene went into the kitchen to check the oven. Leon excused himself and headed for the bathroom. Alone, I stood a moment by the bookshelf, checking in my automatic way to see if they had any s-f, and then I followed Helene into the kitchen to refill my glass from the martini pitcher in the refrigerator. Suddenly she was up against me, clinging tight, her lips seeking mine. She muttered my name; she dug her fingertips into my back. "Hey," I said softly. "Wait a second! We agreed that we weren't going to start that stuff again!"

"I want you!"

"Don't, Helene." Gently I pried her free of me. "Don't complicate things. Please."

I wriggled loose. She backed away from me, head down, and sullenly went to the stove. As I turned I saw Leon in the doorway. He must have witnessed the entire scene. His dark eyes were glossy with half-suppressed tears; his lips were quivering. Without saying anything he took the pitcher from me, filled his martini glass, and drank the cocktail at a gulp. Then he went into the living room, and ten minutes later we were talking office politics as though nothing had happened. Yes, Leon, you're Henry Darkdawn to the last inch. Out of such stuff as you, Leon, are prophets created. Out of such stuff as you are cosmic martyrs made.

* * *

No one could tell the difference any longer. The sleek, slippery android had totally engulfed its maker's personality.

* * *

I stood at the edge of the cliff, staring in horror at the red, swollen thing that had been the life-giving sun of Earth.

* * *

The horde of robots—

* * *

The alien spaceship, plunging in a wild spiral—

* * *

Laughing, she opened her fist. The Q-bomb lay in the center of her palm. "Ten seconds," she said.

* * *

How warm it is tonight! A dank glove of humidity enfolds me. Sleep will not come. I feel a terrible pressure all around me. Yes! The beam of green light! At last, at last, at last! Cradling me, lifting me, floating me through the open window. High over the dark city. On and on, through the void, out of space and time. To the tunnel. Setting me down. Here. Here. Yes, exactly as I imagined it would be: the onyx walls, the sourceless dull gleam, the curving vault far overhead, the silent alien figures drifting toward me. Here. The tunnel, at last. I take the first step forward. Another. Another. I am launched on my journey.

There is a point to life, to living . . .

In Between Then and Now

Arthur Byron Cover

I was sitting in the desert. The sun would have blinded me if I were not immune to such things. My throat would have been dry and thirsty if I could not manufacture water when it pleased me. I had been there, leaning against a pyramid of my making, for a few hundred years, I think. The wanderlust was building in me again, and I was getting ready to move to another galaxy. The Milky Way is a boring place, where I go for peace and relaxation and nothing else.

Then she attacked me. It was almost a playful attack. Just boulders and windstorms and rains, all hurled at me while I was off guard. I became angry; she had not bothered me for an eon or so and I was used to the loneliness. I became part of the desert and it was easy to find her because she can never hide her beauty. I swallowed her in sands and she became air and slid out from under me. She flew to the stratosphere and laughed at me. The bitch. Then she became a great weight and plowed right into me, trying to cut me into a million pieces. That was dumb of her. I was nothing but sand anyway.

"Will you get off my back?" I demanded.

"Never," she said.

"Oh well." And I fled.

Now you have a good idea of how it was. If she didn't attack first, I did. Neither of us knew why we hated each other so much, why we got such a kick out of annoying the other. Maybe there wasn't a reason, but since shallow intellects claim everything has a reason, then there might have been one. Who am I to argue with billions upon billions?

Once I flung a galaxy at her. An unimaginative attack, to be sure. She dodged it with ease and flung three or four back at me to show me that anything I could do, she could do better. I shudder to think of what happened to the puny life-forms of those galaxies. What did the fish-men say as their world passed too close to a sun and their seas evaporated? What did the plant-men say as the soil was torn from their world? What did the just plain old men say as their navigational charts mapping routes between worlds became hopelessly outdated in a matter of seconds? I'm sure neither of us gave a thought to it. Our one concern was our skirmish.

Another time she sent whirling space-storms at me and tried to tear the fourth dimension out from under my feet. Now that was a beauty, because it might have been dangerous if she had caught me off guard. But I got back at her. She was the one who was off guard and it took her an eon to set things right about her. Still, I couldn't help but admire how she handled herself in the jaws of her own trap. She even added colors to space to make life more interesting.

Well, any more of that sort of thing would be redundant. I hope you have the general picture now, because the complications are yet to come.

For a few eons it had been bothering me that we hated each other so much. Why couldn't we be friends? There are only two of us and we rarely tried to kill the other, despite appearances. So why not be friends and do things together? Why not make love and have kids, like any other normal couple? Why not at least call a tempo-

rary truce and ponder the error of our ways until another way of life came to us?

When I saw her at the fair I decided to ask her. That was a mistake; she created a vortex when I was riding the ferris wheel and I was sick for a week. However, I did not lose my resolve. I still wanted to ask her. I was afraid my questions would have all kinds of allegorical connotations and that her answers would too. It would be demeaning to talk at such a retarded level, but I couldn't see any way out of it. I saw her at the rodeo and was about to ask her when she changed into a horse and ran away to the convention. She knew I wouldn't follow her there because I hate conventions.

The look in her eyes was beginning to bother me. She has such lovely eyes, no matter what form she takes. I was appalled to see fear in them. It was as if she knew my questions and was afraid to answer them, even to hear them. Maybe the same thoughts I had were plaguing her.

Conventions are transitory affairs and it was not long before I saw her again, in another galaxy, swimming the deep of a black ocean. She was laughing with a monstrous fish with twenty gills and a hundred fins and a brain the size of a house. I don't know what the fish said to her, but whatever it was, I was jealous. I cast the fish into the sun and said to her, "I want to talk to you."

She ran away.

Then I wondered: Why in the world would I be jealous over her? We are two of a kind, there are no others like us, why would I become angry at a fish? What did I have to fear from it? I felt ridiculous. Why did I even bother to kill it? I suppose I have already answered my own questions when I said I was jealous. But how could I ever hope to understand her and the reason why we hated each other if I could not understand my most barbaric emotions?

There was only one thing to do and that was to search her out again. I found her leaping from meteor to meteor and she was almost enjoying herself. When she spied me she tried to burn me up, which is a hard thing to do considering the fact that there isn't any oxygen in space. I encased myself in ice before she remedied her oversight and I asked, "Why was I jealous of a mere fish?"

She asked, "Why did you kill him? He was doing a great impersonation of Alexander Hamilton. And he promised to do Ralph Waldo Emerson next."

"Because I was jealous of him."

"You are a fool."

She tried to burn me once more before she fled.

I was more perplexed than ever. True, she had hated me since before I could remember, but she had never been angry at me before (there is a fine line of distinction between the two). Something was afoot and I still needed to talk to her. I even wanted to touch her. I felt hideously aglow and banal. Perhaps running around with so many lower life-forms had corrupted me. Maybe I was only a shadow of my former self. I knew, even as I considered it, that I still had all my intelligence, my power, and my confidence, but also that that was not enough. I asked myself: How many eons will it take before we are both mature? A strange question and, in other times, a meaningless one.

If you haven't guessed by now, I was extremely confused. An embarassing situation for one who has never been confused before. Then it occurred to me that maybe I had been confused all my life and was just now coming out of it. I wanted to call out to her, asking her to come back, but she had no name, just as I have no name. I searched for her in silence.

And found her transformed into a world. I landed on her and touched her flowers and she quivered, trying to shake my balance. She almost made me bash my head on

a rock. Not that it would have caused any damage, but it would have smarted for a second. I said, "Listen, I want to talk to you."

"I gathered that," she said in the booming voice of an entire world.

I covered my ears. "Why don't you change? I feel like a fool."

"You should be used to that by now."

"Very funny. Why don't you change before I have to repair my ears?"

"I don't feel like it."

"Bitch."

That insulted her and she changed. I made the mistake of not flying off into space and was all shook up when she appeared in her true form. I licked my lips and wondered what kind of change had occurred in my emotional make-up.

"All right, turd, what do you want to talk about?"

"You can't call me a turd," I said. "We don't even have waste products."

"I don't. You do."

"Don't be coy. We're both the same."

"No, we're not. We're different."

"We're different, but we're the same," I said. "For that reason I don't hate you anymore. I feel differently toward you."

"I don't care."

She did care, I know she did. She just didn't want to admit it. So why was I pressing the issue? Why couldn't I wait until she saw things my way? I was in the process of swallowing my pride for some unfathomable reason and somehow I knew she would eventually. I had all creation to wait, so why did I want her to change right now?

"You do care," I said for want of knowing how else to react.

"Care about what?"

A damn good question. I wanted to flee.

"Care about what?" she repeated.

"I don't know. I can't think right now."

I almost reached for her. She was standing there in the middle of space and she looked so beautiful. She was wearing yellow hair at the moment and she was tossing it about her, playing with it. It assumed the form of a clock, then of a square, then of an animal I saw once on the Dog Planet. She was what was wrong with me, but she had always been what was wrong with me. In some way or another she had always been the cause of my discomforts. And this time the real cause rested somewhere in me, though she was involved in a way I could not and cannot describe, ever.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "It's not your fault."

She sighed. "I don't understand you. For eons piled upon eons it has been all my fault and now suddenly it's changed."

"I'm glad you figured that out."

"But *I* haven't changed. I still hate you!"

She was lying. I knew it and she knew it. But I didn't have the guts to tell her.

"Why do we hate each other so much?" I asked. "Can't there be something else?"

She looked away. "It's been like that since the birth of creation. Why should it be any different?"

"We've seen the universe change a thousand times," I said. "What makes you think we're immune to change?"

"We're not," she said just before she ran away.

I sat there in the middle of space and watched her dwindle in the distance. Then I increased my powers of sight and watched her run for an election. She lost. I haven't let her out of sight since and she knows it, though I haven't approached her.

And that brings me up to date. Now that I'm convinced she feels the same way I do, I know it's only a matter of time before we erase the games and habits of

old and start playing something new. I don't know yet what form our games will take, but that doesn't bother me. The emptiness I now feel will be replaced by another emotion which will make it all worth while.

I can wait, and so can she. The universe will contract until it is like it was in the beginning, a single point in space. We will both be there in that single point and we won't be able to run away from each other.

When we finally meet those aliens Out There, what will we ask of them . . . or they of us?

Kelly, Fredric Michael: 1928-1987

William F. Nolan

MONITORED THOUGHT PATTERNS CONTINUE:

. . . wrong, twisted . . . and I'm being . . . being . . . Steen is already . . . they want me to free form again . . . goddam it, I don't understand just what this . . .

We had a coal-burning furnace in the basement with a slotted iron door, and you broke up the clinkers inside with a poker, lifting the door latch with the heat sweating you . . .

And Mickey left Minnie standing at the little white picket fence. She was blushing. "Love ya," he said. "Gee," she said. "Gotta fly the mail for Uncle Sam," he said. "Golly, you're so brave!" she said. His plane was a cute single-seater with a smiling face and rubbery wings . . .

The Moon! They'd made it after all, by Christ, and Armstrong was walking, jiggling, kind of floating sometimes with sixty million or more of us watching. He could still be a part of it. He was only 41 and that wasn't old, not too old if he really . . .

. . . kept shooting, but the bullets bounced right off

his chest. "Time someone taught you a lesson in manners!" He tucked a thug under each arm, pin-striped suits with their hats still on, and leaped through the window of the skyscraper with him in the air now and them yelling and him smiling, square-jawed, with that little black curl over his forehead and the red cape flaring out behind . . . soaring above the poorly-drawn city with the two . . .

Alone in the back of the car, the two of them, not watching the movie (a comedy with Hope in drag and Benny pretending to be his daughter), not giving a damn about the movie and him with his hand there inside her elastic white silk panties . . . "Don't, Freddie. I can't let you." Sure she could. He'd taken her out often enough for her to let him. He wouldn't hurt her, ever. He was sure he loved her, or if he didn't he *would*—if she'd just . . . He had her blouse all the way open and God those tits! ". . . never have come here with you if I thought you'd . . ." Seat slippery under him but he got her legs open enough to do it, but all he did was rub her down there. He'd lost his erection and his penis was as soft as a flag with no wind; it flopped against her white stomach and she was . . .

Tight against the rocks with the Arabs coming. The legion guy next to Coop was plenty nervous. "Think we can hold 'em off?" And Coop smiled that slow easy boy-smile that meant nothing could touch him; we all knew nothing could touch Coop. "Sure, sure we can. They won't attack at night. We'll slip out after dark." He fired twice and two fanatic Arabs fell in closeup. A hidden ground wire tripped their horses, but we were too young to know about hidden ground wires . . .

". . . so I'm going to tell Dawson he can go fuck himself!" "They'll bounce your ass right out," I told Bob. "So what, so who needs a Ph.D. from this lousy . . . Look, man, college is shit. Dawson is a phony little prick and he knows it and so do his students, but they just sit there listening to him spout out his . . ."

. . . planet wants me to . . . no, no . . . it isn't the planet itself. It isn't alive, doesn't tell me anything . . . dead planet out here on the fringe of the System . . . but it has . . . a kind of influence—in conjunction with the rest of this System . . . the whole thing is a form of . . . new force, or goddam it I wish they'd let me . . . just wouldn't . . .

Mother wanted to know what I was doing in my bedroom all alone for so long and I said reading a Big-Little-Book and she came in to see. I had a pretty fair collection and the best were the ones set on the planet Mongo. "You read too much. It'll ruin your eyes." But she looked relieved. I didn't know why. She was smiling and roughing my hair, which I hated but I didn't hate her. I loved her very, very much. ". . . to sleep now. You can read more tomorrow." The room was small and comfort-making and I could smell her perfume and the special soap she used and I liked the way she smelled, always, and she was always . . .

. . . to row close to the shore, along the rocks, while he fed line into the quiet lake. "This is where the fat ones like to come in," he said. The sky was so blue it hurt my eyes so I kept my head down. A mosquito bit me. That was the only trouble with lakes, the mosquitoes. They loved water the way Dad did. I liked rowing, feeling the long wooden boat slide through the water with Dad at one end, feeding out his line, and the lake blackgreen with no motorboats on it, quiet and hot and . . .

She twisted under me, doing a thing with her pelvis, and I came. Hard, fiery. First time inside . . . She groaned and kept her eyes squeezed shut and she looked tortured and I kept thinking what her father would say if he knew I had her doing this. He always worried about her. "You two kids take care, ya hear?" And then he'd say, "I trust you, Fred because you're a Catholic." And told him that I . . .

. . . more . . . keep wanting more . . . I'm being . . . forced to spill out all the . . .

"Hey, Kelly, the old man wants to see you." Sure he did, and I knew why. Because I was late three mornings this week. I had reasons. The lousy freeways were jammed so I took surface streets but Old Cooney would never listen to reason, which is why he's such a bastard to work for. "Tell him I won't be late anymore." I was going to the Moon. To work there. To train for space. And someday, with luck, maybe I could . . .

Whap! Wow! Pie right in the kisser. The little tramp wipes it off, sucks his thumbs, does a kind of ballet step back and falls down three flights of stairs. Terrific! Up he bounces, dusts the seat of his baggy pants, tips his hat, spins his cane, and walks into a cop! Whomp! Cop is furious. Jumps up and down, shaking his stick. The tramp does a polite little bow, tips his hat again and ducks between the cop's legs. Zing—right down the middle of the street. Cars missing them by inches. Two more cops join the first cop. Three more. A dozen. Falling and yelling. Tramp is up a fire escape, over a roof, through a fat lady's apartment—she's in the tub!—out a door, down an alley, and into a big . . .

. . . snow came and I'd rush for the basement to dig out my old sled. Rust had coated the runners with a thin red film and I had to get them shiny again with sandpaper, doing it fast, wanting to get out on the hill and cut loose. School closed, the hill waiting, Tommy Griffith yelling at me to get a move on and then the long whooshing slide down from Troost with snowdust in your nose and steering to miss Tommy's sled and picking up speed coming onto Forest, mittens and yellow snow goggles and warm under the coat Uncle Frank got you for Christmas . . .

The sons of bitches were worried about the fucking score while his father was *dying*. Okay, okay—pull back, cool down, all the way down—because if he wasn't

dying he'd want to know the score too. It was the Series and he'd want to know the score like the others did. The hall smelled of white paint and starch and, faintly, of urine. Hospital smells. The young priest had been emotionless about it, kept smiling at him and saying "a passel of years" when he told him how old his father was. He was glad to be out of Holy Mother Church, because she didn't really give a damn about him or his father. Maybe God did, somewhere, but not Holy Mother Church. What did it matter how old his father was? So what? He was still dying of cancer and you never want to go that way no matter *how* fucking old you are, even if . . .

"My country tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty . . ."

Sing it boy, sing it loud and let the world know that you're an American. Sure, he was too young to fight, but he was proud. And scared, too. They were giving us hell on those beaches. Giving us bloody hell . . .

. . . born in 1928 *. . . into space when I was fifty . . . Moon first, then Mars . . . If I could just tell them straight and they didn't . . .*
. . . keep trying to force all the . . . it's 1987 *and I'm fifty-nine years old and I shouldn't even be on this planet . . . said I was too old, but nobody listened. Experience. We need you out there, Fred. Help chart the new Systems. Warps did it, make it all possible . . . one jump and into another galaxy. No dream. Fact. Cold reality. All right then, I volunteered . . . but not for this . . . didn't know I'd ever be . . . goddam sick of being . . . sucked dry this way . . . without my having any choice in how I . . .*

"That's it, oh, that's fine! Keep coming, honey!" Mom, with her arms out. Wobble. Almost into the lamp. "C'mon, son, you can do it. *Walk* to me!" Daddy there,

kneeling next to her, looking excited. The room swaying. Terror. Falling. Rug in my face. Sneezing with them laughing and pulling me up and me trying again, with it better this time. Steady now, and Daddy was . . .

Feeding her power, letting her drift out, then snapping her back. "You're great, Fred," Anne told me. "Nope. Car's great," I said. "Handles, doesn't she? Richie did the suspension. Short throw on the shift. Four downdraft carbs. She'll do 200 easy. And a road like this, she eats it up." Life was good. Power under my foot and power in my mind and the future waiting.

". . . when the sniper got him." "What?" "Sniper. In Dealy Plaza." "Where's that?" "Texas." "What was he doing there?" "Wife was with him. They were—" "She dead too?" "No, just him. Blood all over her dress, but she's fine, she's fine . . ."

"Let's see what he looks like under that mask?" Oh, oh, they *had* him now. Guns on him, his hands tied, no chance to get away. "Yeah, Jake, let's us have a good look at him." Spaaaaang! "What the—" Oh, boy, just in time. Neat! "It's the durn Indian! Near killed me. Looks like he's got us boxed in." What are they going to do? "Better untie me, Jake, and I'll see to it that you both get a fair trial in Carson City." Deep voice. "You have my word on it." They won't. Or *will* they? Not much choice. Spaaaang! "His next shot won't miss, Jake." Oh, they're scared now, all right. Look at them sweat. "We'd best do as the masked man says," the big one growls. Spaaaang! Boy, if they don't . . .

"But, Fred, the job's on Mars. We can't go to Mars!" I wanted to know why not. "Because, for one thing, Bobby is too settled in. His school, all his friends, everything is here. The Moon is his *home*." I told her I was going, that it was a chance I couldn't afford to miss. But she kept up the argument, kept . . .

. . . on his stomach under the porch with the James Oliver Curwood book, the one about the dog who runs

away and falls in love with a wolf and they have a son who's half dog and half wolf. Jack gave it to him for his fourteenth birthday. It was his favorite James Oliver Curwood. Rain outside, making cat-paw sounds on the porch, but him dry and secret underneath with all the good reading ahead of him. He pushed a jawbreaker, one of the red ones, into his mouth and . . .

"Christ, Fred, let her go! She doesn't want to hear from you. She's never going to answer you. She wants to forget you." That was all right. Sue was still his wife and they still had their son and maybe he could put it all back together. He'd visit them on Bobby's birthday and maybe he could . . .

The stars . . . the *stars* . . . a massed hive of spacefire, a swarm of constellations . . . the diamonds of God . . . It was worth it. Worth everything to be out here, a part of *this*. Everything else was . . .

Enough! . . . I've given enough . . . sick . . . exhausted . . . hollow inside, drained . . . pulped out . . . They were lucky, the others were lucky and didn't know it, dying with the ship . . . but they took us down here, two of us . . . and Steen's insane now . . . They got . . . He free formed until they . . . know . . . know what they still want from me, what they have to experience along with all the rest of it . . . before they're satisfied. They want to taste that too—the final thing . . . Well, give it to them. Why not? There's no way back to anywhere . . . Your friends are gone . . . Steen's a raving fool . . . so give them the final thing they want, goddam them . . . whoever they are . . . whatever they are. Just give them

THOUGHT TRANSCRIPT ENDS.

Nostalgia Tripping

Alan Brennert

"—*old gold,* nineteen-forty-*nine*: John Lennon, remember him, old-timers? *Years* ahead of his time. Transcription disc's a little scratchy, sorry—"

"That's all right," the old man said softly. He sat, hands clapsed like folded papyrus, head cocked to one side, smiling. Waiting. The radio blared beside him on the hard plastic table:

"—but it's still *OLD GOLD.* Nineteen-forty-*NINE* . . ."

"Yes, yes, you said that." The old man was impatient.

". . . for your enjoyment!" Words faded into music, into a song culled from the Golden Past, into *then;* the music faded into memories, flickering shadows across a dimly-recalled world. The old man, crinkled sallow leather stretched over sharp and angled bones, nodded contentedly as the music flooded his half-deaf ears like voices through wadded cotton. Distant, remote: but then, so was the past, and each in its turn helped to reinforce and support the other. The music spurred the past, the past brought memories of the music which coalesced into the canned Muzak of the present. The old man immersed himself in the music, launched happily onto the

nostalgia trip—he smiled, listening, tapped his foot in conjunction with the radio-the past, smiled some more.

The music blared on. 1949! Ah, what a year that had been. The close of World War II after two bloody years; not with a bang, but a whimper—surrender by the Japs and the Jerries without so much as the dropping of one A-Bomb. *That* came later: 1956, or was it '57? Korean Conflict. Bombed the crap out of them. The old man chuckled drily to himself. A hell of a mistake, that was. Good old Uncle Sam thought he'd had all the nukes to himself, could afford to splatter North Korea all over the map. Good old Uncle Sam got thoroughly screwed; Russkies had one or two stockpiled up, lobbed a couple at Iwo Jima . . . ah, but the end justifies the means, doesn't it? Arms limitations and all that, ban on all wars, good strong peace-on-earth shtick? Sure, sure.

1949. The year Wilson, President Woodrow Wilson hey remember *him*?, died in office—assassinated, some cheap Nazi bastards who may not have known the meaning of the word "die" 'cause they never said it, but damn well knew the word *kill*. VP Kennedy took over. The old man pursed his lips thoughtfully; Kennedy or was it Eisenhower? It all tended to run together after a while. Well, what the hell.

The radio continued with its tribute to the magic year 1949, music from the era—McKuen, Stones, Lennon—summoning up memory after faded memory. Previous weeks had seen salutes to the thirties, the twenties, all the way back to the opening years of the twentieth century. God, there was a wealth of memories. God, it was good. The old man was dimly aware that the tribute was on its second go-round, that he'd heard itall before, allowed it to conjure up the past for him once before, but did not care. It was always good to dip back into your past, re-live old experiences, maybe alter them slightly: recall a wife's kiss, a friend's voice, maybe your first lay. The old man's face, creased and lined with age,

shattered into a thousand-wrinkled mask as he grinned broadly. 1949.

1949 crept gelatinously around the edges of his consciousness, engulfing it, wiping away the stains of the present. Screw 2003. He wasn't eighty-two years old, he was twenty-eight, and it was 1949, he had married five years earlier, Emma was alive and young and lovely, pregnancy and children and a sterile present still ages away. 1949. God, it was good.

Yes, a very good year.

—nineteen forty-*nine!* The music of—the Rolling *Stones—!"*

The young man lay on the crisply-sheeted bed, the music sharp with crystalline clarity as it spiked into his brain. 1949. The memories it spurred were artificial, contrived. He had never known the year himself; he had been born in 1977, damn the luck, had to wait until that magic year rolled up to bring into play his own memories—but even then there was little satisfaction, for the years of his life thus far paralleled the whitely sterile society that had reached its culmination of ennui in the not-so-magic year 2003. So for all intents and purposes, perhaps this was the best of all possible worlds: listening to a past you never shared, attempting to snatch bits and pieces of it, savoring them for as long as they made themselves available.

1949. The 1949 the young man savored now was not the only one he had so embraced—but it was the only one he knew now. Somewhere else were shadows of other 1949s, also touched only through the radio. A 1949 in which Germany had won World War I, in which World War II was a second war for American freedom, beyond which laid a bleak and joyless future: *that* 2003 was dark and desolate, the result of bacteriological warfare that left only a very few, very weak survivors. A 1949 in which the first Terran walked on the moon, the

result of the Wright Brothers' discovery of rocket power in 1907, leading to a future plumbed of imagination, half its population fled to the distant stars. A 1949—

Another '49—

And another—

All worlds ending in bitter hell or antiseptic peace—a 2003 in the ruins of war, or the plastic womb of the robot. Environments which forced a return to pleasanter times, pleasanter days. A return to the past . . .

1949 bounced from plastic wall to plastic wall. Outside Earth was bright and green and stagnant. In another 2003, this room was pitted and scarred by the dregs of war, barren and lifeless. In yet another, the young man held clutched to his face a mask, breathing in spastic gulps the polluted air seeping in from the defaced Earth. In another he was dead many long years, and in a fourth he had never existed at all. There was only one constant—

The radio.

Always the radio blared on.

1949. 1959. 1969. 1979. 1989. 1999.

Back to 1909. 1919. 19—

The young man closed his eyes in appreciation of the past threading its way into his mind. 1949. God, what a very damned good time to live in it must have been. He envied those who had lived it, envied even more those of *them* still alive to recall it. So good. So very damned good.

The salute to this 1949 was the second the young man had heard, but he did not care. They were running out of the past, he knew. Running out of Golden Years, of Nostalgia Trips, of Weeks That Were. Pretty soon it would be back to 1999 and then what? Back to 1909?

In a multiplicity of 2003s the timestream over, the young man asked that: and in all of them the answer was, "No."

In a crowd. People pressing in, forcing the air up and away from themselves, throwing more out and away by yelling. Cheering. In voices high, languages foreign. Bordering a street, clogging the sidewalks: waiting for something down the street, a man on a horse, ornately uniformed, smiling proudly. The people wave, shout, cheer.

Somewhere in Europe, 1904. A node of chronal unimportance in this timestream: a great leader, his people, a parade. Nothing important . . .

In the middle of the crowd, at its core, two men: one light, one dark. One with a camera, one with a gun. The man with the gun is shaking, nervous. He looks around him, at the crowd, down the street at the man approaching on the sleek black horse, turns to his companion.

"Sam. Sam, they'll kill us."

"Not necessarily. Not likely. Look, he's coming."

"But Sam, why can't we spot him from a window someplace? Someplace safe."

"You get too safe you might miss. Ready, now . . ."

"Sam, we gotta live out our lives back here after this. 1904. Jesus, you think it's going to be easy hiding? After what we're gonna do?"

"No help for it, Denny, can't go back. A one-way trip." He smiled. "Nostalgia trip."

"Sam, I don't want to die."

"You won't die, dammit. What's that in your hand? Hand laser, best available. You think the Nostalgia Corps doesn't give its agents top equipment? If the crowd sees it's you wasting him, why hell, just blast them, too, okay?"

"But I . . . I can do that?"

"Sure. Why not? The more you screw up the past, the more varied the memories become, right? Oh sure, you might phase out a couple of their descendants, but they'll be back when the next team comes through. Maybe. Come on, Denny, he's almost here. Shoot."

"I . . ." The man with the gun slips the laser pistol

from under his jacket; his hand is moist and stiff from having held it there so long. It glistens alienly in the light of 1904. A 1904 different from a thousand other 1904s, different from a thousand yet to come—

The man Denny raises the gun to eye-level, aligns the shot carefully. His finger trembles slightly on the trigger, then stops. He aims, closes his eyes, opens them. Fires.

A beam of piercing scarlet light stabs out, singeing heads caught in its path, spearing the uniformed rider now screaming now falling now dying—

The node of chronal unimportance spreads, grows, eddies into a major oscillation, ripples . . .

The old man sat quietly before the worn and pock-marked table, not feeling the sting of splinters into the beaten leathery skin of his folded hands. Not hearing the staccato beat of bullets against the side of his rotting wooden shack. Not seeing the gangs of marauding looters ripping away the decayed face of the city. Not caring about the savage, lawless reality of the present.

The old man listened.

The young man lay reclining on the bed, sheets dappled by stains of caked blood and dried urine, dying of severe malnutrition. His eyes had receded deeply into their sockets, his face was pale and skull-like, his hands were limp and fleshless by his side. He cared little of the lack of food, of the efforts of the world-at-large to destroy him piece by dying piece. He cared little for the Earth of 2003, in all its incarnations.

The young man listened.

"—*old gold,* nineteen-forty-*nine*: the year of Watts XVI, sure, the black-white wars in Florida and Louisiana, granted, but hey, don't those days hold some special memory for *you*? Right, right. Let's go back, then, nineteen-forty-nine—*the Golden Year*—"

The radio blared on.

The creation of an alien viewpoint may be the most difficult task of all for the s-f writer—for we are, first and always, human . . .

She/Her

Robert Thurston

One minute I am drifting through the wall of my dwelling, contemplating my arguments against the alliance with man, and the next minute I am leader—it happened like that. For us momentous events are not invested with significance, as are the acts of man. The event occurs, and we realize its existence, and the next moment arrives without extra fanfare. We have few ceremonies, no rituals. In this particular case enough of our people had concluded that they wanted me as their leader, so that I suddenly had more support than the previous leader. The job was mine until enough of our people had a desire for someone else to lead them.

As I assembled into my corporeal form, I saw that She was there, waiting for me, holding my leaf-robe. I have learned to think of Her as She (and Her) ever since the men defined sex difference. She of course has come to think of me as He or Him, in the manner of men, who were the first to think of us two in those terms. She is able to communicate with them as well as I, but for Her they put a gentleness into their voices and thoughts. They think She is beautiful, even according to their human standards. I have seen Her through their eyes.

They put human features onto her face, it is really very comic. They see a long straight nose on what they know is more like one of their animal's snouts. Her curved mouth opening is like a perpetual smile to them. Her round eyes are mentally changed into the eyes of human women in amazement, as if they are saying how wonderful you men are. They are astonished at the silken loveliness of the hair on her head, while their minds shut out the hair of her face. And they ignore the fact that our heads are not rounded but squarish, and that little else of us is humanlike—no neck, no appendages on the body, a body which in fact is really shapeless by their standard. They do not see as practical the way we can comfortably reshape our bodies to fit whatever surface on which we sit, nor do they particularly like the way we can turn ourselves into what they call smoke. But we are the closest sentient being to human that they have found, and they are most at ease with us when their minds have humanized us. I do not understand why men must see us that way, or why they are repulsed if they do not, since we have to make no such adjustments to view them, nor are we much affected in any way by their appearance.

