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Gene Wolfe

ALIEN STONES

"Heading unchanged," Gladiator said. "Speed unchanged." She flashed figures on the cathode-ray-tube terminal at the command console to substantiate it.

Daw nodded. Twenty-eight firing studs stretched along the mid-band of the console. They would permit him, Daw, alone on the bridge (as he liked it) to launch every missile aboard the ship; even if Gladiator's central processing unit were knocked out or under system overload, there would be strike vectors from the independent minicomputers that clung, embryonic self-brains, to the walls of the missile foramens.

But there was no need for the minis. His ship was untouched; he could order Gladiator herself to do the shooting. Instead he asked, "Drive?"

And Gladiator answered: "No indication of drive in use."

"Okay."

"Shall present course be maintained? Present course is a collision course in point three one hours."

"Match their velocity and lay us alongside. How long?"

"One point forty-four hours."

"Do it. Meantime maintain battle stations." Daw flipped on his console mike without touching the switch that would have put his own image on the terminals in every compartment of the ship. Naval tradition decreed that when the captain spoke he should be seen as well as heard, but Daw had watched tapes of his own long, brown face as he announced, in what he felt to be unbearable stiff fashion, various unimportances, and he found it impossible to believe that his crew, seeing the same stretched cheeks and preposterous jaw, would not snicker.

"This is your captain. The ship sighted last night is still

on her course." Daw chewed his lower lip for a moment, trying to decide just what to say next. The crew must be alerted, but it would be best if they were not alarmed. "There is no indication, I repeat, no indication, that she is aware of our presence. Possibly she doesn't want to scare us off—she may want peace, or she may just have something up with her sleeve. Possibly something's wrong with her sensors. My own guess—which isn't worth any more than yours—is that she's a derelict; there's no sign of drive, and we haven't been able to reach her on any frequency. But we have to stay sharp. Battle conditions until further notice."

He flicked off the mike switch. Several como lights were blinking and he selected one: the reactor module. Mike switch again. "What is it, Neal?"

"Captain, if you could give me a breakdown on the radiation they're putting out, it might be possible for me to work up an estimate of how long it's been since they've used their drive."

"I'm happy to hear that you know their engineering," Daw said. "Especially since Gladiator's been unable to identify even the ship type."

Neal's face, seen in the CRT, flushed. He was a handsome, slightly dissipated-looking man whose high forehead seemed still higher under a thick crest of dark hair. "I would assume their drives are about the same as ours, sir," he said.

"I've done that. On that basis they shut down only an hour before we picked them up. But I'm not sure I believe it." He cut Neal off and scanned the rest of the lights. One was from the ship's cybernetics compartment; but Polk, the cyberneticist, was bunking with the systems analyst this trip. Daw pushed the light and a woman's face appeared on the screen. It was framed in honey-toned hair, a face with skin like a confection and classic planes that might have shamed a fashion model. And a smile, he had seen that smile often before—though as seldom, he told himself, as he decently could.

"Yes, Mrs. Youngmeadow?"

"Helen, please. I can't see you, Captain. The screen is blank."

"There's some minor repair work to be done on the

camera here," Daw lied. "It's not important, so we've given it low priority."

"But you can see me?"

"Yes." He felt the blood rising in his cheeks.

"About this ship, Captain . . ." Helen Youngmeadow paused, and Daw noticed that her husband was standing behind her, beyond the plane of focus. "Captain, everyone on the ship can hear me—can't they?"

"I can cut them out of the circuit if you prefer."

"No—Captain, may I come up there?"

"To the bridge? Yes, if you like. It's a long way."

Another como light. This time the alternate bridge module—in appearance much like his, but lacking the battered Old and New Testaments bound in steel and magnetically latched to the console. "Hello, Wad," Daw said gently.

Wad made a half-salute. His young, dark-complexioned face showed plainly the strain of two years' involvement in a hell that demanded night and day a continual flow of deductions, inferences, and decisions—all without effect. Looking at Daw significantly, he drew a finger across his throat, and Daw gave him the private circuit he had offered Mrs. Youngmeadow.

"Thanks, Skipper. I've got something I thought you ought to know abbout."

Daw nodded.

"I've been running an artifact correlation on the visual image of that ship."

"So have I. Electronic and structural."

"I know, I got your print-out. But my own analysis was bionic."

"You think that's valid?"

Wad shrugged. "I don't know, but it's interesting. You know what the biologists say: Man has reached the stage where he evolves through his machines. The earliest spacecraft resembled single-celled animals—pond life. The dilettante intellectuals of the time tried to give them a sexual significance—that was the only thing they knew—but they were really much closer to the things you find in a drop of pond water than to anything else."

"And what does your analysis say about this ship?"

"No correlation at all. Nothing higher than a tenth."

Daw nodded again. "You think the lack of correlation is significant?"

"It suggests to me that it may have originated somewhere where life forms are quite different from what we are accustomed to."

"Mankind has colonized some queer places."

With heavy significance Wad said, "Would it *have* to be mankind, Captain?" He was speaking, Daw knew, not to him but to his instructors back home. If his guess were correct he would, presumably, be given some small number of points; if not, he would lose ground. In time he would, or would not, be given his own command. The whole thing embarrassed Daw and made him feel somehow wretched, but he could not really blame Wad. He was Wad. To keep the ball rolling—mostly because he did not want to answer the other como lights—he said, "Men have spread their seed a long way across the galaxy Wad. We've seen a lot of strange ships, but they've always turned out to be of human origin."

"The part of the galaxy we know about is tiny compared to the vastness we don't know. And there are other galaxies!"

Daw said, "I've been thinking about the stranger's build myself, as I told you. He looks like a crystal to me—modules ranged in a three-dimensional rectangular array."

"What do you think that means?"

"Comes from a world where they've discovered radio."

Wad broke the connection; Daw grinned but found he didn't much blame him for it.

Daw wondered what Gladiator's bionic correlation program would say about Gladiator herself. Perhaps liken her to the armor of a caddis-fly larva—an empty cylinder of odds and ends. Caddis-fly armor exploded. The interior of his helmet held the familiar smells of fine lubricating oil, sweat, and the goo he sometimes used on his hair; he kicked down and the soles of his boots clinked home on the hull of the bridge module.

Above him and around him Gladiator flung her shining threads, the stars a dust of ice seen through the interstices,

the connecting tubes like spider web—half glittering, half drowned in inky shadow.

Still ten thousand miles off, the other ship was, under the immense lasers Gladiator directed toward it, another star; but one that winked and twinkled as its structure surged and twisted to the urgings of accelerations long departed.

A hatch at Daw's feet opened and a metal-clad figure he knew to be Helen Youngmeadow rose, caught his hand, and stood beside him. Like his own, her faceplate was set for full transparency; her beautiful face, thus naked to the darkness of a billion suns, seemed to him to hold a hideous vulnerability. In his earphones her voice asked: "Do you know this is the first time I've been out? It's lovely."

"Yes," Daw said.

"And all this is Gladiator; she doesn't seem this big when she talks to me in our cabin. Could you show me which one it is? I'm lost."

"Which module?" From his utility belt Daw took a silver rod, then locked the articulations of his suit arm so that he could aim it like a missile projector with the fine adjustment controls. In the clean emptiness no beam showed, but a module miles down the gossamer cylinder of the ship flashed with the light.

"Way down there," the girl said. "It would be a lot more sociable if everyone were quartered together."

"In a warship the men must be near their duty," Daw explained awkwardly. "And everything has to be decentralized so that if we're blown apart, all the parts can fight. The module you and your husband are in has more of the ship's central processor than any of the others, but even that is scattered all over."

"And their ship—the ship out there—is modular too."

"Yes," Daw said. He remembered his conversation with Wad. "Ours is a hollow cylinder, theirs a filled rectangle. Our modules are different sizes and shapes depending on function; theirs are uniform. You're the empathist—the intercultural psychologist—what do those thing tell you?"

"I have been thinking about it," Helen Youngmeadow said, "but I'd like to think some more before I talk, and I'm anxious to fly. Can't we go now?"

"You're sure—?"

"I've had all the training." She relaxed her boots' grip on the steel world beneath her, kicked out, for an instant floated above him, then was gone. Backpack rockets made a scarcely visible flame, and it was several seconds before he could pick out the spark of her progress. He followed, knowing that all around them, invisible and distant by hundreds of miles, the other boarding parties he had dispatched were making for the ship ahead as well.

"I'm an empathist, as you said," the girl's voice continued. "Gladiator is a warship, but my husband and I are here to take the side of the enemy."

"That doesn't bother me."

"Because by taking their side we help you. We give you someone who thinks like them and reacts to *their* needs. In a way we're traitors."

"This is exploration; if we had come just to fight you wouldn't even be on board."

"Because the Navy's afraid we might blow our own vessel up, or induce the crew to mutiny. We humans have such a high empathy coefficient—some of us."

"When you and I reach that ship," Daw said wryly, "*we'll* be the underdogs. Perhaps then you'll empathize with the Navy."

"That's the danger—if I do that I won't be doing my job."

He chuckled.

"Listen, Captain Daw. If I ask you something, will you tell me the truth? Straight?"

"If you'll let me catch up to you, and assuming it's not classified."

"All right, I've cut my jets. I'm—"

"I see you, and I've been ranging you on suit radar. It's just that with more mass to accelerate I can't match you for speed when you're flat out." Ahead of them something had been transformed from a winking star to a tiny scrap of diamond lace. Three thousand miles yet, Daw estimated, and checked his radar for confirmation. Five thousand. That ship was big. He said aloud, "What's the question?"

"Why did you let me come? I want to, and I'm terribly grateful, but while I was going up to the bridge I was sure

you'd say no. I was thinking of ways to go without your permission—crazy things like that."

For the second time Daw lied.

He held her in space, his hand on her arm, telling her it was a safety precaution. The scrap of lace grew to an immense net and at last acquired a third dimension, so that it was seen as thousands of cubes of void, tubes outlining the edges, spherical modules at the intersections. "Right angles," Helen Youngmeadow said. "I never knew right angles could be so lovely." Then, a moment later, "This is more beautiful than ours."

Daw felt something he tried to choke down. "More regular, certainly," he admitted. "Less individualized."

"Do you still think it's abandoned?"

"Until they show me otherwise. The question is, which one of these things should we enter?"

"If we *can* enter."

"We can. Mrs. Youngmeadow, you empathize with these people, even though you've never seen anything of theirs except this ship. Where would you put the command module?"

It was a challenge, and she sensed it. "Where would you put it, Captain? As a sailor and a military man?"

"On a corner," Daw said promptly.

"You're right." He saw her helmet swivel as she looked at him. "But how did you know? Are you trained in empathics too?"

"No. But you agree? I thought you were going to say in the center."

"That's what I thought *you* were going to say—but it has to be wrong. The entire ship is a structure of empty cubes, with the edges and corners having the only importance. An outer corner would be the corner of corners—did you feel that?"

"No, but I saw that observation from an interior module would be blocked in every direction, and even on an outside plane the rest of the ship would blot out a hundred and eighty degrees. A corner module has two hundred and seventy degrees of clear field."

They explored the surface of the nearest corner module (Daw estimated its diameter at sixty thousand feet, which

would give it a surface area of over three hundred and fifty square miles) until they found a hatch, with what appeared to be a turning bar on the side opposite the hinge. "How do you know it's not locked?" the girl asked as Daw braced himself to heave at the bar.

"Nobody's worried about burglars out here. But anyone's going to worry about having a crew member outside who has to get in fast." He pulled. The bar moved a fraction of an inch and the hatch a barely visible distance. "I'll give you some more data to empathize on," Daw, said. "Whoever built this thing is damn strong."

The girl grasped the other end of the bar, and together they turned it until the hatch stood wide open. Light poured from it into the limitless night of space and Helen Youngmeadow said softly, "They left everything turned on," and a moment afterward, "No airlock."

"No, they don't mind vacuum." Daw was already climbing into the module. There were no floors and no interior partitions; windowed solids that might have been instruments lined the hull wall; machines the size of buildings, braced with guying cables thousands of feet long, dotted the vast central space.

"It's weird, isn't it?" the girl said. "Like being in a birdcage—only I can't tell which way is up."

"Up is always an illusion on a ship," Daw told her. "Why have illusions?" He was already far over her head. exploring. "No chairs, no beds. I like it."

"You mean they don't rest?" The girl had launched herself toward him now, and she put herself into a slow roll so that, to her eyes, the interior of the module revolved around her.

"No." Daw moved closer to one of the great mechanisms. "Look, on our ship we have couches and chairs with thousands of little suction holes in them, so that when your clothes touch them you stay where you put yourself. But somebody who might have been doing something more valuable had to make every one of those pieces of fancy furniture, and then a hundred times their cost was spent lugging them up out of Earth's gravity well into space. Then their pumps require power, which means waste heat the ship has a hard time getting rid of—and any time we want to go anywhere on reaction drive—all the

close-in maneuvers—we have to accelerate their mass, and decelerate it again when we get there. All this to hold you down on a ship that never gets up much over half a G, and in addition to the crash couches on the tenders and lifeboats."

"But we have to lie down to sleep."

"No, you don't; you're simply accustomed to it. All you really have to do is pull your feet off the floor, turn out the lights, and hold onto something—like this guy wire—with one hand. Which is probably what the people who built this ship did. Our ancestors, in case you've forgotten, were a tree-dwelling species; and when we go to sleep with our hands around anything that resembles a limb, we automatically tighten up if it starts to slip out."

"You still think this ship was built by human beings?"

Daw said carefully, "We've never found one that wasn't."

"Until now."

"You don't."

There was no reply. Daw looked at the girl to make certain she was all right, jockeyed himself to within touching distance of the great machine, then repeated, "You don't?"

"People? With no airlock?"

"The hatch we used may not have been intended for use in space. Or there might be safety devices we don't know about, deactivated now."

"There wasn't any atmosphere, even before we opened it; as large as this place is, it would have to discharge for hours, and we'd have felt the push as we came through. There wasn't anything. You said yourself that they didn't mind vacuum."

Daw said, "I was thinking they might use this one for some special purpose, or they might wear suits all the time in here."

"Captain, I love mankind. I know when somebody says that, it's usually just talk; but I mean it. Not just the people who are like me, but all human beings everywhere. And yet I don't like this ship."

"That's funny." Daw swung himself away from the machine he had been examining. "I do. They're better naval engineers—I think—than we are. Do you want to go back?"

"No, of course not. The job is here. What are you going to do now?"

"First check out a few more modules; then have some of our people land on the opposite corner of this thing with routes mapped out for them that will take at least one man through every module. They can work their way toward us, and I'll take their reports as they come in."

"Are you going into some of the other modules now?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll come with you. I don't like it here."

It was almost ten hours later when the first searchers reached the point where Daw and the girl waited, having traversed the diagonal length of the ship. They came in talking, in threes and fours, having met when their lines of search converged. Daw, who except for one brief return to Gladiator had spent the time studying some of the devices in the corner module and those immediately adjacent, broke up the groups and questioned each man separately, using a private communication frequency. Helen Youngmeadow chatted with those waiting for debriefing and waved to each party going back to ship.

In time the groups thinned, fewer and fewer men clustered around the girl; and at last the last crewman saluted and departed, and she and Daw were alone again. To make conversation she said, "It always seems so lonely on our ship, but seeing all these men makes me realize how many there are; and there are some I'd swear I've never even met."

"You probably haven't," Daw said. The list Gladiator was flashing on his in-helmet display showed one man still out, and he was not sure the girl was aware of it—or that she was not.

"I've been wondering what they all do. I mean, the ship can almost run itself, can't it?"

"Yes, Gladiator could pretty well take care of herself for a long time, if nothing had to be changed."

"If nothing had to be changed?"

"We have to worry about damage control too, on a warship; but adaptability is the chief justification for a big crew. We can beat our swords into plowshares if we have to, and then our plowshares back into swords; in other

words we can rewire and re-rig as much as we need to—if necessary fit out Gladiator to transport a half million refugees or turn her into a medical labor a factory. And when something like this comes up we've got the people. This ship is too big to have every part visited by a specialist in every discipline, but the men I've just sent through her included experts in almost any field you could think of."

She was too far off for him to see the beauty of her smile, but he could feel it. "I think you're proud of your command, Captain."

"I am," Daw said simply. "This was what I wanted to do, and I've done it."

"Captain, who is Wad?"

For an instant the question hung in the nothingness between them; then Daw asked, "How did you meet Wad?"

"I asked the ship something—a few hours ago when we went back—and she referred me to him. He looks like you, only . . ."

"Only much younger."

"And he's wearing some sort of officer's insignia—but I'm certain I've never seen him before, not at mess or anywhere else."

"I didn't think Gladiator would do that," Daw said slowly. "Usually Wad only talks to me—at least that's what I thought."

"But who is he?"

"First I'd like to know what question you had that made the ship turn you over to him—and how he answered it."

"I don't think it was anything important."

"What was it?"

"I think she just felt—you know—that it needed the human touch."

"Which Wad has in plenty."

"Yes." Helen Youngmeadow sounded serious. "He's a very sympathetic, very sensitive young man. Not like an empathist of course, but with some training he could become one. Is he your second in command?"

Daw shook his head, though perhaps she could not see it. "No," he said, "Moke's my second—you've met him." He thought of the times he and Moke had shared a table with Helen Youngmeadow and her husband—Young-

meadow slender and handsome, a bit proud of his blond good looks, intelligent, forceful and eloquent in conversation; Moke's honest, homely face struggling throughout the tasteless and untasted meal to hide the desire Youngmeadow's wife waked in every man, and the shame Moke felt at desiring the wife of so likeable a shipmate as Youngmeadow.

"Then who *is* Wad?"

"If I tell you, will you tell me what it was you asked him?"

The girl's shoulders moved, for Daw could see the bulky metal shoulders of her suit move with them. "I suppose so—Gladiator would tell you if you asked."

"Yes, but it wouldn't be the same thing as your telling me, Mrs. Youngmeadow. You see, Wad is me. I suppose you could say, too, that I am Wad, grown up."

"I don't understand."

"Do you know how ship captains are trained?"

"I know an officer's training is very hard—"

"Not officers—captains." Unexpectedly Daw launched himself toward her, his arms outstretched like a bird's wings, dodging the wide-spaced guy wires until, almost beside her, he caught one and swung to a stop.

"That was good," she said. "You're very graceful."

"I like this. I've spent a lot of time in space, and you won't find any of that sucking furniture in my cabin. You can laugh if you like, but I think this is what God intended."

"For us?" He could see the arch of her eyebrows now, through the dark transparency of her faceplate.

"For us. Leaping between the worlds."

"You know, understanding people is supposed to be my profession—but I don't think I really understand you at all, Captain. How *are* captains trained, anyway? Not like other officers?"

"No," Daw said. "We're not just officers who've been promoted, although I know that's what most people think."

"It's what I thought."

"That was the old way. I suppose the British carried it to the ultimate. Around eighteen hundred. Have you ever read about it?"

The girl did not answer.

"They put their future skippers on board warships when they were boys of eight or nine—they were called midshipmen. They were just children, and if they misbehaved they were bent over a gun and whipped, but at the same time they were gentlemen and treated as such. The captain, if he was a good captain, treated them like sons and they got responsibility shoved at them just as fast as they could take it."

"It sounds like a brutal system," Helen Youngmeadow said.

"Not as brutal as losing ship and crew. And it produced some outstanding leaders. Lord Nelson entered the navy at twelve and was posted captain when he was twenty; John Paul Jones started at the same age and was first mate on a slaver when he was nineteen and a captain at twenty-three."

"I'm sorry. . . ." The girl's voice was so faint in Daw's earphones that he wondered for a moment if her suit mike was failing. "I've never heard of either of those men. But I'll look them up when we get back to Gladiator."

"Anyway," Daw continued, "it was a good system—for as long as people were willing to send promising boys off to sea almost as soon as we'd send them off to school; but after a while you couldn't count on that anymore. Then they took boys who were almost grown and sent them to special universities first. By the time they were experienced officers they were elderly—and the ships, even though these weren't starships yet, had become so large that their captains hadn't had much real contact with them until they were nearly ready to take command of a ship themselves. After a hundred years or so of that—about the time the emphasis shifted from sea to space—people discovered that this system really didn't work very well. A man who'd spent half his life as a subordinate had been well-trained in being a subordinate, but that was all."

The taut cable beneath Daw's suit-glove shook with a nearly undetectable tremor, and he turned to look toward the hatch, aware as he did that the girl, who must have felt the same minute vibration, had turned instead to the mouths of the connecting tubes that led deeper into the ship.