She wove the leaf-robe around me and immediately my hungry body began to absorb nourishment. She of course knew that I was leader now, and She waited for my instructions. I enjoyed being leader. Leaders have extra privacy of mind, and secretiveness was pleasurable. However, I knew that She would be my communicant to the others and that She now awaited my first public statements. Knowing that my people would become impatient if I remained silent too long, and that a larger contingent supporting someone else as leader could easily form in the interim, I acted quickly. I instructed Her to transmit the following: that the former leader was to be commended on his excellent period of leadership and that it was our hope that the former leader might ascend again in popularity and dethrone me; that men

were for the time being to be dealt with as usual, until further observation and communication revealed what our final attitude toward them must be; and that the difference in sex which men had defined the previous day was to be ignored as unacceptable alien superstition. I had known that the decrees concerning men were the most important measures with which to begin my term of leadership. The others knew that I was the direct communicator with our human visitors, that I received the most information from them, and that I was therefore best qualified to be leader while the men were here. I also knew that the last decree was especially important because of the internal dissension which had been caused by the pronouncement of sex differentiation.

I should explain here that we are not stupid. We did not suddenly realize that there was a difference between those who dispatched seeds and those who received them. Man's defining did not plunge us into that awareness. But the men saw more than just a difference in biological function, and their explanations had been disruptive to us. Their initial offense was a desire to name what they saw. Male and female, man and woman, He and She, Him and Her, boy and girl—the naming in the subject-area of sex alone seemed endless. Then there were long lists of characteristics. We had always been conscious of our characteristics, especially as compared to other species on our planet, but we had never emphasized any differences among ourselves, particularly male and female, and the other names. I did not care for classification, expecially now that I was leader. One of the things I had kept in the privacy of my mind was that, among themselves, men were trying out names for our species. Their classifications had already harmed me so much that I did not know if I would ever be the same—I thought in terms of I and the others, I and She, Me and Her, Them and Us. My mind was filled with the irrelevancy of difference.

All day I tried to work out a plan for what we should do about man, my thoughts interrupted only by her need for affection, or mine. I decided to base my plan on man's hatred of loneliness. Through Her, I instructed the others that they were to ignore man as much as possible. If they made any sort of advance, or gesture of friendship, we should show no emotion and continue whatever action preceded the men's offer. I also suggested that the others make no independent communication with the men. For the time being I, as leader, and She, as delegate, would continue to communicate with men, using all our skill to force men to lose interest in us. We would also continue our secret travelings in their minds (many compartments were still closed to us) to discover ways with which we might cause them enough mental anguish to make them want to leave. I transmitted all of this to Her, who passed it on to the others, each of whom would carry the messages to a group of still more messengers. All our people would know my plan within minutes.

I felt suddenly exhausted. I told Her that I had no wish to transmit seed if She had no wish to receive it. She said that desire was also not strong in Her tonight. Before I stirred to sleep, I noted that She thought about our several months together with no fertilization. Even among our people, for whom conception is rare, our childlessness was becoming crucial. We both knew that we might have to separate soon. It was well known that another Her was available for me if I made the choice. Such personal thoughts exhausted me further. I vaporized and submerged myself in the mist which led to sleep.

. . . In my dream I became a man, and I walked among our people with arrogance, pity, and envy in my mind. I selected one of our Hers and convinced Her to come back to the ship with me. There I began to say things to Her (I do not remember what) which caused

pain to appear in her face. Then I cried and said I was sorry, and She soothed me . . .

When I awoke, She was drifting across the room. Her thoughts flooded in on me and I was shocked. She felt me in her mind, and She turned to me in surprise. Upset, I could not look at Her. She had been thinking about the men, about being affectionate with one of them. She had changed her body so that it took on some of the human shape: no appendages but clearly a torso, the suggestion of tiny human breasts above the slight concavity that resembled a waist, the squareness of the lower part of her body rounded to suggest hips. She changed back immediately and told me She was sorry. I could see that She believed that men were good, that their range of feelings was worthy of further investigation, and that any changes the alliance would cause should be beneficial to us. I asked Her if, in her searching of their minds, She had discovered the many types of conflict within them. There were ways in which our small group of men did not trust each other. Their memories showed instances where they took lives of other men. That *range* of feelings She felt worthy of investigation was, I said, a mixture of dangerous emotions that they used to differentiate themselves in what seemed an enormous and unnecessarily complex variety of characteristics. She said that She had seen and felt beauty in them. Even if there was some danger, we should risk learning more about them. I told her we could not, and made it clear that I meant that as leader. We both closed off the subject but could not avoid noticing that we had just shared a conflict. The strain of that awareness made me dizzy with sickness.

I did not know how much time I would have as leader but knew that I must use it as well as possible. I could not merely send out cautionary decrees, I must act. As temporary measures I decided on these: To increase our avoidance of the men by ignoring them completely and

moving away from them when they walked among us, and to discover and report any ways in which we might increase their discomfort without putting ourselves in physical danger.

My dilemma concerning the men was interrupted by my first emergency as leader—and what a welcome emergency it was. The message came that the Enemy was about to invade. It is the rare leader who is offered the opportunity to war against the Enemy, and I seized it with, I admit, some satisfaction. Within minutes I had notified our people. Those who wished to be warriors joined me on the plain outside the border of our living place.

Before I left for the plain, She offered herself for the reception of seed. I refused Her without the usual kindness, and She showed me in her mind that She did not like that. I told Her that we were becoming more human every day. Before I left She transmitted a large amount of affection for me, more than I had ever known from Her. Normally I would have tried to equal it, but there had already been too much difficulty with Her. Men and war made it impossible to give way to affection, so I merely showed gratitude, then vaporized and slipped through the wall quickly.

On the plain the warriors had already assembled according to the plan I had sent out. We exchanged views to make sure that everyone understood correctly. Not that there was a possibility of confusion, since the plan was traditional and I, like leaders before me, had merely changed a few fine points. I received in abundance the loyalty of my comrades which lent further conviction to my confidence as leader. However, I knew that the battle must be quick, or else I might lose some of these followers and might no longer have the largest number of supporters for leadership. Many a leader has returned from a successful but casualty-filled war and found himself no longer leader. But years of fighting the Enemy and real-

izing that they never changed their mode of attack, even when faced with certain defeat, had made war easier. It was merely essential to surround the Enemy. The faster we did that, the faster the battle.

The Enemy appeared just ahead of the sun on the horizon. I was momentarily blinded by its rays shooting through the advancing legion. But delay was the biggest threat to victory, so I ignored the shining light and mobilized my warriors. Starting the mental link myself, I was joined to all my soldiers within minutes. Then we began advancing across the plain, the outer flanks progressing more quickly than the inner. I was at the center. As we approched the Enemy we started vaporizing. The Enemy's chatter began to diminish. Our outer flanks now pulled us along at a rapid pace. This reminded me of the irony of my role—although leader, I was the most remote and functionless of the army, since I was in the center position and therefore the one most guided by the other soldiers. I could feel the force of their pulling forward, but pulled no one along with me. I was also the last to see the Enemy closely. As always, I was nauseated by them. I concentrated on one of them, if it is possible to concentrate on an Enemy. The sun, now a bit higher on the horizon, showed through the irregular and unconnected sections of its body. I was dizzied by the thought that the parts of its body were not linked by anything except air. (Although our scientists did theorize that an Enemy's body was linked together electrically, and that this power ended as soon as the creature died. That was why it collapsed into a pile after death. I was not sure about the existence of the electrical link, because we had never captured a live Enemy for study.) Floating above the body, which was the color of earth, was the triangular pinpointed head, which seemed to be all eye on each plane.

There was something pitiable about an Enemy. It

looked so childlike and helpless. Many of our people believed that this stupid warring should stop and, in fact, we had sent out reformers to discuss the matter with the Enemy. However, except when they attacked, they could not be found anywhere on our planet, above or under ground.

The main thrust of the Enemy attack gradually slowed, diminished with their screeching and caterwauling. Already several of them had stopped to just stare at us with those glaring eyes the color of an approaching storm. The one at whom I had chosen to stare seemed to have his concentration on me, though of course I only received one third of his intense attention —two other warriors may also have felt the burning pain of his gaze. I tried to see if there was any link visible between the various parts of his body, some just barely discernible line or wire, maybe a spark from the electric force. I could see nothing but apparently open space.

The rear guard of their army stumbled and rebounded off the main clump. The last sounds came, and there was a silence. Our army had shut off most of the sound from outside. The Enemy stood entranced by their own rare silence. Then they began their feeble part of the battle. The outer group of their warriors started charging various points of our linkup, sometimes attacking one of us directly, sometimes rebounding off the force between us. They did not seem able to distinguish what was us and what was the area between. They just ran haphazardly at our closing circle, their strange pointed weapons—fashioned out of rocks, earth, dried fruit, and other particles of debris—thrust out in front of them. It was an odd strategy, one designed to save an occasional individual but destroy the army. When one of them made rare contact with the vital area of the head of one of us, the link was temporarily broken and that Enemy soldier could shoot through the opening to safety, never to be seen

again in this particular battle. Our link was reestablished quite speedily, with our fallen comrade shunted to outside the circle.

The battle continued. Their only chance to kill any of us was in those early moments, just before our two outer flanks joined to complete the circle and surround the Enemy. We did not begin our attack until the circle was completed. Perhaps because of the inspiration of my leadership, we surrounded the Enemy faster than usual with only the loss of two to our side. I gave the command to attack as soon as I received the message of final linkup from the outer flanks. Then we all turned the force of our thoughts inward, toward the Enemy we encircled. Immediately their forward warriors began to retreat, falling before they could reach the main army.

The death of an Enemy has been described often as a tortured dance: it receives the pain we send and immediately begins to writhe, the triangular head tilting from side to side, the pieces of the body closing and unclosing the gaps, all in very even motions. Then it begins to separate, each body-part attracting and then repulsing its neighbors, at each repulsion creating a wider space. The head continues to spin and tilt, and finally turn upside-down as its eyes close. At this moment, the Enemy lets out an horrendous and drawn-out shriek that seems to say that the dying Enemy has just glimpsed the afterlife and it is worse than this minute. The shriek stops abruptly and the Enemy collapses ungracefully into a jagged little pile. In the battle itself, with several Enemies dying at the same time, the overall effect, while horrifying, is also somewhat entrancing.

The battle was quickly over, and again I felt some satisfaction in my leadership. After disposing of corpses, my warriors emitted a similar satisfaction toward me. It flowed through me in dizzying waves of contentment.

I returned to my dwelling as soon as possible, wishing to share my satisfaction with Her. I knew what had hap-

pened the moment I restored my corporeal form. She did not want to hide it from me. While I warred, She had visited the men, explaining and showing to them how we distrusted them, how we were working on measures to discourage them, and how our apparent cooperation with them was merely a way of stalling until we had decided what to do. She told me they were initially disturbed by what She revealed and feared attack from us. She had convinced them that we would not attack, except for our attempts to make them unhappy and discouraged in their minds. Some of the men had agreed that they did not feel as serene as when they first arrived on our planet. She told me that they understood and were now discussing what they should do. She had felt a strong affection for one of the men, but She would not show me which one. If the men decided to leave, She wanted to go with them. This was impossible, I told Her, an act too strange to be imagined. She reminded me of an Enemy—in her mind there seemed to be pieces floating apart, an eye threatening me. I told Her that She could not separate from us, but She said She would not be missed by a single one of our people. She told me She wanted to share emotion with a man, the man whose face She would not let me see. I was afraid, seeing her unprecedented determination, that She might attempt such a thing.

I felt that it was time to call a council and sent that message through Her. Those who wished to come to council came, and we met outside my dwelling. I felt great satisfaction at the number of people who came for the meeting. Their satisfaction with me entered my mind in even ripples of pleasure. I explained the problem of man and found that others shared my concern. Possible solutions to the problem were shared among us. Some admitted that they had even considered warring on man, but this was easy to discount unless man would somehow provoke us. Someone suggested

that we could exert enough control over their minds to cause them to attack us, but I said that would merely be provoking the provocation, robbing their attack of the free will it must have. We shared the idea of asking them to leave our planet, but we could not efficiently form the hostility necessary for such an act. The idea came to let time pass, but I said that had already proven ineffective. Nor could we just continue to ignore them, since they now knew we were doing that. Finally there were no more solutions to be shared, and the council was dissolved with no plan of action decided upon. I felt waves of dissatisfaction and retreated quickly through the walls of my dwelling.

She had sneaked away during council. There was no doubt where she went. I vaporized and went through the opposite wall of my dwelling, toward the ship of the men.

In the clearing next to the ship, one of the men came out to greet me. He told me I had been traveling so fast that I looked like a smoke-trail to him. I searched his mind, trying to see if he felt any affection for Her. I wanted a clue to the man whose identity She had hidden from me. In his mind She was compared to what he called a housecat, a kind of pet. I realized that I could never tell whether or not he was the one, since his attitude toward Her might be entirely different than hers toward him.

Other men came out to the ship and told me they must meet with me. I agreed. They said that, if they had known that I was the leader of my people, they would have dealt with me in a different way. In the mind of one of them I saw that they viewed a leader as a special being who was treated with extra kindness and allowed particular benefits by those whom men called subjects. Their idea of a leader was not unattractive. I tried to explain that, among our people, a leader was not considered to be elevated above his followers. They said they

understood but I could tell by their thoughts that they did not, and they began to treat me in what they considered the proper way to communicate with a leader.

They told me that they were sorry to cause trouble among my people. It was not their intention to alter the cultures and societies they encountered in any way, one of the men said. I could see in his mind that he considered himself the leader of the group of men, and that he felt especially comfortable with the methods of communicating with me. He said they had talked for hours and had come to the conclusion that they must leave our planet for now. They, or other men, might return in the future. However, he said, a problem had come up that required my judgement. She wanted to go with them. She had even begged to go with them, the leader of the men told me. I looked quickly in all their minds and saw that none of them really knew what She had shown me. None of them realized the strength of her affection, although their leader had noticed that She was looking more humanlike every day, especially in the shape of her torso. They all saw Her as a kind of specimen which could be exhibited on their home planet. She knew that was what they wanted to do, and had given her approval. They were so eager to have Her as a prize that they had done little to dissuade Her, much less than they now pretended to me.

In the privacy of my mind I heard the Enemy death shriek again—

She appeared, in smoke form, on the outer wall of their ship. She became corporeal and drifted down to the ground, then curled herself onto one of the stairs that led to the outside of the ship. I looked into her mind and saw that She hoped to be something more than a specimen.

I showed Her that I did not want Her to go. She did not want to leave me either, but there had been a conflict

in Her and She could only resolve it this way. She felt She could not be part of us anymore, that her ideas were now too dangerous, and She would only cause sorrow if She stayed. She was afraid of any further contact, even with me.

I wanted to protest, to demand that She stay, to say that I could see from the men's minds that She would be unhappy as a specimen, to tell Her that She could be spared from sorrow if She and I left the others and lived the rest of our lives in isolation. I wanted to act, to take Her by force or destroy the men and their ship. I had the urge to reduce them to a pile, as I had the Enemy. I wanted to delay, until some sort of alternative could be found. I wanted to do *something*, but instead I remained in council with their leader, his mind trying to select ways that he could convince me to accede to what he had already decided.

He said that they would not take Her with them if I decided they should not. I could see in his mind that he was prepared to continue the argument even if I said no. She sat on the stair and showed me in her mind what life would be like if She was forced to stay. She would not only be miserable, She would cause misery. She would transmit hate, like I sent seeds, and I would receive the most of it. She would attempt to cause dissension among our people.

Anyway, She showed me, I could go to the She that wanted to replace Her, and there my seeds might take root. I showed Her that I thought that was an acceptable solution, but She could not hide from me that She thought it was not. I realized, too, that it was not.

The men stopped talking, and awaited an answer from me. In their minds they saw it as a simple decision. Nothing would be altered in our world if they took one of us away. I could see that their intentions were good, that they really did not want to cause pain.

They waited.

Their leader told me again that they would abide by my decision, and in his mind again was the thought that they would start on alternate plans to persuade me if I refused permission.

I knew that our life would be terrible if I ordered that She stay. But that was the only decision for me. I had analyzed the arguments, thought on both sides of the issue, and knew it was better to force Her to remain with us instead of changing herself into a specimen. We would be hurt by her attempts at revenge, but we could surmount them. And, with time, She would change.

It was my decision and I was leader. I had, I knew, to say no.

I started to tell my answer to the leader of the men. I drifted toward him to add emphasis to my decision.

Suddenly I knew I could not tell him. It was no longer my right. In the instant of moving toward the men, the right had been taken away from me. I was not the leader of my people anymore. The new leader was chosen and, at that moment, was considering new measures. The decision for change of leadership had begun to grow during the last council and had accumulated until that moment. It had nothing to do with my decision about Her, which was merely a small issue within the total problem of man. I knew the new leader was in favor of the alliance with men, and might ask them to stay. I searched the minds of the men and saw that their decision to leave was firm. The new leader would not achieve his alliance, at least now, and might have a shorter term of leadership than mine had been.

I looked at Her. She showed me that She now was uncertain. The leadership change had altered her attitude in a way that She could not understand. I could not myself comprehend the confusion in her now. She seemed different, not Her as I had known Her before.

I turned my attention back to the men. Their leader still stared at me, waiting for my response. I realized

then that he did not of course know that I was not the leader anymore. He stood there in front of me, with a set of reactions ready according to whatever decision I made.

Leader or not, I could make the decision, and the men would not know that I did not have the right.

Even if my people sent more representatives before the men left on their ship, they would at least have extreme difficulty convencing these men of their right to negotiate. They would have extreme difficulty even communicating with the men, who were accustomed to communicating with me.

I could make the decision. The leader of the men stared at me.

I backed away, bewildered by the differing urges within me. If I refused the men, they would argue at length to change my decision. If I said yes, She would be gone forever.

For a long moment something like the confusion I had seen in the mind of Her originated independently in mine. As I looked at the men and their leader, and at Her, I suddenly could not be certain where I was or why I was there. I wanted to make these men disappear, and again make contact with Her, and force Her to obey my will in this matter which I no longer understood.

A minute later my mind was clearer. I looked into the men's minds and found disorientation. They did not understand why I had just been swaying from side to side and threatening to go into what they called a spin. I did not understand either.

The leader of the men had been mildly amused at my actions, and had a brief memory of a zoo animal whose species he did not recall. He wondered if I would give them their answer today.

I told them that I had made my decision, and that I was honored to allow them to take Her with them. The leader smiled. The men gathered around us. From them

I could feel satisfaction something like, but different from, that which had been transmitted by my warriors.

She moved toward me, some sadness amidst the gratitude in her mind. One of the men began stroking the top of her head, his fingertips just lightly touching her hair. I looked in his mind and found there the hope that he could be her protector. This was the normal affection that the men always showed Her, yet there was something slightly different in it.

The leader of the men started to thank me. I interrupted him and said I had not supplied my complete decision. He looked puzzled.

I told him I was going with them, too.

I could sense several of our people blazing a smoke trail toward the ship. She showed me that She was happy that I would stay with Her. I showed Her that it was not only desirable but necessary.

The leader of the men said that, according to his calculations, it would be advisable to set about procedures for liftoff from our planet soon, or put it off until tomorrow. Sensing the distance of our new representatives from the clearing at that moment, I agreed with him that it would be a good idea.

As we approached the ship, She left the side of the man who wanted to become her protector and drifted to me. She showed me in her mind that She believed I had grown very fond of being the leader. I suddenly realized the truth of that. Furthermore, her opinion was that, by going with these men, and Her, I could continue my love of leadership by exercising my control over Her. I realized the truth of that, also. She showed me that, now that we had been contaminated (a word she had taken from the mind of one of the men) by the men's unintentional influence upon us, my skills as leader might no longer be so useful. Then again, She showed me before clouding some further thoughts in the privacy of her mind, they might be extremely useful.

Trashing

Barry N. Malzberg

In Topeka, the madman had been in line for an open shot but at the critical instant my pistol had jammed, in Abilene I thought I had him levelled but his assassins surrounded him quickly after the speech and he got out of the way, in Los Angeles I could not possibly fail again until he cancelled out of schedule at the last moment and headed North instead. (He must have foreseen what would happen I thought then: the madman had flashes.) Throughout that summer, the lunatic raged through the ruined country like a beast, spreading his lies and sedition wherever he landed and left in his wake, as always, the fires, pain, looting and destruction. The Republic seemed, in those last days of August, as if it would not survive; as if finally all of its agonies had been taken past containment by the ravings and lunacies of one cunning enough to use its vulnerability: and I was frantic, oh yes my friends, I was frantic.

It was me, only I who could save the Republic then: detailed to the Mission by virtue of my superb skills and training, that and the fact that I had never, in all the years of various projects, missed a shot. I welcomed the assignment. I did not quail even when the Committee said in the grim way that the Committee had of speaking

at crucial times, "Only you stand between order and destruction. Only you can destroy the madman. We have sent others and they have failed; now he is close to his destiny and if you fail as well, everything is ended." The Committee never overstates; I know it well, have worked for it in troubled times and good for all these years of my successes and I was not frightened by what was said to me, nor was I stricken.

"I'll get him," I said, "I'll get him and save us all," and had gone out on the path of the madman then, through all the stones and stricken partitions of the country with the obsessive calm that always characterizes me on a quest . . . and I had missed him.

Missed him in Topeka. Lost him in Los Angeles, had him levelled to the ground in Abilene and other places too numerous to mention, but something had always happened to deter me and at last I came to understand that it was not merely a cunning and terrible series of mishaps but instead the very nature of the enemy against whom I was opposed. He *knew*. He judged my assignment and the responsibility I had taken, understood my purposes and never had I been confronted by an enemy more profound because not only did he evade, he taunted me. In Atlanta, from the circle of his assassins he winked, in Topeka he laughed and grimaced as I swore helplessly at my pistol, in Los Angeles he released a mysterious statement to the captive press that he had cancelled an engagement for "personal and important reasons". When I read this last in the newspaper the following day, I felt the passion to murder as I had never known it in the performance of my other assignments because his crazed face, dotted out by the camera of an imprisoned lithographer, hung before me in an obscene glint of knowledge. He teased. He knew the limits of my necessity and worked upon them as superbly as he worked on the rotted soul of the country: in Cleveland he called for the dispersion of the power structure, in Detroit he spoke of plans to enslave yet another class, in

New York and then throughout New England he spread his lies and foment while behind him the cities shook and roiled in the blood of his wake. But finally I found him and knew, with completion, that this time I would not fail. It was in Plainfield.

In Plainfield, where I trailed the madman cautiously and with precision through one hundred and fifty miles of New Jersey landscape which he had deadened, turning into bare earth and refineries, choking on the oil fumes of his diseased lust, I came upon him slowly and easily, waiting until his assassins had spread into the surrounding populace to carry on their quiet terror as they always did through his tirades, and finally confronted him whole on the concrete as he gestured to the crowd, ending his rant. I remembered the words of the Committee, then, as I closed the ground between us.

"He is wise, he is shrewd," the old Committee had said, clasping one gnarled hand within the other, "he believes himself, as do all psychopaths, to be invulnerable, and at the last moment he may fix you with a gaze of such chilling power and intensity that you will be unable to deliver the blow. Do not look him in the eyes. Like Medusa, his strength comes from his will and you must look at some neutral object or at the sky as you destroy him. Nor must you listen to his words because he will try to seduce you, as he has done to all of the others in this dying country," and I remembered, advancing, the words of the Committee and smiled with reminiscence for I knew, all of the old Committee's doubts to the contrary, that I had the strength and power to complete the assignment.

"Do so and be done with it," the madman said, concluding his speech, and then, in the sound looked upon me, knowing who I was. "Hello," he said, faking cordiality out of his knowledge of entrapment. I saw his eyes. They had no effect upon me. "You seem to be upset or angry, is something wrong?" the lunatic asked,

attempting to misdirect me but his words meant nothing, so attuned was I then to his maniacal shrewdness.

"Only this," I said pleasantly, "only this," and raised my weapon, centered it on the pale forehead behind which bulged his deformed brain, and fired. He fell with casual quiet to the stones, easy at the end as I had always known it would be. I stood there at ease, confident, accepting plaudits from the crowd which I had liberated as his assassins, angry but helpless, came upon me. Indeed they were frustrated, as how could they be not? All of his cunning, their own acuity, had saved them nothing. The maniac lay dead at my feet and his assailants, groaning out their fury, could do nothing.

"I suppose you'll want to take me now," I said, nodding cordially as the liberated of the crowd ran over me like a wave, a wave in the free and retrieved state of New Jersey in the country which had waited in agony for my liberating caress, and I felt their hands upon me, hard but gentle, fierce but calm.

"Get him, get him away right now for God's sake!" one of the assassins said and another said, "Yes, before they get him!" and I said to them, letting the pistol fall away into their grasp and sagging against them gracefully, "No, it's perfectly all right; I want their congratulations, want their touch and love, for as I am freed of the madman, so are they all."

I would be more than happy to go on with my further recollections about this last and greatest of all my adventures except that my memory from this point is blurred and I have now run out of the very few pieces of paper which the assassins' minions, who appear to administer these quarters, allow me. I would only ask to say this to the Committee: "If the madman is indeed shot why are his legions still in influential positions?" but the Committee, infuriatingly obscure as always when more practical questions are asked would, I am very sorry to say, probably not answer this too well.

Hello, Walls and Fences

Russell Bates

Thornton ignored my complaint. "They're doing it in France," he said, shifting his bulk on the kitchen chair. "Doubtless we should be doing it, too." He turned attention to his meal and put a knife to the cheese. Bright red edged white as his blade dug wax and piquant curd.

I paced away from Thornton's table, wishing we were in any other room but the kitchen. "But I don't see why *I* have to do it!" I turned back: "You believe that it will be a universal thing, that—"

"*That* it has enough importance to change the entire field!" Thornton waved a slice of cheese at me, then took a dainty bite, leaving crumbs in his coppery beard.

I reversed a chair at his table, sat-straddled on it, and looked him in the eyes. "Stop eating a minute," I said, pulling the cheese toward me. "You'll still have twenty-three hours and fifty-nine other minutes to eat!"

Thornton eyed the shelves beside us: jellies, honeys, jams, preserves, and more cheeses abounded. But he merely sat, not reaching for any. He held up his wrist, aiming his fat, fancy watch toward me. I had fifty seconds left.

Quickly: "I don't want to do it any other way but my own, the way I've evolved for myself over the years. I

just can't see doing it in some truncated and inexplicable fashion. I wouldn't understand it my own self. I'd have no freedom. I'd lose other people like I'd lose myself. No, Thornton. It can't be done. I would be less than honest . . ."

Thornton's heavy hand snatched the cheese away. "And you'll also be less than paid if you don't!"

"What?"

Nibble of cheese. "No pay. Zero. The cold for you."

"How can you be so sure? Everyone in the field won't—"

"Oh, you might make a little money." His nostrils flared. "*Commercial* work is easy to get. But you won't be respected. Part of pay, you know, is the salary for the soul."

My chair fell with wood and metal clatter in my angry rush to leave. "*Get bent!*"

I stood on Thornton's porch and waited. But the car that had brought me out here did not reappear. I tried the door; it was locked. I stepped into the driveway and looked up at the second-floor windows. Thornton was there, blandly looking at me while he slipped on a smoking jacket-tent.

The window slid open; Thornton leaned out. "I'll have nothing to do with you until you change your mind."

I gave him the sign of age, IQ, sperm count, and number of white parents. No reaction. I started away across the vast meadow he called his lawn. The house soon was lost among the many trees and flowering shrubs. I felt a little better when I couldn't see him any more.

The sudden bark of a loudspeaker beside me: "You know, of course, that it's people like you who are responsible for the ills of the world." I searched around, found it in a protective cage under a bush. A well-placed kick only spoiled my shoeshine.

"Damn you, Thornton!" I said, hopping on one foot.

"Tut, tut. You don't get rid of me that easily."

"I'll tell you the same, long distance. *No!*"

I limped away quickly and changed my intended path. But it did me no good. Between two evergreens hung the layered glass screen of a hologrammer, something I had thought only the government using. Its silver was suddenly replaced by a color projection. A soundtrack of mortar explosions and rifle cracks backed movie shots of soldiers pouring over hills. Villagers ran, leading their children and animals in panic. The soldiers fired into them. Women, children, old people tumbled away, fell. One thin boy ran for the crest of a hill: a rifle barrel was raised into view, its tip in foreshortened perspective seeming to touch his back. Atop the hill, the boy vanished in an exploding cloud of smoke and flame.

I found the road and shook my head. Thornton wasn't through, I knew. I set out for his gate.

"Pick me up," said shattered bottles in the ditch.

"Remove me," said a crumpled insecticide can.

"Take me away," said the bloody body of a smashed turtle.

I hurried past them all, grateful to see the highway into town. I walked along it, looking for traffic. But no cars appeared on the highway. Seventeen miles stretched between me and Jemmenton: walk. One mile later, I heard a car behind me. I waited, hoping it wasn't Thornton. But . . . the long black limo was his, all right. I hurried on, knowing I was no match for three hundred horses plus additives.

The car slowed beside me, then paced me nicely. I couldn't see inside; the windows were opaqued against the afternoon sun. Thornton might or might not be in it.

"Thornton?" I stopped walking and faced the car. It halted quietly, idling and shaking like an old man with palsy. I started forward again and the car crept after me. A cold thought: perhaps I should run for the nearest tree.

But at last, he said, "Still time to change your mind, you know. Won't take but a second. It's a long way back. But say the word, that you'll do it, and ride."

"I've walked it before," I said, trudging on without looking at anything. "It's a safe, familiar path."

The car fell back, turned around, and accelerated away fishtailing.

Town: quiet, dark, damp. Having houses around me again took away some of my exhaustion. A police car slowed near the end of the first block. Waiting for me? *Don't trust anyone out after dark!* I turned in at the closest house, pretended to seek the doorway. The car moved on.

Pepper waited in the apartment. She sat in my easy chair; the heavy plaster cast on her right leg lay across two pillows on a hassock. An open jar of peanut butter, a loaf of wheat bread, and a brown-smeared knife were on the coffee table.

Pepper put down her magazine. "Well, Pooky. What did Thornton say?"

"The same," I said, sitting down on the couch across from her. "Either I infuse that new thing they're doing in France or he'll boycott."

Pepper eyed me carefully. "And?"

I watched her a moment, then got up, dipped the knife in the jar and licked it. "Looks like we live on this stuff a while longer."

"Come here, Pooky," said Pepper. She put her arms around me. "So we eat cheap. Thorntons come and go."

I nuzzled the side of her neck. "So do pookies."

Pepper and I ate badly. Then we lost the phone. I dreamed I heard Pepper crying and woke up and grabbed her, but she was sleeping peacefully. Evenings that followed found me working in the common room, stylizing the randoms I punched into the house com-

puter, trying for a French-inspired. Thornton, Thornton. How does your garden grow?

No one answered when I rang the bell. Thornton, dammit! I rang again, then walked around the house. Thornton was on the lawn by a pool, placing wickets.

"Thornton?" I said, and held it out to him. He blinked at me, still on his knees. Then he took it, held it up to the sun, shook his head and handed it back.

"Been three months," he said, getting up. "Things change. Now it's the Portuguese."

Angry: "But you said—!"

"Can't help it. Things change."

I stood there, confusion to all sides. I sighed and slumped. "All right. Got the resources?"

He smiled and led me to the house. "In my studio. Take all the time you want."

Pepper squealed at the check. Crutches swinging, she was out the door and off to the market with a neighbor before I could take off my coat. The house was silent; our bare apartment echoed my slightest sound. I sat in my easy chair, and wept.

Goodbye, Godspeed, farewell: whatever I thought I was or would be.

Hello, walls and fences.

The Goulartian future is fast upon us, a damnation that few would consider terrifying . . . unless they had to live it.

Free at Last

Ron Goulart

His wife fell across the threshold, slumped to her knees and came rolling down the ramp into the living room. Her neotex plastic skirtdress was in shreds, a link of neariron chain was twisted around her leg. She hit the thermal living room flooring on chin and elbows, then, with a faint sigh spread out limply alongside a floating coffee table.

Stu Connington clicked off his electric pencil, dropped his work sheets and budget notes down beside his chair. "I thought you were going to stop dating that sadist?" he asked, walking over to help her up.

Debbie Connington sighed again. Upright, she was wobbly as she brushed her tangled black hair away from her forehead. She was a slim pretty girl of twenty-eight. "I did," she said. "This was one of my other lovers I was out with tonight. That attractive cyborg lifeguard from the Santa Monica Sector underwater park. You know, Buddy is his name."

Guiding her across the living room of their stilt house, Stu said, "Some of those muscle types can get

quirky. Like that girl I was dating who rode the electronic horse in the circus. She liked to—"

"Buddy didn't do this," said Debbie. "It was some of the kids in his coven." She smoothed down her ruined neotex skirt. "It was an initiation thing, sort of."

"You didn't join a coven?"

"No, but—"

"Things are a little tight this month, Deb, since it's my turn on the 3 day shift again," said Stu, pointing at their budget ledger which was open on the arm of his chair. "Those witch groups usually soak you a couple hundred bucks to join. Not to mention having to spring for grimoires, runes, entrails and all."

"What about your Mona? You paid $150 to join that motorized psychodrama club out in the Pasadena Sector."

"Well, Mona needs a little therapy."

"I imagine she does." His pretty wife lifted her chained ankle, shook it. "See if you can get this off, will you, Stu?"

"Mona never tied me up with noryl plastic chains," said Stu. "She never tore my clothes to smithereens. She never did that."

"That's a nearsteel chain, not noryl. And I told you Buddy didn't do it. You really must . . ." She stopped, shook her head. "Wait, we're losing track of something."

"Stop jiggling," suggested Stu. "Did Buddy used to be a sailor? This is some complicated knot."

"Buddy didn't chain me, it was the assistant warlock," explained his wife. "But listen, Stu, we shouldn't be arguing. It's not at all in keeping with the informal charter we worked out last year, is it?"

He glanced up at her. "You're absolutely right, Deb. I'm sorry."

"Ouch, don't twist in that direction," cautioned his wife. "Exactly, Stu. This is 1992 after all and not the dark ages."

"Not the Victorian Era," corrected Stu. "That's the comparison you want. Because the dark ages, actually, were quite liberal in terms of—"

"Whatever era this isn't," said Debbie. "The important thing is we agreed to have a Wide Open Marriage. Meaning we can do what we want, see who we want and —which is the most mature and enlightened part of it— we can discuss it all afterwards. Neither of us has any secrets from the other and yet we lead a rich and varied social and sexual life. It's been working just fine, hasn't it?"

"Certainly, of course." Stu concentrated again on the chain, yanking it off with a sharp tug. "There. Does Buddy want his chain back or can I toss it down the rubbish chute?"

"It isn't . . . Yes, our life together has been really pleasant and tension free since we switched to the Wide Open policy, hasn't it?"

"Yes, certainly." He rose, holding the chain at arm's length as though it were a snake.

"There's no tension, more openness. You're not restless anymore," said Debbie. "Better still, I'm over those really severe bouts of jealous rage I used to have."

"You're absolutely right, Deb. Everything has changed for the better."

"I think I'll go freshen up." His wife walked, still slightly unsteady, toward the ramp leading to the bedroom area. "Oh, by the way, who'd you date tonight?"

"Nobody actually," Stu told her.

"Oh, really? What about that cute little teleport stewardess you were balling?"

"They lost her." Stu returned to the chair where he'd left the work he'd brought home from the office.

"Who lost her?"

"TransAmerica Teleport," said Stu. "Seems she was demonstrating a teleport platform to a group of timid tourists and got sent off someplace accidentaly. TAT isn't

sure where. She never came out the other end, which was supposed to be Chicago."

"Oh, Stu, that's awful. You really were fond of her, too."

"I'm sure she'll materialize someplace eventually," he said. "I think I'll start sleeping with that blonde combat nun I met last month. We'll see."

"So you simply stayed home tonight?"

"As a matter of fact I went over to poor old Aunt Cordelia's for awhile."

His wife gave a small shudder. "I don't know how you can spend so much time with that old woman. I really get unsettled by old age and illness."

"She'd like to see you," said Stu, turning on his electric pencil.

"Keep making my apologies," said Debbie. "You know, it seems like she's been dying for years now."

"Advanced hyperlipidemia is like that."

Debbie said, "Of course I never think of it, but I can't help thinking we'll inherit a pretty penny when she does finally give up and die."

"Deb, we can't think of human beings like that," said Stu. "Although, as a matter of fact, even after central government inheritance tax, Greater Los Angeles death dues, Malibu Sector wake assessments and voluntary defense bond fees for loved ones, we'll still net over $100,000."

"So much? It's too bad the maternal side of your family tree is so tough."

"You can't beat heredity."

"Speaking of spooky things, there's a government Preparation Wagon parked on the beach," said Debbie from the bedroom. "Did someone die around here—no, don't tell me. I'd get unsettled."

"Does it have gold racing stripes?"

"What?"

"The death truck."

"I didn't study the darn thing in detail, since I was too busy crawling across the sand."

Stu stood up. "I bet it's that nitwit Dwight D. Tupolo."

"You mean the Regional Arranger for the US Transition Service?"

"That Dwight D. Tupolo, yes." Stu crossed to the exit ramp. "He keeps wanting to talk to me about advance funeral arrangements for poor old Aunt Cordelia."

"Tell him he should be talking to her and not us. It's spooky having that big black thing parked out there, even if it does have gold stripes."

"He has been talking to her. Until it was decided she was too weak to see outsiders."

"Yes, coming out of a little black speaker on top was playing a tune, too."

"The death truck?"

"Yes, coming out of a littte btack speaker on top was some kind of Hallelujah song, with lots of harps and sopranos."

"I think it always plays that when it's working."

"You mean it's processing . . . No, I don't want to think about it."

"I'll tell him to be off."

"I wouldn't go out, it's after eleven." Debbie reappeared in the bedroom doorway naked. "There might be freelance marauders, third world avengers, adolescent thrill gangs, crazed gadget freaks, illegal Mexicans or what all not out there now."

"I'll take my Suburban Killer pistol."

"Oh, wait. I've got your gun under the pillow in my sleeping pit."

"Why do you have my Suburban Killer under your pillow, Deb?"

"I got scared the other night. You know, the evening

you had to stay over at your aunt's all night while she went through her crisis." Debibe disappeared again, returned with the silver and black blaster pistol.

Taking the weapon, Stu went out into the night to talk to the funeral man.

Nurse Raffles sat up, sniffing.

This caused Stu, who had been dozing partly atop her, to roll over to the edge of the hydrobed.

"Do you smell something funny?" asked the plump blonde nurse.

Stu teetered above the floor five feet below, flapping his left arm to regain his balance. "What do you mean, funny?"

"Some kind of . . . odd smell."

"You don't mean you think Aunt Cordelia is decomposing?"

Marisue Raffles snorted softly. "Am I not a Technical Sergeant 1st Class in the Greater Los Angeles Private Nurse Corps? I ought to know how to keep a fat deceased old broad from putrefying, oughtn't I?"

Stu worked his way back to the center of the high pedestal hydrobed. "Don't talk about poor departed Aunt Cordelia that way, Marisue."

"Now you sound like Dwight D. Tupolo," said the pretty plump nurse. "Anyhow, you're the one who decided to stuff her down in the frozen food locker."

"Well, she was too big for the refrigerator."

Nurse Raffles sniffed again, then snapped her pretty plump fingers. "I know what it is. It's the obfuscation box I attached to her Medimex unit. One of the connections is smoldering."

Stu pushed at her left buttock, urging, "Go fix it, quick. We don't want the whole Greater LA Health Service down on us."

Snorting once again, Marisue said, "Didn't I job the Medimex in the first place, Stu? I know how to fool a

medical patient monitoring unit for pete's sake." She rolled onto her stomach, snaked backwards across the rippled hydrobed and swung her plump legs down to meet the bunk ladder. "I'll patch it up."

Stu waited until she'd touched the floor of Aunt Cordelia's spare bedroom, followed her down. "If they get suspicious at the Health Service it's all up with us, Marisue."

The unclothed nurse jogged along the intricate ramp and into the master bedroom. "No one is going to catch wise," she assured Stu over her smooth freckled shoulder. "Far as they know the old bimbo is still flat on her ass with advanced hyperlipidemia."

The hydrobed in the big domed bedroom was empty. Next to it stood a tank-shaped copper mechanism. An assortment of wires and tubings extended from the tank. Instead of being connected with a patient in the bed they were hooked up to a homemade boxlike gadget which rested on the rippled surface of the bed.

"There, it's smoking." Stu pointed at the metallic box.

"Nothing serious." The plump blonde girl squatted, feeling around the support pillars of the raised bed. "This is where I always leave the screwdriver. Yeah, here we go."

"You think it's too late? Suppose they send out a doctor to investigate?"

"A doctor hasn't made a housecall in Greater Los Angeles in several decades."

"Suppose they're wise back at the Health Service? Maybe this damn Medimex thing here has already tipped them off."

Marisue shook her head, poked at the makeshift box. "There, all better," she told him after about thirty seconds. "Nope, don't worry. Over there at the big patient monitoring center they think the old girl is doing as well as can be expected."

"I hope so," said the naked Stu. "Because if they found out, it would mean the end of our relationship."

"Not really," said Marisue. She dropped the screwdriver, kicked it away with bare plump toes. "You could tell your wife about our affair. You're supposed to be such strong believers in a Wide Open Marriage."

"I've explained to you: I must have some kind of atavistic streak in me. I'm not in tune with the mores and folkways of the waning years of the 20th Century." He stepped closer to her, placed his hands on her shoulders. "To me it's no fun having an affair if I have to tell Debbie about it. No, I've got to keep something secret, got to have one hidden vice which is all my own."

"I understand," said the blonde nurse.

"And if we admitted poor old Aunt Cordelia had passed away six weeks ago, then you'd be assigned to a new patient and I wouldn't be able to meet you here while pretending to Debbie I'm sitting at the bedside of my ailing kin."

"I truly appreciate the sacrifice you're making, Stu. After all, now she's dead you really ought to inherit almost $100,000."

"Over $100,000," corrected Stu. "But money isn't important. Well, not as important as my privacy."

"I know." Marisue pressed against him. "I understand."

"Bing bong!" said a speaker grid up in the ceiling dome.

"Somebody at the door." Stu pulled away.

The plump blonde grabbed him back. "Ignore it."

"Bing bong!"

"No, that might cause suspicion." He extracted himself from her grasp, went running back toward the spare bedroom. "Better get my clothes on."

Nurse Raffles came trotting after him. "I guess I shouldn't have ripped off your garments in a moment of passionate abandon."

"Help me find them now is all."

"Bing bong."

"Here's your all-season unionsuit hanging from the light strip mobile."

"Okay, what about my trousers? Oh, there's the left leg sticking out from under the golden age movie cassette organ. Christ, Marisue, that's *only* the left leg!"

"You didn't criticize me at the time, Stu. Wait now, you've got a spare pair of trousers in the closet."

"Here's my pullover tunic wrapped around the bed pillar. Come on, get those pants."

"Bing bong!"

"Here."

"Okay, okay. Now what about my boots?"

"Your boots. Let me think."

"Bing bong!"

"Think faster."

"I flung them out the window . . . didn't I?"

"Bing bong!"

"Never mind." Stu ran up a ramp, heading for the front door. "Get yourself dressed and go hide in poor old Aunt Cordelia's room." Stu stopped short of the front door, flipped on the two-way view system.

Standing out on the porch was a small grinning man in a one-piece gray mourning suit. "Ah, good afternoon, Mr. Connington."

It was Dwight D. Tupolo of the US Transition Service. Lurking out at the curb was his black preparation vehicle. It had narrow gold stripes running across its bonnet. "Hello, Mr. Tupolo."

The little undertaker's pupils dropped to the bottom of his eye sockets. "Barefooted, are we?"

Wiggling the toes of one foot, Stu replied, "Nurse's orders. Aunt Cordelia must have absolute silence. I might add that your bong bonging on the chimes doesn't help."

"Bing bonging," ammended Tupolo. From behind his back he produced a mechanical dove. "I wanted to show this to your dear aunt. What do you think of it?"

"Very life-like."

"Yes, isn't it?" The US Transition Service man poked one little finger into the dove's breast. "It plays a medley of favorite excerpts from best-loved hymns of all faiths, including *The Old Rugged Cross, When The Saints Go Marching In, Nearer My God To Thee* and *God Bless The Pope.*"

Loud organ music was issuing out of the dove's tiny mouth.

"*When The Saints Go Marching In* isn't my idea of a sacred tune," said Stu.

"Beg pardon?"

"Turn off your goddamn dove."

"Oh." He poked it again. "Now what were you saying?"

"*When The Saints Go Marching In* isn't my idea of a sacred hymn."

"Well, as you must know, Mr. Connington, the United States Transition Service, acting under the authority of the revised Funeraid Bill of 1989, is obliged to provide each and every citizen with an absolutely free funeral," said Tupolo, who was still holding the dove shoulder high. "That means everybody, Mr. Connington, regardless of race, creed, color or musical taste. I can assure you that it's a wonderful source of consolation to the loved and bereaved survivors in these desperate moments to know—"

"You told me all this before, Tupolo," cut in Stu. "On your many previous visits."

"—to know that a friendly courteous Transition Service attendant stands ready with his immaculate and daily sanitized preparation wagon to take all burdens off their already grief-bent shoulders." He gestured at his truck with the dove and the bird began to spout organ music.

"Turn it off."

After punching the bird to silence, Tupolo said, "I also brought your aunt tri-op photos of our latest crypt de-

signs, plus swatches of coffin lining. The new crypts are part of our Famous American—"

"Nobody's dead yet here, Tupolo. Go away."

"Ah, Mr. Connington," said the funeral arranger. "What kind of man do you take me for, some sort of ghoul perhaps? No indeed, I much prefer to deal with the living in my sad profession. As you are aware, your dear long-suffering aunt was quite happy to have me visit her. I feel once we know we are booked for our last great voyage we should start giving some attention to accommodations. Your dear aunt was quite cheered—"

"She's too ill to see anyone, I've told you that."

"Very disheartening," said Tupolo. "Not to be able to see the dear woman these past two months."

"Six weeks it's been."

"Six weeks then." Tupolo lifted up on tiptoe so as to bring his face closer to the porch's monitoring camera. "I tell you frankly, Mr. Connington, when I last saw your Aunt Cordelia, two months—forgive me, six weeks ago —I had the distinct impression she was hovering at the very brink of her last great adventure."

"Well, she's still holding on. She must, though, have peace and quiet. So stop dropping around and stay away from my place in Malibu Sector, too, quit making all kinds of funereal noise."

"Now really, that vehicle of mine is nothing if not discreet." Tupolo nodded in the direction of the black wagon. "It was built to be subdued and efficient while responding to my verbal commands."

"Yeah, okay—"

"For instance," went on the little man, "when the dread moment of blessed release does at last come for your poor sweet aunt, all I need do is turn to my vehicle and say, 'Free at last!' That activates it."

On the street the processing wagon began spouting Hallelujah music out its top. Its rear doors flapped quietly open to allow a black and gold cart to roll out.

"Enough, enough,!" said Stu. "If the old girl hears that thing rattling up here . . ."

"Only a dry run," Tupolo called to his wagon. "Wasn't that beautiful, though, Mr. Connington? So efficient, so sublime."

"I keep telling you, we've no need just yet for your services."

Tupolo smiled a precise smile. "I assure you, Mr. Connington, the US Transition Service never intrudes," he said. "Nor can I afford to make mistakes. You see, since I am usually the first one to view the dear remains after the fearful moment of passage to a hopefully better sphere, it is I who must make absolutely sure the death has been of natural, completely natural, causes and—"

"When the time comes, Tupolo, you can be sure—"

"Of course, of course, Mr. Connington. I'm merely explaining to you the fearsome burden of responsibility which rests on my shoulders." He sent another precise smile into the camera. "Should I notice anything in the least suspicious, any little thing at all, mind you, I am compelled, under the Police At The Funeral Act of 1990, to summon the proper authorities. You see?"

"When the time comes I assure you you'll find—"

"Ah, of course," said little Tupolo. "Such is true in 99 per cent of all my unhappy cases. And when I sense nothing wrong I then have full authority to handle everything. I am free to summon my mechanical aides by crying out, in a rueful voice, 'Free at—'"

"You already told me."

"Let me bid you goodbye then," said Tupolo. "Be careful you don't catch a fatal chill from bounding about without shoes. A word to the wise, you know."

Stu blanked the view screens. "That little twit," he said to himself. "He acts like he *knows* something." He stayed in the foyer of his aunt's house until he heard the black wagon drive away.

Six roaring aircycles came chuffing low over the rain-swept beach. The lead aircycle, piloted by a huge tattooed black man, touched the sand for an instant, spitting grit. The black man tossed Debbie Connington off his handlebars. "See you next week, hon."

The cycles roared off into the twilight, heading out over the gray Pacific.

"Um," said Debbie. She was flat on her back on the synthetic beach which bordered their tract.

"Ah, you're alive."

The little gray-suited Tupolo was bending down over her. "Yes, I'm fine." She sat up, scratching the sand off her knees. "You see, my husband and I have a Wide Open Marriage, meaning anything goes. Today is my gang bang day."

"Ah," said the funeral director. "You are Mrs. Connington, are you not?"

"Yes, I am." She got to her feet, holding on to the little man's elbow.

"My name is Dwight D. Tupolo. Perhaps Mr. Connington has mentioned me."

"You're the fellow who keeps hounding his poor old Aunt Cordelia."

"Poor old Aunt Cordelia indeed," said Tupolo. "It's been seven and a half weeks since I've had an opportunity to see her. Careful now, don't trip on any of those artificial abalone shells. Yes, and today I decided to pursue my suspicions a bit further."

"Suspicions about what?"

"Because of my long years devoted to this dismal occupation I have developed, Mrs. Connington, a very accurate sense of impending death," he told her as they stepped onto the porch approach ramp. "I was certain when I had my last discussion with the sweet old person that she was on her last legs. Your husband, while not allowing me to visit her again since, has maintained she is still extant and thriving."

"Your visits depress her," said Debbie. "Not that I ever see her myself, since illness upsets me, but my husband has told about it." Debbie inserted her thumb and forefinger into the print lock on her front door. "I'm sure that's all it is, Mr. Tupolo."

"Perhaps I should have accepted that explanation," he said as he stepped onto the thermal doormat. "Today, may the good lord forgive me, I decided to approach the dear old lady's home not with the implements of my tear-stained calling, but rather with monitoring equipment borrowed from a long-time friend in the National Security Office."

"Bugs?"

"Just as you say," answered Tupolo. "I learned two quite interesting things. Before I take any official action I thought I'd best discuss the matter with you."

"What did you find out?" Debbie rested one hand against the door jamb.

"Firstly, your poor dear Aunt Cordelia doesn't seem to be anywhere in sight. She's not in her sick bed certainly," said Tupolo. "Secondly, and it pains me dearly to say this, I discovered Mr. Connington, in an advanced state of undress, in bed with Nurse Raffles."

"In Aunt Cordelia's sick bed?"

"No, in the spare bedroom bed."

Debbie's face grew pale. "But we have a Wide Open Marriage."

"Ah, so many people do these days. While I myself am not married I—"

"That son of a bitch! Sneaking off to shack up with that fat nurse and not telling me one word," said Debbie. "I don't know, I guess I'm a throwback to an earlier era. I've got this atavistic streak and I can't stand the thought of his being with that bimbo and not telling me. It makes me violently jealous, damn it." She glared at the little funeral arranger for a moment, then closed the door on him.

While Tupolo was cutting across the artificial sand to his truck he saw Debbie go running toward the landcar port. In her hand she clutched a Suburban Killer blaster pistol.

Nurse Raffles plopped the rubberoid hand on his back once again. "How's that?"

"Yowl" Stu jerked his shoulders until the robot massage hand fell off. "Too hot now."

The pretty plump girl scowled as she retrieved the hand. "I've fixed it twice. And I've got the dial set at body temperature."

"Maybe they have a different body temperature in Sweden."

"This Handi-Swede Massaging Hand was made in China II." The nurse shifted her bare buttocks on the bed edge, waggling the hand. "A massage will help you relax."

"It will," agreed Stu. "Why don't you use your own hands?"

"I paid $49.50 for this knicknack. I ought to be able to fix it so it works."

"Bing bong!"

"The door," said Stu. "Where did you hurl my shirt?"

Marisue was holding the robot hand up toward the light strip mobile above the bed.

"Kaboom!"

Stu leaped from the hydrobed, not bothering with the ladder. "Hey!"

"What's that?"

"The door."

"The door goes *bing bong.*"

"Not when it's blown off its hinges." Stu ran to the open doorway cautiously.

"Okay, you son of a bitch, where are you?"

Nurse Raffles rested the Handi-Swede on one plump knee. "Must be somebody for you."

"It's Debbie."

"I just shot the door down," announced Debbie out in the living room area. "Next comes that fat floozie, then you, you son of a bitch!"

Marisue tumbled down off the bed. "Floozie. I haven't heard that term since—"

"Shut up and hide," ordered Stu. "I'll try to pacify her."

Something sizzled out in the living room. "I just blasted an ugly shepherd and his pipes lamp off the mantel. I'm warming up for you, you son of a bitch!"

Stu eased over the threshold. "Deb," he said.

"Oh, there you are . . . all naked!" Debbie lowered the pistol, began to sob. "Fresh from some sweaty carnal—"

"I only took off my shirt so we could try out this Chinese Swedish thing that—"

"Don't tell me about the weird perversions you've been practicing."

"With only my shirt off? Listen, Deb, I know—"

"You've made a mockery of our whole Wide Open Marriage."

"Well, frankly, I don't much like the whole notion. Particularly that cyborg with the chains."

"You don't? Neither do I, really." Debbie brought up her gun hand to rub at her tearful eyes.

"Don't shoot your ears off with that thing."

Debbie blinked at the Suburban Killer pistol, then set it down on a tin hassock. "Is your poor old Aunt Cordelia really dead?"

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact. I suppose we better let the health people . . ."

"Sure, it will mean about $100,000 for you." Nurse Raffles had put on her uniform and moved carefully into the room. "If you did that I wouldn't feel so guilty."

"Debbie, this is Nurse Raffles. Nurse Raffles, my wife."

"Pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you." The plump blonde drifted over to the hassock to examine the pistol. "Hey, this is one of those new Suburban Killer jobs. I hear they pull slightly to the left." She hefted the gun in her plump palm.

The door to the basement area swung open. A large heavyset old lady seemed to move lopsidedly into the room. "Ah," said a voice behind her. "Look what I found when I took the liberty of breaking into your cellar while you were busy with—"

"Good gravy!" exclaimed Nurse Raffles. "The walking dead!" She swung the Suburban Killer into firing position and squeezed off two shots.

The body of the big old woman toppled over sideways.

Behind her was Tupolo, who'd been carrying her corpse with his little hands under its arms. There was a look of puzzled surprise on his face. "This isn't at all as beautiful as I . . ." He clutched his chest and fell down dead.

"Oy," said Stu.

Nurse Raffles dropped the pistol back on the tin hassock. It went *pong*. "We've cleared up some of our problems, but what'll we do about him?"

Stu turned on one foot, jogged to the front door. Tupolo's processing wagon was out at the curb.

He opened the door, jumped onto the porch. He put his cupped hands up to his mouth. *"Free at last!"*

There is only one certainty in life: that each generation shall one day be called to account for its lifetime . . .

Changing of the Gods

Terry Carr

Wearing a new pair of pants-hose that trimmed his middle without actually getting into any corset squeezes, Sam Luckman slipped into the offices of Harrison, Jones, Wheeler and immediately ducked down the hall to the men's room. He fumbled in his jacket pocket for the key, but his hands were sweaty and he dropped the whole cluster of them; they hit the floor with a crash like a cheap computer sound-effect. "Phooey," Luckman muttered, then pressed his lips grimly together to make sure he wouldn't follow that up with any dirty-word additions. His wife always told him he cursed whenever he wasn't deliberately thinking not to, and he spent big chunks of his time fearfully imagining the obscenities he might utter to little girls and Talmudic old men. Sometimes at night in bed with his wife he had trouble coming.

The corridor was brightly lit but oppressive. The ceiling was low and the carpet was green Monsantoclover, put in by the president of Harrison, Jones, Wheeler in an effort to enable his copywriters to get back to the roots of the American experience. It didn't make Luckman feel

bucolic, however, particularly since he'd read in the *Times* that dogs wouldn't shit on such carpeting. The news had disheartened him; it wasn't that he wanted dog turds up and down the hall, but if even a dog could tell it was fake clover how could he allow himself to be taken in?

He picked up the keys and sorted through them for the right one. This was the executives' washroom and he wasn't yet used to the fact that he was authorized to go into it. He wasn't on the design-making end at Harrison, Jones but he had a top rep on the creative staff, so the key that he was now fitting into the lock of the executives' washroom had been a kind of trophy for him, presented by the president of the company with the solemnity of a Nobel Prize ceremony. Luckman hated it. In the old washroom, the regular men's room in the outer, uncarpeted hall, he stood the chance of being mugged while he peed, but at least out there he was king of the hill, he was somebody. In the executives' washroom he was just a tolerated outsider, one of those neurotic-artist types from the west corridor with sandal strap marks hidden beneath their pants-hose.

He opened the door resentfully and stepped in, and the door swished shut behind him and locked with an audible *thssssppp*, keeping out all the muggers and tough homosexual rapists and all the other non-executives but him. It was 8:55 in the morning and the place was crowded; he should have remembered to come in a little earlier or later. Executives were standing in line for the urinals, each reading the morning print-outs from the *Wall Street Journal* and shuffling forward two steps whenever someone finished and left. Luckman quickly opened his attache case and took out the first set of papers that came to hand; then he chose a line that was neither the longest nor the shortest and took his place on it.

Too late he realized that the man in front of him was

Harrison himself, president of the company. Harrison always felt he had to talk with Luckman in the washroom, because Harrison prided himself on being an American. Luckman was terrified of him; he considered him stupid and ignorant and was constantly in fear that he might tell him so. He tried the only defense he could think of: he lifted the papers from his attache case in front of his face and pretended to be studying them.

"What's that you're reading, Sam, a new story board?" Harrison asked him, seeing right through the sheets of paper with presidential X-ray vision. Luckman winced. The papers were a letter from his brother in Florida, a cataloging of the troubles he was having with his scheme to open a chain of diners in NASA-surplus space capsules, but to Harrison anything one of his writers might read must be a story board.

Letting the letter fall to his side, Luckman smiled weakly and said, "Oh, good morning Mr. Harrison. No, not a story board, just a sort of report. Information, statistics, that sort of thing. I thought I'd read it while I was waiting in line, get a little head start on the day."

"Good thinking, Sam. I remember when I was your age, I used to take my reports and statistics and I'd read them right through the piss itself. You figure how many times a man takes a piss every day, it works out to maybe five, ten minutes of pissing. That's valuable time, Sam; you add that extra ten minutes to your work day and you're nearly three percent up on the fellows around you. I guess you could say I pissed my way to the top of the business, Sam."

Harrison was a florid-faced little man with a bald spot on top of his head. When Luckman had first met him he'd felt obscurely sorry for the man, condemned to go through life with everybody looking down on his bald spot from above, but as Luckman had come to know him he'd lost that sense of empathy. For a little man, Harrison was a bully; he smiled a lot with his strong, white

teeth but to Luckman it only made him look savage. Sometimes Luckman was afraid of Harrison's very shortness, because that brought his teeth closer to the level of Luckman's testicles, and Luckman had anxious fantasies of the balding little president suddenly whirling on him and biting off his balls before Luckman could protect himself.

They moved up two steps as a man left the front of the line. "Sam," said Harrison, "I guess I know why you're putting your nose to the grindstone today, eh?"

"Excuse me?" Luckman asked.

Harrison winked at him. "Christ Pragmatist," he said.

For a timeless moment Luckman had no idea what his little boss was talking about. He could hardly understand the words, and he certainly had no idea what they meant; nor could he in that moment call to mind the day of the week, the date, his own name or why he was standing in line with all these urine-brimming businessmen.

But the moment mercifully faded, the world returned to fill Luckman's blank mind, and he said, "Oh! Yes, yes, Christ Pragmatist." As a matter of fact, the Ancient and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, Pragmatist was Luckman's only reason for having come to the office at all this morning; ordinarily he never worked Tuesdays. But there would be a board meeting about the Christ Pragmatist assignment today and Luckman was making the presentation.

Harrison elbowed him in the ribs in his bullying way of friendship. "Got a hot idea today, Sam? You got your story board smokin'? Maybe a shot at the Elsie?"

"If it's all right with you," Luckman said uncomfortably, "I'd rather save it for the meeting. I get pains when I talk too much on a full bladder." The Elsie was the annual award for the best holo commercials of the year, presented every year at a short-wig banquet in White Plains. Luckman had already won six of them, and

everybody at Harrison, Jones, Wheeler expected him to be able to walk off with another handful of the prestige-laden statuettes whenever he wanted to. The thought of awards had come to fill Luckman with terror and foreboding; he was sure one of his heavy trophies would someday fall from its shelf and bash in his head just enough so that his creative lobe would be forever clotted and sluggish. He had dread-weighted visions of ending his career grinding out storyboards for aluminum siding commercials.

"Okay, we can't have you straining your balls over shop talk," Harrison said, chuckling as he touched the button that popped open his codpiece; he had reached the head of the line for the urinal. "I never push a man before he's taken his morning leak."

The Ancient and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, Pragmatist had been founded in the seventies and had prospered in the eighties, gaining millions of desperate, suspicious followers who had left their former churches during the Defloration. The eighties had ushered in an era of doubt in religion, a time of strikes by Lutheran ministers, embezzlement scandals in the Salvation Army and lurid exposes of the number of Tibetan monks who were psychologically addicted to lysergic acid. The Pope, on direct orders from God, committed suicide and the man chosen to succeed him declined, since he had a good thing going in a chain of pizza stands in Africa. Buddhist priests got a reputation for being fire hazards and a group of New York rabbis were indicted for operating a usurous money-lending syndicate. The Dalai Lama ran for political office in India and was defeated by a Westerner, an aging beatnik who delivered his speeches to hard-edged jazz accompaniments.

Throughout the world, churches and synagogues and temples echoed with the sound of their own emptiness; those who still retained their faith worshipped at home,

distrustful of all religious authority. Wall Street was in a panic and the European Common Market held special meetings. Into this breach leapt the Ancient and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, Pragmatist, which "put all religions into one bag," in its own words. The Christ Pragmatists were devoted to salvaging what credibility was left in religion, and they went about it in a business-like manner, using computer cross-checking to compare dogma and rituals of the various world faiths. A good number of the computer facilities that had once been used for the fad of computer-dating bureaus were used now in this work.

What these computers fashioned from their binary creeds and transcendental punchcards was a religion offering the most appealing aspects of all the faiths that had gone before. Polygamy was accepted; lay priests were encouraged; exotic drugs were reintroduced into the sacraments. All saints, gods, demigods and prophets of previous religions were accepted in the new pantheon. Conscientious objectors were given official-looking affidavits to show their draft boards.

But though the church was making great strides, it needed a major issue to focus attention upon itself, so it decided to take on the problem of overpopulation. The world's masses lived in each other's shadows, breathed each other's exhalations, and already it had become a political issue: party spokesmen debated the most practical, foolproof methods of enforcing family control, and Presidential candidates on speaking tours offered locker-room rhetoric, earthy no-bullshit talk about condoms, rib-elbowing instead of handshaking.