The man coming through the hatch was Polk, the cyberneticist, identifiable not by his face but by the name and number stenciled on his helmet. He saluted, and Daw waved him over.

"Got something for me, Captain?"

"I think so, the big cabinet in the center of this module. It's their computer mainframe, or at least an important part of it."

"Ah," said Polk.

"Wait a minute—" There was an edge of shrillness to Helen Youngmeadow's voice, though it was so slight Daw might easily have missed it. "How can you know that?"

"By looking at the wiring running to it. There are hundreds of thousands of wires—braided together into cables, of course, and very fine; but still separate wires, separate channels for information. Anything that can receive that much and do anything with it is a computer by definition—a data-processing device."

Polk nodded as though to support his captain and began examining the great floating octahedron Daw had pointed out. After a minute had passed the girl said in a flat voice, "Do you think theirs might be better than ours? That would be important, I suppose."

Daw nodded. "Extremely important, but I don't know if it's true. From what I've been able to tell from looking into that thing they're a little behind us, I think. Of course there might be some surprises."

Polk muttered, "What am I looking for, Captain, just their general system?"

"To begin with," Daw said slowly, "I'd like to know what the last numbers in the main registers were."

Polk whistled, tinny-sounding over the headphones.

"What good would that be?" Helen Youngmeadow asked. "Anyway, wouldn't they just print it—" She remembered how much of Gladiator's output came over CRTs and audio, and broke off in midsentence.

Polk said, "Nobody prints much in space, Mrs. Youngmeadow. Printing—well, it eats up a lot of paper. and paper's heavy. It looks to me like they use a system a lot like ours. See this?" He passed a spacegloved hand across the center of one facet of the cabinet, but the girl could see no difference between the area he indicated and the sur-

rounding smooth grey metal. To look more closely she dove across the emptiness much as Daw had a moment before.

"This was one of their terminals," Polk continued. "There are probably thousands scattered all through the ship. And they seem to have been used about the same way ours are, with turnoff after a set period to conserve the phosphors; they go bad if you excite them for too long."

"I've noticed that on Gladiator," the girl said. "If something's written on the screen—when I'm reading, for example—and I don't instruct it to bring up the next page, it fades out after a while. Is that what you mean? It seems remarkable that people as different as these should handle the problem the same way."

Daw said, "Not any more remarkable than that both of us use wires—or handles like the one that opened the hatch outside. Look inside that box, though, at the back of that panel and you'll find something that *is* remarkable. Show her, Polk."

The cyberneticist unlatched the section he had indicated. It swung out smoothly, and the girl saw the display tubes behind it, tubes so flat that each was hardly more than a sheet of glass with a socket at the base. "Vacuum tubes?" she said. "Like a television? Even I know what those are."

Daw grunted. "Vacuum tubes in a vacuum."

"That's right. They shouldn't need anything around them out here, should they?"

"They don't, out here. This ship, or at least parts of it, goes into atmospheres at times. Even though the crew doesn't seem to care whether there's one in here or not."

"Captain," Helen Youngmeadow said suddenly, "where is my husband?"

Hours later Moke's voice (unexpectedly loud and near because Moke had the kind of voice that transmitted well through the phones' medium-range frequencies) asked a similar question: "You find Youngmeadow yet, Skipper?"

"We don't know that he's lost."

"You didn't find him, huh?"

"No, not yet."

"You really think he's alive and just not answering?"

"It could be," Daw said. He did not have to remind Moke, as he had Helen Youngmeadow, that there was no danger of running out of oxygen in a modern space suit—each suit being a system as self-sufficient as a planet and its sun; energy from the suit's tiny pile scavenging every molecule of water and whisper of carbon dioxide and making new, fresh food, freshwater, clean air that could be used again, so that once in the suit the occupant might live in plenty until time itself destroyed him. (He had not mentioned that even death would not end the life encysted in that steady protection, since the needs of the bacteria striking in at the now defenseless corpse from the skin, out from the intestines, would be sensed, still, by the faithful, empty suit; and served.)

Daw thought of Youngmeadow dead somewhere in this strange vessel, still secure in his suit, his corpse bloating and stinking while the suit hummed on; and found, startled, that the thought was pleasant—which was absurd, he hardly knew Youngmeadow, and certainly had nothing against the man.

"His wife still out looking for him?" Moke asked.

Daw nodded, though Moke could not see him. "Yes," he said. "So are the other parties. I've got a couple of men with Mrs. Youngmeadow to make sure she comes back all right."

"I was just talking to her," Moke said. "I think she's been talking to Polk too"

"What about?"

"She said she'd heard you found some maps, Captain. I guess Gladiator told her."

"No reason why she shouldn't, but I found those while she was here—she must have seen them. While we were waiting for the first survey parties to come in."

"You didn't hide them from her, or anything like that?"

"No, of course not. She just didn't show much interest in them." Actually, Daw remembered, he had taken the charts—technically they were star charts rather than maps—to show Helen and had been rather disappointed by her reaction; as an empathist, she had explained, she was much more concerned with things that had *not* been vital to the ship's operations than with the things that had.

"*Everyone takes what is necessary, Captain,*" she had said. "*By definition they have to. It's what is taken that could be left behind that reveals the heart.*"

"She wanted to know if any of them showed the inside of the ship," Moke said.

Daw felt tired. "I'll talk to her," he said, and cut Moke off.

He started to adjust his communication for the girl's band, then thought better of it. His investigation of the command module—if in fact this was the command module—was nearly complete, and it served no purpose for him to stand by and watch Polk tinkering with his instruments. After having Gladiator scan the charts so that duplicates could be made on board for study, he had replaced the originals. Now he gathered them again.

It was the first time he had been more than two units away from the corner module he and Helen had first investigated, and though he had heard the chambers of the interior modules described by the men he had sent through them, and had seen the pictures they had taken, it was a new and a strange experience to plunge through tube after tube and emerge in chamber after chamber, each so huge it seemed a sky around him, each seeming without end.

The tubes, like those of his own ship, were circular in section; but they were dim (as Gladiator's were not) and lined with shimmering, luminous pastels he felt certain were codes but could not decipher. His years in space had taught him the trick of creating the thing called *up* and *down* in his mind, changing them when it suited him, destroying them with the truth of gravitationless reality when he wished. In the tubes he amused himself with them, sometimes diving down a pulsing pink well, sometimes rocketing up a black gun barrel, until at last he found that he was no longer master of these false perceptions, which came and went without his volition.

Entering each module was like being flung from a ventilation duct into the rotunda of some incredible building. The walls of most were lined with enigmatic machines, the centers cobwebbed with cables spanning distances that dwarfed the great mechanisms they held. Light in the modules—at least in most—was like that in the first Daw had examined—bright, shadowless, and all-surrounding;

but some were dim, and some dark. In these his utility light showed shapes and cables not greatly different from those he had seen in other modules, but in the dancing shadows it cast to the remote walls, it sometimes seemed to Daw that he saw living shapes.

At last, when he had become almost certain he had lost his way and was cursing himself (for his religious beliefs permitted any degree of self-condemnation, though they caviled at the application of the same terms to any soul except his own) for a fool and a damned fool, he saw the flicker of other lights in one of the half-lit modules and was able, a moment later, to pick out Helen Youngmeadow's suit with his own beam and, a half-second afterward, the suits of the sailors he had sent with her. At almost the same instant he heard her voice in his phones: "Captain, is that you?"

"Yes," he said. Now that he had found her, he discovered that he was unwilling to admit that he had come looking for her. Everyone, notoriously, fell in love with empathists—the reason they were invariably assigned as married couples. In retrospect he realized how foolish it had been for him to allow her to accompany him at all, despite the rationalizations with which he had defended the decision to himself; and he found that he was anxious that neither she nor the men with her should think that he had come here for her sake. "I understand you were asking my second about charts, Mrs. Youngmeadow," he said, deliberately bringing his voice to the pitch he used in delivering minor reprimands. "I want to make it clear to you that if you have found any such documents they should be submitted to me for scanning as soon as possible."

"We haven't found any maps," the girl said, "and if we did, of course I'd turn them over to you, though I don't suppose you could read them either."

The fatigue in her voice made Daw despise himself. Softening the question as much as he could, he asked, "Then why were you questioning Mr. Moke?"

"I knew you had found some. I was hoping they showed this ship and could tell us where my husband might be."

"They're star charts, Mrs. Youngmeadow. You saw them when I found them."

"I wasn't paying much attention then. Do you think they're important?"

"Very important," Daw said. "They could easily be the key to understanding—well, the entire system of thought of the people who built this ship. Naturally Gladiator can't stay here—"

"Can't stay here until my husband's found?"

"We aren't going to abandon your husband, Mrs. Youngmeadow."

"I don't suppose I could stop you if you wanted to."

"We don't."

"But if you do, Captain, you'll have to abandon me too, I'm not going back to our ship until we find out what happened to him, and if he's still alive; you say that a person can live indefinitely in one of these suits—all right, I'm going to do that. Even if your ship leaves they'll still send out another one from Earth to investigate this, with cultural anthropologists and so forth on board; and when they get here they'll find me."

One of the crewmen muttered, "Tell him!" under his breath; Daw wondered if the man realized it had been picked up by his helmet mike. To the girl he said, "They'll find me too, Mrs. Youngmeadow. This ship is much too valuable a discovery for us to leave before someone else comes—but when they do come—this is what I was trying to say when you interrupted me—we'll have to go. They'll have equipment and experts; we are primarily a fighting ship. But it should be possible for you to arrange a transfer at that time."

"Captain . . ."

After a moment had passed, Daw said, "Yes?"

"Captain, can these men hear us?"

"Of course."

"Would you send them away? Just for a minute?"

"They could still hear us, if we stay on general band. If you have something private you wish to say, switch to my own band."

He watched as she fumbled with the controls on the forearm of her suit. One of the crewmen glided skillfully toward her to help, but she waved him away. Her voice came again. "Have I got you, Captain?"

"Yes."

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm sorry I said what I did. You've been a friend to my husband and me, I know. I'm very tired."

Daw said, "I understand."

"Captain, I've been thinking. Will you mind if I ask some questions? I realize it may be silly, but if I don't at least try—"

"Certainly."

"That cyberneticist—Lieutenant Polk. You asked him to find out—" She hesitated. Then, "I'm sorry, I can't think of the words."

"I asked him to find out for me what the numbers in the operating registers of this ship's computer were. To put it another way, I asked him to find out the answer—in raw form at least—of the last computation they performed."

"Is that possible? I would think their numbers would be all different—like Roman numbers or something, or worse. I asked him about it—a few hours ago when you went back to Gladiator—and he explained to me that whatever he found would just be ones and zeros—"

"Binary notation," Daw said.

"Yes, binary notation, because it isn't *really* numbers, you can't have real numbers inside a machine because they're not physical, but just things turned on or off; but I don't see what good knowing it—just one, one, one, zero, zero, zero, like that—will do you if you don't know how they'd be used when they came out of the machine. Captain, I know you must think I don't know what I'm talking about, but I did have to take some mathematics . . . even if I wasn't very good at it." The transmission ended in a whisper of despair.

"I know you're worried about your husband," Daw said. "We're looking for him, as you know. I've got parties out. I shouldn't have included him among the searchers—that was a mistake, and I'm—"

"No!" Helen Youngmeadow jerked at the cable she was holding, swinging herself toward him until their faceplates touched and he could hear her voice, conducted through the metal, like an echo to the sound in his earphones. "You should have sent him. That's just it. At first, when we were waiting and waiting and the others came back I talked to them and listened to them, and, my God, they

didn't know anything, they hadn't seen anything, and I thought just wait, just wait, Mr. Captain Daw, my man will show you what an empathist can do! Then when he didn't come I started to blame you, but that isn't right. *I'm* an empathist, my profession is supposed to be understanding cultures—every culture, when most people don't even comprehend their own. Now you've got these men staying with me to watch out for me—to watch out for me!—and do you know what they are? I asked them, and one is a plastics engineer and the other's a pharmacist's mate."

"They're good men," Daw said. "That's why I sent them with you, not because I thought they could assist you professionally."

"Well, you were wrong," the girl said in a much calmer voice. "We found a dingus of some sort floating loose in that last module we were in, and your plastics engineer looked at it for a while and then told us what he thought it was and how it had been made: he said they had used a four-part mold, and showed me where they had squirted in the melted stuff. So he understands his part of them, you see, but I don't understand mine. Now you're implying that you understand their math, or at least something about it. Can't you explain it to me?"

"Certainly," Daw said, "if you're interested. I'm afraid, though, that I don't see that it has any immediate bearing on locating your husband."

"A computer will answer anyone, won't it? I mean normally."

"Unless some sort of privacy provision has been made in the program."

"But there isn't much chance they'd do that on a ship like this; you said when we opened the hatch to get in that no one worried about burglars in space, so I doubt if they'd be worried about snoopers aboard their own ship either. And if their computer is like Gladiator, meant to run everything, it will know where my husband is—all we have to do is learn how to turn it on and ask it."

"I see what you mean," Daw told her, "but I'm afraid that's going to be a good deal more complicated than what I've got Polk trying to do."

"But it's the first step. Show me."

Moved by some democratic impulse he did not bother

to analyze, Daw switched back to the general communication band before spreading one of the charts—without gravity or air currents it hung like smoke in the emptiness—to illustrate what he was about to say; then for the benefit of the crewmen he explained: "This is one of their star charts—we found it in the first module we entered. In a rough way you could consider it a map of this part of the galaxy, as seen from above."

The girl said: "I don't understand how you can talk about seeing a galaxy from above or from below, except by convention—or how you know those dots on the chart are stars at all without being able to read the language. And if they are stars, how do you know they represent the region we're in? Or is that just a guess?" Her voice was as controlled as it might have been during a dinner-table discussion on board Gladiator, but Daw sensed tension that held her at the edge of hysteria.

"To begin with," he said, "the galaxy's not a shapeelss cloud of stars—it is disk-shaped, and it seems pretty obvious that anyone mapping any sizable portion of it would choose to look at things from one face or the other. Which face is chosen is strictly a matter of convention, but there are only two choices. And we're pretty certain these things are star charts, because Gladiator measured the positions of the dots and ran a regression analysis between them and the known positions of the stars. The agreement was so good that we can feel pretty sure of the identities of most of the dots. What's more, if you'll look at the chart closely you'll see that our friends have used three sizes of dots."

Daw paused and one of the crewmen asked, "Magnitude, Captain?"

"That's what we thought at first, but actually the three sizes seem to symbolize the principal wavelengths radiated—small dots for the blue end of the spectrum, medium for yellow stars like Sol, and large for the red giants and the dark stars."

Helen Youngmeadow said, "I don't see how that can help you read the numbers."

"Well, you'll notice faint lines running from star to star, with symbols printed along them; it seems reasonable to assume that these are distances, and of course we know the actual distances."

"But you don't know what sort of squiggle they use for each number, or what units the distances are given in."

"Worse than that," Daw admitted, "we don't—or at least we didn't—know whether they ran their figures from left to right or from right to left—or whether they were using positional notation at all. And of course we didn't know what base they were using, either. Or which symbol took the place of our decimal point."

"But you were able to find all that out, just from the chart?"

"Yes. The base was fairly easy. You probably remember from your own math that the number of numerals a system needs is equal to the number of the base. Our decimal notation, for example, uses ten—zero through nine. If you'll look at these numbers you'll see that a total of thirteen symbols are used—"

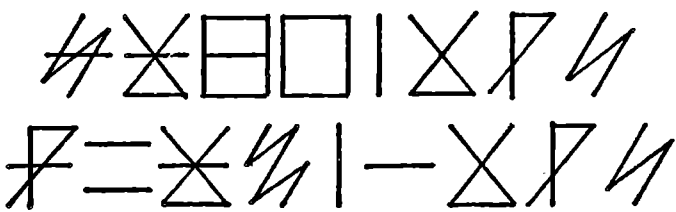
"Base thirteen?"

Daw shook his head. "We doubt it very much. Thirteen is a prime number, divisible only by one and itself, and as such an almost impossible base. But if we assume that one of the symbols is a position indicator like our decimal point, that leaves twelve; and twelve is a very practical base. So the question was which symbol divided the wholes—of whatever unit they were using—from the fractional parts."

Helen Youngmeadow leaned toward the chart, and Daw sensed, with a happiness he had hardly known himself capable of, that some portion of her despair was fading. "You could try them one by one," she said. "After all, there are only thirteen."

"We could have, but there turned out to be a much quicker way. Remember, these numbers represent stellar distances, and we felt that we knew what most of the stars were. So we programmed a search routine to look for a star whose distance from one of the base stars on the chart was twelve times that of some other, closer star. In positional notation—and we had to assume for the time being that they were using a positional notation, since if they weren't they wouldn't need an analogue to the decimal point—when you shift the symbol, or group of symbols, at the front of a number up by one position, it has the effect, roughly, of multiplying the number by the base. So we had

our program determine the ratio nearest twelve, the closer the better; and when we had located our stars we looked for a symbol that hadn't changed position in the larger number. Here"—he indicated two lines of print on the chart—"see what I mean?"



"No," the girl said after a moment. "No, I don't. There are eight symbols in one expression and nine in the other, but the one on the right looks like an equation—the thing like a fish with a spear through it is equal to one group minus another."

"Yes, it does," Daw admitted, "but the thing that resembles an equals sign is their mark for seven, and the 'minus' is a one. The vertical mark that looks like our one is their decimal point, and the numbers are read from right to left instead of left to right."

"How did you get the values of the numerals?"

"Do you really want to hear about all this?"

"Yes, I do, but I don't know why. Captain, is there actually a chance we might be able to get the computer on this ship working, and ask it where my husband is? And it would answer—just like that? That's what I'm trying to believe, but sometimes it slips. Maybe I'm just interested because you are, and I empathize; it's a fault of mine."

Daw was suddenly embarrassed, and conscious as he had not been for some time of the empty ship around him. "Gladiator could explain this as well as I could," he said. "Better."

"I could guess some of them myself, I think. You've already told me that the horizontal mark is a one, so since

the equals sign isn't two it must be the *S*-shaped thing."

"You're right," Daw said, "how did you know?"

"Because it looks like our two, only backward; and ours is a cursive mark for what used to be two horizontal lines—it used to look like a Z. From the shape of their *S* sign I'd say it started out as two lines slanted." She smiled.

"It is interesting, isn't it?" Daw said.

"Very interesting. But now will you tell me what you're going to learn when you can read whatever number the people who built this place left in their computer?"

"We don't know, really; but from the nature of the number we may be able to guess what it was. What I'm hoping for is the heading they took when they abandoned the ship."

"Did they abandon this ship?"

Daw was nonplussed. "We've been all through it."

"Even through the path assigned my husband?"

"Of course; the first thing I did when he failed to return was to send a party to retrace his route."

"And they did it?"

"Yes."

"And came back and reported?"

"Yes."

"Captain Daw, could *we* do it? I mean, I know you're needed to direct things, even if I'm not, but could we do it? I don't have your logical mind, but I have a feeling for situations, it's part of my stock-in-trade. And I think the two of us might find something where no one else would."

Daw thought for a moment. "Good administrative practice," he said. "I see what you mean."

"Then tell me, because I don't myself."

"Just that since this is our biggest problem I should give it my personal attention; and who should come too, because you are the one who wants it settled most and will have the greatest dedication to the job. You realize though, don't you, that you are—we are—almost in the center of your husband's route now."

Even as he made this last small protest Daw felt himself carried away by the attraction of the idea. He would lose a certain amount of face with the men he had assigned to guard Helen, but, as he told himself, he could afford to lose some face. Addressing them, he said: "Mrs. Young-

meadow and I are going to retrace her husband's search path through this vessel in person. You may return to your duty."

The two saluted, and Daw saw—incredibly—a new respect in their expressions, and something like envy as well. "Dismissed!" he snapped.

When they had gone Helen Youngmeadow said: "You really like it, don't you, going off by yourself? I should have known when we went alone to board this ship."

"No," Daw said. "I should be on Gladiator."

"That's the voice of conscience. But this is what you like." The girl launched herself from the cable she had been holding and gave half-power to her backpack rockets, doing a lazy wingover to avoid the next wire.

"Where are you going?" Daw called.

"Well, we're going to retrace the way my husband came, in the same direction he did, aren't we? So there's no use going back to the beginning that way; but if we take the modules next to his we might find something."

"Do you think your husband would have deviated from the assigned route?"