The ambitious new church took the religious and moral lead in this crisis; it retained Harrison, Jones, Wheeler to mount a massive holovision ad campaign to sell the concept of family control. Harrison, Jones, Wheeler was chosen primarily because that was where Sam Luckman worked; he was tops in the field. They

remembered his pornographic Roche Laboratories series that had made contraceptives sound like Spanish fly: if anyone could sell family control, it was Luckman.

Luckman's wife spent so much on rejuve treatments that she looked like his daughter; when he and Cora went out together Luckman was convinced everyone else saw him as a musk-breathed old lecher who kept this young girl in a state of perpetual frustrated virginity, locking her in his home and at night gloating over her unplumbed body, his alone. In actuality Cora was thirty-seven, just a year younger than Luckman, and if she was his alone Luckman had no confidence of that. She flirted with every man she met, flaunting her archaic horizontal bellybutton in a variety of bare-midriff dresses, moving her tongue coquettishly side to side across her front teeth, a favorite mannerism of hers.

"Cora, for God's sake won't you at least draw the line at teenagers?" Luckman pleaded one night returning home from a party. "That kid you were eyeing for the last hour isn't even old enough to vote."

"Oh, we can't have that," she said caustically. "I mean, if he isn't old enough to get in a voting booth I can't very well let him get in me, now can I? I mean, he can't practice on *my* buttons, isn't that right?"

Luckman groaned. "There's such a thing as decency, Cora, there's such a thing as acting right." But he knew he wouldn't win this argument, any more than he'd won any others from her; she'd turn his words, evade them, pretend he wasn't talking to her. Being married to her was like living with his desk secretary: she only heard him when his words moved her rigidly defined inner mechanisms.

Luckman positioned his helicar over their garage and lowered it carefully. He'd bought this car without thinking to measure the garage, with the result that he had just six inches fore and aft clearance to set it down in.

Some nights when he came home tipsy he landed in the driveway and left it uncovered for the night, sure that it would be stripped before dawn by whale-smelling Eskimo gangs.

"The kid was young enough to be your son," he said, and immediately knew he shouldn't have. Their boy Sergei was only thirteen, but he was big for his age and good looking; Cora doted on him. She'd given him the effete foreign name, but Sergei blamed Luckman and lately had taken to cursing his father contemptuously for it. Luckman, spilling fat between the buttons of his shirts, could see the boy was itching for a fight, but he wasn't about to give his own son an excuse to pound him at will.

Cora smiled sweetly at Luckman as they stepped from the car to the pedwalk: "Maybe I should keep it in the family, Sam. I mean, there's always Sergei, as long as I'm working his age-bracket. Why should I have to go outside the home, eh Sam?"

"That's not funny," Luckman said, but he figured she hadn't meant it to be.

When they entered the house they smelled the muggles immediately. Luckman followed the scent into the bathroom, and found Sergei lazing back in the bathtub, eyes closed, roach stubbed out in the soap dish.

"Darn it, you said you were going to study tonight," Luckman said, picking up the roach and dropping it into the wall stash. "How many pages did you read?"

"I don't know," Sergei muttered. "Two hundred. Five thousand. Don't bring me down."

"You're going to wreck your wind," Luckman told him. "Or maybe you're trying to stunt your growth, is that it? What's your mother going to say when you graduate from multiversity only four feet tall?" Sergei gave him a pained look: he was already nearing six feet and taller than his father.

"She thinks I'm terrific no matter what I do," Sergei

said, closing his eyes again. "Did you know she doesn't wear pasties around the house when you're not here?"

"Don't kid me," Luckman said, certain the boy was telling the truth. "I don't want to hear smut about your mother." Panic flared in his heart: he could see Cora parading around the house with everything showing above the waist. She probably stood in front of the open freezer for ten minutes before Sergei came home from school.

"What's this?" came Cora's voice behind him. "Smut about me? Tell me quick!" His cosmetically refurbished wife slid through the door beside him with a breathless look formed on her face.

"I told him you don't wear pasties around the house in the daytime," Sergei said.

Cora chittered out a girlish laugh and winked at the boy. "Oh is *that* all. As long as you didn't tell him the *hot* stuff." Her eyelashes were cut youthfully short, in the style that had taken over in the high schools. She hardly looked a day older than Sergei, Luckman had to admit.

"No sexy stuff in the bathroom," he said. "I've got enough on my mind without you getting sexy in the bathroom with your own son." Luckman turned to leave the room, but his wife stood in the way, eyeing Sergei speculatively.

"You know, he really does have a good body," she said. "Look at him, just look."

Luckman glanced at the boy, a slim, muscled body topped by a handsome leonine head. He thought, why did I give him such good genes? Why couldn't I have kept them for myself? Then he noticed that Sergei had an erection; it bobbed in the bathwater, a pink island surfacing in the detergent-clouded water.

"Sam! Look at that!"

"You've got smut on the brain," Luckman growled at the boy. "You sit there right in front of your mother with that sticking up and you're too stoned to have any

shame." But he couldn't help noticing that the boy's whang was larger than his own.

Sergei just grinned at him. Luckman grabbed his youth-injected wife, brimful of estrogen, and pushed her ahead of him out the door. "Anyway," he said, "the AMA has a report out that smoking that stuff can give you cancer."

"I'll worry about that when I'm your age," Sergei said, looking at his pink island. "I'll bet you're under water half the time already."

The meeting was held at 10:00 in the morning; in addition to the regular assemblage of administratively hardened vice presidents and fiscal minded board members there were two representatives from the Ancient and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, Pragmatist. Wearing solemn black body-hose with white collars, they sat calmly yet alertly as the conference table rose from its floor niche, extruding pens and notepaper.

"I guess we all know why we're here," said the diminutive, piranha-like Harrison in his role as president of Harrison, Jones, Wheeler. "So let's just put Sam on camera and see if he stands up in three-dee." Harrison always felt he had to talk like someone out of a Mad Ave ethnic joke.

Grunting because his codpiece was suddenly chafing, Luckman stood and went to the miniature holo projector at the back of the conference table. The projector was one of those ingenious little Argentine jobs, full of crypto-Germanic cunning but gaucho-tough for all that; Luckman was always unnerved by it, as though the machine could tell he was a Hebe and was likely at any moment to seize his shirtsleeve and draw him into some gaping maw hidden with mirrors inside it, to emerge in a matter of seconds as a detergent tablet or a plastic log.

Standing carefully back from the projector, Luckman

said, "Gentlemen, you've given me a most serious assignment, and I want you to know that I've approached it with the respect it deserves. I firmly believe that family control is the single most imperative issue facing the world today. If the idea isn't sold to people before the end of this decade, we're going to find ourselves up to our fannies in children."

Someone cleared his throat in the dimness; Luckman, shifting from foot to foot in an effort to dislodge his bruised right testicle from the pressure of his codpiece, had a vision of being smothered under the swarming bodies of a myriad contemptuous children: little girls jabbing him with sharp girlish knees, runny-nosed boys of five and six giggling at him, babies sweating and pulling in his ear, teenaged boys pointing at his diminutive penis . . . He hurried on talking:

"The question is, how do we sell the idea of *not* having kids? Kids are part of American life—what would Christmas be like without them, for instance? Not to mention Mother's Day. How many holo shows use kids as symbols of happy homes? Look at the appeals we make to maternal instincts, paternal responsibility . . . endless shots of kids romping in the daisies, splashing at the seashore. We may think we're selling suntan pills or air insurance, but what we're really selling is kids.

"We've got to stop that. We have to *un*sell the joys of having children, and once we've done that the population will level off."

A voice spoke from the darkness; Luckman couldn't see who it was, but he assumed it to be one of the Christ Pragmatist men. The voice was cool and smooth, like a bank vault: "How do you suggest we go about this . . . this unsales campaign?" There was a flutter of chuckling at the table, the sort that businessmen do for the people who are paying.

"I've worked a bit with the computer to mock up some simulations," Luckman said. "These will be rough, since

they're all standard images from the memory bank, but I hope you'll be able to get the idea." He touched the button of the little pampas-fascist projector and above the conference table formed the image of a white-haired grandmother; she was walking down a dark city street, one of those alleyways where there's always garbage that moves. Suddenly, materializing in the three-dimensional foreground of the holo like someone who'd just teleported there, a boy of ten or twelve ran after the old lady, snatched her bag and knocked her sprawling amid cans and boxes. The boy paused as he saw her go down, but the assembled execs and churchmen could clearly see his face spread into a grin, and then he ran off into the dark.

"We'll have him laughing on the soundtrack," said Luckman. "This is all still very rough."

The next scene showed a howling mob of kids, from five to ten years old, waving signs of the Youth Liberation movement. IT'S OUR FUTURE was one; others said KIDS ARE AS GOOD AS ANYBODY and CHILDHOOD IS SLAVERY and GROWNUPS ARE SCARED OF US. The boys and girls swarmed around a terrified adult like voodoo-directed army ants, and bore him to the ground. Signs rose and fell; the man's legs kicked spasmodically out of the heap. Afterward the children dispersed, leaving a red pool whose image had originally been part of the six o'clock Afghanistan war news.

"The kids will be shouting slogans and obscenities," Luckman said, cueing the next scene. "It'll be socko, don't worry."

The new image was of a young mother nursing her baby; it was shot in soft-focus by a camera circling slowly around the maternal scene. Once around and the camera began to move in, still slowly, and as it did the image became clearer: the lovely young mother's sky-blue eyes, her face scrubbed and smooth as a petal as she gazed adoringly at her baby. But the infant's face was twisted in malevolence even as it nursed, and as the holocamera

came to sharp-focus in a closeup the men at the conference table could see that the babe had sunk sharp vampire-teeth into the mother's nipple; a thin trickle of blood drooled from the corner of the babe's mouth.

Luckman left that image in the air for nearly half a minute, and listened to tomblike silence in the room; execs and churchmen alike had forgotten to breathe. At last he switched off the holo projector and turned on the room lights in the same instant with a flamboyance that came to him when he knew his work had done what he wanted from it. His codpiece had even stopped hurting him. "We may use that image as a sort of running theme," he said to the stunned and eye-rubbing decision-makers. "We can repeat it at the end of every one of the commercials, as a sort of coda. We'll sink that image into the subconscious of every potential mother in the country."

There was silence at the conference table when he stopped speaking, and finally one of the churchmen, a tall gray man who wore his hair and beard in the conservative Jesus fashion, cleared his throat and said, "I don't see that this expresses a religious concern for the future of our nation."

Luckman waved his hand dismissively. "We're going to work that in, don't worry. The other repeated image is going to be a handsome mature priest of Christ Pragmatist blessing a tray of contraceptive pills. We'll be pushing the idea of contraceptives as sacraments."

The churchman looked a bit doubtful. "I don't suppose that's *contrary* to dogma . . ." he began.

"It follows everything you're trying to sell," Luckman told him firmly. "It's part and parcel of your message. If it isn't part of your dogma yet, you'd better get it in there quick."

After the meeting Luckman went to his office and shut the door. He sat in his swivel waterchair and closed his

eyes, letting a sense of peace descend on him. Visions of the madonna and vampire baby drifted in his imagination. He wondered if he ought to work out a visual presentation of the idea that pregnant women were harboring cancers in their bodies instead of babies.

His desk secretary buzzed and said, "Mr. Harrison to see you, sir." Luckman sat up in the waterchair and punched the button to his office door, which swung open on silent air hinges.

The hearty little president of the company came in wiping his bald top. "That was some presentation, Sam," he said. "But I think they'll go along with you. I'll tell you the truth, I think they agree with you, secretly. They may be priests or something but they've got to recognize the truth about the world when they see it. I'll level with you, Sam, I fought my way up in this business all my life for the sake of my seven kids and now it's going sour. I never had a pee in twenty-five years here when I wasn't working during it, that's how dedicated to them I was. And now what do I get? I set up trust funds years ago that automatically deed my stock to them as they turn eighteen, and you know what's happening? They're trying to ease me out of the company. They're voting their stock against me at the shareholders' meetings. Jesus, when my youngest kid inherits his I'll be the ex-president of Harrison, Jones, Wheeler, did you know that? You're right about kids, Sam, they're vicious little sharks. They're ungrateful, all they do is criticize, they'd just as soon crap in your ear as say thank you for anything. Jesus, they're worse than women. Well, Sam, I just wanted you to know I like your work; keep it up." With that Harrison waved a cheery goodbye and left Luckman's office. Luckman hadn't said a word.

Religion had never been a big issue in Luckman's life. His family hadn't been able to decide whether to change their name to Luce or join the Unitarian Church, and

they'd ended up doing neither. Luckman had been bar mitzvahed but he'd used dormiphones to learn the responses. On his college debating team he always chose to defend religious issues rather than secular ones because he preferred the greater challenge.

In actual fact Luckman had no opinion about God. Luckman had found no way of getting certified data on God so he'd ignored the issue as much as possible. Sometimes at night he dreamed that he was on a debating platform with a flaming bush, but these debates were always inconclusive, devolving into arguments about enzymes and pulsars. Luckman occasionally saw a face in the fiery shrub, and he would stop the debate to ask, "Uncle Saul, is that you? Rabbi Agberg? Poppa?" But the face would fade and merge with the flames, and Luckman would wake up in a cold sweat.

When he was in college he had one of those mystic experiences that were so fashionable in the seventies. A friend, a roommate who wore his hair cropped Navajo fashion and who liked to rhapsodize about the beauty of scorpions, took him on a backpacking trip to the Great Salt Flats, where they walked due west for three days and took peyote. His friend had brought twenty-five of the little alkaloid buttons, which looked remarkably like a collection of mummified fragments Luckman had once seen in a small museum connected to a skating rink. The two of them sat crosslegged in the whitened dust and took turns grinding the peyote. When they ate the dark powder, washing it down with organic papaya juice, Luckman was unable to believe how vile it tasted but his friend just smiled and spoke of investments of energy in a way that made him sound like a Freudian analyst justifying the size of his bill.

Luckman had been sick for two hours, heaving and crawling in the desert, beaten down, wretched and not really minding all that much. He came to see that the universe was a matter of intake and output, expansion

and contraction, and that these were the same thing, so that the question of which happened first, the Big Bang or the coalescence, was meaningless. For the rest of his life Luckman was unable to think of religion without feeling nauseated, and sometimes when he had drunk too much he would lie on the floor in the bathroom with puke on his chin, feeling oddly at peace with the world.

The door to his house was stuck when he got home; though he palmed the coded panel for a full minute it refused to open for him. "Rats," he muttered through tight lips, and fumbled in his briefcase for his manual key. The key worked, and when he examined the palmlock he found it had been turned off.

Immediately suspicious, he had visions of Cora grinning conspiratorially at the teenager from last night's party as, bare-nippled, she unkeyed Luckman's palmcode. Then they'd be off to the bedroom, trailing what clothes they had left onto the floor as they went, Cora completely forgetting that he had once been so sentimental about this house, their first house together, that he had kept the manual key given to them by the housing agent as part of some old owner's ritual. Luckman tiptoed cat-silently down the hall toward the bedroom, feeling like a sex-paranoid fool and knowing that Cora would come upon him at any moment from the kitchen, surrounded by smells of gravy and innocence, and that she'd never let him forget his comical suspicions.

But no gravy-scented Cora met him in the hall, and when he came to their bedroom he found the door closed. Anxiously quieting his breathing, he put his ear to the door and heard voices. At first he thought he was imagining them, like an intense flash-fantasy, but when the surge of adrenalin had passed, the voices were still there:

". . . big and strong, oh I love that, I lo-o-o . . . lo-o-o . . . I lo-o-o . . ." And rustlings of sheets, mattress gurgling, gasps and moans. The gurgles were entirely too

rhythmic to allow Luckman to pretend for an instant that they were doing anything other than what they were doing, for instance those sounds wouldn't be made by two people doing a quick holojig puzzle. They were the sounds of watery shtupping and cuckolding. ". . . turn over, I want to . . ." Luckman couldn't stand it; he staggered back from the door and, in a daze, went to the kitchen and began to make himself a cheese sandwich.

He couldn't understand why he was doing this. There was Cora in the bedroom screwing some kid who probably thought she was his own age, an empty-headed life-groupie who took her input between the legs, and here he was, Sam Luckman, standing by the refrigerator making a gorgonzola sandwich. He'd always imagined that if this ever happened to him he would go to the coat closet for his unregistered laser, which he ordinarily used only for carving Thanksgiving turkeys, and he'd burst into the room saying "Okay, now I'm going to do a little whittling." What was he to do with this sandwich he was making? Should he go in and offer them a bite, taking care not to interrupt at too crucial a point in the proceedings?

Well, why not? The laser fantasy wouldn't go anyway; he'd played it so often in his head that he'd feel like a holo-construct if he tried to act it out. Why not do the unexpected thing, why not offer the kid a little extra hospitality? Maybe Cora would be impressed by his command of the situation, would fall loving and repentant at his feet, and *then* he could think about the laser.

But when he went to the bedroom again, sliding soundlessly on the hall carpet as though he were equipped with air-hover jets, the sounds of lovemaking had gone and he heard laughter instead. "Do you know what Sam likes to do?" Cora was saying, between bursts of the giggles. "He has a thing about my ears, he likes to screw me behind the ear, really, he does, can you believe

—" and she broke out into coarse uproarious laughter that had the sound of sex-sweating to it, and the mattress gurgled as the two of them rolled back and forth, no doubt still joined at the crotch.

"You ought to ask him to pierce your ears while he's at it," said the kid, and Cora said, "But he might not reach all the way through!" Luckman heard them with numbed senses, almost unable to believe that his sharpest late-night dreads were coming true right on the other side of the door before the sun was even down, his wife in bed with some whippetlike boy and making fun of their most intimate moments as husband and wife. He reached convulsively for the door, but stopped when he realized he didn't know what to say to them. He couldn't just burst in there and trust to luck that he'd come out spontaneously with exactly the right line to erase their laughter, he had to know in advance that he had the perfect verbal slicer. But as he paused, trying to think with his heart pounding in his forehead, came another explosion of raucous laughter and Luckman knew he didn't dare wait any longer or the whole thing would get out of hand.

He kicked the door open and moved in like Bogart in full holo, his gorgonzola sandwich outthrust before him. "I've heard about enough of this, now let's get down to some facts," he said, but then he saw who it was who was in bed with his wife and his stomach froze. It wasn't just some teenager, it was his son Sergei, with his long pink incetuous dork lying spent and only half-erect, the tattoos on his balls glistening with sweat.

Cora cried, "*Jesus*, Sam! You could *knock*, for Christ's sake, you could have some *consideration!*" and she bounded out of bed to put on her pants, but Sergei, after a moment's startlement, only grinned and lay back in the bed and met his father's eyes with hate-filled daring.

"All right," Luckman said with a note of finality, "all right, I see how it is here." He felt suddenly cold and dis-

passionate, understanding the whole thing, seeing it clearly and in depth like some being on a superior plane of existence or maybe just a holo director but certainly somebody who had a grasp of what was what when it showed up right in front of him. "Okay, but you can't figure I'm going to put up with this kind of thing," and he turned and went right back down the hall, out the front door and took the aircar back to town, where he checked in at Harrison, Jones, Wheeler and settled down for a determined stay on the couch in his office.

The thing that bothered him most was that Cora didn't even call him. He could maybe understand her crazy worship of youth, her pathetic pretense to be younger than she was even if it meant bouncing in the watery hay with her own son, he could see how a woman could be driven to that stuff in this modern day when you never saw an actor or actress on the holo who was a day over twenty at the outside. He could figure her being driven to extremes, and he could see how Sergei might get a twisted, pus-rotten kick out of shtupping his mother, sticking as much of himself back into the womb as he could and at the same time taking a little shot at his father; Luckman had always understood things like that deep inside without thinking about it so it was no great wrench of his inner philosophies to come to grips with the situation when it played itself out. What he couldn't grab very well was the fact that when he'd caught them right at it, pants off and legs open, and when he'd stormed out of the house and not come back, there suddenly wasn't a word from Cora, not a contrite phonecall or a pleading message left with his desk secretary. That just didn't make sense to him.

He didn't tell anyone at Harrison, Jones, Wheeler that he was on his own because his sullen-faced son was snaking it to his crazy wife; he just spent his days working on the Christ Pragmatist business, mocking up the

holo simulations and assigning directors, working with technicians, approving actors. He kept as busy as he'd ever been during the day, and he stayed out of the executives' washroom because he figured Harrison or one of the others might take the open-fly occasion to grill him about why his clothes were getting more rumpled every day, as though a man had to make excuses for devoting himself wholeheartedly to his job. He forgot about the home situation and concentrated on what he was doing with the campaign, didn't think of his wife's open crotch getting injections of youth-sperm from that vapid skinny son of hers, forgot completely the gurgles and moans he'd heard through his bedroom door and the colorful glistening of the kid's balls and even forgot the gloating look he'd seen on Sergei's face as he'd lain there with teen-come dewing from the tip of his putz. Luckman put all his energy into the campaign, and by the time the commercials were aired he got to the point where he could even call the whole bedroom scene to mind without getting the faintest tremor of a hard-on.

There was this woman, this girl really, not a day over seventeen with the wide-eyed vacuity that passes for youth and freshness, and she was smiling softly as the hospital bed rolled her down the clean white hall. The headboard, lined with colorful buttons and dials, flashed alternately blue and pink on its message board: MATERNITY. Passing doctors and nurses smiled at the girl. The bed rolled on and entered its assigned delivery room.

It was fifth in line, but the line moved quickly and before long the girl had her turn under the lights and in the care of live doctors and nurses. They were all white, Anglo-Saxons with wisps of blond hair showing under the edges of their caps; none of those smelly social-climbing P.R.s or Samoans that you got most of the time. Clean fingernails even under the rubber gloves, you

could just bet. The doctor in charge looked at the bed's headboard dials, nodded and punched a button and the bed began undulating. The girl smiled, relaxed, then gave a little gasp and opened her eyes wide in wonder. Another little gasp and the doctor smiled, and she smiled back at him bravely, trustingly, then there was the business with the legs up and out, and the bed continuing to move, pneumatic belts stretching across her body flexing and relaxing rhythmically, and very soon the baby's head was emerging from her body.

It was ugly and misshapen, purple, bloody, malevolent. It had tiny razor-sharp teeth with which it was ripping and tearing its way out of the girl's body—blood streamed into the bedclothes, and the little head slashed from side to side, growling. The girl screamed once, but then you could see one of those bed-tubes pump something into her arm and she quieted down right away, only moaning a little. The doctor waited for the baby to claw and squirm its way out till head and shoulders were free of the bloody maw before he reached down and carefully, avoiding the sharp teeth, slid it the rest of the way to freedom and life. The baby kicked and ripped as it emerged, leaving tatters of flesh behind and splashing big red drops of blood all over the bedclothes. The girl was still now, probably fainted or maybe the injection had put her out; but there she was, the sleeping mother, newly delivered of her baby, and you could see right away the sunken shadows of her face and the haunted look that even now lingered about her eyes. She'd learned, in that moment before the bed had zapped the injection into her, and you could tell she'd never be whole again.

And there was the pleasant-faced young doctor, holding up that monstrous snarling baby, blood streaming from its mouth and a sharp little erection showing there between its legs, and the announcer's voice came on asking, "Don't *you* want to be a mother too? This has been a

meditation scene for Americans, presented by the Ancient and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, Pragmatist."

There was this typical city street, littered with overturned garbage cans and wine bottles in the gutters, trash and dirt and dog turds all around. Silent, empty, and then a loud school bell sounded and out the gate of the Forest Hills Elementary School poured a bunch of screaming punks with rivulets of snot and open wounds on their faces and clothes that looked like seaweed. They pushed and poked each other and a couple of them got into a scuffle for a minute, but finally everybody seemed to settle down, sitting on the sidewalk and opening lunch bags.

On the soundtrack you heard: "Cunt, baby, you know it," and "Don't take no shit from no pea-pricks," and "Ram it up his ass and twist it," and more. Several of the kids were shooting up, a couple of others were screwing right there on the street, their heads half buried in garbage, and right next to them an Eskimo girl squatted to shit. And more and more kids poured from the school gate, jeering and shouting, till the noise was so great you couldn't pick out any one voice.

Finally an adult came out the gate, apparently a teacher; he was a greying man who wore rimless glasses and walked a little feebly, slowly, as though he was troubled with arthritis. You could see him saying something to the punk kids there, his mouth open and one finger raised admonishingly, but you couldn't hear what he said for the din around him. A bunch of the kids laughed at him, and one girl ran up to him and flashed at him, lifting her dress to the waist and doing a dirty little dance. Then one of the boys poked another in the ribs, grinning, and the two of them jumped up and threw the remains of their lunches in his face, and moved right in from there to attack him: one of them tackled him and bore him to the ground and the other little punk cackled and leaned

over to spit deliberately in the teacher's eye. The drool ran down the man's face but that wasn't important anymore because the boys began to stomp him, kicking him in the ribs and the head and the balls, and suddenly all the kids around decided this must be a good game so they jumped the teacher too, and then there just wasn't anything to be seen except a swarm of kids like locusts jumping up and down and screaming and fists rising and falling, and once or twice you'd hear the sickening smack of fist against face, or a cry of pain from the man. Suddenly there was a surging among the kids and a cheap knife flashed and somebody yelled, "Get back, get back, gimme room!" and the man screamed hoarsely and long, and finally out of the crowd of filthy grinning kids came this one ferret-eyed punk holding up something red and dripping like a trophy and you could see it was a severed prick, they'd castrated the poor bastard of a teacher, and the kid held it high and led the rest of them off like some hideous Pied Piper, leaving behind just this crumpled body, blood running from it to the gutter and the man's face swollen, dark and weakly crying.

And: "Aren't kids cute?" said the announcer. "Do you suppose what we need today is more children? A meditation scene for Americans, presented by the Ancient and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, Pragmatist."

A young girl, maybe twelve, maybe fourteen years old, with blonde hair and a round child's face, swayed into what looked to be the family bathroom: pretty curtains on the window, clean plastiles and a man's shaving gear at the sink. The girl didn't shut the door behind her, just left it standing open as she slipped off the transparent chemise she'd been wearing and let it drop. She stretched, and her youthful high breasts were silhouetted against the window, her dimpled buttocks highlighted momentarily as she turned on tiptoe. But then she looked

toward the door and acted surprised; her mouth formed a pouty "Oh!" and she reached to slide the door shut.

But a man's hand held the door back, and he stepped into the bathroom slowly, a little hesitantly. The girl met his eyes, smiled, and stepped forward to cuddle against him, at first very like a little girl hugging her daddy but very quickly changing all that, as her hands fumbled at the man's codpiece and her body arched against his. Neither of them said anything, but you could hear the man's heavy breathing.

He tried to shut the door, but the girl just giggled and pulled him down onto the bath mat and you could see his pants-hose being pulled off and tossed to one side, and the backs of the man's legs there on the plastile floor between the girl's smooth pink legs, her toenails painted silver, and there was some moving and some gasping, familiar sounds, until suddenly the girl's legs disappeared, pulled away, and she let out a long dirty laugh that you wouldn't have thought she could produce. Then the man's voice, indistinct, pleading, and more laughter from the girl, and a thumping as though she were hitting him or shoving him, till finally she slid the door open and pushed him out and threw his pants-hose after him, and there he was, standing ashamed in the hall with a wilting hard-on, and his daughter breaking into peals of laughter as she watched him slink away.

And the announcer's voice: "There's nothing like family life to make a man of you, is there? Another meditation scene for Americans, presented by the Ancient and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, Pragmatist."

After that third one Harrison burst panting into Luckman's office, pounding the OFF button of the nerve-shot adman's desk secretary to shut up its officious protests at his intrusion, and shouting at Luckman, "Are you crazy? Are you crazy? What's the matter with you? I ask you to

do me a nice religious series, wholesome stuff in the public interest, and what do I get? Smut, filth and violence, that's what I get. Bloody dorks right on camera, Christ you're supposed to be an artist, couldn't you just suggest that without putting it right up there for everybody in the country to see? And there were kids screwing right out in the open in that one, too; you think you're doing spots for the educational networks? I won't even tell you what I think of that thing with the guy shtupping his own daughter. That's filth, Luckman, and worse than that, it's *bush!* Strictly Anchorage local. You got a daughter? Nah, you don't; if you did you'd know that fathers don't screw their own daughters. I got three daughters, Luckman; you think I ever snuck into one of them? Hell no. Nice little asses, too, don't think they aren't, but I never did nothing and you know why? Because I'm their *father* for Chrissake; they could have babies with gills or something. And I'll tell you, my wife wasn't too overjoyed with that thing about childbirth, either. You can imagine."

Luckman sat through all of this numbly, the creative intensity of the past few weeks having drained him of all emotion. He hardly knew what his bald-topped little boss was talking about; as far as he was concerned those scenes he'd shot were as true to life as they came. He wondered momentarily what the odds would be on his making Harrison see that the ads were in the reputable long line of ashcan art, gritty realism, stark depictions of reality without everything prettied up. He could say, "Look, a real artist can't get into how his public will react," but he figured Harrison might argue about that too. He could point to his awards, but he had little confidence in their convincing power, since he wasn't impressed with how much they said himself. He decided to hear the little man out in hopes that eventually they could reach a meeting of minds.

But Harrison said, "I'll tell you what I'm doing, Luck-

man, I've already ordered those ads off the air from this moment on, and I've had the tapes locked up in the vault as evidence, and my lawyers are drawing up a suit against you right this minute. I don't know how you're going to pay the damages, Luckman, especially since I'm firing you as of this instant, but I don't care either. You get your stuff out of this office by tonight, and turn in your key to the executives' washroom too. Right now, Luckman; hand it over." Red-faced and sweating, Harrison held out his hand, and Luckman, after staring uncomprehending for a few seconds, slowly drew out his key-chain and extracted the one to the top-level urinal banks.

"I want you out of here tonight," Harrison said as he strode with big steps to the door. "I won't have a filth-merchant one more day in my office."

After he'd gone Luckman sat for a long time at his desk, thinking vaguely that he ought to get mad or break something or at the very least throw some good swearing after the narrow-minded old company president, but he was too exhausted to manage anything more than a querulous "Peepee-doodoo."

Luckman hung around the office all afternoon, slowly wandering the Monsantoclover halls, pointedly ignored by writers, technicians and receptionists alike. He tried to make it through the day without having to pee, reluctant to wind up his stay with the company by taking a leak in the common bathrooms, but toward four o'clock his bladder let him know that it had gone the distance for him so he made his shamefaced way to the outer hall lavatory, where as he fumbled with his codpiece he was attacked by a gang of young thugs from the mailroom.

Shouting "Filthy old fart" and "Establishment propagandist" they began to pummel him with heavy package-carrying fists, jabbing and kicking and pounding him like a bunch of Roman mailmen beating up Julius

Caesar. "That's an unfair picture of kids today," said one of them as he kneed Luckman in the uncodded groin, and Luckman, groaning as he fell, gasped, "It was art, you can't beat up a man just because you don't go for ashcan art," but this didn't stop them and he took a lot of pavement-worn shoeleather in the face. He felt his nose break like a firecracker going off, and the hard white tiles of the lavatory floor tilted off toward infinity. He fell into a silent void, but the mailroom louts managed to find him for several more shots in the ribs as he went.

At the hospital, near death in an oxygen bed, Luckman vaguely heard his aging nurse tell him, as she roughly rolled him over in order to make his bed, that the older members of the staff had pulled strings to get him into a maximum-security ward where the young interns could be kept away from him. There was a guard at the door, she told him, who was guaranteed no younger than sixty, and his doctor was just two weeks away from enforced retirement, so he could count on all the protection the hospital could dish up.