"He might have," said Helen's voice in Daw's ear. He could see her now, far ahead in the dimness, ready to dive into the pale, circular, lime-green immensity of a tube. "He was a funny person, and I guess maybe I may not have known him as well as I thought I did."

Daw put on a burst of speed and was up with her before she had gone a thousand yards into the tube. "You're right," he said, "this is what I like."

"I do too—maybe my husband liked it too much. That would be in harmony with his personality profile, I think." Daw did not answer, and a few seconds later she asked in a different tone, "Do you know what I was thinking of, while you were telling me about those charts? Stones. Little pebbles. Do you get it?"

"No," Daw said. The tube was bent just enough here for the ends to be invisible to them. They sailed through a nothingness of pale green light.

"Well, I may not know a lot of math but I know some etymology. You were talking about calculations, and that word comes from the Latin for a stone: *calculus*. That was the way they used to count—one stone for one sheep or

one ox. And later they had a thing like an abacus except that instead of rods for the counters it had a board with cup-shaped holes to put stones in. Those numbers you figured out were little stones from a world we've never seen."

Daw said, "I think I understand." He could make out the end of the tube now, a region of brighter light where vague shapes floated.

"The thing I wonder about is where are they now, those first stones? Ground to powder? Or just kicking around Italy or Egypt somewhere, little round stones that nobody pays any attention to. I don't really think anything would happen if they were destroyed—not really—but I've been wondering about it."

"Your sense of history is too strong," Daw told her. He nearly added, *"Like Wad's,"* but thought better of it and said instead, "For some reason that reminds me—you were going to tell me why you were talking to Wad, but you never did."

"Wad is the boy that looks like you? I said I would if you'd tell me about him."

"That's right," Daw said, "I didn't finish." They were leaving the tube now, thrown like the debris from an explosion through an emptiness whose miles-distant walls seemed at first merely roughened, but whose roughness resolved into closely-packed machines, a spininess of shafts and great gears and tilted beams—all motionless.

"You told me about the midshipmen," Helen reminded him. "I think I can guess the rest, except that I don't know how it's done."

"And what's your guess?"

"You said that you were Wad—at least in a sense. In some way you're training yourself."

"Time travel? No."

"What then?"

"Future captains are selected by psychological testing when, as cadets, they have completed their courses in basic science. Then instead of being sent to space as junior officers, they go as observers on a two-year simulated flight—all right on Earth. The advantage is that they see more action in the two years of simulation than they'd get in twenty of actual service. They go through every type of

emergency that's ever come up at least once, and some more than once—with variations."

"That's interesting; but it doesn't explain Wad."

"They have to get the material for the simulations somewhere. Sure, in most of it the midshipman just views, but you don't want to train him to be a detached observer and nothing else. He has to be able to talk to the people on shipboard, and especially the captain, and get meaningful, typical replies. To get material for those conversations a computer on every navy ship simulates a midshipman whom the captain and crew must treat as an individual."

"Do they all look like you?"

"They have to look like someone, so they're made to look—and talk and act—as the captain himself did during his midshipman days. It's important, as I said, that the captain treat his midshipman as a son, and that way there's more—" Daw paused.

"Empathy?" He could hear the fragile smile.

"That's your word. Sympathy."

"Before it was corrupted by association with pity, that used to mean what empathy does now."

A new voice rang in Daw's headphones: "*Captain! Captain!*"

"Yes. Here."

"This is Polk, Captain. We didn't want to bother you, sir, but we've got the numbers from the central registers in that corner module, and from the form—well, we think you're right. It's a bearing."

"You've got duplicates of the charts, don't you? Where were they going?"

"What star, you mean, sir?"

"Yes, of course."

"It doesn't seem to be a bearing for any star, Captain. Not on their charts, or ours either."

Helen Youngmeadow interrupted to say: "But it has to point to some star! There are millions of them out there."

Daw said, "There are billions—each so remote that for most purposes it can be treated as a nondimensional point."

"The closest star to this bearing's about a quarter degree off," Polk told her. "And a quarter of a degree is,

well ma'am, a hell of a long way in astrogation."

"Perhaps it isn't a bearing then," the girl said.

Daw asked, "What does it point to?"

"Well, sir—"

"When I asked you a minute ago what the bearing indicated, you asked if I meant what star. So it does point to something, or you think it does. What is it?"

"Sir, Wad said we should ask Gladiator what was on the line of the bearing at various times in the recent past. I guess he thought it might be a comet or something. It turned out that it's pointing right to where our ship was while we were making our approach to this one, sir."

Unexpectedly, Daw laughed. (Helen Youngmeadow tried to remember if she had ever heard him laugh before, and decided she had not.)

"Anything else to report, Polk?"

"No, sir."

She asked, "Why did you laugh, Captain?"

"We're still on general band," Daw said. "What do you say we switch over to private?"

His own dials bobbed and jittered as the girl adjusted her controls.

"I laughed because I was thinking of the old chimpanzee experiment; you've probably read about it. One of the first scientists to study the psychology of the nonhuman primates locked a chimp in a room full of ladders and boxes and so on—"

"And then peeked through the keyhole to see what he did, and saw the chimpanzee's eye looking back at him." Now Helen laughed too. "I see what you mean. You worked so hard to see what they had been looking at—and they were looking at us."

"Yes," said Daw.

"But that doesn't tell you where they went, does it?"

Daw said, "Yes, it does."

"I don't understand."

"They were still here when we sighted them, because we changed course to approach this ship."

"Then they abandoned the ship because we came, but that still doesn't tell you where they went."

"It tells me where they are now. If they didn't leave

before we had them in detection range, they didn't leave at all—we would have seen them. If they didn't leave at all, they are still on board."

"They can't be."

"They can be and they are. Think of how thinly we're scattered on Gladiator. Would anyone be able to find us if we didn't want to be found?"

Far ahead in the dimness her utility light answered him. He saw it wink on and dart from shadow to shadow, then back at him, then to the shadows again. "We're in no more danger than we were before," he said.

"They have my husband. Why are they hiding, and who are they?"

"I don't know; I don't even know that they are hiding. There may be very few of them—they may find it hard to make us notice them. I don't know."

The girl was slowing, cutting her jets. He cut his own, letting himself drift up to her. When he was beside her she said: "Don't you know anything about them? Anything?"

"When we first sighted this ship I ran an electronic and structural correlation on its form. Wad ran a bionic one. You wouldn't have heard us talking about them because we were on a private circuit."

"No." The girl's voice was barely audible. "No, I didn't."

"Wad got nothing on his bionic correlation. I got two things out of mine. As a structure this ship resembles certain kinds of crystals. Or you could say that it looks like the core stack in an old-fashioned computer—cores in rectangular arrays with three wires running through the center of each. Later, because of what Wad had said, I started thinking of Gladiator; so while we were more or less cooling our heels and hoping your husband would come in, I did what Wad had and ran a bionic correlation on her." He fell silent.

"Yes?"

"There were vertebrates—creatures with spinal columns—before there were any with brains; did you know that? The first brains were little thickenings at the end of the spinal nerves nearest the sense organs. That's what Gladiator resembles—that first thin layer of extra

neurons that was the primitive cortex. This ship is different."

"Yes," the girl said again.

"More like an artificial intelligence—the computer core stack of course, but the crystals too; the early computers, the ones just beyond the first vacuum-tube stage, used crystalline materials for transducers: germanium and that kind of thing. It was before Ovshinsky came up with ovonic switches of amorphous materials."

"What are you saying? That the ship is the entity? That the crew are robots?"

"I told you I don't know," Daw said. "I doubt if our terms are applicable to them."

"But what can we do?"

"Get in touch with them. Let them know we're here, that we're friendly and want to talk." He swung away from her—up, in his current orientation, up six miles sheer before coming to rest like a bat against the ceiling, then revolving the ship in his mind until the ceiling became a floor. The girl hovered five hundred feet above his head as he inspected the machines.

"I see," she said, "you're going to break something."

"No," Daw said slowly, "I'm going to find something to repair or improve—if I can."

Several hours passed while he traced the dysfunction that held the equipment around him immobile. From the module where he had begun he followed it to the next, where he found broken connections and fused elements; another hour while he made the connections again, and found, in cabinets not wholly like any he had seen built by men, parts to replace those the overloads had destroyed. When he had finished his work, three lights came on in distant parts of the module; and far away some great machine breathed a sigh that traveled through the metal floor to the soles of his boots, though Helen, still floating above him, did not hear it. "Do you think they'll come now?" she asked when the lights gleamed. "Will they give him back to us?"

Daw did not answer. A shape—a human shape—was emerging from the mouth of a distant tube. It was a half

mile away, but he had seen it as the girl spoke, a mere speck, but a speck with arms and legs and a head that was a recognizable helmet. In a moment she had followed his eyes, "Darling," she said. "Darling." Daw watched. A voice, resonant yet empty, said, "Helen."

"Darling," the girl said again.

The empty voice said: "I am not your husband. I know what you believe."

Daw saw it as the figure came down beside him. He thought the girl would not see it, but she said, "Who are you?"

Through the clear faceplate Daw could see Youngmeadow's face. The lips shaped: "Not your husband. You would call me a simulation of him. Something that can talk to you; they cannot, or will not, do that directly." It seemed to Daw that the face, so like Youngmeadow's, was in some deeper way not like Youngmeadow's at all, or anyone's—as though, perhaps, those moving lips concealed organs of sight in the recesses of the mouth, and the voice, the sound he heard, poured forth from the nose and ears.

"Where is my husband?"

"I cannot answer that."

"Cannot," Daw asked, "or will not?"

"There are four words, and all are difficult. What is meant by *is*? By *husband*? I can ask, but you could only answer in further words, further concepts we could not define."

"You are a simulation of him?"

"I said, 'You would call me a simulation of him.' "

Helen asked suddenly, "What have you come to tell us?"

"That with this"—the figure that looked like Youngmeadow gestured toward the repairs Daw had made —"there has been enough. You have seen something of us; we now, of you. There cannot be more, now. We both must think."

"Are you trying to tell us," Daw asked, "that we could not have worked out a philosophy for dealing with your culture until we made this contact?"

"I can answer few questions. We must think. You too."

"But you want us to leave your ship. Are we friends?'

"We are not," the simulation answered carefully, "not-friends." He lifted off as a man would have, and in a few seconds was gone.

"He wasn't your husband," Daw said.

"I know it."

"Do you trust me, Helen? Will you take my word for something?"

She nodded.

"Your husband is dead. It's over."

"You know."

Daw thought of the scattered bits of rag and vacuum-shriveled flesh he had seen—and not mentioned to the girl overhead—while making the repairs. "I know," he said.

He lifted off, and she flew beside him for a time, silently. There was a dysfunction in his headphones so that he heard, constantly, a sound like the noise of the wind. It was not unpleasant, except that is was a dysfunction. At last she said, "Was he ever alive, Captain? Do you know what I've been thinking? That perhaps he never was. The cabins, you know."

"What about them?" Daw asked.

"They're only supposed to be for one person, but you had two of us in there. Because everybody knows empathists have to be married . . . and there's Wad—he really wasn't on the ship either. Are you sure my husband existed, Captain? That he wasn't just something implanted in our minds before we left Earth? I can remember the way he held me, but not one thing he said, not word for word. Can you?"

"He was real," Daw said, "and he's dead. You'll feel better when you've seen the medics and had some rest."

"Captain . . ."

"He came in here," Daw said, "and somehow he realized the truth, that the crew of this ship—whatever you want to call them—was still on board. Then he thought the same thing you did: that he would break something and make them notice him. His empathy was all for people, not for things. He broke something and they noticed him, and he's dead."

"Only people are important," the girl said.

"To other people," Daw answered, "sometimes."

On board Gladiator she said: "I never told you what it was I asked Wad, did I? I was asking about you—what your childhood was like."

In Daw's mind a voice more insistent than hers quoted: *"At the resurrection, therefore, of which of the seven will she be the wife? For they all had her." But Jesus answered and said to them, "You err because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For at the resurrection they will neither marry nor be given in marriage . . ."* Aloud he said, "I hope Wad told you the truth."

"When you were in training—I mean, like he is now—you were watching a simulated captain, weren't you? Was it yourself you saw there, only older?"

"I don't think so," Daw said. "A real captain. He was a crusty bastard, but he generally knew what he was doing."

Vonda N. McIntyre

SPECTRA

I am dreaming. I reach out for something I have lost, something beautiful. I cannot remember what it is, but I know that it is there. Sounds echo in the background. My hands are stopped. I push against the barrier, straining, helpless. I open my eyes to darkness, and remember. I am lying in my sleeping place, with my hands pressed hard against the ceiling just above me, as if I could push it away and be free again. My hands move across the smooth cold surface to corners, as far apart as the width of my shoulders, down the walls to the narrow spaces at my sides. My hands stop, and I lie still.

There is a quick sharp pain in my leg as the cannulae withdraw from the valve implanted in my ankle. The bell that woke me rings again, the bell that calls us to our work. The panel opens at my feet, and light pierces the dark hole in which I am imprisoned. I turn over and crawl out, backward, bending my elbows so I don't scrape my back on the ceiling. I stand on the walkway among the formless gray shapes of the others. Our routine is unchanging, unchangeable. The walkway slides, taking us toward our consoles. Everyone around me whispers and laughs, but I am silent.

They all claim they know what beauty is. They say they see it every work period. They say the patterns that direct us calm and gratify and excite them. They are proud they are better than machines. They say it is ecstasy. If all I could remember was the blackness and the shadows and the broken bars of light, perhaps I could be as content, but I can never feel what they do.

The walkway stops. I turn, walk two steps, slide into the seat of my console. The fear that touches me every day reaches deeper. I have tried to avoid the helmet before,

and learned better. It engulfs my head, cutting off the shadows of my sight. The probes reach out and touch the metal sockets that replace my eyes. I flinch back, but I cannot move away. The probes enter, and the patterns begin.

I work hard. I do my duty. I watch the patterns of darkness and light and do what they tell me. But I want to see the day again.

The sky and the trees are what I remember most. The trees brushed their points against blue, all around our house. The bark was rough and the needles soft and sharp. When I climbed the trees my hands became sticky with golden pitch that left the smell of evergreen on my fingers. The sky was the color of my mother's eyes (I wonder if they took hers away, too?). I only saw the end of the sky once, when I walked too far and the forest stopped. I was very young. I stood at the edge of a cliff accompanied by wind and sun. And I saw that the sky ended in a yellow-brown roiling cloud. I ran home crying, real tears salty on my tongue, drying stiff on my face. My mother comforted me. She said the cloud would never come any nearer. I did not walk that way anymore, even when I was older and should not have been afraid.

A mild electric shock jerks me to awareness. Some error has been made. Three of us work on each set of patterns, as a check against mistakes. I look again, consciously, at the image in my brain. I do what it indicates. My error is confirmed and corrected. I cannot escape my punishment by drawing away or by bracing myself. It jolts through me, and my fingers clench. It is not too strong this time, but if I err again it will be worse. I think that's because they know that sometimes I make mistakes on purpose. The others say they never make mistakes. I don't believe it. I hate their silly patterns. It took them a long time to teach me how to figure out what each set of lines told me to do. They are all different, and I didn't want to learn.

When I was little I could make figures in the dark by pressing my fingers against the corners of my eyes. All the colors came, the ones that are in rainbows (it's so hard to remember rainbows . . . which was on top, violet or red?) and some that aren't. The jagged lines and circles and

flowing creatures moved and danced and kept me company at night.

Now, when I'm supposed to be asleep, I remember my childhood companions and I touch my eyes. I always hope that the colors will return and that I'll see the day again. It's hard to remember what colors really look like. I hope, but I touch my closed eyelids and see nothing, and what I feel is hard and dead. Crystals and circuits and lenses that allow me to resolve dark bands into fine lines. It all seems very important to them. It is meaningless to me, and that makes me angry. Sometimes I claw at my eyes in the night. I know I should not. . . .

One day as I was coming home I heard voices. Hidden by the corner of our house, I watched. I heard them call my mother selfish. They said we couldn't stay there anymore. She said they were wrong and they knocked her down. I cried stop it! stop it! and beat my fists against their chests. They pulled me away. I looked down and saw how small and frail she was. I tried to hit them again, but they laughed at me and knocked me down too, and when I woke up I was here, and the world was gray shadows. I wonder what they did to my mother. . . .

The bands of light and dark fade. I stop. If I tried to keep working without information I would be punished again. It is time for exercise. They want to keep us healthy. The eyepieces withdraw from my dead sockets and the helmet lifts from my head. The world turns to gray, featureless, formless shapes. In this it is worse than when I am working, when the magnified patterns are sharp and clear.

I turn around on my chair and stand up. Two steps forward. The floor moves. The first time it moved beneath my feet I fell down. They had warned me about it. They were watching me my first day, so they punished me. After that I did not fall. The floor takes us all to a large room where the paleness of the walls is a little grayed by distance,and I can hear echoes.

The gray shapes of the others move around me. I know they cannot tell, and I think no one who can see is watching, but I am ashamed to be naked. We put our hands on metal bars and push. Around and around, until

we perspire and the air drafts make us cold.

We all have glowing symbols on our backs, each different, so we may be identified. I can feel no difference on my skin, so I don't know how they are made. I push, and walk around and around. There is no symbol near me that I recognize. I hear conversations going on but they are all about the ecstasy of the lights and who had the most unusual pattern. My sweat tickles me, and I want to scratch. Finally the bars slow and lock. The shadows seem to spin around me. I almost fall. The pressure of the others forces me to keep my balance.

We make our way to the moving hall again. I feel disoriented and dizzy. We squeeze our eyelids shut and water gushes over us, cleaning the sweat away. The water is always too hot. Air dries us. Sometimes it is too cold, and we are not really dried at all.

I remember swimming in a deep dark pond near our little house. I wasn't ashamed to be naked there, and I liked the breezes that spread me with goosebumps. I remember grass and pebbles under my feet, and sun cushioning the wind on my back.

The helmet lowers, clasps my head unmoving. The eyepieces extend, enter, attach, and I am once more a receptacle for lines of black and bars of light. I no longer have to think carefully about what I am doing. I think of later, when I can lie down and rest. There will be no patterns and no shadows against the blackness where my sight should be. I think of the insubstantial varicolored companions of my childhood. I am lonely. . . . I think of another way to touch my eyelids, a way I've never tried before, so my night friends may perhaps come back. I tell myself that I will be disappointed, but I do not believe it. I believe it will work. I want to close my eyes now and try, but my eyes cannot close here, and if I take my hands from the controls I will be punished again. I work with anticipation now, and eagerness, as if by doing so the time will pass more quickly.

I make an error. I cringe from the shock and my mouth is metallic. My mind has ignored a dark line. I do not understand how I could have missed it. I try again. The punishment surprises and hurts me. I do not know what I have done wrong. The shock recurs. My actions become

almost erratic. Perhaps it is their error—

The eyepieces withdraw abruptly. There is something wrong. The senseless punishments frighten me. The helmet releases me. I turn and get up and take two steps, because I know that's what I'm supposed to do. The floor begins to move. I can hear nothing but its glide, see nothing but the uniform paleness of walls passing me. There are no shadow-people here, no people like me. Dark lines flash around me, around and around, spinning, enclosing me. I know what is the matter. There's something wrong with the things I use for eyes. I know they will blame me. I'm terrified that they will take away the last remnants of my sight. But now I think, if theirs will not work they will have to give me my real eyes back.

The floor stops. I am reeling. A door opens and a shadow-person takes my arm and pulls me inside. I close my eyelids, screw up my face, keep my eyes shut tight. I want my real eyes back. Yours will not work much longer. I will not let you fix them, give me back my eyes.

They tell me to open my eyes. I almost smile. I can't open something I don't have. They tell me again. They slap me. I put up my arms to shield my face, and they slap me again. I can only make dry sobs. My eyelids open and the heavy things behind them drive the ugly shadows and lights into my brain. I am taken to a table and made to lie down. They put straps around me so I can't move, and they start to probe my eyes.

It hurts. It takes a long time, and I can't even see their shadows. It hurts.

They finish, they untie me, they thrust me out. I hear them laughing as I stumble onto the moving floor. It is an ugly sound. My head aches. I go back to my place and sit down. The lights are too bright, the blacks too dark, but I'm not allowed to stop. My hands are trembling. I remember that I've thought of a new way to make myself see, and for a while I can forget the pain.

Finally my time is up. The floor takes us back to our sleeping places. I crawl inside, crouching. I must fit my ankle against the cannulae or the panel at my feet will not slide shut, and I will be punished. I remember soft fragrant pallets of pine boughs and the pleasant soft scratchiness of those needles. Tonight I do not fear the pain. I do what is

expected of me and wait for the panel to cut off the light.