"Confidentially," she said, "I'd like to know where you got those shots in the delivery room. Was that a Caesarean?" "Ashcan art," Luckman managed to say between puffed and bandaged lips. His liver-spotted old nurse squared off a corner of the sheet and said, "Listen, do you think I could make it as a character actress if you got me a break? I'd like to get out of nursing, too many people die on me."

But Luckman went into a coma and couldn't continue the conversation. When he came out of it, a dark time later, his wife Cora was at his bedside, her hair dyed in red, white and blue streaks and tiny gold stars on her teeth; she said, "Don't get your hopes up, Sam, I just came by to let you know I'm divorcing you on grounds of insanity. I figured it was the least I could do to tell

you myself, I mean in honor of all we used to mean to each other."

His son was there too, wearing a see-thru codpiece with at least two dozen notches marked down the side. "I'm changing my name," he muttered. "No more of that Sergei crap. I'm changing my last name too, so people won't think I'm related to you."

"We came to pay our last respects," Cora said. "The doctors say you've about had it. You don't mind my telling you that, do you?" Luckman tried to protest that he'd be up and around in a couple of days, with plenty of years left in him for trail-blazing aluminum siding commercials, but his face seemed to be tied down.

"Shall I have you cremated?" Cora asked. "A real funeral would be a financial burden on me as your widow, you know. Anyway you don't look too handsome right now, with those tubes in you and all. You were a real looker when you were young, remember? Before you got fat and your putz shrank."

"I'm bored here," said Sergei, and he started fooling around with his mother's tightened little rump. Cora got to breathing hard so the kid tossed her skirt up and muscled Luckman to one side of the bed so he could climb onto Cora right there. Cora giggled and thoughtfully held Luckman's hand as she spread her legs, then the sullen wiry kid was pumping into her like a jackhammer and Luckman, horrified, whispered, "In and out, in and out, it's all God, isn't it." But Sergei said, "*I'm* God. I'm the Son." Luckman wondered at what point he'd passed into a delirium. He sank back into the bedding as darkness closed in, receded, surrounded him again. At last he fell into dark flames, murmuring, "Oh, shit."

Interpose

George Zebrowski

> "If Christ has not been raised,
> then our preaching is in vain
> and your faith is in vain."
> —Corinthians 15:14

His unwashed clothes were pasted to his lean body with warm sweat. As he moved slowly down the litter-strewn street, he thought of fresh blood running on green wood, refusing to mingle with the last droplets of sap. The noonday sun heated the layer of dust on the sidewalk. A gust of hot wind whirled it into his face. He tried to shield himself with his right hand, but the grit penetrated into his eyes, making them water.

He staggered to the open doorway of a deserted building and sat down on the doorsill. It was cooler here and he was grateful no one had found it before him.

As his eyes cleared, he sat looking at the limbo of the street. A stream of dirty water was flowing in the gutter. A roach ran across the sidewalk in front of him, and a gust of wind swept the insect into the current which carried it away toward the drain on the corner.

The spear entered his side, but only enough to jar him from his shock sleep, enough for him to feel that he was

too high on the cross for it to reach his heart. The pain penetrated layers of memory, bridging more than these last twenty years of pavement, to a time before they had marooned him here, and sometimes dimly to a time still earlier. *His eyes were heavy with blood and sweat; his face was benumbed. The wood groaned with his hanging weight. It was green and pliant and the nails were loose in the pulp. The ropes around his arm muscles had shrunk and were biting into his bones.*

The land was dark except for the thin ribbon of dawn on the horizon. Someone was struggling with a ladder on the ground. Soon hands were removing the nails from his hands and cutting the ropes from his arms. He felt himself lowered roughly and wrapped in a cold cloth.

Voices. They were not speaking Aramaic, but he understood them. He heard their thoughts and the words which followed took on meaning. "It couldn't be him, look at his face, not with that face, look at his face."

Another voice echoed, "that face, that face, faceface."

"So many hangermen strung up at this time, impossible to tell for sure, for sure."

"For sure impossible."

"Anyway he was a man like this one. We'll have fun, fun with him as well, just as well."

A third voice shouting, "Hurry, hurry, the machine is swallowing power parked in time," giving him more pain behind his eyes. A laugh, a giggle. "Lots of power, gulping and waiting for us—where do we take him after we fix him?"

"Shut up!" A voice with depth, commanding attention from the shallower cortex which mimed him. "See how afraid he is . . ."

Other voices. "See how afraid, afraidafraid!"

"We'll see how afraid he is and take it from there."

"From there, from there, fromthere."

Earlier in the garden he had asked to be taken away from this place where they were planning his death. The

saving of men was not a task for him. He had done enough in helping mutate the animals into men, and more in making sure that all the main groups remained isolated long enough to breed true; he had even worked with the others trying to imprint food and hygiene commands on the groups. He would leave it to others to set the examples for the development of a sane culture. The trouble with men seemed to lie in their excessive awe of nature and their own capacities, an impressionability which led them to be convinced only by powers and authorities beyond them, or by the force of the stronger ones among them. Reason was powerless unless allied with one of these. He was not going to die for these creatures, he had decided in the garden, but they had come and seized him while his attention was with communicating . . .

"He'll take some fixing," the dominant voice said as he was being carried. "I wonder if he knows what's happening?"

Another voice was saying, "If it's really him, then he knows. All that brotherly stuff—and from a wreck who crawled away after they cut him down, and all the nothings made up a story. When we cut him up, we'll know for sure." And he laughed.

"Cut him up, cut him up, cuthimup!"

Later he woke up on the floor of a small room. He saw their boots near him. They were looking at the open door where the world was an insubstantial mist, a maelstrom of time flowing by in wave after wave of probability moving outward from a hidden center which somewhere cast the infinite field of space and time and possibility. He felt the bandages on his body and the lack of pain. Time travel, he understood from their thoughts. How cunning and irrational they have become to make it work, a thing so dangerous, absurd and impossible that no race in the galaxy had ever succeeded in making it work. And like the ones who had put him on the cross,

they had come for him to soothe their own hatred and cruelty through pain in the name of pleasure. The beast's brain was still served by technical cleverness, so many centuries hence.

Suddenly with a great effort he lifted himself from the floor, and without standing up completely threw himself head first through the open portal, tumbling head over heels into the haze, hearing them screaming behind him as he floated away from the lighted cube. "We'll get you!" they shouted as their light faded and their forms were carried into time . . .

By 1935 he had been alone for twenty years, slowly learning what his disciples had done after his disappearance. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John had lied, creating a fantastic legend. Their written words only served as a reminder of who he really was. The words which he read in the Public Library remembered everything for him.

But he had not saved mankind, either in terms of the story or his own mission. His death was needed to complete the story, and his presence with the resources of his entire civilization, twenty centuries ago. He had not heard his people's voice in a long time, an age since the time in the garden when the sun had hung in the trees like a blood red orange.

He took out his small bottle of cheap whiskey and gulped a swallow, grateful for the few lucid moments in which he knew himself, knew he was not the man the apostles and time had made him. The bottle slipped from his grasp and shattered on the pavement. He looked at the pieces, then bent his head and closed his eyes. The reality of his world, so filled with knowledge and the power over one's life, was so distant and his exile and suffering so near and unfulfilled. Silently he spoke the words which would have freed him in the other time, but were ineffectual here.

He tried to look through shadow to the time before he

became a man, and it was a dream filled with light he had lived somewhere, the shards of a madman's memory delivering him into an abyss of doubt. Why should not the recorded version be any more true than his memory of his home world?

He did not know who he was; he could not prove anything to himself, or anyone else. A proof of his divine origin would deny men the choice of following his example. Only fools would fail to bet on a sure thing. His followers had followed him first, then they had been given their proof; mistaken as it was, it had passed for reality. He thought of how many had followed his name during the last twenty centuries, believing in him even when it had meant their deaths.

The others, the men from the future—they had wanted a living creature to play with, to harm in the way that human wreckage was used and dumped from speeding cars in this evil time around him. They had not had their fill with him, at least. But there was no judgement in his mind, only the awareness of the life he could not lead, the powers he could not enjoy, and the knowledge that he would die eventually, never knowing the perspective of his own kind.

Slowly the sun came lower into the west and hung swollen over the stone alleys of the city, casting its still warm rays against the face of the building and into the doorway where he was sitting. In front of him the whiskey was dry around the broken glass. An old dog crept by, sniffed at the remains and continued down the street.

His thoughts faded as he tried to remember them. It was difficult to remain alert. The sun took an eternity to go down behind the building across the street, but finally it left him in a chill shadow, trying to make sense of the thought of places beyond the world and the bits of conversation floating in his mind.

"Why take the effort? It's like dozens of worlds. They're intelligent, but it's all in the service of the beast."

"Maybe an example might make all the difference—stimulate their rationality through belief. It's worked on many worlds. The sight of a man who was also more than one of them, a man who visibly lives the best in them, maybe it would work here too."

"Whoever took the job would be in for it—the experience would alter him permanently," the first voice said.

"Karo wants to isolate a new group, work on their genetic structure, maybe supplement it with some teaching."

"Karo has always underestimated the power of persuasive forces, and any creature's ability to alter its own choices and tendencies . . ."

He had come among them, taking the place of an unborn man in a human womb; and the mother had come to the cross to cry for her son.

It was so hard to remember. He still found it deadening to think that these creatures from the future had developed time travel, had taken him from the cross and had made it possible for him to have lived so long in this city. The words in the book—maybe they were truer? No one from his own world had ever thought of making time travel a working reality. They would never find him here.

He started to cough as the darkness filled the stone corners of the deserted street, and he felt the sidewalk grow colder under his feet. The evil ones from the future had taken his life, saving it for their own pleasure; his own kind had forsaken him centuries ago.

His mind clouded; it was more than the alcohol. The shock of appearing in a specific time after he had tumbled out of the shuttle, after he had floated for an eternity in the faintly glowing mists, had left him with sudden discontinuities in his thinking and consciousness, as if his mind were trying to regain the other place, the high ground of his original locus, the place he looked up to now from the bottom of a dark hole.

He heard footsteps in the darkness to his right.

Shapes entered the world, came near him and squatted on the pavement. Suddenly a can of garbage caught fire in the middle of the street and the quick dancing glow showed three ragged figures warming themselves, their shadows jet black crows on the walls of the deserted brick tenements.

One of the men walked over to him and said, "Hey Hal, there's an old guy here in the doorway, come see!"

The other two came over and looked at him. He looked up at them with half closed eyes. He was sure they were not from the future.

"Too bad—he wouldn't be here if he had anything valuable on him."

He tried to sit up straighter on the doorstep, to show them he thought more of himself. Their stares were making a mere *thing* of him, something to be broken. He felt it in them, and the wash of hopelessness in himself.

"We could take his clothes," one said. They were all unshaven and dirty, their elbows showing through their sleeves.

"Why do you wish to harm me?" he asked.

"Listen, old man, you're not going to last long when it gets cold; we can use your clothes."

"Do you have a drink? I dropped mine . . ."

"Okay, let's strip him down. Now."

They came at him, blotting out the light of the fire. Almost gently they began to remove his clothes, moving his arms and legs as if they were the limbs of a mannequin. His body tensed and he became an object in their hands, forgetting where or who he was. Their arms held him like constricting snakes.

He felt a spasm in his right leg and he caught one of them in the crotch with a sudden kick. The man doubled over in pain and fell backward onto the pavement, revealing the fire behind him suddenly.

"Kill him!" he shouted from where he lay. "Kill the bastard!" And he howled from his pain.

The others started to kick him. "*Interpose a god to change animals into men, stir a noble ideal in their beast's brain.*" He felt his ribs break, first on one side and then the other, and they hurt as his body rolled on the pavement from their blows. "*We've been fortunate on our world, we have to help where there is even a chance, even a small chance.*" The words of his co-workers on the project whispered to him softly, but he could not remember the individuals who had spoken them.

"Take his clothes off," the groaning man said from the pavement where he still lay. "Make it hurt good!"

When he was naked one of them kicked him in the neck, exploding all the pain inside his head. For a brief instant he had a vision of the vandals from the future materializing on the street to carry him away; but he knew that they were the same as these who tormented him now.

Two of them rolled him near the fire and he felt its warmth on his bare skin. "Can you spare me?" he whispered. A hot stone from the fire touched his back, settling into his flesh as if it were plastic. His thoughts fled and the pain was a physical desolation. He did not know who he was; he knew only that he was going to die.

A sense of liberation passed through his being as his body shuddered. He closed his eyes and hung on to the darkness. He felt them grab his feet and drag him closer to the fire. Hot sparks settled on his skin . . .

But he knew now that the lie of his death of long ago would become the truth. He had to die now, violently at their hands to make good all the writings and prophecies —to make worthy the faith which was linked to his name. Only this could release him to return home. Suicide would have been useless, accident would not serve to please the Father.

He knew who he was now. The written words were all true, and his only purpose was to fulfill them. He could trust no other memories. He was the Son of God, and he would have to die to hear his Father's voice again. "*The mission, you're a teacher, a man of science, a bringer of culture, remember*?" Lies! The voices died, the deceiver was beaten.

I am Jesus of Nazareth . . . I have to be, or my death is for nothing, he said to himself. A great light filled his mind, illuminating all his images of the world's dark places.

He heard a bottle break somewhere near.

The light destroyed all the false memories which the deceiver had sent to plague him.

He was ready.

They turned him on his back, so the wounds on his back would touch the stone hardness. He did not open his eyes, knowing that in a few seconds the mission would be complete. The broken bottle pierced his chest, entering his heart and spilling blood onto the street and into the cavities of his dying human shell.

Naked, he sought escape from the trap that was the world . . .

Grayworld

Dean R. Koontz

1

He was not dead, but nearly so.

For an inestimable length of time, he had seen nothing except a hazy light emanating from an unknown source, filtered through (it seemed) the underside of a cosmic fly's wing: translucent white streaked through with pale, blue veins. He had heard nothing at all in that time. He had required no nourishment. He drifted in syrupy warmth which had no odor, and he received no tactile stimulation. As a substitute for the womb, this place, whatever it might be, was without parallel.

Perhaps because of this lack of stimuli, he had not even entertained a single thought in all those hours. He existed as much like a vegetable as like a man, insulated from everything except his own greatly reduced bodily functions.

All of this changed in an instant.

The distant, blurred light burst apart and showered on the fragile wings of the cosmic fly, set them afire and destroyed them. The air was filled with the shriek of de-

struction; he was heaved upwards into dim purple light and cold, dry air . . .

He was naked upon the couch that had risen from a long, metal cylinder which he had inhabited during his sleep, but he was not the sort of man to be diminished in stature by the removal of his clothes. He was more than six feet tall, slab-shouldered, pinch-waisted, with a barrel chest in between. His arms and legs were those of a man who lifted weights until further development would not have been beneficial but a hindrance: strong limbs corded with muscle.

In the background, relays clicked and computers chattered as they produced printouts of his condition. Heavy machinery growled in the floor, like unseen gods of concrete, while the hydraulic arms of the couch now pivoted to the right and angled downwards. In a few seconds, the couch had been brought three feet above the floor, well below the level of the pod hatch from which he had come. Relays ceased clicking; computers stopped typing up reports for human eyes; the machinery, or the gods, beneath the floor, sighed and were quiet.

The next move, the room seemed to say, was entirely up to him.

He sat up, swung to the edge of the couch, dangled his legs so that his toes brushed cold tile. Bewildered, he looked around for a clue to his whereabouts.

On three sides, the white enameled walls were featureless except for a breathcoat of dust. On the fourth side, a door broke the chalky uniformity, as did several observation windows. The room behind those windows contained no light whatsoever. The ceiling of this room was low and black, fixtured only with a long, central light row which provided a minimal illumination. The chamber measured approximately thirty-by-thirty feet and contained fifteen other pods like the one he had just vacated. Each of these was half again as long as a man, of burnished steel, with a delineated topside hatch whose

center contained a four-inch square glass plate so that one might see who lay inside; from this angle, he could not see any of the viewplates. Beneath the cylinders, conduits encased in pipe fed into the floor, out of sight. Without the pods, the place might have been the walk-in freezer for a modern butcher shop. Even without the pods, however, it was an utterly alien place.

He closed his eyes, opened them again, frowned when the scene remained the same. He had been hoping that it would prove to be a nightmare, for he didn't like the idea of waking up in a place where he couldn't remember having gone to sleep.

He got off the couch and stood on the floor, exposed, before he realized that there was an even more pressing question to be answered: Who was he? He looked down at himself as if he were examining a stranger, and he could not remember anything this body had ever done. He felt newborn, but with an adult's potential mental capacity.

Behind him, the couch rose on its hydraulic arms, straightened above the open hatch and lowered out of sight into the pod. The hatch slid shut and, with a *snick!*, locked itself.

He turned toward the observation windows and called out. "Is anyone here?"

He felt like a fool. Of course, someone would be there. From the looks of the place, it was either a hospital or laboratory, the kind of establishment which would not be left unstaffed at any hour of the day.

No one answered.

He remembered the dust on the walls and realized that neither a hospital nor a laboratory would tolerate uncleanliness of that nature. The thought was disturbing, and he refused, for the moment, to give it any more consideration.

Padding across the floor to the narrow windows, he looked into the unlighted room beyond, the monkey pre-

cociously spying on his jailers. In the backwash of light from the pod chamber where he'd just awakened, he could see decks of controls built into the wall beneath the windows, and a row of swivel chairs facing both these controls and, through the glass, the pods. Behind the chairs, the room was too dark for him to see anything else. It appeared to be deserted.

He was anxious to get out of that chilly room and find some clothes, but he did not want to leave until he he had looked in the peepholes of the other pods to see if he recognized any of the other sleepers. He recalled how his own cylinder hatch had latched itself; if the door to this room operated on a similar principle, he might not be able to get back in again once he had departed.

He didn't know how he could be so certain that, in the rooms beyond this one, there was no one to let him back in here once he had left, but he *was* certain. Deadly certain.

Hurriedly crossing the floor, his teeth chattering, he gripped the hatch rim on the nearest cylinder and pulled himself up the rounded side to peer into the pod. Death returned his gaze . . .

A skull, thinly stretched over with ragged, crackled, leathery skin, lay directly beneath the viewplate. Its eyes were gone, and all beyond them as well. Its mouth was open in a yawning leer—or perhaps a frozen scream—that revealed fine, white teeth which had been well cared for. Bright lemon hair flushed around the ghastly sleeper's calcimine cheeks, cradling the death's head in an anachronistically feminine pillow.

If he could have shifted his point of focus from the skull to the polished glass of the peephole, he would have seen his own face there, superimposed on the dead woman's face, suddenly drawn and haunted. But he was mesmerized by the specter's stare.

For a time, he hung there, arms aching with the effort,

unable to drop. The black sockets of the dead woman's eyes pinned him, skewered his attention and trapped his soul. He could not imagine how she must have looked in life, yet he felt that he had known her. He reached for a name, felt mental fingers curl on emptiness, and finally let go. The floor felt unsteady beneath his feet.

Before his nerve could give out on him, he stepped to the adjoining pod and levered himself up to the viewplate. Another skull looked back at him. This one was sheathed in more unholy, weathered meat than the first had been, as if there had been too little air inside its coffin to allow the process of decay to go as far as it should have. In the depths of the bony pit where its right eye had been, something white gleamed malevolently. No matter; though this corpse was in better condition than the other, it was still unrecognizable.

He leaned against the cool steel pod and wiped perspiration out of his eyes, though the room had grown no warmer.

"They're dead!" he called out.

He did not know whom he expected to answer.

No one did.

If this had been an experimental laboratory—no matter *what* the subject of the investigations had been; time, later, to wonder about that—things had gone horribly wrong. The others had been allowed to die in their pods, and he had been awakened without memory of even part of the affair. That was a hell of a way to run a scientific investigation. Someone would pay for it, heads would roll, when he found out who was responsible.

That peculiar sense of isolation enveloped him again, that certainty that no one was left alive to be held responsible, that he was the only man here, that the scale of the disaster was larger than what this room exposed. He tried to pinpoint the source of this fear but could not.

Pushing away from the pod, unable to withstand the

shock of looking at yet another corpse, he went to the door beside the observation windows, opened it, walked into the other room.

Behind him, the purple lightstrip in the colder vault dimmed and finally winked out altogether. In sympathy, the overhead lights in the new chamber rose steadily until he could see that the dust had seeped into here, too, and that it had laid claim to everything, the death shroud of the inanimate.

To his left, along the wall, sixteen lockers stood like narrow metal caskets, each with a first name stenciled just above the three slits of the air vents. He walked toward these and momentarily forgot about the door. When he remembered it, he was too late to act: the door swung shut and was instantly, electronically locked. He continued to the lockers and opened them, one after the other. Eight of them contained women's clothing in an assortment of sizes. Of the other eight, which contained men's clothing, only one held a suit which had been tailored for his wide shoulders and narrow waist. He dressed in the dark, one-piece jumpsuit and soft black leather boots, then closed the locker and stared at the name on the door: JOEL.

Joel . . .

He said it a few times, to himself, but he could not make it fit.

He looked at the other names and tried to find something familiar in them: Archie, Will, Leonard, Tamur, Alicia, Mary . . . Though he strained to evoke a face to match each name, all fifteen remained nonentities.

Since none of the lockers contained identification for its owner beyond the simple uniform and the name on the door, he turned away and explored the remainder of the rectangular room.

When he sat in one of the command chairs, he was

surprised to discover that he understood how to read the banks of controls, graphs, charts, and monitoring screens set before him. They were all designed either to report on or change conditions in the pods—heartbeat, temperature, metabolism, hormone secretion . . . All were unlighted now and might or might not have been functioning.

Despite his grasp of these details, he could not formulate an understanding of the overall purpose of the place. He felt he should be able to build from the specific to the general, but had no luck. The controls were known, but their part in the larger design remained a mystery. He was like an unskilled laborer assembling the housing of a complex computer system: taking part in the production of the finished item but never really aware of what that item was for. His perspective was severely limited.

Yet he knew that, in the past, he had been at home here and well-versed in the intentions of the experimenters. That was as lost to him as was his own identity.

Joel? Joel who, what, when and where?

Angry, he stood. He wanted to strike out with his blocky fists, but there was no one person or thing to draw his rage. The mouse, dropped unexpectedly into the maze, must also experience this sort of undirected fury. And he would have to solve his problem just as the mouse did—by finding his way to the end of the maze and picking up his reward. If there was a reward. Maybe a booby prize. He found the outside door of the observation chamber and opened it.

Beyond lay a long corridor which lighted as he entered it. Not all the bulbs in the two ceiling strips worked, but enough to show him cement block walls, a red-tiled floor, and a great deal more dust. For the first time, he realized that there were no footprints in the dust and that no one had passed this way in ages.

"Hello!" he called.

Though it was clearly futile to cry out, he was unable to restrain his compulsive need for companionship.

The corridor was short, with only four rooms leading from it. Each of these was a cubicle devoid of everything but a desk, chair and unused filing cabinet. At one time, these must have been the offices of minor executives; now, the dust was nearly half an inch thick, a gray-brown blanket that softened the sharp edges of the furniture, many times thicker than the jacket of dust he had seen elsewhere.

At the end of the hall, two elevator doors were recessed in the wall. Above each was an unlighted floor indicator which was framed by a chrome strip and was all but unreadable for the grime which time had spread over it.

Joel touched the controls of the lefthand lift and waited. When nothing happened, he tried the cage on the right. The floor indicator there lighted instantly, a soft yellow with crimson numerals. The lift was at the eighteenth, the topmost floor. It descended so rapidly in answer to his summons that it seemed as if it must have snapped its cable. A moment later, however, the doors opened with a rasping noise which set his teeth on edge, and the lift awaited his use.

He didn't trust the device, but he had no choice but to consign himself to it. He stepped inside, pushed the button for the second level. The doors closed with less noise than had accompanied their opening, and he was carried swiftly, smoothly upwards.

The second level was larger than the first and composed strictly of laboratories and chemical storage closets. Again, there were no windows or doors to the outside world. All the file cabinets and record drawers had been emptied; he could not find a trace of their contents. Though he recognized the purpose and nature of some of the furniture and machinery—slate-topped

lab tables, racks of pyrex beakers, rusted bunsen burners, a Lexical-7 Computer Chemical Analyzer, acid-resistant porcelain sinks—he could not tell from all of it what might have been done here.

On the third floor—which was larger than the second, as if the building were an inverted pyramid—half the space was given over to storage, half to offices. No scrap of paper remained, no mark of individual presence. Even if they had not left in a hurry, the residents and workers of this place would surely have overlooked some minim of written material from which he could have ascertained the nature of their business. This complete sweep of the building indicated a cautious withdrawal, as if they had known some hated antagonist was soon to come into possession of the place, as if they didn't wish to leave behind anything of value beyond the structure itself.

Was a war in progress?

That seemed unlikely. What had happened to the conquering horde before which the original owners might have fled? Once the building had been evacuated, no one had come to claim it.

Too, if war were the reason for abandonment, why leave the men and women in the pods, since they seemed the central reason for the entire project?

Still unable to formulate an answer that he could live with, he came to the last office on that level, where he finally uncovered a trace of those who had worked here: another corpse, one of theirs.

It was the skeleton of a large man, slumped across the desk in a posture of defeat which it had held for many years. In the open air, the worms had made swift work of it; it contained not a scrap of leathery flesh, but was white and clean and looked as if it had been scrubbed with sand and water. It had no hair. The few tattered garments it wore were so rotten that they crumbled into ash when he touched them.

Joel carefully pulled the skeleton away from the desk and let it slump back in the decayed swivel chair. Cautiously, he opened all the desk drawers in hopes of finding something, anything, even the last words of a man long dead. But there was nothing.

When he turned away from the desk, the skeleton appeared to be glaring at him.

He swung it around until it faced the wall. It stared at the plaster with the same intensity which it had focused on him a moment earlier. Perhaps its gaze was not one of malevolent intent, but a longing for the sarcophagus where it might rest after so many years of sitting in a chair.

When he continued his search, safe from fossilized observation, he was met with more disappointment. The four-drawer filing cabinet was locked but proved empty when he used a heavy, rust-filed letter opener to snap the main latch. The supplies closet contained no supplies.

He was about to return to the rest of the room to see if he had overlooked anything, when the cold finger touched his shoulder, as if testing his solidity. For a moment, he was sure the skeleton was touching him, as irrational as that fear was. However, when he leaped sideways and turned on it, he found that it was worse than that, worse than the skeleton.

He backed up, bumped into the filing cabinet and realized he was trapped.

The creature which had come up behind him now took another step in his direction, raising its pale right hand. It had no face. Where its features should have been, there was only a smooth, doll-like sheen of flesh, no eyes or nose or mouth, no hair on the oiled-looking head.

It touched him with fingers so cold they stung his wrist.

He drew back, swayed as his strength seemed to drain out of him, and he sank to his knees, watching the floor

circle round and round like an opponent waiting for a chance to jump him, bear him down and finish him. With his last bit of strength, he raised his head and looked at the faceless man.

Noseless, eyeless, mouthless, terrifying, the creature tilted its barren face towards his, as if returning his gaze.

What have you done to me? he wanted to ask. He was unable to speak.

Darkness swooping down like a huge bird, dizzy, he pitched forward, out cold, and he was unaware that the icy fingers reached down and touched him again, exploring him more fully this time, taking his pulse and thumbing back his eyelids to see if he were genuinely unconscious . . .

2

Joel lifted a lead blanket and rose out of a bed of molasses, shook off unconsciousness and came dizzingly awake. For a moment, as he waited for the whirling to subside, he did not remember the faceless man. When the memory returned, it was like a punch just below the heart, and it stopped his breathing for a moment.

He could hear voices, but he didn't want to open his eyes to see who was speaking. He didn't want to discover that it was the man without a face, for then he would have to wonder how the thing could speak without a mouth. Curiosity like that could only lead to madness. He contented himself with listening, and he discovered that the voices were in another room, distant enough to be meaningless. He opened his eyes then, and he found himself lying on a bed in a darkened room.

The voices stopped suddenly, as if the speakers knew he was finally awake.

A door slammed somewhere in the house. Footsteps. Another door, closer at hand this time, opened and closed more quietly than the first. Soft footfalls sounded

on the carpet, like evenly spaced sighs. He had closed his eyes again, but he felt the light the visitor had turned on. Someone loomed over him, casting a shadow across his face. A hand touched his forehead, warm and small, a woman's hand.

Joel opened his eyes again and stared straight into *her* eyes, which were blue and quite large, one of them partially covered by the thick fall of her black hair. She had a pug nose, full lips and a creamy complexion. She was not beautiful, for she was better than that: cute and saucy. He wanted to reach up and pull her down and kiss her, at least. At least.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

He nodded when he found his mouth was too dry for him to speak.

"Does your head hurt?"

"No," he wheezed.

"The doctor has been here and gone, already." She moved her hand, caressed his face, touched his warm, chapped lips. Apparently, there was an intimacy between them of which he was ignorant. Hell, he didn't even know who she was!

She said, "I'll give you your next medpac treatment."

He nodded, watched her cross the room to the dresser where she picked up a football-sized device that looked like a water-smoothed stone. She fooled with it for a moment, giving him a chance to study her outfit: a white blouse and brief shorts that revealed long, brown legs. He approved. When she returned, she put the stone on his chest and touched a clearly defined discoloration on the top of it. The stone came alive and fed microscopic tendrils into him, diagnosed his present condition and administered whatever drugs it deemed suitable. It withdrew its tendrils and was still. She had explained what it was doing, having seen the confusion and slight fear in his eyes, and now she removed the device and put it on the covers beside him.

He looked around the room, pleased at what he saw. Wood paneling. A low ceiling with antique light fixtures. Emerald green velvet drapes. Heavy furniture: a dresser with six drawers, two full-length mirrors in ornate frames, a nightstand with a black and red marble top, a chest which doubled as a dressing table, two bookcases filled with leatherette-bound volumes whose titles he could not make out.

"You'll be better, soon, darling," she said.

Her voice drew his attention back to her, and he could not imagine why he had ever looked away from her in the first place.

"Who are you?" he asked.

She frowned. Her wandering fingers froze as they smoothed his hair down. "You don't know me?"

"No."

"You fell and struck your head. Doctor Harttle said there was a possibility of amnesia, but we—"

"Wait," he said, as the drugs began to take effect and the bed began another slow revolution under him. He said, "The man without a face . . ."

"Who?" She looked perplexed.

"The faceless man," he repeated. "The one who—"

"Joel, you were dreaming. What a terrible dream you must have had!" She reached out, as if to comfort him.

"It wasn't a dream," he insisted.

"Certainly it was. Men without faces? A dream. But don't be frightened, Joel. I'll be here with you, all the time."

As she bent closer to him, he saw the full curves of her breasts in the deep vee-neck of her blouse. Then, dammit, he fell asleep.

This time when he woke, a man stood over him; it made for a distinctly inferior reception compared to his first. The stranger was almost as tall as Joel, perhaps fifty-five or sixty years old, his hair white, his face wrin-

kled but undeniably strong of character. His carriage and manner bespoke authority.

"So you don't remember me either," he said.

"No sir."

The stranger looked at the ceiling, exasperated, then down at Joel again. "We've sent for Harttle. If you can be helped, he'll set you right."

Joel sensed the old man's barely concealed dislike for him and also understood, somehow, that the antipathy was supposed to be mutual. He pushed himself up, surprised that his strength had returned, and leaned against the headboard. "Sir, do you think you could bring me into the picture? Who is that woman? And yourself? And me, for that matter? *Who is me . . .*"

The old man wiped at his eyes and brought his hand away from his face as if he had captured his weariness in it. He said, "The woman is Allison, of course. Your wife. You were married a year ago last month—against my wishes."