I reach up and touch my eyes. Anticipation tickles my throat. It will be so good to see the colors again and remember what they really are. I know this way will work. I reach up—

My hands jerk away. They cannot punish me here. They cannot. This is my place, my time. . . . I reach again, and the shock is stronger. My fingers jerk back reflexively and the back of my head hurts from the pressure of the bed. My hands creep up once more. The shock is so strong that the spark flashes back to my brain. I smell seared flesh, and my fingers are numb. I put them to my lips. I can taste blood. I know they will hurt tomorrow, when I must use them at my work.

But even if they did not hurt, I could not touch my eyes. The shadow-people will not let me. If only they would, I know that I could see.

I want to cry. I wish that I had tears.

Frederik Pohl

I REMEMBER A WINTER

I remember a winter when the cold snapped and stung, and it would not snow. It was a very long time ago, and in the afternoons Paulie O'Shaughnessy would come by for me after school and we'd tell each other what we were going to do with our lives. I remember standing with Paulie on the corner, with my breath white and my teeth aching from the cold air, talking. It was too cold to go to the park and we didn't have any money to go anywhere else. We thumbed through the magazines in the second-hand bookstore until the lady threw us out. "Let's hitch downtown," said Paulie; but I could feel how cold the wind would be on the back of the trolley cars and I wouldn't. "Let's sneak in the Carlton," I said, but Paulie had been caught sneaking in to see the Marx Brothers the week before and the usher knew his face. We ducked into the indoor miniature golf course for a while; it had been an automobile showroom the year before and still smelled of gas. But we were the only people there, and conspicuous, and when the man who rented out the clubs started toward us we left.

So we Boy Scout-trotted down Flatbush Avenue to the big old library, walk fifty, trot fifty, the cold air slicing into the insides of our faces, past the apple sellers and the winebrick stores, gasping and grunting at each other, and do you know what? Paulie picked a book off those dusty old shelves. We didn't have cards, but he liked it too much to leave it unfinished. He walked out with it under his coat; and fifteen years later, shriveled and shrunken and terrified of the priest coming toward his bed, he died of what he read that day. It's true. I saw it happen. And the damn book was only *Beau Geste.*

I remember the summer that followed. I still didn't have any money but I found girls. That was the summer when Franklin Roosevelt flew to Chicago in an airplane to accept his party's nomination to the Presidency, and it was hotter than you would believe. Standing on the corner, the sparks from the trolley wheels were almost invisible in the bright sun. We hitched to the beach when we could, and Paulie's pale, Jewish-looking face got red and then freckled. He hated that; he wanted to be burned black in the desert sun, or maybe clear-skinned and cleft-chinned with the mark of a helmet strap on his jaw.

But I didn't see much of Paulie that summer. He had finished all the Wren books by then and was moving on to *Daredevil Aces*; he'd wheedled a World War French bayonet out of his uncle and had taken a job delivering suits for a tailor shop, saving his money to buy a .22. I saw much more of his sister. She was fifteen then, which was a year older than Paulie and I were. In his British soldier-of-fortune-role-playing he cast her as much younger. "Sport," he said to me, eyes a little narrowed, half-smile on his lips, "do what you like. But not with Kitty."

As a matter of fact, in the end I did do pretty much as I liked with Kitty, but we had each married somebody else before that and it was a long way from 1932. But even in 1932 I tried. On a July evening I finally got her to go up on the roof with me; it was no good; somebody else was there ahead of us, and Kitty wouldn't stay with them there. "Let's sit on the stoop," she said. But that was right out in the street, with all the kids playing king-of-the-hill on a pile of sand.

So I took her by the elbow, and I walked her down the avenue, talking about Life and Courage and War. She had heard the whole thing before, of course, as much as she would listen to, but from Paulie, not from me. She listened. It was ritual courtship, as formal as a dog lifting his leg. It did not seem to me that it mattered what I said, as long as what I said was masculine.

You can't know how masculine I wanted to be for Kitty. She was without question the prettiest doll around. She looked like—well, like Ginger Rogers, if you remember, with a clean, friendly face and the neatest, slimmest hips.

She knew that. She was studying dancing. She was also studying men, and God knows what she thought she was learning from me.

When we got to Dean Street I changed from authority on war to authority on science and told her that the heat was only at ground level. Just a little way above our heads, I told her, the air was always cool and fresh. "Let's go up on the fire escape," I said, nudging her toward the Atlantic Theatre.

The Atlantic was locked up tight that year; Paulie and I were not the only kids who didn't have movie money. But the fire escapes were open, three flights of strap-iron stairs going up to what we called nigger heaven. I don't know why, exactly. The colored kids from the neighborhood didn't sit up there; in fact, I never saw them in the movies at all. The fire escapes made a good place to go. Paulie and I went up there a lot, when he wasn't working, to look down on everybody in the street and not have anyone know we were watching them. So Kitty and I went up to the second landing and sat on the steps, and in a minute I put my arm around her.

And all of this, you know, I'd thought out like two or three months in advance, going up there by myself and experimentally bouncing my tail up and down on the steps for discomfort, calculating in a wet morning in May what it would be like right after dark in August, and all. It was a triumph of fourteen-year-old forethought. Or it would have been if it had come to anything. But somebody coughed, higher up on the fire escape.

Kitty jabbed me with her elbow, and we listened. Somebody was mumbling softly up above us. I don't know if he had heard us coming. I don't think so. I stood up and peered around the landing, and I saw candlelight, and an old man's face, terribly lined and unshaven and sad. He was living there. All around the top landing he had carefully put up sheets of cardboard from grocery cartons, I suppose to keep the rain out. If it rained. Or perhaps just to keep him out of public view. He was sitting on a blanket, leaning his forearm on one knee, looking at the candle, talking to himself.

And that was the end of that. We tiptoed down the

stairs, and Kitty said she had to go home. And did. Otherwise I honestly think that in the long run I would have married her.

I remember the years of the war, the headlines and the blackouts and the crazy way everything was changing under my very eyes. Paulie had it made. He enlisted first thing, and wrote me clipped, concise letters about the joys of close-order drill. I remember buying his old car the last time he came home on furlough, with his cuffs tucked in his paratrooper boots, telling deadpan stories about the hazards of basic training. The car was a 1931 Buick, with a jug cork in the gas tank instead of a cap. I sold it for the price of two train tickets when I ran out of gas-ration coupons in Pittsburgh, on my honeymoon. Not with Kitty. Kitty had gone far out of my life by then. Her dancing lessons had paid off: amateur-night tap dancer to *Film Fun* model to showgirl at the International Casino; and then she'd gone abroad to Paris with a troupe and been caught in the Occupation. Well. Mutatis mutandis and plus ça change and so on. Or, as one might say, things keep getting all screwed up.

I breezed through the war. Barring a company clerk in Jefferson Barracks who I really wanted to kill, there was nothing I couldn't handle; Paulie had lied. Or maybe for me it was a different war. I had got into newspaper work, which let me get into Special Services when my time came. Nobody was shooting at unit managers for USO shows. I went through forty-one months of exaltation and shame. You see, this was the war that really mattered and had to be won; and how I burned, with what a blue-white flame, with pride to be a part of it. And how I groveled before anyone who would listen because my part was mostly chasing enlisted men away from big-breasted starlets. Do you suppose it's really true that somebody had to do that job, too? I couldn't believe it, but it was because of that that I met Kitty again.

She turned up looking for a job as a translator, looking very much as she always had. She was different, though. She was married, to this very nice captain she had met during Occupation days in Paris, and she had become a German national. It was a grand reunion. I took her to

dinner and she told me that Paulie had been wounded in the Salerno landing and was still in the hospital. And a little bit later she told me about her husband, the darling, dimpled SS officer, who was now a POW on the Eastern front. And for four months in Wiesbaden she lived in my billet with me, translating day and night; and, actually, that's what happened to that first marriage of mine, because my wife found out about it. I don't think she would have minded a *Fräulein.* She minded my shacking up with a girl I'd known before I knew her.

I remember more consequential causes than I can count. When I look inside my skin I don't see anything but consequences; all I am is the casual aftereffects of, item, an unemployed carpenter evicted from his home and, item, a classification clerk who had been in the newspaper game himself once, and all the other itemized seeds that have now blossomed into fifty-two-year-old me.

I remember more than I absolutely want to, in fact, and some things I remember in the context of a certain time and a certain place when, in fact, I really learned them later on.

The man on the landing. Years after the war, when I had become a TV producer doing a documentary on the Depression, I put one of my research girls on checking him out. She was a good girl, and tracked him down. That's how I know he had been a carpenter. The banks closed and the jobs vanished, and he wound up on the fire escape. It happened that when the police chased him away a reporter was in the precinct house, and he wrote the story my girl found.

And I remember Paulie, twenty-nine years old and weighing a fast ninety pounds, gasping hoarsely as he reached out to shake my hand in the VA hospital ward, the day before he died. He had been there for three years, dying all that time. He looked like his own grandfather. That was a consequence too: a landing in the second wave at Salerno and a mine the engineers had missed. He got his Purple Heart for a broken spine that kept getting worse until it was so bad that it killed him.

I think I've seen the place where he got it—assuming that I remembered what he said well enough, or under-

stood him well enough, when he was concentrating mostly on dying. I think the place it happened was on the city beach at Salerno, way at the north horn of that crescent, about where there's a little restaurant built out over the water on stilts. I stood there one afternoon on that beach, looking at the floating turds and pizza crusts, trying to see the picture of Paulie hitting the mine and being thrown into the sky in a fountain of saltwater and blood. But it wasn't any good. I can only see what I've seen, not what I've been told about. I couldn't see the causality. All I could do was ask myself questions about it: What made him sign up for his hero suit? Was it really reading that Percival Christopher Wren book when he was thirteen years old? Or: What made me alive, and sort of rich, when Paulie was so poor and dead? Was it the four or five really good contacts I made in the USO that turned me into a genius television producer? Is there any of me, or of any of us, that isn't just consequence?

I think, and I've thought it over a lot, that everything that ever happened keeps on happening, extending tendrils of itself endlessly into the moving present tense of time, producing its echoes, and explosions and extinctions forever. Just being careful isn't enough to save us, but we do have to be careful. Smokey Bear wouldn't lie to you about that.

If I'd married Kitty I think we would have had fine kids, even grandchildren by now; but I didn't, not even batting .500 out of my two chances at her. First it was the old man on the fire escape, then it was the kindly Nazi she decided to go back to waiting for. She waited very well and for a long time, all through the years while the Russians were taking their time about letting him go and all through the denazification trials after that. I suppose by then she felt she was too old to want to start a family. And none of my own wives have really wanted the PTA bit.

And think of the consequences of that—I mean, the negative consequences of the babies that Kitty and I didn't have. Did we miss out on a new Mozart? A Lee Harvey Oswald? Maybe just a hell of a solid Brooklyn fireman who might have saved a more largely consequential life than his own, or mine? Think of them. And that's all you can

do with those particular consequences, because they didn't get born.

Percival Christopher Wren didn't mean to kill Paulie. The sad old derelict on the fire escape never intended to break up Kitty and me. Intentions don't matter.

We all live in each others' pockets. If I drive my car along Mulholland Drive tonight, I only mean to keep my date with that pretty publicity girl from Paramount. I don't even know you're alive, do I? But the car is burning up the gasoline and pumping out the poison gas that makes the smog; and maybe it's just that little bit of extra exhaust fume in the air that bubbles your lungs out with emphysema. It doesn't matter to you what I meant to do. You're just as dead. I don't suppose I ever in my life really meant to hurt anybody, except possibly that J.B. company clerk. But he got off without a scratch, and meanwhile I may be killing you.

So I walk out on my balcony and stare through the haze at the lights of Los Angeles. I look at where they all live, the black militants and the aerospace engineers, the Desilu sound men and the storefront soul-savers, the kids who go to the Académe Française and the little old ladies with Back Up Our Boys bumper stickers on their cars. I remember what they, and you, and each and every one of you have done to me, this half a century I've been battered and bribed into my present shape and status; but what are they, and all of you, doing to each other this night?

James Sallis

DOUCEMENT, S'IL VOUS PLAIT

They're forwarding me on to Versailles now. At least I think it's Versailles. I watched the postman's lips as he readdressed me, concentrated on the stammering pressure of the pen as it darted across my face—the *a*'s and *e*'s, unaccountably, in small capitals, the rest properly in lower case—and tried to ignore, to block out, *faire taire,* the dragging accompaniment from the side of his hand. And I think the word he printed, with his felt-tip pen, was *Versailles.* I felt the four strokes of the V and *l*'s quite distinctly; they were rapid, hard. That I am being forwarded is certain, for I saw the stamp descending like a dark sky and was able to read quickly, and backwards through the smear of ink before it moved away, leaving my eyes blotched with black, the words *prière de faire.* And if the next were *renvoyer,* there would have been no need for the postman's pen, for the additional letters among which I was able to discern only (I think) the single word *Versailles*; a simple circling, an arrow, should have been sufficient to send me on my way back to 1, Petherton Court, Tiverton Road. It must have been, then, *suivre.* So at least, for another day, another few weeks, perhaps my abiding fear—that I bear no return address and will end among the dead letters—this fear is allayed.

I am dropped from a box into a hot canvas bag. The smell of paste and ink, of dry saliva and, somewhere deep inside us, perfume. Apparently, while sleeping I have gone astray and been returned—to travel to some scrawled new address, to be set aside for inspection and at least referred back—to the post office collection box. It was the shock of falling through the slot onto hard edges and sharp corners, no doubt, which awakened me. The other letters will

have nothing to do with me; they sense difference. And their language is unfamiliar now. Something guttural, that might be German. My questions go unanswered. Deep in the canvas (the perfume?) I can hear a British accent, a soft weeping, but am unable to make out the words.

I wait in a cold hall, propped against the frosted mirror of an ancient oak wardrobe near the door, for a week before someone finally scribbles *Not at this address* in a cramped, small hand, afterwards retracing several of the letters and scoring beneath them, four heavy lines which feel at first like rips then like deep bruises, and drops me in the corner mailbox on his way somewhere. The mailbox is round. British.

Why do they move about so much? How are they able; where does she get the money? And is there the faintest remain of a familiar perfume in this box. . . .

I am being forwarded again. I have no idea where.

It is Christmas, I think, and I am lost in the deluge of mail. Crushed with parcels, shuffled like a card but never dealt. High in my solitary forgotten pigeonhole now, I observe the functioning of our postal service. It never before occurred to me how astounding, what an efficient, essential instrument of society, this service is. Or the complex problems dealt with each day as little more, actually, than part of the routine. I watch with fascination. Perhaps this is the work I was meant for.

I was a writer. More and more, my attention centered about the mail: my correspondence, the possible arrival of checks or hopeful word from my agents, rejected manuscripts that must be sent back out at once, copies of my books or magazines containing some small piece of mine, perhaps a foreign translation of something I'd done long ago and almost forgotten, packets of books about which publishers hoped I would be inclined to say something complimentary, a note of praise from some editor of a non-paying quarterly. The post was delivered twice daily, nine in the morning and just after noon. I would sit on the steps in the hall with a cup of tea, or the worst times, days I was definitely expecting something, with a drink, waiting. My wife and I got into shameful screaming

fights over this, and once I struck one of the children who raced out of the flat before me and grabbed the mail from the postman's hands. (I always waited, looking away, until he had deposited it in the box and left the building; then forced myself to walk slowly to it, whistling, and to every appearance completely uninterested. I believed that somehow this outward display of unconcern would influence what was there.) After we left the States and came to live in London, things became much worse; my expectations more desperate. And while my wife was conscientious about collecting it from the box, that having done, mail lost all importance to her, as though for some reason she could not accept it as a real thing, part of the daily discourse of our lives. Forced to be away from the flat during the time of delivery, I would return to look hopelessly into the empty box, and then to spend untold minutes searching the flat—for she could never remember just what she had done with it. Often I would find an important letter leaning against a dirty cup among stacked lunch dishes, forgotten. Others would finally appear in my oldest son's wastebasket, the stamps having just been torn away for his collection. Generally, considerable portions of the message were torn away as well.

Faces bend down and leer at me where I lean in the boxes. Shade light from the small window with their hands so they can see my diagonal cutting through the stream of fluorescent light from behind. Breath frosts the glass. Finally I'm removed between two fingers, crushed with others in a gloved hand. The thumb of the glove is empty and flops against us.

Later a man stands over me. All the others have been opened. They are lying, torn and empty, at one side of this table, and he is turning me over and over again in one hand, mumbling to himself, a pink plastic letter opener in the other hand that I see periodically, rising jerkily toward me as though by its own will, then retreating again from sight. Minutes pass, and the next time the hand appears, the letter opener has been replaced by a pen; then a rapid scribbling. He puts me down, goes away. From beside me, among torn bodies, comes the scent of familiar perfume. It is fading.

It would seem that I am in Poland. Or perhaps Yugoslavia.

I always wanted to travel. Jane and I would lie for hours in bed with carlights sliding in sheets across the walls and ceiling and talk of all the places we should go—making plan after plan and abandoning each in turn, as some consideration of my work intervened. Departures were postponed time and again, applications for visas were canceled, passports expired. Jane collected a sizable library of travel guides, two cardboard boxes full of travel folders. She became well known in the lounges of airports, ticket agents, foreign consuls. Soon she read nothing else, thought of nothing else.

"How were the children today?"

"They were in Hawaii."

Other places.

They're forwarding me on to Rhodes now. Ailleurs. Gdzieś. I have no idea where. And my sole, my only consolation, is that somewhere, at the end of all this, somewhere my wife and family wait to receive me. I imagine how they will discover me one morning on the floor by the door, beneath the mail slot—perhaps they will have heard the outside door, the brass lid swing shut as I'm pushed through, even the sound I make striking and sliding out onto tile or wood, a few inches—and how then they will prop me up lovingly on the table between them; between, perhaps, the cornflakes and Billy's strained fruit.

C. L. Grant

THE SUMMER OF THE IRISH SEA

I

Once he had made up his mind to run for the heaven in the sea, Traynor was both relieved and apprehensive. After fifteen years of relative solitude, he relied more on instinct than on conscious thought, and he enjoyed the feeling of having a goal, though he didn't call it that, even with the dangers that would come with the trying; and in a submerged cavern of his mind, something told him to go on.

Necessity ruled his life; he had known it had become imperative to run for it when he was almost driven to the ground two seasons before because he was too slow. He had wavered, hesitated, fearful of leaving his sanctuary. It had taken a second near-capture to give him the strength, and the fear.

Heaven was an island in the Irish Sea. So he had heard. So he believed as he sat on the low bank watching the shallow stream pass him by. In the twisting clear water he saw his face and shook his head to be sure it was his. Had he the memory, he would have been able to compare what he saw with the way it had been when he was released; now there was only long, black and matted hair tangling with a dark beard he tried to keep short with sharpened stones. His thin face was cracked and browned by the weather, splotched with dull red infections from insect bites and thorns. He leaned forward and saw the strength in his lean arms and chest, the speed in the long legs. The leaf-and-reed loincloth was only a protection, not a reminder.

He grunted and threw a pebble into the water, and immediately the ripples were erased.

A bird called, was answered and called again.

A hare poked its head through the tall grass opposite him, but he was not hungry and he let it go.

A short while and the heat was erased by shadows that covered the movement of the stream. There was a comfort in the twilight coolness telling him the end of the season was near; and he was glad because the next day he would be on his way, heading for heaven and the plentiful game that would feed him until he died.

He believed it, and that fed him too.

During his first few months of freedom, Traynor had attempted to keep track of time so he would know when fall officially arrived and he could move across the low hills without fear; but there was too much to do just to stay alive, and he learned instead to watch for the changing leaves and to test the night air. He quickly discovered an animal pleasure in staying alive long enough to watch the snow fly, and he felt sorry, for a while, for those who purposely lived in the open. Somehow, in spite of everything, they had failed the training and wanted to die, not knowing what it would be like to die.

When the last of the light faded into stars, he lowered himself into the stream, ignoring the water's sting, and waded upstream to the low-hanging branch that marked his lair. Being careful not to touch the bank, he leaped up to a reed rope and climbed rapidly, silently into the middle branches. Three trees growing together wove an effective screen, and a slight rearrangement provided him with a narrow platform for sleeping, and hiding when necessary.

The mattress of leaves was damp and cool, and there was a moment's regret at leaving the bed that had given him eight winters of protection, eight summers of hope. His stomach protested when he stretched out, but it wasn't the first time he had gone to bed without eating. He remembered the hare and smiled.