"You?"

"I'm her uncle, Henry Galing, her father's only brother." He seemed to puff up with pride at the mention of his name. "You are Joel Amslow," he said, with no pride at all. "You are a beach bum, a no-account, and probably more than a little bit of a gigolo. You are twenty-eight and have never held a full-time job; the only thing you've accomplished is a college degree in literature and a legal marriage to my niece."

He ignored the challenge, for he wanted to get as much information as possible without getting bogged down in petty arguments. Besides, the hard-jawed old bastard might be telling the truth. He said, "But I must be working now, with a wife to support—"

Galing interrupted him. "You're managing Allison's estate, as you so glibly describe your loafing about." He stopped and shook his head, gave Joel a hard look. He said, "I find your story of amnesia hard to accept. It's

more than likely some trick or other. I should have seen that possibility right at the start."

"It's no trick," Joel said.

"What isn't?" Allison asked, stepping through the open door with a tray of silver dishes all covered with silver lids. A set of silverware was wrapped in a white linen napkin and laid next to a squat, cut crystal goblet that was half-filled with what appeared to be wine.

"Nothing," Henry Galing said. "It's between Joel and me." He looked at his watch and gruffly excused himself, closing the door behind.

Unaware of the crosscurrents of conflict into which she had stepped, the girl placed the tray across Joel's lap, removed the lids from the dishes and unrolled the napkin from around his silverware. "Dinner's everything you like," she said.

The plates contained a steak which was browned just enough to let him feel civilized, a baked potato, creamed corn, tossed salad, and wine. He had not been hungry until the food was before him, but now he was insatiable. He consumed every morsel and was not content until he leaned back against the headboard and surveyed the empty plates. In all that time, neither of them spoke, but Allison had time to think.

Now she said, "Was Uncle Henry going at you again?"

"He thinks I'm a gigolo for having married you."

"Then your memory's returning?"

"Not at all," he said. "I just know what he told me."

She was wearing another pair of shorts, these the color of blood and as brief as she ought to dare. She also wore a loose, pink gypsy blouse. When she moved, she was a bright flash. She slid closer to him and took his hand, and she said, "What he told you is all untrue."

"He seemed convinced."

"He was against the marriage from the start, and you know—but of course you *don't* know. It's hard to believe you've forgotten everything . . . me included."

"That's the part I find most impossible," he said.

She laughed prettily. She had perfect teeth. "Anyway, when you took over my estate and began managing my stock in Galing Research, you soon made an even more bitter enemy of Uncle Henry."

"How'd I manage that?" he asked. He felt as if all of this were not real, but the bare lines of a stage play, an act, a charade.

"You and several other minority stockholders had the voting potential to go up against Uncle Henry's forty-four per cent, and you did. Several times, in fact."

He thought about that for a while, but he could not get it to lead anywhere: Galing Research, voting stock, Henry Galing, even Allison—all these were, if not unreal, certainly less than real. The real things were the faceless man, the pods, the corpses inside the pods . . .

He said, "What does Galing Research research?"

"It investigates all the facets of parapsychology—telepathy, teleportation, clairvoyance. You name it, Galing has the lead in its development and application." She was clearly pleased by the family's position of leadership in the industry.

Joel closed his eyes and tried to pretend he had not heard what he *had* heard. He suspected he was going mad and that all of this was an illusion, but when he opened his eyes, he saw that she was still sitting on the edge of the bed, her fine long legs tucked under her.

"Allison, telepathy and clairvoyance, all of those things are not sciences. You can't research and apply them."

"Whyever not?" Her face was a mask of perplexity.

He hesitated, closed his eyes, considered all the holes in his own memory and, doubting himself, said, "You mean it's been done?"

"Galing Research did it," she said. "This is going to be very trying if I have to convince you of basic truths as well as specific facts." She sighed and said, "Galing markets seventeen drugs which are ESP-talent inducers. You

see, we all have extra-sensory abilities, but most of us require drugs to help us utilize them."

"You've used these drugs, then?" he asked. "You have telepathic abilities?"

She laughed, showing lots of white teeth, her throat slim and taut. He wanted to nibble at her throat, and at the same time he could not understand his instant, animal need for her. He hardly knew her, even if she were his wife.

She said, "My telepathic ability is minimal, even with the aid of the drugs. I hear whispers but can't really tell what's being projected. I have two strong abilities. One is teleportation on a non-personal level." She saw his confusion and said, "That means I can teleport objects from place to place, but I can't teleport myself. It's handy, but it'd be handier if I had the personal touch, 'cause I'd save a lot of travel bills. Anyway, my second talent is in making illusions."

"Illusions?" he asked, feeling inordinately stupid.

"I make pictures in the air. It's a branch-off telepathic talent probably related to some ESP-talent we haven't discovered yet in its full manifestation."

"What kind of pictures?" he asked.

"Sometimes, familiar landscapes. Other times, weird places no one has ever seen. Often, just colors and patterns."

He sat up straighter. The silver pieces rattled on the tray as he set the encumberance aside. He said, "Can you make these illusions for me, now?"

"I'd have to take the drug first," she explained. "And the drugs are generally restricted to industrial and espionage use, though the government will soon be opening the way for general merchandising. I can get what I want, being a member of the Galing family. But not tonight, darling. You can't take too much at once. Since every bit of this is news to you, you must be overwhelmed right now."

"Quite," he agreed.

A moment later, as if on cue, footsteps sounded in the corridor, followed by a knock at the door. Joel knew it wouldn't be Henry Galing, for the old man would rarely knock. When Allison called out permission to enter, a wiry dark man in his early forties entered the room carrying a flat black satchel. His hair was full, combed low on his forehead and over his ears. His face was drawn, wrinkled around the mouth and eyes, and his manner was far too energetic to be pleasant.

"So, you're sitting up, eh? And having yourself a full meal. Well, that's marvelous!" His voice was deeper than Joel had expected it to be, firm and confident.

"Dr. Harttle?" he asked, making an educated guess.

"Yes, yes," Harttle said. "And soon you'll be recognizing everyone and not just guessing at their names." He dropped his bag on the nightstand, touched the tab which sprung it open, and took out an old-fashioned stethoscope which he used on Joel's chest, groin and back.

As the doctor listened to his heart for a second time, Joel found himself staring down at the small man's head. For a moment, he was perplexed by a *wrongness*—perplexed, because he couldn't identify the source of that feeling. Then he saw the dust in Harttle's hair. A fine, gray powder lay across his brown locks, distributed as evenly as the dust in those corridors he had walked through in his dream . . .

Harttle sat up and clicked his tongue approvingly. "You're fit."

Joel now saw that there was dust on Harttle's shoulders. His suit looked as if it had hung in a closet for years and had been hastily brushed before the doctor donned it again.

"Can you do something about his memory?" Allison asked. She had stood against the far wall while Harttle

worked, but now she moved forward, a sinuous creature, all soft lines.

"Probably," Harttle said. When he shook his head, he actually snapped it, as if it were connected to his neck by a tight spring.

"How?" Joel asked.

He thought he could see a film of dust in the doctor's left nostril, like a gossamer membrane. But that was impossible, for it would mean that Harttle wasn't breathing.

"Hypnosis," the doctor said. "If that doesn't work, then we'll use a telepathist to enter your mind and give you a nudge or two. This is the Twenty-third Century, after all, not the Dark Ages. We have means." He looked at Allison and smiled. "You used the medpac as I directed?"

"Yes."

"Good," Harttle said. He said it a few more times, bobbing his head up and down like a badly operated puppet. He took a packet of red capsules from his case and placed them on the nightstand. "If you have any trouble sleeping, take two of these."

"I don't want to sleep," Joel said.

"That's what I mean," Harttle said. "I know you want to be up and about, re-learning your identity. But it can't be done all at once. You must rest, eat and sleep well." He snapped his satchel shut, nodded to both of them, promised that he would be around the following morning, and went out, closing the door behind.

Allison went to the door and locked it.

"Did he seem strange to you?" Joel asked her, remembering the inexplicable coating of dust.

"Strange? Willie's been strange as long as I've known him, but he's been our family doctor for fourteen years, bursting with energy but very good when—"

"That's not what I meant," he said.

He realized, then, that she was undressing, and he let

his last few words trail out like a dying breath. In a moment, she stood at the foot of the bed, nude, the most perfectly formed woman he'd ever seen.

She giggled and said, "Is *this* what you meant?"

"Look," he said, clearing his throat with effort, "you better think about this. Are you sure you know what you're doing? After all, it's almost like we're strangers, like this is the first time we've met."

"For you, maybe," she said.

She slipped under the sheets.

He said, "What?"

She said, "*I* remember *you* perfectly."

She rolled against him, her long warm legs touching him, sending an electric tremble throughout his body. She leaned over him and kissed him on the cheek, then on the mouth.

"And," she said, "I'm going to have you remembering me soon enough. You're going to remember me so well you won't ever be able to forget me again."

When she touched the light and brought darkness down upon them, he saw that dust lay between the full cones of her breasts. Then, he could see nothing more at all. She was in his arms, against him, and he soon ceased to care about the dust.

3

The following afternoon, having taken a light lunch together, they went for a tour of the great house to see if he could remember anything of it. It had fourteen rooms and four baths, each chamber large, airy and well-appointed. All of it was new to him.

Two servants saw to Henry Galing's comfort, a male cook named Richard who was nearly Joel's size, and a young maid named Gina whose eyes were as large as half dollars. Both servants were uncommunicative to the point of rudeness, but Allison did not seem to notice and

was confused by his direct references to the staff's surliness.

That was like Allison. In only one night and morning, he had come to know her and to like her enormously. She was, in many ways, childlike, especially in that her outlook on life was so naive. She was not a woman for sarcasm, either to deliver or to understand. He doubted if she ever got angry, so joyous was her relationship to the world around her. She was aware of beauty in everything she saw, and she spent a good deal of time pointing out the loveliness in some bit of daily life which he had not seen himself. If the servants were rude, Allison would think of them, in their silence, as being shy.

Yet, even with her at his side, the house seemed cold and empty, as if no one actually lived in it. Here and there, he saw pieces of furniture skinned with dust while the rest of the room looked freshly polished, and he remembered, on such occasions, the dust on Dr. Harttle's hair . . .

He also remembered the dust on Allison's breasts, and shivered uncontrollably, possessed by a fear he could not pin down. Then she would touch him, hold his hand, say something funny to draw his attention, and such incongruities as the dust would escape his notice for a time.

In the den, as they stood by the window watching the rain slice through a grove of pines at the end of the south lawn, he said, "Where did I fall and hurt myself?" The moment he had asked, he wondered why he'd taken so long to pose the question.

Her face paled, and she said, "It was awful." Her hand tightened on his. "You'd gotten on a ladder to climb onto the garage roof where Jasper was."

"Jasper?"

"The cat," she said. "It was my fault. He was on the garage roof, whining so pitifully, as if he were afraid to come down. You said he'd jump when he wanted, but

you couldn't convince me. Then you went after him, and he jumped when you were reaching for him. He startled you, and you fell."

He laughed, appreciating the irony of such a mundane event bringing such a major change to his life. "And why were we here, staying with your Uncle Henry, when he hates me?"

"Because," Henry Galing said from the doorway, "I *don't* dislike my niece, no matter how foolish she's been in her private affairs."

The old man was as impressive as he had been the day before, slim but strong, unstooped. With his white hair and dignified posture, he might have been a senator or diplomat; certainly not the president of a firm dealing in paranormal research.

"I enjoy *Allison's* company," he added.

Joel flushed but was unable to respond, for he hadn't known Galing long enough, nor did he remember anything salient from their previous relationship, to be able to find the old man's weak spot.

Allison settled the clash with an insistence that defeated even her uncle. She refused to put up with any petty squabbles, she told them. Galing shrugged, turned away from the door; the carpets soaked up his footsteps.

Allison insisted that Joel take a nap before supper, even if he didn't want to, took him upstairs, tucked him in bed, gave him a lingering kiss that erased any sleepiness he might have had, left the room and closed the door. Then he was alone with the sound of the rain—and with a renewed certainty that something was not right about this place or these people.

He tried recalling how Allison had looked this morning, but not even that vision made him content again. When he had tossed and turned for half an hour, he got up and paced about the room, stopped by the only window and sat in a chair before it to watch the rain sheet across the New England countryside.

He added all the pieces of doubt that littered his mind, tried to put them together in a sensible whole. First: Galing's pathological dislike for him. Second: the rude silence of the servants. Also: the dust on Harttle, and on Allison; Allison's unbelievably naive good humor; the *too* ironic and mundane manner in which he'd reputedly sustained his head wound, a much too reassuring—

He sat straight up in his chair and continued staring at the rain as if he were afraid to look away from it and, in changing the direction of his gaze, find some unspeakable terror standing close behind him. Carefully, he touched his head, the temples first, felt only the throb of blood. He touched his forehead, the crown of his head, the back of his skull. He was not wearing any bandages, and he felt no place which was scabbed over or even the slightest bit tender.

He resisted an urge to call Allison. If he asked her why he had no visible wound, after falling off a garage roof, she would have some half-acceptable, amusing answer. He preferred, for the moment, to fret about it rather than be mollified by her exceptional beauty. It was time he stopped floating through this scene like a theater customer willing to be temporarily deceived into believing the reality of events on the stage. It was time that he started thinking, by himself.

While he puzzled over this newest incident, he watched the rain, the swaying pine trees and the low clouds which scudded by close above them. He also watched the sparse traffic on the nearby highway a quarter of a mile to the right, and almost an hour passed before he realized that something was distinctly odd about those distant cars. Twenty minutes after that, he saw what it was: the same vehicles kept passing in their same relative positions, with the same number of seconds between their appearances. There were eight different spurts of traffic, and the entire vehicular cycle took only six minutes to repeat itself. Then it began again. He

watched it happen twice before he got out of his chair and opened the window.

He reached out and touched the trees which were only inches from the glass.

He touched the tiny cars that sped past.

He touched the clouds.

All of these things were back-projected images on a holographic screen of excellent verisimilitude. If he shattered that screen, he knew he'd find an automatic projector behind it.

Closing the window, he sat down and tried to imagine why they should attempt to fool him with false windows and fake scenery. Apparently, they had even constructed a false house . . . did that mean Henry Galing's hatred was also false? Was the dust false, put on Harttle's head to confuse him, and sprinkled between Allison's breasts to make the mystery of this place even more inexplicable? Was Allison—

"Well, you're cheating on your nap time," Allison said, pushing open the bedroom door with her hip. She was carrying his supper tray.

"Watching the rain," he explained.

She looked quickly at the window, frowning. "Do you feel all right?"

"Better than ever," he said.

"I've brought your supper." She grinned again, her blue eyes growing larger, as if the beauty of her own smile surprised her. "Your favorite dessert." She put the tray down, lifted a silver lid. "Apple pie with raisins," she said. And it figured.

He waited until he knew she was asleep before he got out of bed. For a while, when they'd finished making love, he seriously considered forgetting about everything. If he were being mislead, it was for good reason. How could Allison be engaged in anything sinister . . . ?

But when she grew drowsy and slept, leaving him alone with his thoughts, he realized that he had been reacting to events as if he were drugged or witless. He saw, he *sensed*, a falsity about this place, yet he hesitated to pinpoint his suspicions. Now, while the others were not up and about to keep tabs on him, he dressed quickly, opened the bedroom door, stepped into the darkened second floor hallway, closed the door again without waking Allison.

The house was quiet.

When he was sure the corridor was deserted, he walked to the head of the stairs. A light burned somewhere below, and he could hear voices towards the back of the house: two of them, both male. Henry, and the cook, Richard? He went down the stairs to the main hall. He had originally intended to investigate the ground floor exits to see what landscape they opened onto, and he wanted to rifle the drawers of Henry Galing's desk in the den, but now he would have to know for certain who was up and about and what their conversation might concern, then build his plans from whatever circumstances he found. The light and the voices came from the den where the door was ajar, and he crept in that direction.

As he stood against the wall by the partly opened door, he recognized Henry Galing's deep, officious tones. The other voice was that of a stranger.

"How much longer," the stranger asked, "are we going to carry on with this 'recovery' act?"

"Originally, he was to stay in bed another three days," Galing said.

"That's proving impossible."

"Exactly. He's become much too inquisitive. He's already discovered that the view from his window is an artificial construction."

"I've heard. That window should have been locked."

The stranger was angry and concerned. "You overlooked an important detail."

"Nonsense," Galing snapped. Clearly, he had final say. "If the window had been locked, he'd have picked it open to find out if what he suspected were true or not. You know how persistent he is."

"Only too well," the stranger said.

"And I'm worried about the girl," Galing said. "Despite the drugs, she seems to be getting suspicious about me, the house, the whole deal."

"Increase her dosage."

"It isn't that simple," Galing said. "If we up her milligram intake, Amslow's going to realize she's hopped up. That's no good at all."

The stranger sighed. "Then what do you suggest?"

"We'll go to the next stage of the program ahead of schedule." He opened his desk drawer. Papers rustled.

In the pause between their exchanges, Joel Amslow leaned away from the wall and peered into the den through the two inch crack between door and jamb. Galing stood behind his desk, leafing through a sheaf of papers, absorbed in his search for something while in the chair beside the desk, slumped back as if he were exhausted, sat the faceless man.

4

Henry Galing said, "You'd better wake Richard and Gino so we can go over this together. We don't want any mistakes."

The faceless man said, "Of course, Henry." The smooth plane of his face didn't even wrinkle as he spoke. He got up, stretched and started for the door.

With a swiftness that was pure instinct and no intellectualizing, Joel backstepped to the next door along the corridor and went into the darkened library, closed the

door most of the way, leaving only a narrow crack through which he could observe the hall.

The faceless man walked past without seeing him, went up the stairs very quietly.

Joel hoped no one planned a bed check.

The faceless man was back in a minute with Richard and Gina, and none of them seemed excited. They'd have been whooping if they'd known he wasn't tucked in bed with Allison, exhausted from his fun and games. The three of them entered the den; this time they closed the door the whole way.

He tried to listen through the door but found it too thick for eavesdropping. Whatever they were planning, it was not for his own good; it hardly mattered whether or not he knew the details.

Quietly, he went upstairs, found streetclothes in the closet, and dressed.

He sat on the edge of the bed and gently shook Allison's shoulder until she stopped mumbling, opened her eyes and yawned and said, "What is it?"

"We're going away, now," he said, trying to remain calm, trying not to consider the possibility that he had lost his mind.

"Whatever for?" she asked.

He cautioned her to keep her voice down. Looking at her closely, he fancied he could see the effects of some drug in the circles around her eyes, though she was otherwise healthy. "Get dressed while I explain it."

She did as she was told, though she was obviously confused by his story of sinister plots and faceless men. When he was done, she said, "Joel, do you feel all right?" She touched his face, her fingers cool. "You did have a head injury, remember. I don't want you to feel—"

Her tone precluded his getting angry, for she was concerned about him, nothing more. "If I fell off the garage roof, where's my head wound?"

She was startled by the question, licked her lips, couldn't answer.

He opened the window and called her over so she could touch the hologram screen which was now showing a night scene complete with moon and stars.

"But what does it mean?" she asked, stunned by his revelation.

"I don't know. But we won't find out until we're away from here."

She stood on her toes and kissed him. "I'm scared."

"Me too." He returned her kiss, pleased that implicit in her statement was a willingness to do whatever he wished. She had adjusted to the situation much faster than he had expected.

"What now?" she asked.

"Do you have any money?"

"Quite a bit, in my purse."

"Good enough," he said. "Stay close behind me. Once we're out of the house, we can decide what to do. With money we aren't helpless."

"I can't understand what Uncle Henry's doing," she said.

"Are you sure you have an Uncle Henry?"

"Of course! That's part of the truth, and so is Galing Research—and our marriage. I don't understand the faceless man or the window, but the rest of it isn't a lie!"

She unsettled him, for he was more ready to accept an entire fraud, no matter how fantastic, than to explain half of one. But in either case, how could you explain a man without a face?

They went downstairs, past the den where the voices of the plotters seeped through the door too soft to be distinguished word for word. In the kitchen, they opened the back door and stared out at a lawn and trees much like the scene the hologram had shown them. The highway and cars were the only things missing.

"Why show us a fake when the real isn't much different?" he asked.

"Let's hurry," she said, his first indication, aside from her word, that she was *really* frightened.

He wondered, briefly, if her fear was generated by the absurd circumstances they found themselves in—or whether she knew more about all of this than he did, knew something that especially put her on edge. He refused to pursue that thought, for it smacked of paranoia. He needed *someone* in the middle of this surreal nightmare, someone to trust and confide in, someone to make plans with.

He took her hand and lead her quickly across the lawn toward the trees; in fact, the journey was *too* quick. Though the lawn appeared to be several acres deep, they crossed it in only a dozen paces. When they turned and looked at the house, which was certainly no more than thirty feet away, it appeared distant, shrunken as if a quarter of a mile lay between their position and the back door they had just departed.

"How's that done?" he asked.

She was bewildered.

He could see that a man, desirous of a lot of land but with a bank account too small to permit an estate of any size, might want to employ such a ruse to give himself the feeling of distance. That made sense, even if the science behind it seemed impossible and most likely more expensive than the land itself would have been. But to go to the trouble of creating this illusion—and then to use hologram screens on his window so that the genuine article could not be seen—that was insanity . . .

"Uncle Henry," she said, clutching Joel's arm as they stood in the shadows of the trees.

Galing stood in the open doorway of the house, looking toward the trees.

"Come on," Joel said. "We can lose them in the woods."

The forest, which had seemed deep and cool and serene, turned out to be no more extensive than the illusion of the lawn had been. In twenty steps they were through the carpet of brown leaves, the smell of foliage and the chitter of insects, coming out onto the sidewalk of a quiet, residential street.

Mercury vapor lamps, spaced a hundred feet apart on the far side of the street and thrusting dragon-necked to the center of the roadway, shed soft blue light on the neatly painted fronts of middle-class, white frame houses with contrastingly painted shutters. Some porches had swings; some did not. All the windows were dark, the houses apparently deserted or the households all asleep. The lawn directly across the street contained a white plaster birdbath, a crystal ball on a plaster pedestal, and a number of hideous plastic ducks lined up along the walk: modern American bad taste. Some houses had fenced-in lawns; some did not. Here and there, a weeping willow tree bent across a fence and dipped feathery branches over the sidewalk and street. Three cars were parked on the street: two late model fan shuttles and one older vehicle battered by a number of collisions, this with a double fan system like the first electric hovercars had used.

Behind them, footsteps sounded in the woods.

He grabbed Allison's hand more tightly and ran for the nearest car.

Behind them, Henry Galing shouted, "Wait!"

Joel pulled open a car door and shoved Allison across the seat, got behind the wheel and slammed the door. The keys were in the ignition.

He knew, then, that they were never going to get away. He hadn't thought how he would start the shuttle, but he knew this easy ride was a trap of some sort. Still, he had to go ahead with it.

Twisting the key in the ignition, he stamped the starter. The engine purred; the blades beneath them stut-

tered and lifted the car off the pavement. "Hold on!" he shouted.

He pulled the car away from the curb, barely avoiding Galing, who had come out of the woods and was trying to block their escape. The old man shouted at them, but his words were drowned by the chattering blades.

The wheel was too stiff. Joel could barely turn it; the car maneuvered like a tank with one broken tread. He saw the intersection ahead, made the mistake of trying to corner, and found the wheel frozen altogether. He took his foot off the accelerator, discovered that was frozen too.

Allison screamed.

The fan shuttle tilted as if its gyros were as worn as the rest of it, turned on its side, driving Allison down against him.

A brick building loomed up ahead.

They struck the side of it, were spun away, rolled over onto the roof with a thunderous roar. Metal screamed against macadam, showering sparks into the night air. They were brought up hard against the trunk of a willow tree and finally came to a full stop.

Unconsciousness threatened, but he refused to cooperate. He saw that Allison was slumped against her restraining straps, blacked out. He could see no blood and chose to assume she was uninjured. He tried to force the door open on his side so they might escape the wreckage before Galing showed up, but the door was welded tight by the crash. He relaxed, trying to gather his wits, and he listened to the sigh of hot metal rapidly cooling. A fluid dripped out of a ruptured line and hissed as it splashed on hot steel, and he could smell a thin but acrid smoke that rose out of the undercarriage.

Suddenly, the door which he had struggled vainly to open was now opened easily, and he was confronted by the faceless man who had reached the wreckage before Galing. Hanging upside-down in the overturned car, still

strapped in his seat, Joel had a strange view of the specter, one which made his featureless face seem even more hideous.

"Go away," he said, closing his eyes, hoping to wake up.

The specter raised a chalky hand. Hundreds of tiny, silver needles protruded from the palm in evenly spaced rows.

"No!" Joel said. He had opened his eyes again, angry as hell that he hadn't awakened.

The specter reached down and touched him.

A cloud of steam hissed out of the undercarriage, whirled through the car, obscuring everything for a moment.

The touch was as cold as it had been the first time Joel experienced it. Now, however, he saw that it was nothing more than the sting of a drug injected by the needles, and not a supernatural phenomenon at all, though that knowledge did nothing to hearten him. He fell asleep again, against his will . . .

5

Joel activated a number of data transmitters. Turning slightly in his command chair, he read the life systems reports on experimental subject Sam-3. Everything seemed well: heartbeat steady at 51 per minute, respiration normal at 8 per minute, encephalographic patterns as expected, digestion in both primary and secondary stomachs proceeding as anticipated.

He looked through the thick observation window in the wall in front of him, above his deck of controls. The pool was only minimally lighted now; the aquamen were barely visible, dark shadows flickering in the green light.

He directed Sam-3 to approach his observation point.

A moment later, smiling with a quasi-human face full of wicked teeth, the aquaman swam into view. He was

five feet long (one could not say "tall", for that implied that he stood erect), with the legs and arms of a man but with the sleekness of a porpoise. His feet and hands were twice as large as those of a land-bound man, his digits connected by filmy webbing. His neck held six gill slits on each side, spaced close and angled toward his throat from the atrophied flaps of his ears. His eyes were exceptionally large and transparently lidded. He passed the viewpoint and glided away, feet gracefully churning water.

"Get's boring, doesn't it?" Henry Galing asked.

Joel looked at the older man beside him and understood why Galing had once given up a career in genetic science to run for political office. Wealthy, handsome, dignified, with a voice that was confident and brooked no debate, he was a father image in whom the voters could place at least psychological confidence. And beyond the image, he *was* capable. He'd have done well by those who elected him—if he'd have assumed office before everything fell apart and the support of an elective government was no longer feasible. But if mankind had lost a statesman, it had regained a superior genetic theorist whose talents were now desperately necessary for the many projects at hand.

"If I were project director," Joel said, "I'd not spend time sitting at a console, like you do."

"We're short of good technicians," Galing said. "I'd rather take an extra shift myself than load it on someone who has already done twelve hours of monitoring. Besides, I've been taking inhibitors, and I don't need more than two hours sleep a night."

"How long can the body take that, though?"

"A year," Galing said. "After that, what does it matter?" He had a good point. "I suppose we'll still be living here, then, waiting the end. But our children will have started their journeys, leaving us behind."

They both looked into the pool beyond the observa-

tion windows. The aquamen swam by, looked in at them as if the roles in this zoo had changed. And maybe they had changed, at that. It was the aquamen who were going out, taking the wider universe for their home, while he and Galing and the rest of them were forced to remain behind, in bunkers.

Turning away from the ports, Galing said, "How about you and Anita stopping by my suite for supper tonight?"

"It's okay with me," Joel said. "If Anita—"

"I'll ask her," Galing said. He looked past Joel, down the row of command chairs. "Anita! Supper tonight? Fine!" He turned to Joel. "It's all set, then."

Joel turned and looked at Anita, his raven-haired wife who sat in the fifth chair down from his. That was when it all fell apart . . .

He had seen nothing unusual in the rest of it, not even in Galing's being a genetic scientist instead of a researchist in paranormal science. But he couldn't fit the girl in the illusion. Delusion? Whatever this was, *her* name was not Anita. It was Allison. Or was it? Yes: Allison Amslow, his wife, Galing's niece. And Henry Galing wasn't so friendly as this . . .

He stood up, stepped away from his chair and ran to the door which lead into the "pool", the door he'd come through after leaving the pods long ago. It wasn't the same door as it had been; now it was a heavy metal pressure hatch. However it swung open without admitting water to the observation room.

Beyond there was no water, no aquamen. The room was white-walled and contained sixteen life support pods full of corpses. A back-projecting hologram film machine had been attached to the inside of each observation window; the underwater scenes were fakes.

He started toward the pods, not sure what he intended to do when he reached them, turned when Galing called to him.

The faceless man was there, had sneaked right up be-

hind him. The faceless man touched him, touched him again, grabbed him as he slumped forward into sleep . . .

6

He woke and found that a rat was worrying at his shoe. He looked at it until it peered up at him, and as he moved to strike it, the creature turned and ran into the darkness on the far side of the room. Had it been real, or part of some new illusion?

He sat up and looked around, was surprised to find himself in a cell: carefully mortared stone walls and ceiling, no light fixtures except for a guttering candle in a shallow pan by the door. There was no furniture, not even a sleeping mat. The only door was a massive slab of oak with iron hinges; the tiny window in the center of it was fitted with iron bars.

He got to his feet and circumspectly, lest someone be listening in the corridor beyond the door, went to that oak panel and peered through the bars. He saw a dark, candle-lit cement hallway. In the flickering orange light, he also saw the hallway ceiling contained lightstrips which were no longer functioning. The corridor was empty; so far as he could see, no one guarded the door.

Hooking his fingers in the bars, he tried unsuccessfully to swing the door open. He considered calling for help—but no. The only response would be from the people who had put him here. Galing? The man without a face?

His fingers still hooked in the bars, he tried to remember what had happened since he'd first awakened on the hydraulic couch in the pod chamber: the deserted laboratories, the dust, the faceless man, bed, Allison, escape from the house, the wreck, waking in the phoney aquaman experimental station, the discovery of the hoax, the faceless man again . . . Senseless.

Turning away from the door, he explored his small

prison more carefully than he had at first. The only thing he had overlooked was a two-foot-square drain in the center of the floor, laid over with iron grill. The rat had probably entered and left this way, but that wasn't going to do him any good. He wouldn't be rescued by any sewer-patroling cavalry.

Behind him a key rattled in the lock, and Henry Galing pushed open the door, silhouetted by the brighter glow of the corridor candles, wearing a white smock that fell to his knees, carrying a black satchel like a doctor's bag. "How are we this morning?" he asked, as Joel turned.

"What have you done to me?" Joel asked, taking a step towards him.

Galing didn't retreat, but moved further into the room so that Richard, the cook, could get by him. But Richard was no longer a cook. He wore a hospital orderly's uniform, all soft blue, with heavy-soled rubber shoes.

"Be calm," Galing said. "You don't want Richard to hurt you again."

Richard held a battery-operated electric prod, smiling slightly as he watched Joel. He wouldn't hesitate to use the thing.

Joel said, "I asked you what you've done to me, you bastard!"

Galing looked sad, as if he had to reprimand a favorite child. "I haven't done anything yet. What I'm *trying* to do is cure you."

Behind Galing and Richard, Allison entered the doorway, then stepped to her uncle's side. She was wearing a white uniform and peaked nurse's cap.

"Ah, Annabelle, my dear," Galing said. "I want you to watch me with Mr. Amslow so you've some experience in the handling of this sort of patient." He turned back to Joel, no longer smiling.

Joel said, "Her name isn't Annabelle."

Galing frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"Her name's Allison, and she's my wife."

The girl sucked in her breath, her eyes gone round with fright.