A bird whispered and was answered.

Then it was quiet and he knew it was safe, and he slept, lightly.

II

In the canyon of sleep Traynor dreamed:

A very wide room without paint or picture. A score of beds made of warped slats laid across bricks. Men and women slept quietly, lightly. A tired-looking man in a

white coat opened the heavy metal door and crumpled a piece of paper in his hand. Instantly everyone sat up. He grinned and left. They slept. Again he was there, stepping on a small twig until it snapped. They sat up. He grinned and nodded. They slept.

A very wide room with a dirt floor covered with gravel. Naked, panting, perspiring, they jogged around close to the walls; the man, a different man, stood in the center like a horse trainer, urging them on until only one remained on his bleeding feet. Traynor. He was young. Food was thrown at them and they fought with hands and feet and teeth and heads, and ate with their fingers. No one talked: only the grunts and pants and crunching of bare feet on gravel.

It was hot; it was cold. They were in a compound without visible barriers, except for the dogs. It was wet, dry, noisy, quiet. Except for the horses, and the dogs. Snow, sex, rain, sex, heat and death. In the buildings, in the open.

In the rooms, both of them, there were bars on the windows.

In the canyon of sleep Traynor sensed:

Two people: one man, young; one man older but not old. Their faces only, distorted, barely recognizable as faces.

"Tell you what, Edwin, I'll make that fifty pounds you don't."

"I love your confidence in me, you bastard, but you're on. See if Margot is ready. I'll be outside with the others."

III

Traynor dropped to the ground and moved quickly through the trees to the burrow he had seen the afternoon before. He crouched, waiting patiently, then leaned forward. His hand darted into the hole and dragged the kicking hare out, twisting its neck before its hindquarters were clear of the ground. As he tore at the warm flesh and spat the fur to one said, he thought of the dreams: he dismissed the first because it was recurrent and had lost its meaning; held the second until it faded only because it was less a dream than a dread. He paused, the animal's blood run-

ning down his forearms and hands, then dismissed that too. It was disturbing, but he would wait until, *if* it came back.

When he finished the meal, he buried the bones in the bed of the stream and waded westward until his lair was out of sight. Then he left the cold water and hurried through the woods. It was still too early for anything to happen, but there was a meadow he had to cross before the heat slowed him down. As he walked, he listened to the wind, separating the sounds into rustling leaves and animals, and just the wind. Excitement made him tense, and the feeling was so different than when he was being hunted that he was reluctant to shake it off.

He surprised a bird in its nest and ate while he moved.

There were images of blue water, green land, and others like him no longer afraid to be together—he hummed and was startled by the sound, but it struck him as being good; peaceful, like the night.

He walked faster, using a memory to prod him on: a man he had met, living in a cave dug into the bank of a river. Traynor had wandered from the self-imposed boundaries of his land when he reached the river, farther north than he had ever been. Together they filled the other's larder with fish caught by hand, then sat in the cave and talked. It was a strange sensation, talking, and Traynor was slow to realize he did not like it.

"What'd you do?" It was the standard opening, the greeting among his kind. The man was old.

"Multiple," Traynor answered without remembering. "A wife, a man and a woman. I was about twenty-five." No memory, just ritual.

"Rape and murder. They were fifteen, I was twenty-eight."

The two traded their lives, near-captures, and the hunts they had seen from hiding places. Both knew they were freaks for living so long. Then the other told him of the heaven. It took most of the afternoon because the words, unused for so long a time, were difficult to resurrect.

"I've seen a few of us lately heading west, always in winter. We're quite a number up here, you see, not so many towns and large houses. These others, they talk of a place in the Irish Sea. Food. Warm places. No blood.

That's what they say. The Irish Sea, over there someplace." He paused a long moment. "I'm trying next year."

The following day, moving south, Traynor heard the baying hounds behind him and ran, angry that he hadn't taken some of the fish with him now that they were sure to be wasted.

Several times in several years he heard about the heaven. The promised delights were always different, but the place was always the same. He ignored the talk as foolish—how could they know?—most especially from the women he only wanted to use. He had been safe for more seasons than he could count, until the summer he'd nearly been caught because he was too slow.

Suddenly, before he registered the fact, Traynor stopped thinking and saw glimpses of the meadow's flowing green. The sun was hot. He slowed, stopped, then crept forward agilely on all fours. His eyes narrowed, his nostrils widened. A large bush a few yards from the tall grass shielded him from any eyes that might have been trained in his direction. He shifted until the wind blew in his face. He knew this place, he could run it without concentration, without looking down.

But now he would wait, listen, and wait again.

Insects drifted to and away from him. His legs became stiff and he shifted angrily. A spider, not three inches from his cheek, leisurely wrapped an immobile bee in fragile-looking white.

He dozed.

IV

In the shadow of the spider Traynor dreamed:

A montage of faces, swirling, spewing words tonelessly. Before Traynor, before his father and his father's father. Fragments overlapping and sometimes senseless. He understood none of it.

"There're just too many . . . no room . . . no room . . ."

"Legalized murder! That's all it is! How can we as a people con—"

"It works in the Union . . ."

"Without war there must be an outlet . . . nothing worse

than beasts anyway how can their vile existence be tolerated when . . ."

The faces blurred and spun—a shift while Traynor shifted his feet in the dust.

"Trained, conditioned, and weeded out, they adapt as—"

"Far more exciting. Instinct and reason, by God it's—"

"German shepherds are best if one heads—"

Traynor made a sound much like a whimper, and sensed:

"Margot, don't tell us you're squeamish."

"Nonsense, Edwin love. I'm just nervous. It's all the excitement, that's all. I'm simply not an old hand at it like you."

V

Traynor shook himself awake and punched the ground in frustration. Time that was not his had been wasted, and a terrifying sense of urgency shook his limbs. He decided against running, however, since the next line of trees was too far away to outrun any dogs. He moved slowly below the tops of the weeds and grass, trying to stay in time to the wind that sifted out of the trees. Bees ignored him, flies did not. The air cooled in the intervals of shade as clouds passed under the sun. He rested for a moment beside a rotted log, not thinking but fearing that he had never had to do this before, knowing he could usually travel a whole day without stopping. He stretched up and measured the distance left; the shadows were what he was after.

He was hungry.

He rose to his knees, tensed, then ran, watching the trees bob in front of him. The afternoon silence was hardly broken except for the sound of his own breathing. When finally he fell gasping into the brush and let the sun-speckled shadows wrap him gently, he closed his eyes and sweat drenched him. Never, never before had he felt so winded. He became afraid.

By the time the sun began teasing the horizon, he found himself in an area beyond his own. He skirted several small farms and a village, avoided the roads as much as he could. There had been a time when he had considered

killing a man and stealing his clothes; but sooner or later somebody would notice the brands on his forehead and back.

Eventually he caught a family of quail and a hare and sat on his haunches eating. He hurried, unaware of the noises around him. He finished and left the bones unburied.

When the evening soothed him and made him tired, he found a tree to sleep in. He thought, for a moment, how fat he'd grow in heaven, the mate to be there when he wanted her, and the dying old he desired.

"Old," he said aloud. He liked the sound of it.

He slept, soundly.

VI

Two people: riding, smiling, bobbing, unidentifiable. One complained about the smell of salt air. Bobbing, riding, smiling.

"Why should he leave, Edwin? I mean, it's not very logical, is it. Why, he's practically a legend."

"Sooner or later, love, he'd have heard of the migration. Maybe he's ready to chuck it in, like a dog, maybe, who's ready to die. I don't know."

"Maybe, but it's still not—"

"My dear, you're giving it credit for something it no longer has. It's like giving a quadratic equation to a horse and expecting him to solve it. Impossible. Hey, there they go! Come, hurry, Margot, I want to get home for supper!"

The air was cool, the ground damp as the sun split itself between leaves and branches. Traynor finished a meager starling and began walking, noticing belatedly a difference in the smell of the air. He wrinkled his nose and wondered. His footsteps were punctuated by grunts and he ran more often.

A partially plowed field stretched in front of him. He halted, looked, leaned into the strange wind that pushed his beard against his chest and his hair over the gothic F scarred into his brow. He drank deeply in a creek, then stepped into the sun, running, keeping balance by the touch of his fingers on the ground. Then he lay in the shadow of a log and watched the belt of woodland ahead

for signs of movement. It stretched like a green quarter-moon, blackened by the glare of the sun in his eyes.

He smiled.

More tired than he remembered being in his life, he clenched his fists and rose, and heard the dogs. Stiffening, he waited for their direction, then sprinted over the frozen waves of the field. Low, hunched, breathing easily now that the tension was broken, he passed the tips of the crescent as the hounds scattered from the underbrush like leaves. Their yelps became bays, and behind them the horn signaled.

Traynor's eyes widened in fear and he surrendered all pretext of hiding as he straightened his legs to get more power. Glancing around quickly, he veered sharply to his right, hearing rather than seeing the horsemen break into the open. The furrows tripped him, slowed him until he began leaping from top to top.

The horn, low and high, low and high, pushed him on. He stumbled without falling. A small dog stood in his way, fangs bared, growling. In sudden anger Traynor kept on, and when the dog leaped, he smashed it across the throat with his forearm. Another began snapping at his heels and he stopped, pivoted, and, grabbing its muzzle, used the momentum to help him toss it over his shoulder. A third was kicked in the head and it collapsed into the dirt, whimpering and whining. He ran on, humming something he knew was about oceans and waves and the wide Irish Sea.

Another dog, still another, became tangled in his legs and they sprawled, rolled on the ground, Traynor's hand on its throat, choking and pushing its tearing fangs and wide, frenzied eyes away from his face.

There was a sharp pain in his side, on his legs, on his back.

Slowly he reeled, fell, stood, fell. A prison cell floated, a man in white coasted, blood spurted softly from a knife wound in a woman's chest. A horse, a rider, fangs, a smile.

Low and high the horn.

He heard the call to heaven.

My God, he cried out silently, I'm not a—

The woman rode up and reined in her mount just as the man screamed.

"Congratulations, Margot, you're the first! He's beautiful, and the trophies are yours, of course."

"God, Edwin, he screamed."

"They always do, dear. You never really get used to it."

"He knew!"

"Nonsense. Why should he be any different from the others? Do you . . . do you want me to carry them back, love?"

"No, not the cloth, just the . . . other. I'm . . . I'm not sure I want it."

"I understand, dearest. You'll change your mind; it's only the letdown after the chase. Just keep telling yourself he was a rapist or something. Dammit, Peter! For God's sake, be careful what you're doing with that thing. That's better. Put it in the saddlebag, will you? And don't force it, idiot, you'll tear the ears off."

Robert Thurston

GOOD-BYE, SHELLEY, SHIRLEY, CHARLOTTE, CHARLENE

In a smoke-congested back room of the universe the God of my agnostic imagination oversees this crooked card game. Bored, His jaw wedged into His left palm, His left arm propped up on the poker table, His left elbow nestled in a wide green rip of felt, He pulls cards randomly out of a grease-stained deck. On the back of each card is a still-life flower picture. (It seems that all the cards of my childhood depicted a variation of that vaseful of lifeless blooms.) God wears a purple waistcoat pulled tight across His ribs. The garters can't be seen amidst the ballooning sleeves of His striped shirt. The top edge of a blue patterned kerchief is coated with a residue of dust and sweat. On one shoulder He sports a campaign button that says—scrape lines crisscrossing curved letters—"Win with Clay and Frelinghuysen."

He doesn't look at me as He turns up cards, but He lets me glimpse each one before tossing it into the pile at His feet.

"Ace of spades," I say. A showy flick of the wrist and the card drifts, hits a couple of air currents which buoy it momentarily, joins the floor pile. A susurrus of admiration whistles from the heavenly kibitzers, a chorus of hardy cloven-footed old men and nubile young maidens who, when not susurring, sing snatches of "The E-RI-E is a-rising and the gin is a-getting low, and I scarcely think we'll get a drink till we get to Buffalo-o-o."

God fingers the middle of the deck and slips out another card. Same old still-life, same grease blotches. Using His thumb (bulging calluses, jagged manicure, knuckle lines like trenches) as a pivot, He flips the card over, presses it toward me trapped between His index and middle fingers.

"Ace of spades," I say. Wrist-flick, wristbone snap.

Card follows spiral flight pattern down to pile. Maiden breasts rise and fall with a determined sigh of approval. The old men applaud.

God deals one from the bottom and shoves it at me.

"Ace of spades." He throws it away arrogantly. A blast of wind sways the overhead lamp which flashes first on a far wall, then back onto the chorus. The maidens have let their robes fall open—but carefully. Lines and shadows tantalize.

God snatches another card while I'm not looking, while my eyes trace lines and shadows to logical conclusions. I look at the card.

"Ace of spades." The card performs a double flip and half gainer before settling onto the pile. God looks neither at the cards nor at me. Maidens and gasping old men spread their loving arms way out in space.

The new card rests in God's palm.

"Ace of spades." I grab the card away from Him before He can fling it. Maidens and old men shriek like parents. The back of the card leaves a greasy feeling on my thumb. I crumple up the card and toss it over my shoulder.

God's hand sweeps across the top of the deck. He shows me both sides of the hand—no card in evidence. He wriggles the hand and, miraculously, a card springs from his finger-tips (deep whorls like rat mazes). The crowd synchronizes its relieved sigh. God holds out the card, now curved slightly in an arch between thumb and fingers.

"Ace of spades." And—pop—it flicks out of his fingers and falls to the floor with such directness it seems guided in by a secret pilot hidden within the vase of flowers. I give the lamp a small push. Its light flickers for a second across the murmuring chorus. I look to see if any robes have fallen open further. My afterimage is lines and shadows, lines and shadows.

God deals out four cards, face down, turns them over one by one.

"Ace of spades," I say. "Ace of spades. Ace of spades. Ace of spades."

He gathers the four cards together.

"Wait!" I shout. His hand stops.

"What are you proving?" I ask. "What is the game? Life? Tragedy? Something about religion itself?"

"Play, stranger," God says. Maidens and old men stay grimly quiet.

"Why the ace of spades?" I say. "To symbolize death? Failure? A Negro Luftwaffe commander? What are your symbols?"

"No symbols, stranger," He says. "Just call the cards. That's the game. Just call the cards."

Shelley, the love of my life, hummed all the way from Corry on Route 6 into Union City, digging whatever it was she saw in brown-tipped grass and stubby hills. Feeling irritable from a long morning's driving, I glanced over at her to be soothed by a look. One comforting smile or gesture from her was better sedation than hundreds of miracle barbiturates packed into a capsule.

Shelley was a good-looking woman or creature or whatever she was. In the car she always sat primly, her fashion-model hands clasped delicately together. I often thought that, if we crashed, when the shock of impact had subsided and the pieces of broken things had all fallen and the steering wheel could be pushed out of my stomach, I'd look up to see her sitting just as primly as ever, her hands unmoved, her pretty mouth slowly forming her well-you-did-it-again-and-I-love-you-for-it smile.

I debated regularly with myself on the question—What was Shelley's greater beauty? The emotional-instinctual side of me championed the Physical Beauty. Soft blond hair that became golden in certain lights. Dark blue eyes which sent an infinite variety of affectionate signals. Perfect nose and lips and ears and chin and neck and collarbone. A body that gave you something classic to look at from any viewpoint.

My intellectual side loved her for her so-called Inner Beauty which projected itself at all times. She always seemed ready to smile or laugh, but never cruelly or harmfully. In bed her powers of divination were astounding. When I needed a gentle seduction, she seduced. When I needed a villainous rape, she became the sweet helpless maiden. When I needed a fierce romp, I found her crouching amidst the covers like a tigress. She knew all the right skills, all the right suggestions, all the words to my favorite love songs.

The main reason I looked at Shelley so often was the self-congratulatory delight I felt in knowing she was mine. Everything else I did in life that was wrong, which was most of it, seemed unimportant because I had her. Who was a failure? Not me. I had the world by the tail in one hand and by the short hairs in the other, and I could toss it anywhere.

All that stupid hubris—I should have known better.

In Union City I made a wrong turn and soon realized that I was lost. We pulled into a gas station, a dirtywhite smudged building fronted by tilting pumps.

I preferred not to talk to strangers. I didn't hate people, I just had difficulty associating with them in any way. In simple social situations, like asking gas station attendants for directions, I stammered, substituted ridiculous words for the word I meant, asked the wrong questions, got the wrong answers, completely misunderstood the clearest statements. Because of this idiosyncrasy, Shelley had become my emissary to the general public. She charmed people handily with her easy smile, shiny eyes, soft voice. Cheerfully she performed tasks for me that would have turned my nerves into boiling jello. She did battle with the telephone company, held my creditors at bay, and asked strangers for directions.

I got out of the car with her to stretch my paralyzed legs. An attendant made his way toward us through the clutter of hosing spread across the cracked concrete.

"Why, Shirley girl," he said, "ain't seen you since the hotel burned down. Where you been keeping yourself?"

Shelley glanced at me. She seemed scared. But all she got from me was a helpless gesture.

"The guys said you cut out of town, Shirl," the attendant said.

"I'm not Shirley."

"What? This a joke? You kidding?"

He appealed to me with a look. I had a helpless gesture for him, too.

"You've mistaken me for someone else," Shelley said, her voice icy.

"You're not Shirley Graham who used to—"

"No. I. Am. Not," Shelley said, low-voiced but hitting every word with a sledgehammer.

"Ma'am, you look exactly like Shirley Graham. Spitting image. Same face, same hair, same voice even—"

"My God, can't you get off it?" Shelley exploded. Her hands were trembling.

The attendant apologized.

Since I'd never seen Shelley so agitated before, I watched the incident in several roles:

Concerned husband, grabbing a hand to steady her.

Student of human nature, attempting to interpret the radical change in the behavior he's just observed.

Debonair madcap, filing away the moment until later when it can be extracted for a good joke.

Sensualist, thinking of all the sexy dividends such fury might furnish.

Coward, glad that it wasn't his embarrassing moment.

As we returned to the car, someone shouted at us from across the narrow main street.

"Hey, Shirley!"

Shelley jumped into the car, rolled up her window, and locked her door. The caller ran across the street to me. He was a fleshy niceguy type, the kind you meet regularly stocking shelves in supermarkets.

"Hey, what's the matter with Shirley? She never snubbed me before."

I tried to explain that Shelley definitely was not Shirley. During the conversation Shelley knocked frequently on the window and gestured nervously for me to get into the car. With exaggerated reluctance, the guy finally believed me.

"Mister," he said, pointing a chubby finger toward Shelley, "if that ain't Shirley, she's her split-egg twin."

"I've gathered there's a striking resemblance but—"

"Jim, quit talking to him," Shelley interrupted angrily. She had rolled down the window. "Get in the car, get us out of here."

Shelley had never raised her voice to me before. I can't even remember a time when she used the imperative mood three times in a row.

As we passed Union City's last rusting gas pump and headed for open country, Shelley sat stiffly. Her usually placid hands moved all over her body, straightening her skirt, brushing back her hair, scrubbing her forehead, hunting for buttons to toy with. Her abrupt change in temperament confused me and I was perturbed by her tension. Yet, sorry to say, there was a miniature Sherlock Holmes just waking up in my brain, just breathing off the smudges on his magnifying glass, just donning his stalker's cap.

Slick icebreaker that I am, I attempted to alleviate the nervous silence.

"Well, Shirley," I said, "you almost blew our cover dat time, kid."

She looked at me, eyes fearful, mouth trembling. "Stop it, Jim. Not even in fun, please."

I think she needed faith from me at that moment, or at least silence. But I, discomfited by the unexpected flaw in my universe, made the wrong choice. I rebuckled my armor, sure that truth was purity, that the soul should be cleansed of deceit, and proceeded to slay the maiden instead of the dragon.

"Shelley, I don't understand why you got so upset."

"Drop it, Jim. Please."

"No, it's inconceivable to me that a simple case of mistaken identity—"

"But that's it, don't you see? Just mistaken identity, that's all. *All.*"

"Shelley, I want to help but I simply don't understand."

"I'm sorry but . . . but . . . okay, that's it. Who ever said understanding was a gift? Just forget it."

"Forget *what*?"

"Please, Jim, I can't keep this up."

Stopped at a traffic light in Waterford (a town I don't remember at all), I began a new tack. "Honey, you've indicated clearly enough that there's a buried meaning to what superficially seems an everyday incident. I mean, hell, people are mistaken for other people all the time. It's not even unique for you. Last year, when we were in Denver, some waiter told me you looked exactly like some friend of his—"

"Waiter?" she said. The frightened look came back into her eyes. "Where in Denver? When?"

The light changed and we happily left Waterford, off on the road to Erie.

"Just a waiter. I don't even remember which restaurant. The one with the red velvet walls, I think."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't remember why. I don't even remember that I didn't tell you."

"You didn't. You should have."

"I forgot, that's all. What are you anyway, jealous that your beauty's not unique?"

"Oh, Jim—"

I looked over and saw that she was crying. (But of course I'd never let anything as sentimental as tears stand between me and Truth.)

"Jim, let's please just catalog this as our first and only quarrel, and you tell me like always all the touristy AAA-endorsed fun we can have in Erie."

"Shelley, there's this—"

"I've run out of synonyms for shut up, Jim. Please, let's find a motel along this godforsaken road, and we can cool off with airconditioning, and watch soap operas all afternoon in color, and—if you're sweet—I'll let you put your thing in my thing and we'll see if something develops."

She composed her face in a parody of the usual enticing smile. Around a curve we came upon a construction gang tearing up the road.

"Your offer is generous," I said, as we came to a stop. "But I don't appreciate the casual use of seduction only as a ploy to divert me."

She gave a little cry and looked away, watched a truck dump some dirt.

"You know I'm stubborn," I continued, "that I follow every task I assume to its conclusion. Sorry, but it's a part of my nature. Why don't you settle with me and clear the air? And then we go to the motel."

She sighed in despair, conveying with a gesture her decision to abdicate from the argument. The flagman waved us on. We managed a few silent miles.

"I'm snowed by the whole thing," I resumed. "So you have twins in a couple of places, so what? So you're not the only edition of your model in this—"

"Model? What do you mean, model?"

I could have sworn the timbre of her voice was one step away from hysteria.

"Model," I said. "Type. Your beautiful, gorgeous type. Did you think when they made you they broke the mold?"

She gasped and her eyes widened in terror. We hit a long stretch of highway. In the distance I could see another road gang.

"Shelley, I've never seen you like this. Just because I mention you have duplicates around the—"

"*Jim, please!*" The intensity of her voice sent shock waves through me.

"Jim," she said more softly, "I can't go on with this."

"I don't really dig your overreactions. I feel like I've uncovered some sort of conspiracy of lookalikes that—"

"I've got to get out. I've got to get out."

"What *is* it, Shelley? Is there some *real* connection between you and this Shirley Graham?" Up ahead the man with the red flag began waving it in the stop signal. I began to decelerate.

"I've got to get out. I've *got* to get out."

I stopped the car where the red flag pointed. Shelley flung open her door and left the car. I got out almost as fast as she did. Not looking where she was going, she collided with the flagman, who was passing our car to signal the next vehicle.

"Why don't you—" he said, then smiled. "Mother of God, why it's Shirley Graham. I haven't—"

Shelley let out a long and painful scream. I still feel its echo.

Racing around the car, I reached for her arm but slipped on soft gravel and fell. The flagman helped me up, saying, "What the hell's going on? If you're planning to hurt Shirley, I'll—"

I cursed him and went after Shelley. She was headed toward the woods. With each agonizing step I saw that she was pulling away from me. I'd never known she could run so swiftly. I'd never seen her run before.

She ran into the woods. That was the last I saw of her.

The flagman called the sheriff's office. A posse—or whatever they call it in Pennsylvania—searched the area. All the police in the county and surrounding counties were

alerted. Roadblocks were set up. All-points bulletins. Floods of questions. Sirens. Reporters.

I turned over all twigs, studied the undersides of leaves. Methodically I reviewed what had happened since we had arrived in Union City. Nothing made sense. I could not grasp how a couple of coincidences and a silly argument could make Shelley run off like that. I cursed myself for being at fault and for not knowing why I was at fault. Once I leaned against a tree and laughed, which somewhat disconcerted my fellow searchers.

Our past life together provided no clues. Her origins were a mystery, but then I had never asked her about them. We had met under the finest romantic conditions, tested our compatibility by living together for a year, married, and enjoyed idyllic satisfaction in the seven years before Union City.

The flagman—his name was Bill something or other—stayed close by me throughout the search. Sometimes we talked. He had known Shirley fairly well. He said she was an exceptional female, that something *truly* glowed from her which made people feel real good and contented in her company.

I stayed the next few days in an Erie downtown motel. Erie is an especially gray city, the proper setting for what I went through there.

Take my advice, never lose a person. Hopes are raised and shattered several times a day. Police get leads, then drag you down to view some frump who bears so little resemblance to Shelley you have to shove the printed description in their faces. People learn of your plight and dispatch professional commiserators to you. Each telephone ring is a hopeless reminder, each knock a reason for hiding in the closet.

Finally I fled Erie and retraced my route to Union City, on the familiar mythical trip for an Answer. There I interviewed some residents whose names Bill supplied one day when he visited me at the motel. I got a composite picture of Shirley Graham. She'd come to the town eight years before and immediately had become popular with its citizens. All descriptions of her were close reminders of Shelley. Shirley, a first-grade teacher, apparently spread

joy everywhere. Some of the men rolled their eyes and told me how stacked she was.

"She was *too* good," a couple of old biddies said. "Never trusted her. Nobody's that good who don't have something going on the side."

Shirley's departure from the town had been as abrupt as Shelley's disappearance. I had a hell of a time finding out where she went until I discovered a girlfriend of hers partial to pink catawba wine. She told me that Shirley had become uptight over something and had skipped to Canton, Ohio. I left the girl in a bar with a brand-new gallon of catawba reflecting pinkly her giggling face. I drove nonstop to Canton.

In Canton I located Shirley Graham quickly through a few inquiries and some minor deceptions. A chief of detectives bought a yarn that I suspected my wife to be hiding in Canton under the alias Shirley Graham. He checked records and found a listing for her in North Canton, a suburb. He gave me directions to her home and a warning that I'd be hanging upside down in hot water if I caused any trouble. "Some fellas are in such misery over missing wives," he said. "that, when they find them, they clobber 'em." Clever people, these Cantonese.

I sped to North Canton, where the Hoover sign shines benevolently over the city. I'm not sure what I expected to find there. I did not want to do anything *to* Shirley Graham, I just wanted to see her. Go to Hades, Canton style, for a glimpse of the duplicate Eurydice.

No symbols, stranger. Just call the cards.

I went to the designated address. It was a muggy night. My drip-dry clothes dripped and dried. Gnats poked into my ears and nostrils. Dust (Hoover emptying a few test models?) coated my tongue and throat.

As I knocked on the pretender's door, I rehearsed many bright opening remarks, none of which I ever used. Although prepared to discover a pretty girl with a strong resemblance to Shelley, I wasn't ready for Shirley Graham. The resemblance wasn't merely strong, she was Shelley's *exact* duplicate, down to the finest detail. No distracting mole, no slight gradation in shade of hair, no extra wrinkles beside the eye—nothing that I could see

which in any way marked a difference in physical appearance.

I gaped.

Shirley asked me my business several times before I collected myself enough to respond. Saying that Bill had told me to look her up when passing through North Canton, I convinced her I was harmless.

The night I watched Shirley Graham intently, trying to discover an unShelleylike gesture, intonation, point of view. It seemed that this pleasant beautiful girl shared every characteristic of Shelley's that I could remember.

I didn't tell her about Shelley, the love of my life.

I made up a new name for myself.

I made a pass at Shirley that first night.

She turned me down. With a smile. But only once.

Two nights later I moved in with Shirley Graham. It had taken two days with Shelley, too. Maybe I should have been troubled by that.

To describe my life with Shirley would be merely to repeat what I've already related about life with Shelley. Shirley anticipated my every whim, led me through my moods like an affectionate tour guide. I spent my first days with her dazzled. She'd dust a bookshelf and I'd think: *Exactly* the way that Shelley did it, the same casualness, the same rate of speed. She'd slip off a skirt and I'd think: Shelley'd push it flat-palmed down her ass *exactly* like that, her thumb inside the zipper in the same way. She'd add a little movie-ballet skip to her walk performing the bedroom and I'd think: I remember Shelley performing the same step *exactly,* even to the left foot being raised to midcalf height.

In bed—the same. No. Better. Not better in the sense that she used any new tricks or was more adept, but better because my loss had trained me to appreciate Paradise regained. I entered Paradise with a sharper realization of its blessed gateway and found inside the manifold gifts of God, the God of my agnostic imagination.

Events had occurred so rapidly that I had trouble catching up with what had happened. I slowly came to realize the uniqueness of my good fortune. I had passed from tragedy to an incredible stroke of luck in a few days.

how many millions of times has someone, after losing the love of his life, wished despairingly for that person's return or, failing that, the sudden emergence of an adequate replacement? How many millions of people have spent the rest of their years with only the memory of the loved one to live with? Or married too quickly a wretch or a simpleton to stare at across narrow breakfast nooks all the remaining hellish days of life?

But I'd beaten the mourning-period game. I'd hardly had time to accept the loss of Shelley, and here I was a few days later sharing bed and board with her exact duplicate.

I loved Shirley. In a way it was a love for the image in the mirror, the affectionate awe due a superb imitation. But it was sincere—something like, I suppose, the luxurious contentment men of earlier times felt when they bought their second brandnew Model T Ford.

Shirley seemed happy. I felt ecstatic all the time. I had the world on a string and could bounce it off the moon.

Like I said, you tend to overlook hubris.

I was not a complete selfish cad. I mourned the loss of Shelley. How could I help it while Shirley was a walking playback of her? I checked often by phone with the Erie police for progress reports. They had the same message always. Nothing new, no reports of her in the continental U.S.A. or Canada.

I did my duty sacredly, though I must admit I don't know what I'd have done if they had turned Shelley up.

I arranged with my brother to take over the administration of our business in Rochester. (We had converted my father's sedate clothing store into a mindblowing head shop.) He hated the extra work but liked getting more than half the profits. In return he sent me adequate if not abundant monthly stipends, which I supplemented with an occasional odd job.

I promised Shirley a wedding. She was too nice a girl to toy with, and I couldn't risk losing her. Later I realized that, if I did marry her, I'd be liable for bigamy charges. If I told her I had a wife, she'd split. If I just forgot to marry her, she might notice.

One day, several months after I found Shirley, I came home from an active day at the Family Billiards Parlor,

where I hustled young mothers and old widows for fifty cents a rack. I'd had a good day until a paper boy on a break from his route took me for all my profits. I pranced out of the parlor, muttering to the owner that such riffraff would bring down his enterprise's good name.

Shirley sat on the living room couch. Stiffly. Ignoring the odor of *déjà vu*, I sat beside her and tried to kiss her. She offered my lips the back of her neck.

"Something the matter?" I said, rushing-in fool that I am.

In a series of choked phrases she told me. Canton's crusading chief of detectives had paid an official call, because he'd discovered my dual identity and wanted to be a nosy prick about it.

"Why did you come here," she said, "specifically to look for me? Why me? What were your purposes?"

I tried to think of answers that might work. Whatever I stammered out, it was completely unintelligible, a string of pronouns and disconnected verbs.

"How in bloody hell could you move in here when your wife had disappeared just a week before? *Your wife!* What kind of monster are you?"

"A phoenix, if you'll give me the chance."

"I'll build you a fire."

At that moment I wished I had a duplicate, one who would click on in a crisis, solve the problem with the proper selection of reason and emotion, then turn the field back to me for the easy stuff.

"Do you want to know my side?" I asked.

"I know your side. That's why I'm crying."

"How could you know? That motherloving cop only knows part of it himself."

"I know. I have abilities."

"Tell me what you know."

"No, not yet. I need a few more minutes."

We sat in silence for a half hour or more.

"Are you ready?" I finally said.

"Ready for what?"

"To tell me my side."

"Bastard!"

"You girls change personality quickly. Too fast for me."

"Yes."

"Aren't you going to ask me what I meant by 'you girls'?"

"I know what you meant. All I needed was your wife's name which was on the missing persons report he showed me. Give me a few more minutes."

"For what?"

"Breathing."

Another long silence. Then she spoke first for a change.

"Poor Shelley. Poor uncompromising Shelley."

"Poor Shelley? What do you mean, uncompromising?"

"What it usually means. She didn't bargain. Apparently she barely hesitated."

"What's the connection between you and Shelley? Why are you two so much alike in looks, manner, temperament?"

"We're identical robots manufactured by a mad scientist. One of us tripped and fell into a Xerox machine. We're one time traveler existing concurrently in two trips to the same time period. We're the Doublement twins. Any of the above, some of the above, none of the above."

"Tell me."

"No."

"Damn it, you owe me an explanation."

"Eat. Molten. Lava."

Silence, my turn to speak first.

"Shelley—is she dead?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"Quit toying with me!"

"I'm not. That was truth."

"Suicide?"

"Yes and no."

"Yes? . . ."

"She no longer exists."

"No? . . ."

"Her power of choice was restricted."

I couldn't make sense out of Shirley's cryptic statements. The truth seemed to be there somewhere, just outside the reach of my comprehension. Shirley stood up.

"Where are you going?" I said.

"I must leave."
"Why?"
"For the same reason Shelley left you."
"Stay."
"I'd like to. I can't."
"It's not fair."
"What isn't?"
"You duplicates always walking out on me. Both you and Shelley made me happy, idyllically so. I don't deserve such treatment."
"Sure you do. Don't be so petulant. Anyway, you're lucky."
"Lucky?"
"You've lived with the two of us, a mathematical possibility we hadn't taken into account. And I know exactly our capabilities. You're lucky. It computes, baby doll."
She walked toward the door, a stiffness in her movements. "I must leave now," she said.
"There are differences, you know, between you and Shelley. She played this bit hysterically."
"There's more than one kind of hysteria. But you're correct, there *are* differences. Shelley had her world disintegrate suddenly, I suspect, judging by what I could infer from the missing persons report. I've had all afternoon."
"What are you going to do now? Bargain?"
"Probably. Another difference for you: I consider compromise."
We stared at each other. Outside it was that gray period between sunset and the dawn of streetlights. I could not see Shirley's face very well. A thick black line seemed drawn around her.
"Can I go now?"
"Could I stop you?"
"No."
"A last request?"
"Sure."
"Withdraw with a good exit line."
She smiled. A *uniquely* Shirley smile.
"You were a pretty good fuck," she said.
"What do you mean, pretty good?"

"Have I ever lied to you?"

She left the house. I heard the hedges beside the house rustle as she took the path to the backyard. I couldn't keep from going to the kitchen and watching her through a window. She didn't do much. She looked around the yard, up at the darkened sky, down at the row of plastic garbage cans, level at the small clump of trees which passed for a woods in the suburbs.

Maybe her outline became shimmery. Maybe not.

She went into the woods; I mentally collected womb symbols while looking out at nothing.

I packed and left town that night. I had plans.

Charlotte was difficult to locate. I'd been bombed the night I talked with the waiter and I couldn't recall the name of the bar. All I remembered was red-velvet walls and a flashy Western layout. The number of Denver restaurants with red-velvet walls and Old West decor has at least one comma in it. But I really didn't mind the search. I am an authority on red-velvet walls. Anything becomes relevant if your life has direction.

Eventually I found the bar, the waiter, and Charlotte.

Charlotte, so like Shelley and Shirley that comparisons are pointless.

Charlotte lasted two years. I sometimes wondered why I did not desire more variety, a taste of another flavor of lotus. But I was never bored with Shelley, Shirley, or Charlotte. Any memory of the others which Charlotte evoked was stimulating rather than nostalgically enervating. Change is what's boring, monotonous. Sameness is a continual challenge, almost impossible to maintain. Repetition, knowing that you've done it right before and can do it right again, is satisfying. If I had merely lost Shelley and not pursued my quest, I would have had to adjust, destroy myself with acceptance of change, let tragedy have a final curtain.

Sometimes I speculated on the origins of my lookalike trio, but I didn't really care who they were or where they'd come from. Why should I? It was truth, after all, that had sent each of them away.

Charlotte departed for reasons unknown. I passed her in the hall of our apartment building, recognized the look

in her eyes. The bedroom telephone was off the hook.

I mourned briefly, felt some regret, but only a slight sense of loss.

Because I had heard about Sherry, Charlene, and Elizabeth from three separate barflies who remarked on their amazing resemblance to Charlotte.

Sherry already had a husband, to whom she was intensely loyal. Elizabeth was a false lead who bore little resemblance to the loves of my life. Charlene was the genuine article. I courted her exactly as I had the other three, and established the same relationship.

We've been a perfect blend for fourteen months now. I rarely worry about losing her. What must be, must be. Besides, I have compiled a backlog of six new names already.

I have this recurrent dream. I hear that somebody else is onto my secret and is fast using up the supply of available duplicates. I polish my sixgun and send Bob Steele to him, challenging him to a showdown. He comes riding into town, the sun at his back, a sinister silhouette. Light flashes from the oily surfaces of both our guns. He steps out of the shadow. I find that he looks exactly like me. He is my duplicate. But that doesn't bother me. I shoot him down anyway.

Philip José Farmer

FATHER'S IN THE BASEMENT

The typewriter had clattered for three and a half days. It must have stopped now and then, but never when Millie was awake. She had fallen asleep perhaps five times during that period, though something always aroused her after fifteen minutes or so of troubled dreams.

Perhaps it was the silence that hooked her and drew her up out of the thick waters. As soon as she became fully conscious, however, she heard the clicking of the typewriter start up.

The upper part of the house was almost always clean and neat. Millie was only eleven, but she was the only female in the household, her mother having died when Millie was nine. Millie never cleaned the basement because her father forbade it.

The big basement room was his province. There he kept all his reference books, and there he wrote at a long desk. This room and the adjoining furnace-utility room constituted her father's country (he even did the washing), and if it was a mess to others, it was order to him. He could reach into the chaos and pluck out anything he wanted with no hesitation.

Her father was a free-lance writer, a maker of literary soups, a potboiler cook. He wrote short stories and articles for men's and women's magazines under male or female names, science fiction novels, trade magazines articles, and an occasional Gothic. Sometimes he got a commission to write a novel based on a screenplay.

"I'm the poor man's Frederick Faust," her father had said many times. "I won't be remembered ten years from now. Not by anyone who counts. I want to be remembered, baby, to be reprinted through the years as a classic,

to be written of, talked of, as a great writer. And so. . . ."

And so, on the left side of his desk, in a file basket, was half a manuscript, three hundred pages. Pop had been working on it, on and off, mostly off, for fifteen years. It was to be his masterpiece, the one book that would transcend all his hackwork, the book that would make the public cry "Wow!" the one book by him that would establish him as a Master. ("Capital M, baby!") It would put his name in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica;* he would not take up much space in it; a paragraph was all he asked.

He had patted her hand and said, "And so when you tell people your name, they'll say, 'You aren't the daughter of the great Brady X. Donaldson? You are? Fantastic! And what was he really like, your father?' "

And then, reaching out and stroking her pointed chin, he had said, "I hope you can be proud of having a father who wrote at least one great book, baby. But, of course, you'll be famous in your own right. You have unique abilities, and don't you ever forget it. A kid with your talents has to grow up into a famous person. I only wish that I could be around. . . ."

He did not go on. Neither of them cared to talk about his heart "infraction," as he insisted on calling it.

She had not commented on his remark about her "abilities." He was not aware of their true breadth and depth, nor did she want him to be aware.

The phone rang. Millie got up out of the chair and walked back and forth in the living room. The typewriter had not even hesitated when the phone rang. Her father was stopping for nothing, and he might not even have heard the phone, so intent was he. This was the only chance he would ever get to finish his Work ("Capital W. baby!"), and he would sit at his desk until it was done. Yet she knew that he could go on like this only so long before falling apart.

She knew who was calling. It was Mrs. Coombs, the secretary of Mr. Appleton, the principal of Dashwood Grade School. Mrs. Coombs had called every day. The first day, Millie had told Mrs. Coombs that she was sick. No, her father could not come to the phone because he had a very deadly schedule to meet. Millie had opened the door to the basement and turned the receiver of the

phone so that Mrs. Coombs could hear the heavy and unceasing typing.

Millie spoke through her nose and gave a little cough now and then, but Mrs. Coombs' voice betrayed disbelief.

"My father knows I have this cold, and so he doesn't see why he should be bothered telling anybody that I have it. He knows I have it. No, it's not bad enough to go to the doctor for it. No, my father will not come to the phone now. You wouldn't like it if he had to come to the phone now. You can be sure of that.