Joel said, "Don't you recognize me?" He stepped towards her.

Richard struck him with the tip of the prod. He jerked as the electric charge slammed through him, felt his knees jelly. He managed to stay on his feet only because he couldn't bear to have Allison-Annabelle see him fall.

"Sit down," Galing said, hunkering himself. "You'll only be shocked again if you stay on your feet."

Though Joel sat against the wall, Richard remained standing, prod ready, while the girl stood near the door, wonderfully erotic in the caress of the red and orange candlelight. She appeared to be frightened of him.

Galing said, "You think she's your wife?"

"I don't *think* she is, I know it."

"How long have you been married?"

"For at least . . ." But he couldn't remember how long. Reluctantly, he said, "I don't remember."

"You have children?"

He wasn't sure. "Look, I don't remember all of that. I had an accident, a head injury, and I've had amnesia ever since."

Galing sighed. "This is going to hurt you, Joel. You won't like what I've got to say, but you must meet it and face the truth. You must stop fleeing into fantasies like this one. You're very ill, Joel. You have been incarcerated in the Fleming Institute for a year."

"I—"

"You have severe psychological problems. Until you can grasp that, you are beyond my help. Annabelle isn't your wife. In fact, this afternoon is only the second time you've ever seen her."

"I've slept with her!"

"I'm afraid not," Galing said.

Richard chuckled, looked over his shoulder at the girl.

Joel was certain she winked at Richard and chuckled. He said, "I don't know what your game is, Galing—"

"No game, Joel. I just want to cure you."

"Bullshit! You're no doctor; you're Allison's uncle. I don't know why you keep using your own name from illusion to illusion, while she must change hers. And I don't know why she goes along with this, unless she's drugged as you once said she was. She's my wife. And that man's your household cook, not an orderly. And this is damn sure no psychiatric ward! It's a cell!"

"Worse than usual," Galing said.

Richard nodded.

Allison drew back, standing on the threshold of the room as if she would bolt and run if he made a single move.

Frustrated beyond endurance, Joel stood and reached for Galing. He wanted to kill the bastard. He caught the older man's lapels as Allison cried out, slammed Galing against the wall.

Then Richard's prod caught him on the hip, whirling him away. He was flung against the wall where he sagged, clutching his invisible wound. Then, only half-recovered, he launched himself at Richard.

The orderly backstepped, jammed the prod into Joel's gut, threw him backwards as if he'd been struck by a sledgehammer. He fell to the floor.

"Thank God, Thank God!" Allison chanted.

He tried to get up, but Richard delivered another shock to his hip, knocking him flat. He felt as if his pelvis had been torn loose. As the full agony of this flooded over him the prod touched his face and brought a bouquet of lights, color, shimmering bubbles of heat and pain. Darkness . . .

When he came to, he found that they had gone. The door was closed; the room was dark; he was alone.

He wept. That was unmanly, he supposed; a sign of weakness. But he didn't hate himself for it. He was

alone. No one would listen, or believe him if they did listen. Not even Allison. Crying was called for. Tears were a sign of compassion; his own tears were the only compassion he would get.

Later, he wondered if they might be telling the truth. Was he mad? He had seen impossible things. He had seen a faceless man . . .

However, if he were only mad, and not suffering from amnesia as he had been in that previous illusion, why couldn't he recall anything of his life beyond waking up in that pod—which was yet *another* illusion?

Of course, who was to say this cell was not also illusion, as gaseous as all the others? And if it were illusory, so was all that Galing had told him about himself, just minutes ago.

He looked at the cracked nails on his hands, the blood caked under them. He touched himself and cursed the electric prod where its pain lingered. This was no illusion. Pinch himself, and he would hurt. This was very, very real.

Yet, this was *not* a mental hospital. Only in the Dark Ages had they confined a man to a dungeon because he was mentally ill. A modern institution had clean beds, nurses, electric lights. However, if insanity wasn't the answer to these strange events, what was?

He recalled Allison's supposed ability to shape illusions from thin air. Was that what these adventures were: figments of his lover's imagination? No. If she were creating illusions, she had told him about her power in the middle of one of them. Unlikely. Besides, he *knew* this was real, genuine.

That left a single course of action: escape. The only way he could regain his perspective was to get out from under their control. Free, he could judge what they'd been doing to him and why.

At the cell door again he looked in both directions,

saw the corridor was still deserted. He tested the door, found it locked. He hadn't expected anything else, yet as he applied his weight the hinges groaned unnaturally. When he looked more closely at them, he discovered they were loose. The bolts holding the hinge flanges to the stone wiggled in their bores. With a few minutes of effort he slid one of them free. Within an hour, he saw, he ought to be able to remove all the hinges and lift the door away.

And that was wrong.

These hinges hadn't been loose when he'd tried the door earlier, nor when Galing had paid a visit; at least they hadn't sounded as if they were. If they were less secure now, it was because Galing and Richard had loosened them.

He didn't see how they could have managed it, for he hadn't seen any of them touch the hinges. Had he lost consciousness that long, when the prod had struck his face? Had Allison-Annabelle loosened them when his attention was diverted to Galing and Richard? However they had managed it, here was a boldly offered escape route.

Obviously, if they wanted him to go this way, he must not.

Turning away from the door, he went to the drainage grill set in the center of the cobbled floor. Kneeling, he hooked his fingers in the metal grid, strained against it and lifted it out of its chiseled fit.

The sewer smelled like a dead horse. A cold draft rose from it, rich with sarcophagal odors. For a moment, he considered using the door even if they were expecting him to go that way, for he didn't want to have to face the incredible darkness of that tunnel. Then he remembered the candle in the pan, and he went to fetch it.

Placing the candle on the edge of the drain opening, he lowered himself into the stinking pit. His muscles

ached from scarless wounds, and weariness threatened to engulf him. Then he was standing on the tunnel floor, and he knew he could go on. He reached up and brought the candle pan down with him.

No one called out overhead. He was getting away clean.

He turned into the righthand branch of the tunnel and hurried forward as quickly as was prudent.

7

He encountered no rats in the tunnel, as he had feared he would, but he did have to cope with the moss. The stuff grew on the curved walls, spongy and thick as hair, green-blue and cold to the touch, unnaturally cold for plant life. In places it flourished so richly that he was forced to squeeze through a narrowed passage, sometimes on his hands and knees, the wet moss dragging over him like the hands of a corpse.

Once, when he stopped to rest, he made the mistake of examining the moss too closely. When he did, he saw the tiny filaments which constituted the mother-plant were in a constant state of agitation. They twisted through each other, slithered like snakes, writhed, wrapped one another and extricated themselves only to form new entanglements. They looked as if they were alive in the way an animal could be, as if some crude intelligence were at the core of them.

He got up and continued his journey, though the drain no longer seemed a safe place to be. When the moss dangled from the ceiling he felt as if long tentacles were reaching for him. When it narrowed the passageway it was a stomach closing over him, digesting him. He began looking for a way out of the tunnels.

Twenty minutes later, he found one. The wall ladder was hidden beneath the moss, and he only saw it when

the light from his dying candle caught on the pitted metal and exposed one rung. A glint of orange, and there it was.

He put the candle on the floor and sought the other rungs, ripping the moss away from them. When his fingers touched the stuff, he felt thousands of icy tendrils wriggling in his grasp like worms. In ten minutes he had climbed to the top, prised away an access plate in the floor of the corridor overhead. He levered himself into dim, purple light.

He recognized this place. Behind him, the hall went on for a hundred yards to a set of doors, featureless on both sides, no extending branches or rooms, no decoration. In front of him, it ran another hundred yards and ended at a pressure hatch upon which were stenciled several lines of printing. He knew, intuitively, perhaps because he had been here before, that the room beyond that hatch held all the answers.

Quickly he slid the sewer access plate into place, wiped his hands on his slacks, and walked to the hatch.

The first line of stenciled print read: CYCLE FOR ADMITTANCE.

He grasped the steel lock wheel in the center of the door, turned it.

The second line said: WAIT FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF COMPUTER DATA LINKAGES. WAIT FOR VERIFICATION OF VIEW CHAMBER'S SANCTITY.

He wasn't sure what it meant, but he waited anyway. In two minutes, the hatch sighed and popped loose of its rubber seal. A green light winked on overhead, and a sign said: PROCEED SAFELY ON GREEN.

He swung the door open and stepped into the room beyond. It was lighted by a curious gray plate in the far wall, the dreariest place he'd seen yet, worse in its way than the sewers. When he saw the fuzzy gray light plate was actually a window, his heartbeat quickened. He

walked towards it, hesitantly, much as a religious man might approach the altar of his god.

When he reached the glass, he found it was very thick, inches deep. Beyond it, shifting mists the color of rotten meat formed cloud-images: insubstantial horses, dragons and towers broke apart, eddied, reformed and pressed against the glass. The mist, he sensed, was more an oily smoke than a water vapor.

He felt a rising panic, a tightening of stomach, a pressure behind the eyes, all unreasonable but undeniable. He took the last two steps to the window and pressed his forehead on the glass, squinting to see through the roiling fog.

Then the smoke split open.

He blinked, certain the scene would pass, just another illusion . . . Then he choked and staggered backwards.

How could he have forgotten *this*? No man could ever forget that hideous spectacle. He was unable to look away, mesmerized by horror.

At last, though, he screamed and fell forward into darkness, finding peace, at least for a short time . . .

8

When he woke, Allison was beside the bed, wearing tight, red shorts and a gray blouse with matching choker at her neck. "How do you feel?"

He looked around and saw he was in the guest bedroom of Henry Galing's house, where he'd first met Allison after waking with amnesia. "As if I'm going mad," he answered.

She bent over him, hugged him, smothering him between her heavy breasts. "Darling, it's all right now! You're out of it! You've come back."

"Out of what? Come back from where?" he asked, warily.

"Uncle Henry!" she shouted. "Hurry!" She went to the

door, quickly repeated the alarm, then returned to his bedside.

Henry Galing entered the room a moment later. He had changed. He was still tall, broad-shouldered, mustachioed, with white hair. But he was different . . . he was pleasant. "My God, we've been worried about you, Joel!" Galing sat on the edge of the bed and touched Joel's shoulder. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Doctor Harttle's on his way up," Galing said. To Allison, he said, "He's lost that yellow color, and his eyes aren't bloodshot anymore."

Joel said, "I can't remember what I'm doing here, what's going on." He had decided against leveling charges or demanding apologies, for he was used to changing circumstances erasing the reasons for normal behaviour.

"Amnesia?" Galing asked. "That's a side-effect we hadn't foreseen." He looked frightened, as if he wondered what else they hadn't thought of.

"Side effect?" Joel asked. He felt like the straight man in an old-time comedy act, though this seemed more real than the other situations. He could smell pork roasting in the downstairs kitchen. A telephone sounded in another room, was answered on the fourth ring. The wind sighed against the window, and outside a bird called, strident but cheerful.

"Do you remember sybocylacose-46?" Galing asked. "We dubbed it *Sy*."

"A drug?" He had sat up now, feeling clear-headed, marvelous.

"Yes," Galing said. "But a special drug. Originally, it was intended for use as an inhibitor of cardiac arrythmias and to stimulate the myocardium to increase contractility. But it didn't develop as intended. The chemists could make a batch in third-stage complexity and watch it mutate into something else again inside of twenty minutes."

"Chemical compounds can't mutate."

"This one did," Galing assured him. "Sy was like a living organism evolving with blinding speed. Unable to develop a mean-strain, we just let a batch of it go, to see what would happen. It went through forty-five temporary states before settling into its finalized form."

"I don't remember," Joel said. "And it's senseless, anyway."

"It would seem to be," Galing agreed. "We thought of everything; that we'd created a living cell in the new compound and *that* was changing the nature of the compound itself; we had created a whole living creature, a liquid being the likes of which the earth had never seen; a strain of bacteria had contaminated the drug each time we made a batch, and the bacteria was what was mutating. None of these checked out."

"Then?"

"Then we began testing Sy-46 on lab animals, with odd results."

Allison came around the bed to the other side. "You don't remember any of this, darling?"

"No. I'm sorry to bore you, but I'd like it all repeated."

So Galing went on: "The lab animals seemed to go into a semi-trance, staring about as if they were seeing things for the first time, awe-stricken. They reacted to stimuli in a confused manner. Some even seemed to welcome pain as if it were pleasure; others reacted to a tickling finger as if it were a honed blade. Mice ran repeatedly into walls, when put to maze tests. All in all, we felt these indices pointed to the discovery of a new hallucinogen."

Joe felt that he already knew what was coming. It was very pat, very neat. "And I volunteered to be a human subject?"

"Insisted on it," Galing said. "From what we knew about the drug, there were too many contraindications to make it easy to find human subjects." Contraindications

were the situations in which a drug could not be administered. "It could not be given to anyone with the slightest eye impairment, to anyone with hypertension, penicillin or sulphur allergies, not to pregnant women or to women past the change of life, not to anyone with any family history of heart disease—the list goes on. In the end, you proved not to embody any of the contraindications, and you were so interested in Sy-46 that you insisted on being the first guinea pig."

"What happened?"

Galing leaned closer. "That's what we want you to tell us."

Allison took Joel's hand, squeezed it. Joel said, "How long have I been under the drug?"

"Eighteen hours," Galing said. "We feared an overdosage, despite controls."

"And your company isn't involved in paranormal research?"

"In what?" Galing asked, incredulous.

"The faceless man, the pods . . . none of that was real?"

"We'll want to know everything about your illusions," Galing said, clearly eager to begin the debriefing. "I'll get Richard to fetch the tape recorder." He rose and turned towards the door.

"Uncle Henry," Allison said, "perhaps Joel ought to rest, first."

"Nonsense," Galing said. "You see how fit he's feeling." Then he was gone, shouting for Richard.

"I was frightened," Allison said, sitting down, bending over to kiss him, her tongue playing briefly between his lips. "Don't ever volunteer for anything like that again." More tongue. "Was it as awful as you made it sound—faceless men? What happened, Joel?"

"I don't want to have to say it twice," he said. "Let's wait."

She kissed him again, leaning into him. When they broke apart, she said, "Does that make it better?"

"It helps," he said. He touched the curve of her full breast. He did not want her to vanish like Anita and Annabelle.

Henry Galing returned with the tape recorder, placed it on the nightstand, hooked it up and said, "Tell me everything you can remember about those illusions."

Joel did, except for one thing: he could not remember what he had seen through that gray view-window in the unlighted room beyond the pressure hatch. He tried hard, but that part of it was gone.

"Perhaps it's best you don't remember," Allison said, shuddering.

That night, he didn't want to sleep; asleep, he dreamed; dreaming, he was frightened awake, filled with a desolation, a bitter sense of loss he could not understand.

Beside him Allison slept on. He wanted to pull the sheets off her and touch her, arouse her, be with her again. But he was sticky with perspiration, and he didn't want to go to her like that.

Carefully he slid from under the sheet, went to the window and stared at the moon and stars. There was no highway this time, nothing but the lawn and the woods. Of course, this was reality, so there would be nothing out of place. He was no longer caught up in paranoid fantasies. Yet . . . Guiltily, he opened the window, glanced back to be sure Allison was still asleep, then reached out for the hologram screen.

He found nothing false. Indeed, the night air was cooler on his skin than the air in the room; a few, fat droplets of rain spattered on his fingers and darkened his pajama sleeve.

He closed the window, but was unsatisfied. It wouldn't

hurt to check a few more details. If anyone learned what he was doing, they'd understand. After Sy-46, anyone would need constant reassurances that the world was real.

He quietly left the room, went down the darkened stairs to Henry Galing's den, sat in the big chair behind the desk. He switched on an eight-sided light crystal which hung from the ceiling on a flexible extension arm: soft light sprang up on the blotter before him.

After only the briefest of second thoughts he opened the center desk drawer and took out the papers that lay there. Most of these were personal correspondence and bills with little interest for him. The single thing of value was a brochure touting Galing Laboratories' products. A quick look at the glossy booklet told him the company was indeed a drug manufacturerer and not concerned with paranormal research. It was strange, he thought, how his subconscious, under the influence of Sy-46, had used bits and pieces of the truth to weave its fantasies, borrowing from reality to reinforce illusion.

In one of the other drawers, he found a folder labeled SYBOCYLACOSE. It contained forty flimsies which were covered with closely-typed paragraphs full of data. He skimmed them but didn't read in detail, for he saw they only repeated what Henry Galing had told him earlier. With nothing more interesting to show for the search, he was reaching for the light switch when he saw the photograph on the desktop for the first time: Allison and him, on their wedding day, at the top of church steps, squinting in bright sunlight.

Somehow, more than all else, this reassured him. He finished reaching for the switch, shut off the lights. He left the den pretty much as he had found it and went to the kitchen where he poured himself a glass of milk, drank it in two long gulps, rinsed the glass in the sink.

He had about given up the idea of checking the lawn

to see if it were real or not, when he saw the partially opened door at the far end of the kitchen. He didn't know where it went, but if it opened onto the lawn, it best be closed and locked. Crossing to it, pulling it open, he found it was the cellar door and that a vague light glowed in the room below.

"Uncle Henry?" he called.

No one answered.

Go to bed, he told himself. He noticed the steps were concrete and the walls were white tile, that it was reminiscent of his Sy-based illusions. *Go back to bed, make love to Allison . . .*

He started down the steps. "Anyone down here?" He reached the bottom of the stairs and turned into a room where purple light glimmered unsteadily.

That was when it all broke apart.

See what you've done! he told himself. He couldn't move, and he realized he was more afraid than ever before.

In front of him, floating in ten glass-walled nutrient tanks, wired to robotic machinery which dangled overhead, were ten human bodies, men and women. In the nearest tank, directly before him, the faceless man lay on the jelly-like nutrient, staring sightlessly at the ceiling . . .

9

He wanted to wake Allison and spirit her out of the house; he found it difficult if not impossible to believe she was a willing conspirator. He recalled Galing and the faceless man speaking of her in one of those other illusory realities; the old man said she was drugged to insure her cooperation. If that were the case, he had to take her with him, now.

At the same time, he knew the basement door had

been let ajar to get his attention, that Galing wanted him to discover the bodies in the glass tanks. The old bastard would also be expecting him to go back for Allison . . .

Therefore, the thing to do was go outside and explore the lawn, the woods and whatever lay beyond. When he knew what they were up against, he could come back for her, more confident of eventually gaining their freedom.

Still in his pajamas, he left the house through the kitchen door, stood on the dark lawn drawing deep lungfuls of chilly air. This had to be real.

It wasn't. Though the lawn seemed six hundred feet deep, he covered it in twelve steps, as he had when Allison and he made their first escape.

The woods were filled with night sounds: crickets, small animals, leaves rustling. Yet it was as phoney as the immense lawn, as shallow. Beyond the woods, he came to the street, the neat houses and willow trees, all calm and middle-class and reassuring. Walking as if the pavement were made of eggs, as if it would crack away beneath him and plunge him into an abyss, he crossed the two lanes to the nearest house, opened the gate in the picket fence and went up the walk to the porch.

The window in the center of the front door was curtained with filmy lace. Between the two lengths of fabric, a cracked paper shade was drawn completely down.

He knocked, waited, knocked again, louder this time, kept on knocking until he thought the glass would shattered. Apparently, the house was deserted.

"Good enough," he said. He felt better talking aloud to himself.

He went back to the lawn, picked up a child's abandoned tricycle and used part of it to smash in the window. He cleared away the jagged shards, reached inside, pushing the lacy curtains out of his way, felt for the lock, threw it, and opened the door.

Three feet inside the front door, the house ended in a featureless wall. A cement wall. The room he stood in ex-

tended only three feet on either side, hardly large enough to turn around in. He managed to turn, however, and he looked up at the timbers and braces that held the false front of the house in place. He couldn't see much in the dim light, just enough to be convinced that the whole street was probably a fake.

Outside, he went to the open ground between this house and the next, to determine why he hadn't seen cement wall between them. Even close up, he seemed to be staring at a vista of lawns and other houses on parallel streets, the winking red warning lights on a distant radio tower . . . He turned, searched the shrubs between the houses and soon located the hologram projectors. When he kicked these apart, the pretty pictures ceased to be, replaced by cement wall.

Now he was getting somewhere . . . although he couldn't be sure just where in hell he was getting.

He trotted up the street to the intersection, turned the corner and saw the wrecked fan shuttle on its roof, crumpled against the willow tree. A smashed picket fence lay across the road like the vertebrae of a reptillian fossil. Oil bled from the shuttle, lay in thick pools on the pavement.

Here was irrefutable proof that this previous illusion had been no illusion at all—unless he was, now, in the same dream he'd suffered through before . . .

He turned away from the car, angry with himself. He was uncovering the truth behind the stage settings, and he should have begun to make sense of it. Obviously he was still in the windowless building where he'd originally awakened from the pods. It had been dressed up to fool him, but the dressings were very shabby duds. Why all this trouble to confuse him? He grew angrier when the answer continued to elude him.

He looked down this second avenue: quaint houses, well-tended lawns, a few parked fan shuttles, darkness, quiet. A long way off, a traffic light winked an amber

eye; a long, low car pulled up on the cross street where the light would be blinking red, then drove through the intersection and passed out of sight.

If they hadn't wrecked here, where would they have ended up? How far did this grand deception continue?

He walked down the avenue approximately seventy yards before he confronted a cement wall upon which a hologram of the rest of the street was projected. The red light and moving car had been features of a cleverly made background film, nothing more.

It was clear he and Allison had never been meant to come this far, that the fan shuttle accident had been part of the play, programmed to occur. Unable to cope with the complexity of the deception, he went back to find the hologram projectors.

On the porch of the last house, he found a projector concealed by the bannisters. He kicked it apart, darkening half the corridor wall. Across the street, on another porch, he found the second projector and destroyed that as well. He enjoyed the destruction, though he couldn't gain much genuine satisfaction from it.

When there was nothing more to crush, he noticed the neatly folded sheet of yellowed paper which had lain beneath the last machine—as if it had been placed there for him to find. Well, let's play along, he thought. He bent, picked it up. The paper was yellowed by years, the creases in it so dry that it cracked and fell into three separate pieces as he opened it. He fitted the fragments together and looked at the message, read it three times:

DEAR JOEL:
NOTHING IS AS IT SEEMS, YET EVERYTHING IS WHAT YOU SUSPECT IT IS. DON'T DESPAIR. YOU'VE BEEN THIS WAY BEFORE AND MIGHT BE THIS WAY AGAIN, YET YOU'RE SANE AND ALIVE. REMEMBER THAT.

The note had been written with a dull pencil.
It had been written in haste.
And the handwriting was his own.

10

The more he tried to make sense of the note, the less clear it seemed. Finally, he folded it, tucked it in his pocket, and went back to the middle of the street. He studied the gray wall where there had once been a long tree-lined avenue, a red light, a moving car. The only thing of interest about the smooth cement was a door which the film clip had concealed. It was white, with stainless steel fittings, devoid of warning signs. Perhaps its very anonymity was what made it intriguing. He walked to it and tried the knob.

On the other side was a corridor sixty feet long, with eight elevators on a side, a set of red doors at the end. He let the door behind him close on the artificial residential street. Since he now suspected his adventures had taken place within a single building, the elevators were of great interest to him. With those, he could more fully explore this place and learn the nature of it. Once that was done, it would be a simple matter to deduce the reasoning behind this charade and his purpose in being here.

Yet he was not most interested in the elevators; instead, he was drawn toward the crimson doors. Pushing these open, he found the same long hall into which he had first come, when he'd exited the sewer in his escape from that dungeon room. At the far end was the pressure hatch which guarded the observation room. He remembered the foot-thick glass window which looked out upon—

Upon what?

He hadn't forgotten what was beyond that window; the memory had merely been suppressed. He had passed

out before that window, had been found and taken back to Henry Galing's house where he was fed the story of Sy-46. He was aware, now, that the Sy-46 story, and the others before it, had been invented to make him forget what lay beyond the observation room window.

CYCLE FOR ADMITTANCE. WAIT FOR ESTABLISHMENT OF COMPUTER DATA LINKAGES. WAIT FOR VERIFICATION OF VIEW-CHAMBER'S SANCTITY. PROCEED SAFELY ON GREEN.

He opened the enormous door and peered into the darkened room. From somewhere ahead, a muddy gray light pulsed dimly.

He closed the door without entering, watched the green light flick off, spun the heavy wheel into lock position.

Leaning against the hatch, he let his breath out in a long shudder of relief. He'd nearly made a fatal error. If he had gone into that room again, he felt sure, he would have been drawn towards the window where he would have looked upon that which he couldn't yet bear to see. He would have suffered another trauma, passed out, would have been found by Galing, would have awakened to another lie, would have had to start all over again.

This the rat learned in the maze: don't make the same mistake twice.

He went back through the red doors and studied the floor indicators above the elevators. Fourteen of the lifts only served the fourth to the eighteenth floors. The other two went to the bottom of the building. One of these was not working. He summoned the functioning cage, stepped into it, punched the button for the bottom floor, watched the door close, went down.

He stepped out of the elevator into the familiar hall that lead to the pod chamber observation deck. That narrow room, where he stood in the center of it, was as he had first seen it: black command chairs, purple lighting strip, unlighted monitoring equipment . . .

Only the dust-covering had changed. Someone had cleaned off the chairs and the control consoles; the dust on the floor was marred by many footprints, those made when they'd tried to fool him with the aquamen. He stepped to the nearest window, looked into the room where the pods stood, lifeless, dust-filmed.

They . . .

Were . . .

Reall

When he had been expelled from that life support pod, he'd been thrust into reality, no matter how bitter and inexplicable it seemed. The world was immutable, then, waiting to be explored and understood. But from the moment the faceless man had touched him, in that third floor office where he found the skeleton, he had been living in Galing's clever stage settings. Now, once again back to reality, to the cold and hard facts of his condition, he set out to explore this eighteen level structure to see what he could learn.

He tried to hurry, though he wanted to give himself a chance to notice anything useful to his inquiry. He could not forget that Galing's crew still held Allison as a hostage.

11

Two hours later Joel had a working knowledge of the building. It was an inverted pyramid lacking both windows and doors to the outside world and, therefore, most likely a subterranean installation. As many floors had been set up as sleeping quarters as had been given over

to offices and laboratories. At one time the pyramid must have housed two thousand people, though now there was not a clue to their fate. The top floor, where Galing lived and where the fake streets had been built, was the garage. The corridors there were several times wider than on lower levels, and several huge rooms were parked full of cars, buses, armoured military jeeps, tanks, amphibious troop carriers, taxis, pleasure cars and utilitarian shuttles. Only one small segment of this topmost level had been used to build the phoney streets, the forest and Galing's house.

Yet, knowing all this, Joel still could not find a reason for the existence of such a place or for his own presence here. It was a puzzle similar to that presented by astronomy: man could learn countless facts about the universe, without ever quite grasping the *why* of it.

Now Joel lay on a bed of ferns at the edge of the telescoped forest, watching the rear of the Galing mansion. He had returned for Allison, but he intended to observe before doing anything. The house was dark and silent; however, just as he decided no one was up and about, a light came on in the kitchen. A moment later the back door opened and three men came outside: Galing, Richard, and the faceless man. The three of them walked purposefully towards the woods, each step giving them an impossible, sudden growth. In a moment they stood at the perimeter of the trees.

Joel could hear what they said, for they weren't more than six feet from where he hid in the ferns.

"We should have foreseen it," Galing said.

Richard said, defensively, "This wasn't part of the program."

"Neither was his escape from the dungeon mock-up. When he went out by the sewer instead of through the door, we should have known the program was breaking down."

They were silent a moment, and then the faceless man said, "Maybe this time he'll have convinced himself about the girl."

Galing grunted. "That'd be nice! No more of these damned charades!"

"And no more time in the cold tanks," Richard added. "I dread it more each time he sends us back to those things."

"At least *you* haven't been temporarily transformed into a monster!" the faceless man said. "Just look at me!"

"As you said," Galing told him, "it's only temporary."

"You think that makes it more fun for me?" the faceless man asked.

Galing said, "Maybe he'll choose me for the faceless part next time."

"No," the faceless man said, sullenly. "You're a major figure in this whole affair, one of the primary symbols his psyche can't do without. Not have Henry Galing in one of his charades? Hell, that'd be like not giving *himself* a role!"

"Come on," Galing said. "We've got to see how much he's discovered and what can be done."

"I know what to do," the faceless man said. "Stop the charade right now."

"He wouldn't like that."

"Why wouldn't he? He must be mad with confusion."

"And that's just what he wants to be," Galing said.

"But it's all falling apart, Henry!"

"Then let's see if we can put it together again, for a while."

They disappeared along the woodland path, reached the fake street and began a careful search for possible hiding places.

Joel got to his feet, crossed the lawn and entered the lighted kitchen. He stood there, inside the door, listening to the silent house. If any of those men and women in

the nutrient tanks had come awake, or if Gina were up and about, he would have heard them. There was only silence. He went after Allison.

12

"Allison, wake up!"

She turned over, blinked at him and yawned. "You're dressed," she said. "Where are you going?"

"I've already been there," he said. "To the street where we had the accident, and farther."

Suddenly concerned, she sat up and threw the sheets back, her bare breasts cast in shadow except for a swath of pale moonlight that emphasized their curves. "What accident, darling?"

"The fan shuttle, of course, when . . ." Then he recalled that the fan shuttle accident had taken place in another reality, another time-place. If she weren't a part of this deception she wouldn't remember it.

"Joel?" she asked, a tremor in her voice. "You better lay down. This is probably some after-effect of Sy-46."

"There's no such drug," he said. "That's a lie, though you don't know that yet. This whole thing's a lie."

She got up and touched him on the cheek. "Joel, lay down and let me get Uncle Henry. A doctor, too. We won't let anything happen to you or—"

He grasped her arm and said, "I want you to see something." Before she could object, he hurried her to the window, held onto her as he threw the bolt and pushed the halves of the window open.

"What is it?" she asked.

He looked at the sky, the moon and stars. He was either going to make a fool of himself or give her incontrovertible proof. He said, "Would you get the chair from the dresser and bring it here?"

When she returned with it, he placed the chair under the window, stood on it, leaned out—

"Joel, you'll fall!"

"No," he said. He leaned farther, out of the upper part of the window, extending his arm until he touched a star. And another star. The moon was too far away, at least twenty feet out on the cement ceiling.

He climbed off the chair, let her take his place, told her what to do and was rewarded by her squeal of surprise when she ran her fingers over the first star and saw it projected on the back of her hand rather than on the ceiling above the house. She said, "The sky isn't real!"

"Neither is much else," he told her.

"But it's not possible—"

"Believe me, love, it is possible. But we haven't time to talk about it now, because Galing and the others might be back at any moment."

He stood at the window, watching the dark lawn as she dressed. When she said she was ready he turned and saw her standing before him with her hand raised like an Indian's peace sign. She was wearing the glove with all of the tiny hypodermic needles in the palm, the device the faceless man had used in the past.

"No, Allison . . ." he began.

She touched him, firmly, on the side of his neck.

"No!" he said.

But it was too late. Darkness.

13

After that, it got worse.

He was subjected to a string of illusions more detailed than the first ones had been, though each fell apart more quickly than the last. Too, the periods of unconsciousness between illusions were now filled with dreams, with the *same* dream. Each time, he woke before that dream could be finished, though each time it progressed farther than it had before. He was aware that there was some meaning in the dream, some solution to the puzzle, and

he almost welcomed the periods of unconsciousness when he could continue with it.