"No, I can't promise you he'll call before five, Mrs. Coombs. He doesn't want to stop while he's going good, and I doubt very much he'll be stopping at five. Or for some time after, if I know my father. In fact, Mrs. Coombs, I can't promise anything except that he won't stop until he's ready to stop."

Mrs. Coombs had made some important-sounding noises, but she finally said she'd call back tomorrow. That is, she would unless Millie was at school in the morning, with a note from her father, or unless her father called in to say that she was still sick.

The second day, Mrs. Coombs had phoned again, and Millie had let the ringing go on until she could stand it no longer.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Coombs, but I feel lots worse. And my father didn't call in, and won't, because he is typing. Here, I'll hold the phone to the door so you can hear him."

Millie waited until Mrs. Coombs seemed to have run down.

"Yes, I can appreciate your position, Mrs. Coombs, but he won't come, and I won't ask him to. He has so little time left, you know, and he has to finish this one book, and he isn't listening to any such thing as common sense or . . . No, Mrs. Coombs, I'm not trying to play on your sympathies with this talk about his heart trouble.

"Father is going to sit there until he's done. He said this is his lifework, his only chance for immortality. He doesn't believe in life after death, you know. He says that a man's only chance for immortality is in the deeds he does or the works of art he produces.

"Yes, I know it's a peculiar situation, and he's a peculiar man, and I should be at school."

And you, Mrs. Coombs, she thought, you think I'm a very peculiar little girl, and you don't really care that I'm not at school today. In fact, you like it that I'm not there because you get chills every time you see me.

"Yes, Mrs. Coombs, I know you'll have to take some action, and I don't blame you for it. You'll send somebody out to check; you have to do it because the rules say you have to, not because you think I'm lying.

"But you can hear my father typing, can't you? You surely don't think that's a recording of a typist, do you?"

She shouldn't have said that, because now Mrs. Coombs would be thinking exactly that.

She went into the kitchen and made more coffee. Pop had forbidden her coffee until she was fourteen, but she needed it to keep going. Besides, he wouldn't know anything about it. He had told her, just before he had felt the first pain, that he could finish the Work in eighty-four to ninity-six hours if he were uninterrupted and did not have to stop because of exhaustion or another attack.

"I've got it all composed up here," he had said, pointing a finger at his temple. "It's just a matter of sitting down and staying down, and that's what I'm going to do, come hell or high water, come infraction or infarction. In ten minutes, I'm going down into my burrow, and I'm not coming back up until I'm finished."

"But, Pop," Millie had said, "I don't see how you can. Exercise or excitement is what brings on an attack. . . ."

"I got my pills, and I'll rest if I have to and take longer," he had said. "So it takes two weeks? But I don't think it will. Listen, Millie," and he had taken her hand in his and looked into her eyes as if they were binoculars pointing into a fourth dimension, "I'm depending on you more than on my pills or even on myself. You'll not let anybody or anything interfere, will you? I know I shouldn't ask you to stay home from school, but this is more important than school. I really need you. I can 't afford to put this off any longer. I don't have the time. You know that."

He had released her hand and started toward the basement door, saying, "This is it; here goes," when his face had twisted and he had grabbed his chest.

But that had not stopped him.

The phone rang. It was, she knew, Mrs. Coombs again.

Mrs. Coombs' voice was as thin as river ice in late March.

. "You tell your father that officers will be on their way to your house within a few minutes. They'll have a warrant to enter."

"You're causing a lot of trouble and for no good reason," Millie said. "Just because you don't like me . . ."

"Well, I never!" Mrs. Coombs said. "You know very well that I'm doing what I have to and, in fact, I've been overly lenient in this case. There's no reason in the world why your father can't come to the phone. . . ."

"I told you he had to finish his novel," Millie said. "That's all the reason he needs."

She hung up the phone and then stood by the door for a moment, listening to the typing below. She turned and looked through the kitchen door at the clock on the wall. It was almost twelve. She doubted that anybody would come during the lunch hour, despite what Mrs. Coombs said. That gave her—her father, rather—another hour, And then she would see what she could do.

She tried to eat but could get down only half the liverwurst and lettuce sandwich. She wrapped the other half and put it back into the refrigerator. She looked at herself in the small mirror near the wall clock. She, who could not afford to lose an ounce, had shed pounds during the past three and a half days. As if they were on scales, her cheekbones had risen while her eyes had sunk. The dark brown irises and the bloodshot whites of her eyes looked like two fried eggs with ketchup that someone had thrown against a wall.

She smiled slightly at the thought, but it hurt to see her face. She looked like a witch and always would.

"But you're only eleven!" her father had boomed to her. "Is it a tragedy at eleven because the boys haven't asked you for a date yet? My God, when I was eleven, we didn't ask girls for dates. We hated girls!"

Yet his Great Work started with the first-love agonies of a boy of eleven, and he had admitted long ago that the boy was himself.

Millie sighed again and left the mirror. She cleaned the front room but did not use the vacuum cleaner because she

wanted to hear the typewriter keys. The hour passed, and the doorbell rang.

She sat down in a chair. The doorbell rang again and again. Then there was silence for a minute, followed by a fist pounding on the door.

Millie got up from the chair but went to the door at the top of the basement steps and opened it. She breathed deeply, made a face, went down the wooden steps and around the corner at the bottom and looked down the long room with its white-painted cement blocks and pine paneling. She could not see her father because a tall and broad dark-mahogany bookcase in the middle of the room formed the back of what he called his office. The chair and desk were on the other side, but she could see the file basket on the edge of the desk. Her practiced eye told her that the basket held almost five hundred pages, not counting the carbon copies.

The typewriter clattered away. After a while, she went back up the steps and across to the front door. She opened the peephole and looked through. Two of the three looked as if they could be plainclothesmen. The third was the tall, beefy, red-faced truant officer.

"Hello, Mr. Tavistock," she said through the peephole. "What can I do for you?"

"You can open the door and let me in to talk to your father," he growled. "Maybe he can explain what's been going on, since you won't."

"I told Mrs. Coombs all about it," Millie said. "She's a complete ass, making all this fuss about nothing."

"That's no way for a lady to talk, Millie," Mr. Tavistock said. "Especially an eleven-year-old. Open the door. I got a warrant."

He waved a paper in his huge hand.

"My father'll have you in court for trampling on his civil rights," Millie said. "I'll come to school tomorrow. I promise. But not today. My father mustn't be bothered."

"Let me in now, or we break the door down!" Mr. Tavistock shouted. "There's something funny going on, Millie, otherwise your father would've contacted the school long ago!"

"You people always think there's something funny about me, that's all!" Millie shouted back.

"Yeah, and Mrs. Coombs fell down over the wastebasket and wrenched her back right after she phoned you," Tavistock said. "Are you going to open that door?"

It would take them only a minute or so to kick the door open even if she chained it. She might as well let them in. Still, two more minutes might be all that were needed.

She reached for the knob and then dropped her hand. The typing had stopped.

She walked to the top of the basement steps.

"Pop! Are you through?"

She heard the squeaking of the swivel chair, then a shuffling sound. The house shook, and there was a crash as someone struck the front door with his body. A few seconds later, another crash was followed by the bang of the door against the inner wall. Mr. Tavistock said, "All right, boys! I'll lead the way!"

He sounded as if he were raiding a den of bank robbers, she thought.

She went around the corner to the front room and said, "I think my father is through."

"In more ways than one, Millie," Mr. Tavistock said.

She turned away and walked back around the corner, through the door and out onto the landing. Her father was standing at the bottom of the steps. His color was very bad and he looked as if he had gained much weight, though she knew that that was impossible.

He looked up at her from deeply sunken eyes, and he lifted the immense pile of sheets with his two hands.

"All done, Pop?" Millie said, her voice breaking.

He nodded slowly.

Millie heard the three men come up behind her. Mr. Tavistock leaned over her and said, "Whew!"

Millie turned and pushed at him. "Get out of my way! He's finished it!"

Mr. Tavistock glared, but he moved to one side. She walked to a chair and sat down heavily. One of the detectives said, "You look awful, Millie. You look like you haven't slept for a week."

"I don't think I'll ever be able to sleep," she said. She breathed deeply and allowed her muscles to go loose. Her head lolled as if she had given up control over everything inside her.

There was a thumping noise from the basement. Mr. Tavistock cried out, "He's fainted!" The shoes of the three men banged on the steps as they ran down. A moment later Mr. Tavistock gave another cry. Then all three men began talking at once.

Millie closed her eyes and wished she could quit trembling. Sometime later, she heard the footsteps. She did not want to open her eyes, but there was no use putting it off.

Mr. Tavistock was pale and shaking. He said, "My God! He looks, he smells like . . ."

One of the detectives said, "His fingertips are worn off, the bones are sticking out, but there wasn't any bleeding."

"I got him through," Millie said. "He finished it. That's all that counts."

Edward Wellen

DOWN BY THE OLD MAELSTROM

They held their breath. Ben Copeland slowed the Hertz VW to take the twists and turns of the baffles leading to the Wall. Soon the steel poles would lift and they would pass under the black-red-and-gold banner with hammer and pair of compasses, then Checkpoint Charlie and the real world, with the East German banner waving 'bye. But first the customs shed.

Inside, four men stood behind a counter under four signs—*Grenz Polizei, Transport Polizei, Kriminal Polizei, Volks Polizei.* The border policeman leered at the six tourists, rolling his eyes at the three women.

"I'm Grepo. Meet Trapo—"

Trapo shook a head of blond curls like wood shavings—they *were* wood shavings; some fell out—and squeezed a heehaw out of a small Martinshorn he carried.

"Kripo—"

Kripo, in vestigiubbal tatters and conical hat, said, "That's-a conical, not-a comical." He blew his nose; the hat tipped.

"And Vopo."

Vopo sprang into an operatic stance and piped, "*Doch mir ist bang, ja mir ist bang—*"

Grepo absently banged him on the head with an outsize passport stamp.

"*Ihren Ausweis, bitte!*" The tourists handed him their passports and papers. He waggled his eyebrows. "You have enjoyed your stay in the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik?*"

Ben's heart seized up. *He couldn't remember a thing about their stay.* He peered at their papers in Grepo's keeping. He smiled and nodded.

While Grepo shuffled their papers and Kripo cut, Ben looked around. At a desk behind Grepo a tonsured monkey

in sackcloth sat working on a palimpsest, relettering *Sieg order Sibirien!*, the encouraging words of the last days of the Third Reich, to read *Sieg Oder-Neisse!* The scribe shooed a black-letter fly specking the parchment, then flung his inkwell at it. The splash, drip-drying on the wall, took the shape of a devil. Grepo whipped out his lighter and playfully threatened to singe the monkey's paw.

"Monkeyshines. Simiantics." He used the flame to light an Upmann cigar. "Speaking of simiantics, what means this? Seven of you—and only six passports."

Ben started. Grepo was wrong—but out of the corner of his eye he took tale: Carol Applegate, here; Liza Ballester, right on; Frank Boguslaw, check; Martin Sartorius, present; Sue Chen, yo; himself. He smiled at Grepo.

"I beg your pardon, but there are just six of us."

"Oh? You think I can't count? Everyone counts in the DDR." Grepo turned to Trapo, Kripo, and Vopo. "Go ahead, count."

Kripo and Vopo each bonged six noses and said, "Seven." Trapo closed his eyes and heehawed his horn seven times.

"You see?" Grepo drew a bottle of Spez from under the counter and pulled his teeth with the cork. Cooly putting his teeth back in after freeing them from the cork, he worked the cork loose with his hands. He rubbed the cork against the side of the bottle; this twittering conjured up in the group's mind a squeaky baby carriage. The image of a chirping bird quickly wiped that out as Grepo took a throbbing swallow, peeled off his mustache, wrung it out over the monkey's waiting mouth, and stuck it back on. He handed Ben the passports without stamping.

Ben tried matching them one-to-one with his group —but not only the photos, the *faces* had blurred; he gave up. He *knew* there were six passports and six tourists, yet he felt the others share his rush of guilt. *Was* there a seventh among them? If so, where? And who? Grepo leered.

"Not so sure now, hey? One last straw and we're over the hump." Grepo ducked under the counter flap and slouched shiftily to the door. He turned and knocked a long ash off his Upmann. "Last one out's a monkey's uncle."

Trapo, Kripo, and Vopo vaulted the counter and shot toward the doorway, which Grepo cleared barely in time; the tourists followed, sedately jockeying for position; the monkey brought up the tail. Grepo pointed: monkey, head down, went back in.

Grepo circled the group's VW, hands behind bent back, while Trapo, Kripo, and Vopo darted in and out of it, opening and closing the VW's doors and hood on each other. The tourists traded looks. If Grepo and his henchmen found a seventh hiding in or under the VW—

Kripo and Trapo dueted on the VW's horn and Trapo's, took bows, then rejoined Vopo in the search. They turned up only each other. Grepo scowled at the rental agency's device on the VW.

"Hertz, eh? My advice is to put it out of its misery."

Trapo spat on his hands, eyed them in disgust, and wiped them on Vopo's shirt tail. He, Vopo, and Kripo fell to with wrench, sledgehammer, and acetylene torch. Though they got in each other's way, they soon stripped the VW. Grepo shook his head at the pile of junk.

"Don't make 'em like they used to, and never did." He dusted his palms, then held them out to the tourists with a shrug. "We get tips, you see." He waited, then dropped them with another shrug. "Sometimes the tips don't pan out. All the same, we believe there *is* a seventh among you. And if you want out you'll have to produce him."

The tourists stared blankly at each other, then at a blank stretch of Wall. Kicking nuts and bolts aside, Grepo slouched shiftily into the customs shed. Kripo, Vopo, and Trapo followed. A heehaw drifted out.

The group walked away, stopped to look back. The Wall of Shame blushed in the evening sun. They turned a corner.

Two men blocked the walk. One's Hitleresque mustache, the other's Stalinesque, were their only unlikeness. Frank leading, the group started to file between the two. Frank halted abruptly, the line accordioning. Word whispered back and each felt an inner kick in the stomach. "Siamese twins." The twins stiffened.

"Two hundred percent Aryan, we assure you."

They wore one pair of gloves between them, open umbrella in gloved right hand, portable TV in gloved left.

a pack of cards.

"Take a card. Any one."

Fast trick? Portnoygraphy? Ambivalence chaser? Frank Boguslaw hesitated, then grabbed a card. The others huddled with him to study squiggly lines on a scrap of graph paper. The twins clicked the inner pair of heels and bowed.

"*Servus.* Graf Emil und Franz von und zu Zwirn." Each had a regular tic in his dueling scar. "We are with *Das Reisebüro.*" The twinkle in Emil's monocle said he meant an underground travel bureau offering *Fluchthilfe* for a price. "Do you mind if we turn on the *Fernsehen*"—they glanced at Ben Copeland—"or, as you might put it, the telavivzion. Two cannot be too careful."

Franz switched the set on and raised the volume as if to over talk, but neither twin said more. The tourists shot gazes to the screen as a voice-over told them they were watching a documentary on the design of the Defense Wall.

A section of Wall by night. A man amoebaed out of darkness, crept toward the Wall, climbed the first fence, made for the second. Touching the second fence set off an alarm that froze him a moment, then he took the fence. He crossed the dog run before the German shepherds got there, but tripped a flare that brought him under searchlights and machine guns. He raced across asphalt as armored cars sped down from both ends. He left a stagger of footprints in plowed earth that came next, jumped the anti-facist tank ditch, and dashed over a hundred-foot strip of cinders under mercury-vapor lamps that almost bleached him out of being. A hidden six-inch steel spike pierced his foot but he tore free and limped to the Wall. He gathered himself, sprang. His hands reached, curved over, but slid off the too-big, too-smooth pipe coping the Wall. His dead flesh still twitched to machine-gun bullets and voice-over. "This is how we save our people from the clutches of the capitalist imperialists." Franz switched the set off.

"See what you're up against? You need our help. But we can't stand here talking." Emil pointed to children of the Freie Deutsche Jugend patrolling the street looking for

TV antennas oriented to pull in the Western signal. "Meet us at Des Pudels Kern. We'll take a taxi now. Wait five minutes and follow."

Des Pudels Kern proved a *Restaurant zur Forelle;* through plate glass they saw a large tank of live trout in the main room; through the tank the Graf's monocles swam in come-hither.

The lettering swam on Ben's menu. He ordered what came to mind, a *Schmarren;* he felt unsatisfied but unhungry on finishing it. The rest gave in to the frowning monocles and ordered trout. The twins had already ordered and each ate enough *Rindfleisch mit Ananas und Kirschen* for two. Carol shared her fried potatoes with Martin; she and Martin were both watching her figure.

As napkins came into play, Franz gripped his handlebar mustache and steered his head in a sweep of the table, keenly monocling Ben and Carol and Frank and Sue and Martin and Liza and, with a start, Emil. The Venus flytrap in Franz's lapel spat out the husk of an olive-colored bug.

"We can talk now. Due to the nature of our business, we can't show you references, but we serve a worldwide clientele. We've been around. We've seen the River Dodder meander and the River Meander dodder. We've woven irenics in Poland and polemics in Ireland. No false modesty. We know our jobs. You want out: here's your chance. We'll guarantee to spirit you out of East Germany. The fee's a measly thousand dollars or West German measly equivalent. Half now, half on delivery."

The twins looked away, both ways, boredly. The tourists eyed one another, then nodded and got up five hundred dollars, which the twins pocketed absently.

"Stay put another quarter hour, when it will be midnight, then slip out the back. A *Lastkraftwagen* will be waiting, license plate JWD. Got that? Good."

The Graf rose, clicked, and left. The waiter appeared and handed the tourists the tab. He was long time coming back with their change and they saw through the trout tank Grepo, Vopo, Trapo, and Kripo pull up out front in the resurrected Hertz VW. Pretending to head for *Herren* and *Damen*, the tourists made a controlled run to the rear.

An LKW idled out back in the parallel street, license plate JWD. Red flags jutted fore and aft and

"SPRENGSTOFF" blazed in luminous paint on the tarpaulin. The LKW started without them. Ben runningboarded the cab, found the Graf there, monocleless, bereted, and with Che Guevara beards that hid the dueling scars. The van braked. Franz was a bit behindhand concealing a button on the dashboard. The lettering, *Torschlusspanikknopf,* meant nothing to Ben at the moment. Emil tapped the crystal of his wristwatch.

"Fourteen past twelve."

"I know, but we couldn't help it."

"A bad job. We don't like the smell of it."

"They were trying to hold us back but we got away."

"That doesn't make the odor nicer. Well, all right, but we've got to hurry."

Ben jumped down and joined the others at the rear. After a tug of war the twins fell out Emil's side, hurried to the back, unlashed tarp, and lowered tailgate. Ben and Martin joined hands, the women mounted the *Spitzbubenleiter,* the men climbed aboard. The twins upped tailgate, lashed tarp, and ran to the cab. The LKW pulled away.

Heehaw heehaw.

"Stephen bleiben!" Grepo's voice.

Slugs tore through the tarp and ricocheted off metal. The tourists tensed against no future, but the firing stopped as the LKW drew away. Through the bullet holes they saw Grepo, Kripo, Trapo, and Vopo jump and wave to commandeer a car.

The LKW sped on. After a kilometer it slowed for a sharp turn; the passengers stumbled backward toward the front, their calves striking metal. Six steel boxes formed a bench across the floor. They sat bouncily on the boxes as the LKW picked up speed. Suddenly remembering the words *Sprengstoff* and *Torschlusspanikknopf,* Ben got up and felt around; welds held the box to the floor, a padlock secured the lid. He sat down gingerly. The others knew what had crossed his mind; they were sitting on TNT: if the police caught up, the Graf had only to press the button to do away with the evidence.

Franz intercommed. "There's a picnic hamper if you're hungry."

They made out the hamper in a corner. "Thanks."

Silence but for the slick sound of the road underwheel, then, "They are tailing us, Emil."

"*Karambolage* is in order, Franz."

The passengers shot to their feet and peered through the bullet holes. Grepo, Kripo, Vopo, and Trapo hung out of a PKW that wove in and out of traffic to the notes of Trapo's Martinshorn. The heehawing grew louder. The fugitives saw a window in the cab crank open and heard two shots crack out.

Behind them and ahead of the pursuing car a truck hauling hundreds of pigs slewed and struck a tank truck full of salvaged crankcase oil; both trucks overturned. Oil purled around independent pigs, slithered vehicles into a massive pileup, then the autobahn stretched out empty behind the LKW. Horns, squeals, grunts, curses, screams faded in a dying heehaw.