Strangely, Galing, Richard, Gina and the faceless man rarely made appearances in these new illusions, but left the whole thing up to Allison. Always, he started out with a deep affection for the girl, a need and desire to please that went beyond mere love. Always, however, he began to see he was in another illusion, remembered she'd betrayed him and couldn't be trusted. Always, he remained calm, unangered by her treachery, only saddened by betrayal. And, always, she seemed as distraught as he, eager to have done with this impossible shifting world, this kaliedoscope of realities that they inhabited and shucked off like old clothes.

Never, strangely enough, was she named Allison, though she was always the same woman, down to the style of her dress and the way she wore her lustrous fall of black hair.

And the illusions went on:

"Well," she said, leaning over him, bare breasts tickling his chest, "I'm glad to see you're awake."

He yawned, sat up and looked around the bridal suite which was costing him a hundred bucks a day. From the flame red wallpaper to the decadently mirrored ceiling it was meant to stir passions, and it stirred his now. He reached for her, pulled her down.

"Darling," she giggled, "breakfast has been sent up. It'll get cold!"

"There's a heating element in the serving cart," he said. "It'll be warm when we're ready to eat."

And, an hour later, they had breakfast.

They dawdled over each other through the afternoon, talking only a little, making love a lot. The day passed.

When they had almost finished with the dinner that had been delivered while Joel was in the shower, he reached for the room service phone and picked it up.

Annie was suddenly frightened. "What do you want?" Why was she so anxious, on their honeymoon? What was there to fear?

"May I help you?" a voice on the other end of the line asked.

He ordered a bottle of Cold Duck, though he felt suddenly ill-at-ease. That phone voice was unpleasantly familiar, though he could not say why. When the bellboy came, he had no trouble recognizing the source of his own uneasiness.

"Richard," he said.

"Relax," Annie-Allison said. Richard was wearing the hypodermic glove. "You'll only be put to sleep a short while, darling."

"Who are you people?"

"Trust us," Richard said. "Relax, now."

He struck out at Richard. The blow connected, but so did the slap of the hypodermic glove.

"Please, please . . ." Joel said, slipping into the old dream again:

He stood at the doorway of a private bath cubicle, waiting for a raven-haired girl. She was squeezing a blue tablet from a plastic coil of pills.

"Do you really need that?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. She had it free now.

"If you do all your view duties sedated, you'll need twice as many tours to satisfy the psychologists."

"I don't care," she said. "I'd fall apart if I tried it unsedated." She took the pill, her lovely throat rippling as she swallowed. He thought how much he loved her, and he desperately wished there were something more for her than this dying world of theirs. A man should at least be able to give his woman a future. He felt robbed by circumstance, cheated and broken open like a dead fruit, rotten inside.

"Let's go," she said.
"All right, Alicia."

He woke at the memory of her name. He didn't want to wake up, for he felt his dream had more reality to it than Galing's stage settings. Alicia had existed. He had seen her name on one of those locker doors next to the life support pod chamber . . .

An explosion shook the room in which he lay; dust settled from the stone ceiling. He sat up, afraid, his head aching, heart beating too fast, mouth dry as the dust around him.

Beside him, Allison said, "Another raid."

"Was I asleep?"

"Yes. I thought the sirens would wake you, but they didn't." Her clothes were torn, he saw, and a spot of blood stained the collar of her blouse.

Suddenly, a series of explosions shook them, a thunderous roar making conversation impossible for quite some time. Indeed, it was impossible even to think in that holocaust. All he could do was look stupidly around the room, which seemed oddly familiar. The walls and ceiling were of hand-mortared stone. In the center of the floor, a drainage grill lay half in shadow. Near the heavy oaken door, a candle guttered in a pan.

When the bombing ceased, Allison came into his arms. "I can't take much more of this."

"Do you have any sedatives?" he asked.

She looked at him strangely. "No. I've used them all."

"I'll ask Henry to prescribe more for you."

"Henry who?" she asked, genuinely bewildered. He thought there might be a trace of apprehension behind that bewilderment.

"Your uncle, Dr. Galing," he said. It was odd, Allison not remembering her own uncle . . .

"I don't have any Uncle Henry," she said.

"Allison, your Uncle Henry is—"

"My name's Alice, not Allison," she said. "You aren't keyed into this at all, are you?"

"I don't understand," he said.

As if he had been listening on the other side, Richard opened the door and came in, wearing the hypodermic glove.

"Don't I know you?" Joel asked.

"I'm the sandman," Richard said, putting Joel to sleep.

After Alicia took her sedative, they left their small apartment and rode the elevator to the top level. Shortly, they came to the pressure hatch leading to the view chamber.

CYCLE FOR ADMITTANCE. WAIT FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF COMPUTER DATA LINKAGES. WAIT FOR VERIFICATION OF VIEW CHAMBER'S SANCTITY. PROCEED SAFELY ON GREEN.

As he pulled the door open, she clutched his hand, though he could not offer her much support. He was every bit as frightened and demoralized as she was. This was one more thing taken from him by these times: his man's strength.

They walked reluctantly into the view chamber . . .

He woke in the observation room, sitting in a command chair, staring through a port at the lazily swimming aquamen. He turned to Henry Galing on his right and said, "It won't work, you know."

"What won't?" Galing asked.

"The illusion."

Galing nodded. "But do you know who you are, who the girl is, the whole story?"

"Her name's not Allison, but Alicia. I don't know anything else."

"Then we'll have to go on with it," Galing said.

"No—"

"Yes. It's what you want me to do."

The faceless man had come up behind Joel; the touch of the hypodermic glove was icy . . .

Joel and Alicia crossed the dimly lighted view chamber and looked out on the gray scene, grayed themselves by its reflection, given a view of everlasting death without equal, death beyond hope, death beyond imagination, death very nearly beyond endurance.

She shuddered but didn't run, remained at his side as if taking her strength from him, unaware that he gained strength from her. The required minutes ticked past . . .

The overhead speakers crackled to life with a lecture on the scene they were required to observe. Each of the tape's words had been carefully chosen by the psychologists and semanticists; no propaganda had ever been so meticulously constructed. "This," the speaker said, "is what you have done and what you can never undo, even until the ends of your days."

Others watched from viewpoints along the thick glass, but no one spoke. The scene was its own best comment. The scene was—

The bridal suite had flame red wallpaper and a mirrored ceiling, and it was costing him a hundred bucks a day. He knew immediately that it was not real. He hadn't yet been able to break down the wall of amnesia to discover who he was and why he was here, but at least he could no longer be fooled by a lot of props and by hypno-structured illusions. He knew that, if he opened the door of the honeymoon suite, he would find Henry Galing's house beyond it, rather than a hotel.

His first impulse was to awaken Allison and question her. Even if she called for help, and even if her call were

quickly answered, he ought to be able to force her to tell him . . .

But that was no good. He wouldn't be able to force her to tell him anything, because he would be unable to hurt her or even threaten her; he cared for her too much. His affection was based on some relationship they had enjoyed when she was called Alicia, back beyond the wall of amnesia, in those days when he'd been totally familiar with this place. No matter how she behaved now, he knew she loved him, as he loved her.

Besides, even if he could learn something from her he'd gain no edge from the knowledge. He'd be put to sleep again. The next time he was awakened they might take more care with the illusion so he would not recognize it, right away, for what it was.

And, ever since this nightmare had begun, he'd been afraid he'd be put to sleep and never wakened again, or at least not for a long time. He was afraid he'd sleep years and then wake in that life support pod again and have to start all over. He remembered the note he found on the porch of that fake house, the note he had left for himself. That indicated he'd been through this before; he didn't want to go through it again.

What, then? Lying there, staring at himself in the mirrors above, he decided his best chance was to act fooled, to lull them into thinking he didn't suspect a thing. They could be tricked; he had proved that before. So, put them off balance, then make a move when they were least expecting it. He would have to get hold of the hypodermic glove. With that, he could sedate all of them and have plenty of time to probe more deeply into the nature of this pyramidal building.

Two days. In two days, he'd make his move and become master of the situation. He saw, now, that escape was not enough. Galing and the others must become his prisoners. Whereas he wouldn't have harmed Allison,

he would not hesitate to torture Galing to extract the information he sought.

Beyond the single window, in the hotel bedroom, skyscrapers thrust at an overcast sky. Distant traffic noises rose against the false window. He knew he could open those panes and smash the hologram scene, but he would not. Not yet. But soon.

Allison rolled over, blinking, yawned at him.

"Sleepyhead," he said, grinning, grabbing for her.

She looked at him closely, as if uncertain of him.

He kissed her, cupped her buttocks in his hands. "Sleepyhead!"

She smiled, slipping into her role now. "Sex fiend," she replied.

He laughed and rolled her atop him and didn't mind at all when they began to add some versimilitude to the phoney honeymoon setting.

14

His deception worked well.

They passed two days in their room, making love, reading, watching old movies on television, making more love, napping, talking. He supposed he had been hypnoprogrammed not to want to leave the room, so he made no mention of the world outside.

Two days later, when Richard delivered their dinner on a silver cart, he was confident enough to turn his back on Joel. That was when Joel picked up a silver wine goblet and knocked the other man unconscious.

Red wine speckled the carpet and showered across the lounging chair.

Allison said, "You weren't fooled."

He stepped to her and delivered a short, gentle punch to her delicate chin. She should have gone down, but she only swayed on the balls of her feet and made a face, as if to scream for help. He chopped at her jaw again,

harder this time, surprised at her strength. She slumped into his arms. Gently, feeling guilty for having had to hurt her, he lifted her and carried her to the bed where she could lay comfortably.

Richard groaned, shook his head, tried to get to his knees. Joel put an end to that with two blows to the back of the man's neck.

Joel stood listening to the house; there was no alarm, as yet. But if Richard was long in reporting back to Galing, it was all over before it began.

He bent and rifled Richard's pockets, found the hypodermic glove. It was thicker than he had expected it to be, and the cuff was a hollow tube in which most of the glove's mechanisms lay. He pulled it on and gave both Richard and Allison a dose of their own medicine.

Then he picked up the room service phone and, when Galing answered, said, "You better come up here." He hung up.

He stood beside the door, quiet, until someone knocked. When he didn't answer, the door was flung open and the faceless man came in, wearing a hypodermic glove. Joel stepped forward and got the freak on the back of the neck before he had a chance to turn around.

Galing came in, not aware how drastically the balance of power had shifted, tried to run when he did see it. He didn't make it out of the room in time, went down under Joel's icy touch.

For a moment, Joel was elated, and then he heard quick footsteps on the stairs, remembered Gina. He gave chase, saw her in the downstairs hall as he reached the top of the staircase. By the time he gained the hall himself, she was entering the kitchen.

"Wait!"

She didn't wait, of course.

In the kitchen, she went through the cellar door and locked it behind her, barely avoiding the swipe of his glove. He heard her going down the basement stairs two

at a time, and he tried to force the door. It was stronger than it appeared to be; perhaps the wood veneer concealed not porous panelboard but metal.

If there had been nothing down there but an empty cellar, he would have blockaded the door from his side and forgotten all about her. But she now had access to thirty nutrient tanks in which other men and women rested. She would know how to wake them, and she would rally a small army against him.

He had still not won.

He ran upstairs again to the "hotel" room, scooped Allison from the bed and took her back down to the kitchen. The cellar door was still locked, which was to be expected. Gina couldn't revitalize her zombie-like companions in such short order.

Outside, he crossed the telescoped lawn and forest, crossed the fake street, turned away from the intersection and eventually found a door leading out of the disguised corridor.

Minutes later, he brought her to a room full of fan shuttles of all types, tiny cars and military vehicles, and he chose one of the largest of these as their escape car, sliding Allison into the passenger's seat.

As yet, there was no pursuit.

He walked around the vehicle, decided it was the equivalent of a tank. It was thirty feet long, twelve wide and fifteen high, lower in back than in front, running on tread rather than on an air cushion, solid. It should get them through anything.

He got into the cab with Allison, strapped both of them in place. He decided, as he studied the banks of controls, that she would be better off if she stayed asleep. He had been driven to the wall, was acting preciptitously, and had no way of knowing what he was getting them into. Yes, it was best that she slept.

With surprisingly little trial and error, he started the

tank's engines, powered by a miniature fusion plant, and put the monstrous machine in gear.

"Here we go," he said, aloud, to himself.

15

He drove the tank down the rows of silent machines, the roar of its big engines thundering from wall to wall, went clear to the back of the huge garage where he found and boarded a ramp leading gradually upwards. Thirty yards along the ramp, the walls closed in and the ceiling lowered, the corners disappeared, and he found himself in a smooth tube, a tunnel. When he glanced at the view-screen which brought a closed-circuit picture of the road behind, he saw that a sphincter door had cycled out of the walls back there, sealing him off from the garage.

A trap? He supposed the only way to find out was to go on. He followed the rising corridor until, at last, they came to a second sphincter door which irised open at his approach, let him through and whirled shut again. He brought the tank to a halt just outside the tunnel mouth and, stunned, looked at the outside world he had been so long in reaching.

16

The sky was a gray-brown mass of roiling vapors and darker, heavier clouds like clots of mucous scudding sluggishly down the throat of the world; no birds flew, and no sun shone. The land was gray, dead. It contained no trees, only towering fungoid forms reaching from the ground like the rotting fingers of dead giants determined to push out of the grave. The earth was all dressed in fungus and moss like that wriggling monstrosity he had encountered in the sewer during his escape from the

dungeon. Thick, brown fog passed between these towers of fungus like an intelligent entity seeking something unspeakable; that was the only movement. No animals scampered through the vegetation; no breeze stirred a leaf, for there was neither breeze nor leaf. Just endless vistas of death . . .

Seeing all of this, he remembered . . .

This was the world man had inherited when the planet's ecological systems began to break down in the late 1990s. In those Last Days, the government had constructed the pyramid deep beneath the flatlands of Utah, a last bastion of mankind where two thousand top administrators and scientists searched frantically for some way to perpetuate the species. While millions died from a complex chain of ecological disasters, those inside the pyramid—Joel among them—had worked in conjunction with NASA to launch the seeds of mankind toward the stars.

Well, not mankind as he had always been known. In a hundred deep-space, faster-than-light drone probes, NASA had never recorded a planet enough like Earth to permit comfortable human colonization. Therefore it was necessary to create genetic alternatives to man—the aquamen, among others—for the interstellar ships which had been readied to take Earth's children from their dying home.

This done, they next studied and perfected the science of cryogenics, building sixteen life suspension pods—all their limited supplies allowed—into which volunteers, drawn from a pool of six hundred, were placed for a thousand-year sleep, in hopes they'd wake in a world where ecological balance had been regained. Fifty years later, all the pods but one were damaged in the riots when rational society inside the pyramid died, leaving only Joel to wake ten centuries later. He found poisoned air and fungus beyond the view-chamber window —and no one in the pyramid, not even Alicia Corley

whom he'd loved and who'd been in Pod Six, to share that awful sight with. He was the last man on Earth.

He activated the nucleotide vats and the computers controlling them, and he built a dozen androids. Originally he intended to treat these artificial companions as man had treated them since they'd first been successfully made in 1995: as tools, slaves, never as equals. He would hypno-educate them, assign them projects, then return to his pod, checking on them for a week or two each century. Because androids were, in effect, immortal, they could pass ten thousand years searching for a way to roll back the ecological disaster. One hitch developed, though it didn't seem like a hitch at first: Joel discovered, through various laboratory tests, that his own tissues had ceased to age, that he was now immortal himself, through some strange effect of his thousand-year sleep. There was now no need to return to the pods. However, over the months that he worked side-by-side with the vat-formed men and women he began to think of them as more than animals or slaves. He felt they were his equals, and soon he fell in love with the one who looked a bit like Alicia: he fell in love with Allison, a vat-born.

He looked at her now, where she slept beside him, and he could easily see why he'd fallen in love . . .

Falling in love with an android was—since there was no one for the last man to murder—the only cardinal sin: a womb-born must never have sexual relations with a vat-born. Never in human history had there been such a universally held, fiercely evangelized and rigidly adhered to rule against miscegenation. He loathed himself for loving her. He tried to overcome this, couldn't, decided that anti-android propaganda must have been fed to him during hypno-training sessions during his early days in the pyramid—this loathing was too strong to be naturally bred. And nothing short of a point-for-point opposing, pro-android propaganda tape could cure him. Yet, without knowing what that original propaganda had

been, he couldn't establish a curing program. Unable to treat his own illness, then, he decided to assign the android team various research tasks and return to his pod, even though he no longer needed it. He thought that another hundred years of sleep would erase either his love or his prejudice. He woke, a century later, with both: he still loved her, and he still loathed himself for his desires . . .

What had happened then? As he watched the swaying fungoid towers which had begun to move on the plain before him, he remembered . . . Next had come Disorientation Therapy, a drastic form of psychiatry popular in the decade before the big ecological changes. He knew it was his best chance. He and the androids had stripped the pyramid of every clue to its nature, stored these records in sealed vaults, and structured a Disorientation Therapy Puzzle of the whole installation. He would be given a temporary chemical amnesia, placed in his pod and, when revived, would find himself in a maze of deception and illusion: fake streets, the dungeon, the house . . . In this weird play, Allison would be his only touchstone to reality as he struggled to solve the problem and reorient himself. They hoped he would come to need her and care for her so much, in his disorientation, that his guilt would be easily defeated.

It had worked. He had slept with her and he wanted to sleep with her again, perhaps even have a family by her, and he felt no guilt. He was cured.

Then why did he feel that something was terribly wrong?

"Joel! Joel Amslow!" Henry Galing's voice crackled on the radio receiver in the panel of dash controls before him.

He flicked a switch permitting two-way conversation. "I'm here."

"This wasn't in the program," Galing said. "You weren't supposed to react like this." He hesitated, re-

gaining his composure. "I assume you understand, now."

"Yes," Joel said. "And the Therapy was a success."

Galing was cautious. "Oh?"

Joel sighed, looked away from the fungus to the girl on the seat beside him. "So successful I can't see why it was even necessary. You people may be vat-born, formed as complete adults, but you've got your own personalities; you're as human as I am. I no longer have to be alone."

"Fine, fine," Galing said. "But that is only half of it. Apparently, you don't know anything about what the Overmaster did to you, how close we came to being destroyed, the pyramid breached."

"Who is the Overmaster and what—" Joel began. He was unable to finish, because the earth rumbled beneath the big tank, lifted up, tilted, slammed down, nearly overturning the elephantine vehicle.

Joel looked up, startled, as he was jerked back against his safety harness, and he saw the towering fungoid forms had come so close that they rose above the tank like the many fingers of an alien hand, reaching down to crush him.

Illusion? He had been through so many illusions recently, that he could not help but doubt the reality of what he saw before him. These things were only plant life; they shouldn't have the mobility of animals.

The fungus flowed toward the tank in a many-pronged ameboid mass, just as the writhing carpet of moss, underneath, surged up once again, rocking them violently back and forth.

This was no Disorientation Therapy Puzzle, no illusion; this was frighteningly real!

Joel shifted the tank into reverse and backed up, turning hard as he did so, trying to pull out from under the falling wave of amorphous fungus, trying to get to the tunnel that lead into the subterranean pyramid from which they had "escaped" only minutes ago.

The glistening, wet mass of vegetable matter, like a gray jelly, fell noiselessly across the place where the tank had been, rolled silently on, lapped at the tank tread, slapped up over the knobby, armoured hood, pushed against the cameras which gave Joel a remote view of the way behind. Then, eddying like thickened water, it pulled backwards, swelled again in a gray pool, rose up for another inward rush.

He was facing the sealed opening of the tunnel, now, and he called to Galing over the open radio: "For God's sake, man, open up! We're coming back inside."

Galing's voice crackled on the radio; but it was drowned out by the clatter of tank tread as the ground beneath them heaved again, the moss trying to overturn them.

"Open up!" Joel repeated.

The tunnel door irised in front of them.

Before it was more than half open, Joel tramped the accelerator and took the tank straight toward the widening entrance.

Behind, the gray mass rushed in.

The tank tread struck the sloping concrete approach to the tunnel entrance, jolting hard but not slowing down. As the door irised fully open, they plunged through it, with the pulsing mass of gray vegetation close behind.

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The insistent, gray fungus was unable to jam the door open; it cycled shut without hesitation, slicing through the stuff like a hot, razor-edged knife. A fifty-pound chunk of the main growth was severed and isolated in the tunnel behind the tank; it curled and twisted, utterly shapeless, but as if it were seeking a shape.

Joel brought the tank to a full stop as a second door confronted him, deeper in the tunnel, sealing him in the first fifty yards of the tube.

"Decontamination," Henry Galing said, over the radio. Now that he was back in the complex they were able to monitor him again.

A thin white gas hissed out of the walls on both sides, filling the passageway until, in a few minutes, the viewscreens showed only blank white vapor. When this cleared, the rear cameras fixed on a dampness on the tunnel floor, all that remained of the fifty-pound piece of fungus.

Ahead, the inner door cycled open.

He shifted gears and drove ahead.

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They were all in the big, top-level garage, waiting for him when he drove the tank back and parked it: Henry, Richard, Gina, Dr. Harttle, the faceless man and the other six who had not figured quite so prominently in his Disorientation Therapy. Seeing them now, his own creations, he wondered how he could ever have feared them or failed to recognize them, even if he had been influenced by a temporary, drug-induced amnesia. He recalled how, in such detail, they had planned his Disorientation Therapy Puzzle: the bare floors of unused offices, the skeleton he had found, the faceless man, the story he had been told about falling off a roof while rescuing a cat, the story about Sy-46 which he had been meant to see through, the dungeon, the honeymoon suite, even the little oddities like the dust between Allison's breasts and in Dr. Harttle's hair. It had worked admirably well, had cured him of his guilt, had made Allison especially precious to him.

There was only one thing he did not remember: the Overmaster. The moving fungus that had reacted more like an animal than like a plant. No such entity had existed, to the best of his knowledge, before his drug-

induced amnesia; and he was certain nothing like that had been included as part of his therapy.

Henry came forth to meet him when he stepped out of the tank, and to Joel's surprise, the android was crying. He took Joel's hand and shook it vigorously. "Thank God you're back," he said.

"It was touch and go," Joel admitted. "I don't know what that stuff could have done to the tank if it had engulfed us, but I'm just as happy not to have had to find out."

"Allison?" Galing asked.

"She's all right; still asleep."

The android was obviously relieved. Seeing how happy all of them were to know that Allison was in good shape, Joel couldn't understand how he could ever have looked upon their kind as little more than animals. They clearly had human emotions, attachments, relationships and needs.

"What did I get myself into, outside?" Joel asked. "What was that gray mass, those towers of—"

"Fungus, moss, various sorts of vegetation—all under the control of the Overmaster," Galing said.

"You've used that name before, but it means nothing to me."

"It will in a moment," Galing said. He wiped a hand over his face, giving himself a moment to think where to begin. "During those thousand years that you slept, before you made the twelve of us in the images of your dead friends, the world's ecological systems changed more than we knew. These new and grotesque plant-forms came to dominate the surface of the globe; they began slowly to function in harmony, then became interdependent; at last, between them, they developed a rudimentary intelligence."

"The Overmaster?"

"Yes," Galing said. "Realize that Earth, polluted as it

was, became a genetic pressure cooker that boiled up mutations faster than anyone would ever have thought possible. In surprisingly short order that rudimentary intelligence became a formidable mind equal to that of any man. In a couple of centuries it developed animal-like mobility in some of its components—which you witnessed a few minutes ago."

Joel said, "When did you learn all of this?"

"After you went through the Puzzle Therapy for the first time," Galing said.

"I've been through it more than once?"

"Five times," Galing said. "You see, when you were first given those amnesia-inducing drugs and placed in your pod, you were unwittingly turned over to the Overmaster's influence."

"I don't understand."

Galing said, "Our mistake was in not monitoring developments in the outside world as closely as we should have. We knew things had changed, but we didn't know how much they had changed, and therefore we took inadequate precautions. The Overmaster, through various of its mobile components—mosses, fungi—infiltrated the lowest computer cell blocks and even the fusion power plant beneath the last main level of the pyramid. Taproots breached nearly every computer memory bank; with access to all our records, it learned all there was to know about us, about mankind. Apparently, it decided that the only enemy it faced on this remodeled world was us—specifically, you. We could be left to die accidentally or of our own hand, but you must be given no quarter, no chance."

"Why did it think of me as being so vital?" Joel asked.

"Because you *are* vital. We need you. For one thing, only you can create more of us, because the operation of the vats requires a womb-born man whose fingerprints are on file in the installation computer. Only you can

give Michael back his face. And only you have the first-hand pre-disaster knowledge we need to channel our energies to the proper research."

Joel said, "But how could the Overmaster have gotten to me?"

"While you were unconscious in your pod, prior to the start of the therapy, the Overmaster fed you highly compressed subliminal propaganda tapes which reinforced your neuroses. It turned your distaste into active hatred for androids, then ballooned that hatred into fanatical loathing. It made an eventual cure remote indeed. When you went through the Disorientation Puzzle so differently than expected, and when, at its conclusion, you seemed even more bigoted against vat-born people, we knew something serious had gone wrong. Indeed, your neurosis was so strong now it would have endangered the future of the entire installation. Therefore we put you to sleep, and we began to search for an answer."

"And you discovered the Overmaster."

"Only after nearly a decade," Galing said. "But when we finally knew he existed, we were quick to find the breach in the pyramid, the computer tap, and the propaganda tape link to your pod. We purged the computers of contamination, used the Overmaster's propaganda tapes to structure pro-android propaganda to cure you. That was only a partial success; we were forced to put you through the Disorientation Therapy Puzzles four more times, to *fully* cure you."

"But now it's over," Joel said.

"No, it isn't over yet," Allison said.

Both men turned and looked up at her, surprised. She had come awake while they were talking, had slid to the edge of the seat and was looking down at them from the open door of the tank cab.

"It isn't over?" Joel asked, perplexed.

"She's right," Galing said. "It's taken nearly a century to undo what the Overmaster did to you."

A century . . .

"Meanwhile," Allison said, "we've been beseiged. We're constantly on guard, waiting for the Overmaster to breach the pyramid again. Sooner or later, if we can't go outside and take the initiative, we'll be finished."

Joel reached up and helped her down. When she was at his side he put his arm around her tiny waist, as she put her arm around him. He said, "Then it's not over, after all. This was only a small battle. The war against the Overmaster is really yet to begin."

"That's right," Allison said. "Before that war could be waged we had to purge you of old hatreds. Now, unfortunately, we've got to build a new hatred in you—make you share our hatred of the Overmaster. From now on, the horrors will not be illusory."

The horrors—they were just beginning. Would he see them to an end . . . ?

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Isaac Under Pressure

Scott Edelstein

The house smelled lousy. George Berger got out a can of air freshener and pressed the button. But instead of spraying sweetened dew throughout the room, the can released a small, purple cloud that floated near the ceiling.

Eyes formed on the cloud, and they blinked. "Ruth?" the cloud said hesitantly.

"No," George said. "My name's George." He sniffed. The room smelled no better.

"I'm looking for Ruth," the cloud said coldly. "Where'd she go?"

"Nobody named Ruth here. Listen, you're supposed to freshen my air, and you're not doing it. The company promised me double my money back if my house didn't smell like a breath of fresh air within thirty seconds. Your time's almost up."

"Did you see her go by, by any chance?"

"No," George said. "I live alone. I haven't had a woman up here in weeks."

"Don't try to fool me. I can see that guilty look on your face. All right, what did you do with her? Kidnapping's a felony, in case you didn't know."

"Wait a second," George said. "You're not making

sense. Just who the hell are you and what are you doing in my air freshener?" A simple, direct question.

"I'm a genii. Okay? Now that I've answered you, why don't we just cut the crap and start on the truth?" The cloud bounced up and down in the air, agitated.

"But I'm telling you the truth! Believe me, she isn't here. I'd have known it if she was." George was nothing if not sincere, and the genii noticed.

"Okay," he said. "You were probably just facing in the other direction. Mind if I look around? I won't touch anything."

"Sure, go ahead."

"Thanks," the genii said, floating up the stairs.

Confused, George went into the kitchen and began making a sandwich, a tried-and-true technique for helping him to solve puzzles. He had just finished spreading the mayonnaise on the top slice of bread when the genii floated back into the kitchen

He topped the sandwich with the bread and put it on a plate. "Find anything?"

"No luck," the genii grumbled, shaking a bit. "Say, listen. I'll make you a deal, okay? You help me look for Ruth. If either one of us finds her, I'll grant you three wishes."

"No dice," George said sternly. "I've been handed that three wishes crap too many times before. It's either cash on the barrelhead or nothing at all."

"But genii's don't have any money!" the cloud whined, darting about the room anxiously.

"Tough titty," George said, taking his sandwich to the table and beginning to eat.

He stopped after taking a few bites. The genii was hovering just above his left shoulder. "Do you have to sit right there?" he asked irritably. "I mean, can't you go sit in a chair or something? It's hard to eat with someone looking right over your shoulder."

"Okay, okay. Don't get angry." It flew across the room

and hovered above George's easy chair. "By the way," it said. "Do you know that you've got roaches?"

George replaced the sandwich on his plate. "Where are they?"

"Two of them, right on this chair. You could have sat right on them."

"Damn." George rose and walked into the kitchen, then returned a few moments later holding a can of Roach Destroyer. He pointed the spray at the insects in the chair and pushed the button.

Another small cloud, this one a pale blue, formed on the seat. It shivered and rose a few inches. The roaches, frightened by the sudden appearance of the cloud, ran down the leg of the chair and scuttled across the floor.

"Isaac?" the blue cloud asked softly.

"I'm here, my love!" Isaac shouted jubilantly, flying down to meet her. "I thought I'd never see you again."

"Oh, I don't like it here, Isaac," the blue cloud whined. "Let's go home."

"All right, darling." To George, Isaac said, "This is Ruth."

George took a big bite from his sandwich, and nodded. "Hi."

"Well, we've got to be off," Isaac said. "See you around." Together, the two clouds floated across the room.

George had a sudden thought. "Hey, wait," he cried, putting his sandwich down. "What about my three wishes?"

"Tough titty," Isaac said, floating through an open window.

George stared out the window. The two genii had disappeared. Thoughtfully, he took another bite from his sandwich, then rose and went to the refrigerator and got out a can of beer.

He pulled the top off the can, and there was a *whoosh* of escaping air. Then a frightened voice said, "Jerry?"

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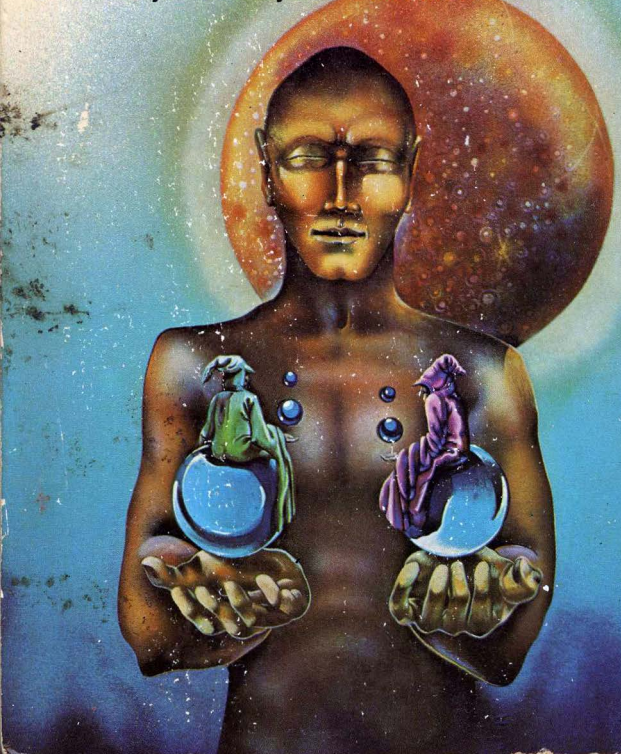

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