The LKW took the next exit. The cab spotlight picked out chalkings on gateposts and utility poles and these *Zinken* drew the LKW along trafficless back roads, with only an occasional "Darf! darf!" from some farmyard. The LKW pulled up without warning. The twins unlashed tarp and lowered tailgate. The tourists climbed out onto a dark byroad in the shelter of trees.

"Are we out of East Germany?"

The Graf shook their heads. It was a stop for *einer Tankfüllung und Entwässerung*. While the twins emptied jerricans into the tank, the tourists emptied bladders. The twins were on the last gurgles of the first jerrican when Liza danced toward a fairy ring of mushrooms.

Wait: hold it.

Streamers of visual purple filled the night sky, the yellow spot of moon solarized; the universe alligatored like a bad paint job, breaking up into test patterns on their retinas.

Ben's right, Liza. Better not wander from the truck. They might try to ditch us here.

Not before we fork over the rest of the payoff, they won't.

No sweat anyway. It's only a dream.

That's just it: its lasting too long for only a dream.

How do you know? You can't time a dream from within.

We can make a guess. Things take as long to happen in dream as in real time. Look at all's been happening. Even with jump cuts, at least twenty-four hours' worth. How many times have we dreamed together? A dozen? Never before went over eight hours.

Alarmist. We'll wake when it's time.

Just try and wake up now.

I still say it's only a dream. Maybe getting nightmarish, but still only a dream.

(A warm nourishing darkness.)

But why aren't we picking up sensory cues from outside?

That's so. I can't feel or hear or smell a thing.

I can't open my eyes.

Don't panic. Dr. Embry will bring us out.

The twins—they're supposed to be getting us out from behind the Iron Curtain. Do you trust them? Did you notice who they look like without the shrubbery?

Dr. Embry!

Right. I think we're trying to tell ourselves something's wrong. Dr. Embry should've brought us out before now. Look, we know we're not here—wherever here is. We know we're dozing in the sleep-monitoring lab at the research center. We are, aren't we? You're each in a cubicle, same as me?

Yeah / Check / Yes / Right on / Right on (A voiceprint of laughter / Yep.

Well— Hold it. Wasn't that six yeses? Is that nutty Grepo right? Are we really *seven?*

You must've counted wrong. Go on.

Well, we know Dr. Embry taped electrodes all over us, hooked us up to an EEG brainwave machine and a computer. We know he shocked the thalamus in each of us to put us to sleep. The thalamus integrates stimuli into an awareness of everyday reality and forwards this awareness to the cortex. If we can't sense anything, that means the thalamus is still in shock. If we're cut off from our bodies we're in danger of hypostatic congestion. Did we just now empty our bladders or only dream we did?

A hypochondriac's nightmare. I have faith in Dr. Embry. He can snap us out of this.

Suppose he *can't.*

How, *can't?*

Maybe the world blew up. Maybe the good doctor dropped dead.

Dead!

I heard he has an artificial pacemaker in his heart. Interference from our alpha rhythms could've syncopated it, frozen him at the key of the thalamus-shocker.

Ugh.

But whatever happened we're stuck in the dream. I don't know about you other men—or the women—but one of Dr. Embry's lab assistants stuck a hypodermic needle in my vein and taped it down to draw blood samples, shoved a tube into my stomach, wrapped a plethysmograph around my penis, belted a hose around my chest. I hate to think we're lying here helpless, but I can't feel any of it.

Same here. Still, even if Embry's dead, or just blacked out, someone's bound to come along soon and—

You're forgetting. After the lab assistant looked me up, and before Embry hit the thalamus-shocker, I heard the guy wish Embry happy holiday and say, "See you next year."

Ouch. This *is* the eve of the Christmas-New year vacation.

And Dr. Embry has no family to worry about him.

We have families. At least I do.

But ours don't know we're here, taking part in this. It's all hush-hush, so we won't meet in real life and compare notes and spoil the experiment. They think we're at some cover address.

Meanwhile, there's no providing for us. Say the body functions without our knowing, say we don't suffer hypostatic congestion; we can still starve.

I don't buy any of that. You're just laying your death wish on Dr. Embry. There must be a reason. Let's get back to the dream and find out.

I hope you're right, Liza; *this* sure isn't getting us anywhere.

The twins had stowed the empty jerricans. Franz tapped the crystal of Emil's wristwatch. The tourists climbed aboard, the twins upped tailgate, lashed tarp, the LKW rolled on. Time lost meaning stretching in all dimensions.

They grew aware of the engine again when it cut off.

The bullet holes showed a railway siding belonging to some factory. The chimneys were dead but smudges of cloud floated like puffs of brown smoke the shape of fossil salamanders buried in lignite. Barracks. Watchtowers. Rows of neat red-brick buildings. They made out letters over the main gate: "ARBEIT MACHT FREI."

Birds twittered in the birches. The Graf unlashed tarp, dropped tailgate, and the escapees climbed down. The Graf upped tailgate.

"Sorry if it seemed we took you *von Pontius zu Pilatus,* but we had to detour, you understand."

"We understand."

They paid the remaining half of the *Reisebüro* fee.

Just within the barbed wire enclosing the factory stood a skeletal scaffold with a heavy iron hook at the top. The birds fell still. A chill breeze came up and the dawngilt grass whispered muffled heehaws. Bray for us. It was all wrong, Ben whirled. Sweat broke out on him.

"This isn't West Germany."

Twin Lugers whipped out to cover the group.

"We guaranteed to spirit you out of East Germany. This is Poland: once the realm of King Boleslaw the Bold, later part of the Greater Third Reich. We're at Oswiecim. Auschwitz."

"We should've guessed you're a double agent."

"Now, now. Let's part like civilized people."

The Lugers waved them away. The twins clicked, bowed, and began to lash the tarp. The others hid Ben as he stole around to the cab. He climbed up, reached in, *Torschlusspanikknopf.* He jumped down, ran, flung himself to the ground.

Vavoom! The earth hemingwayed, seamed. Stormy flames devoured the wreckage. Something clammy struck Ben and clung to his flesh. He forced open his eyes. He dripped with King Coleslaw the Cold, out of the hamper. There was nothing to see of the twins. He got up and joined the others; the heat drove them away.

A road map of East Europe had blown clear; Frank took charge of it and they tramped and farmcarted back toward East Germany. Only, when they sneaked across a

border, they found themselves inside Czechoslovakia. The sky swung like a censer.

"How'd we get so far off course?"

"Take a good look at the map."

It was one of the new Soviet maps. The cartographers had shifted towns, railroad lines, lakes, and rivers from their true sites, by as much as twenty-five miles, to mislead Western strategists when guiding and targeting missiles.

"We're near Prague—if we believe the signposts. The American embassy; let Uncle Sam get us out."

They found a station, a waiting train, and a compartment to themselves. The conductor punched six one-way tickets, smiling at Liza and nodding reassuringly. Almost at once, they were in Prague, taxiing to the U.S. Embassy. The Marine guard stopped them at the door. Carol snuggled up to him.

"We want to see the Ambassador."

"May I see your passports?" They handed him their passports. He looked from photos to faces and shook his head and handed them back. Their passports were blank. "Sorry." He scraped off the marine growth and shut the door in their faces.

They walked Prague aimlessly, then found an aim when they grew aware someone was shadowing them. Surely an agent of the Czech SSB who had picked them up at the embassy, he wore a trench coat and had bare feet to match. They stopped midway on a bridge, leaned on the parapet, and eyed themselves in the Moldau. Their shadow did the same.

Talking lightly to throw their shadow off, they agreed this bridge most likely was the one Good King Wenceslaus depontiated St. John of Nepomuk from, after torture failed to make Nepomuk open up to the king about what the queen had said in the confessional. As one, they snapped back from the parapet; inertia left their reflections on the water. They stepped softly away; once across, they glanced back. The poor schlemiel was still watching their reflections in the Moldau.

They had shaken their shadow but they kept on the go till, dog tired, they had to rest. Ben sat emptying his shoe, pouring a cone of time and space. Boothill. He scraped scatological matter from the sole. Look your last on last

things. Doré had engraved the Wandering Jew sitting wearily down, on Judgment Day, and easing off his shoes. Fitting; the Wandering Jew had been a shoemaker. Was Jesus the Wandering Jew? He could've switched bodies with the shoemaker he put the curse on: humble shoemaker going to the cross, Jesus going on to numberless crossroads. Ever and afar. Ben looked around for the time, saw the hand of a Hebraic clock move counterclockwise on the old Ghetto Town Hall: Over the way, Staronová Synagoga burst on his retina.

He shoved on his shoe; the others followed him to the heaped-up cemetery. A womb of stillness; they felt the soothing heartbeat. Mother Earth. The bedrich bride. Layer upon layer of graves. Ben broke the spell. He hunted the grave of the MaHaRal of Prague, Rabbi Yehuda Loew ben Bezalel, maker of the Golem. The MaHaRal had molded clay from the Moldau' s banks into the likeness of a giant man. In an ecstatic state he had animated it by writing on its brow the Hebrew word for Truth, and the robot had helped save the people of the ghetto. Ben found the grave, a chiseled vault.

Thousands of pebbles covered it, each standing for a visitor. Many visitors dropped letters, prayers for help, into the vault. Ben drew pen and pad. *In the name of Shem . . . forash, Kumopen!* He thrust the note into the vault ground shook, the pebbles scattered, the stone split open, a coffin heaved up. Its lid lifted, shedding moldy letters and Ben's note. A skullcapped, MGM-lion-maned man sat up and opened his eyes. The letters of *Emet,* Truth, shone on his brow. He looked blankly at the sojourner.

"*Ato Bra Golem Dybbuk . . .* Thou, Eleazar of Worms?" The blear passed from his eyes. "No. Who wakes me on the Sabbath?"

Carol's nudge jarred Ben's voice loose. "Ben Kaplan."

"*Shalom,* ben-Kaplan. Help you want, no?" The mane shook slowly. "Joseph the Golem is no more. But the Psalms remain. 'Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect, and in the book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.' Is that not what you term DNA, my son? All matter is one: what matters is how you rear-

range it. Take of me a pinch and get you yonder to Mount Blaník, where the old heroes of the goyim slumber. Them you should disturb on Shabbos. And there prepare you an ark each. And when you see a vulture sup, scatter the pinch."

Before Ben could ask how to take a pinch of him to Blaník, the MaHaRal rubbed from his brow the first letter of Truth, leaving *Met,* Death. Murmuring the Shema Yisroel, he crumbled to dust, Ben hesitated. His mother's voice whispered, "Go on, take a pinch." Ben grimaced but picked up his note, took a pinch of the MaHaRal's dust, and rolled a joint.

A bus dropped them off with the canvas foldboats they had charged to Ben's Diner's club card in a sporting goods store. On top of old Blaník they stretched rubberized sailcloth over knockdown frames and sat the night in the boats, holding the double-bladed paddles and wondering who would first say they were wasting their time.

Dawn. Bird shadow followed contours but bird substance proved crow. Its "Cras! cras!" promised no quick relief. They sat waiting. Another shadow, another crow. Frank nodded. "Quoth the Kafka, 'Ravenmore!' " A third shadow. A vulture swooped down on a dead mouse in the grass; residue of rosy dawn scattered trembling light, the vulture burped culturedly and flew off. Ben field-stripped the joint, shaking out the dust and balling the paper. Breeze blew dust and paper into crevices and, though it had already eked out a mouse, Blaník labored.

"An earthquake!"

A sulfurous, ionized smell, then they were floating on the waters of a sudden hot spring that subsided, drawing their boats deep into the mountain. The quake had sunk potato fields and mushroom patches and they found themselves riding an underground river of bramboračka. It needed a little salt.

"Way we were facing, we should come out in Austria."

"If we come out."

They paddled madly to clear the luminous walls of the tunnel and the echoing emberhang and to keep the soup from capsizing them. The stream suddenly forked. Liza, in the lead boat, strove to bear right. Unexpectedly, she pressed a hand to her belly as if to pump out an aria, the

paddle twisted in her other hand, and the boat swung left. The rest swore and followed. The tunnel darkened and narrowed; they could not help knocking loose stuff off walls and roof but brushed away most of the debris. They burst into day. Signs fleeting by and Frank's map said they were in Yugoslavia.

And barely in time. The boats had torn and filled with lukewarm soup. It was no strain to laugh that off: yet it was to weep that the debris they hadn't managed to brush away proved diamonds and gold nuggets. They pulled up under a bridge, let the boats settle, wrung themselves out, and the others turned on Liza.

"Why did you take the wrong turn?"

"I got a sudden cramp and lost control. I couldn't help it. I'm not mescaline—I mean, I'm no heroine. Oh . . ." Her weeping satisfied them and they let her be.

The scape faded out. A spot of darkness thinned, a Western Union Boy, ninety into the shades if a day, cycled out of the mist and handed Ben a telegram. Ben signed for it and diamond-tipped the messenger, who cycled away into mist.

What's it say?

"Stop." We're wasting our energy shaping the dream. We ought to put it into waking up.

We *tried* that. Someone's working against us.

Or *something*. Maybe our web of energy's made the dream real—an entity conscious of itself, following its own logic, holding us to keep from dissolving into baseless fabric. We need dreams, maybe dreams need us.

Tell it if it holds us it'll die with our bodies. Promise we'll redream if it lets us go now.

How do you talk to a dream? As well talk to the universe awake.

Maybe it has a locus in some symbol.

We can't analyze dream symbols while dreaming, tell real from false.

The scape faded in. They plodded along the riverside, struck an asphalt road. The signpost pointed to Split. Liza sank to the ground, leaned back against the post, and said she couldn't go on. Tears mingling with soup stains, she said she was a burden, said they'd be better off without her. Martin came back from scouting.

"Don't quit now. We're near the waterfront. Just think, Italy's over there."

At nightfall they stole down to the docks, passed ships flying Iron Curtain flags, found a Swedish freighter, *Ariel.* The watchman followed the Balkan custom and slept with his head covered. They climbed the boom of a cargo crane and dropped lightly to the *Ariel*'s deck. They made their way below and hid in an engine room compartment. The *Ariel* got up steam and sailed with the morning tide.

When they felt sure she had gone beyond the limit, they made their way topside. The superstructure had folded down. Men with headphones manned electronic gear. They were aboard a Russian trawler.

A crewman must have shot them with knockout needles, for the next they knew guards were marching them along a swaying corridor. They wore pajamas, the costume of Russians traveling by train. A sign read *Posadit' v Sibiri.* They were in the last car of a long train diminishing toward Siberia.

"Stoi!" They stopped stoically, and the soldier and the matron guarding them shoved them into a compartment. The soldier lit up a filter-tip Laika; at the matron's glare he backed out into the corridor.

The matron sniffled and wiped her eyes as the last onion dome of Moscow slid from sight. Liza quickly lifted the Heroine Mother medal from the woman's breast and hid it under the seat. At Kuibyshev the matron missed it and went into hysterics. The OBS news agancy had interviewed her when she received it and all Soviet media had given her a big play. She frisked her charges roughly and got some satisfaction, but not her medal. They waited their chance. The train swung across the Muyun-Kum sands of Kazakhstan. She dug the medal out from under the seat and dug the pin into the matron.

The matron's yelp brought the soldier back in but the matron's leap brought the two together in a mutual knockout. Meanwhile, Ben jerked the emergency cord. The handle came off in his hand but air and steel spoke success.

The abrupt stop telescoped the train's lines of perspective, analoging the matrioshka, the gaily painted wooden doll nesting a series of successively smaller dolls. Luckily,

they were in the last and so largest car; with everyone else out or in shock, they alone having braced themselves, the six convicts climbed out, careful not to squash tiny engine and tinier engineer, into the middle of nowhere.

The sand was cold where they stopped to rest. They tested the sand all around. Everywhere fiery: yet here one spot of coldness. They scooped the sand away, uncovering a mammoth block of fossil ice. Quickly before it melted they rubbed off grit to lick the ice, then froze at what they saw. A huge amber egg lay inside the ice. The ice melted quickly into the thirsty sand. They hadn't thought of food for a long time; while they wondered how to crack the leathery shell without a stone hand ax, it chipped open from within.

"Leapin' lizards! A dragon!"

"No, a pterodactyl."

A giant pterodactyl. They backed away, but it kept pace by growing. Sudden release from the pressure of cumulative time accelerated the creature's life processes; it reached full growth in minutes. The scales hardened, the wing membrane dried stiff, the long tail section grew rigid.

They were the first beings in its ken; imprinting filled it with dangerous affection for them. Its teeth were long and sharp. But once they saw its forty-foot wingspread they set about harnessing it. It was stupid but the speeding-up made it a quick study. In an hour they broke it to makeshift bridle and saddles, its wings raised a sandstorm, and they were airborne, heading east across Siberia.

Almost at once they pipped on a radarscope and had to evade one SAM 2 (1 SAM 2:4, Ben made it); after that they flew low. Once, at the tingle of a radar beam, Carol drew a stick of spearmint gum from her cleavage and dropped the foil wrapping as wriggly chaff. At the easternmost tip of Siberia they met fog and climbed above it to get their bearings. Through an eyelet in the fog they saw Bering Strait and the lazy colon of the Diomedes: the Russian island and the American.

With freedom in sight, they felt their mount failing rapidly. Dying of old age, it could no longer buck the east wind; they tried forcing it higher to ride a westerly jet stream, but it hadn't the strength in its wings. It barely held trim to glide down the wind that swept them back,

across Mongolia and into China. With a last surge, it landed them safely by the side of a road, then expired with an apologetic hiss.

In death as in life its processes quickened: its beloved burdens dismounted just as the flesh rotted off its bones. The erstwhile riders in the sky gazed dry-eyed at the dry bones: their pet had served them loyally and long, but when you've seen one pterodactyl you've seen them all. They walked away along the road and came to a Tung Fêng auto on the shoulder with a flat and no spare.

Sue tried acupuncture but all that happened was Ben complained of heartburn and chest pains. A repair truck wheezed up, the mechanic and the chauffeur stared, the truck backed out of sight again, and shortly two columns of Red Guards trotted up to find the foreign devils playing ping-pong with invisible tables, paddles, and balls.

These in turn found themselves in a hospital for observation and in Ben's case for American restaurant syndrome. An intern stuck a red-lacquered depressor in Ben's mouth.

"Mouth say tongue."

"Ah."

The intern blew the smoke of his Ming Hua cigarette out of his eyes and peered into Ben. "Must be poisonous weeds. Wrong thoughts. Read chapter four of the Chairman's works and you'll feel better left away. And exercise. Lots of outdoor exercise."

They were helping repair a section of the Great Wall of China their captors called the Mongol Patch. On either side of the Great Wall one vastness was all they could see. They eyed each other wanly.

"How'd we get here? Time warp?"

"Great leap forward."

Their overseer, with red eyebrows and yellow turban, came near, a long rope in his hand. *"Wang yang pu lao!"* They bent to their task. Melon plants blossomed in winter along the Great Wall; the soil was rich with corpses. Lifting bricks and mortaring them became harder. The edges of vision grew shadowy, blurred. A Liza-shaped hole appeared in the dream.

Liza, come back.

The hole filled with Liza once more.

What happened, Liza?

Bad trip, this whole thing. I can't take any more.

Liza flickered out and in.

Just what we need, hysteria.

Part of the pattern. She's been sabotaging us all along.

It's not my doing. It's the baby's.

(Warm nourishing darkness. Baby needs a new pair of shoes.)

So! Baby makes *seven!*

Why didn't you tell us?

I put it out of my mind because I did an awful thing: I didn't let them know I'd been taking LSD.

Let who know?

The gynecologist and the parents. If it were really my own I wouldn't feel half so guilty.

Make sense.

Don't you see? She's a host-mother.

You dug. A childless couple paid me to carry their child. The woman's unable to bear. The husband fertilized one of her eggs and the gynecologist planted it in my womb.

How long have you been . . . with child?

Eight months. Why?

There's our interference. Brainwaves begin—or at least register on detectors—around the eighth *week.* Your baby's had time to learn brainwave alphabet and grammar.

And it's not just any baby, way it's been kicking up. LSD residue in Liza's blood and tissues may have mutated the chromosomes in the germ cells. We don't know what kind of genetic monster's among us.

Heehaw, heehaw.

The baby!

Right on, daddy-o.

If you understand what's going on, you know you're in this with us. If we die, you die.

Heehaw, heehaw.

Let me. Listen, kid. You're not blocked the way the rest of us are. Can you get sensory cues from outside?

Come again? Oh, I dig. Yeah, I hear a buzzing.

That's the thalamus-shocker. You can cut that buzzer off.

Yeah? How?

Get a fix on it and beam your brainwaves at it. That might start a thermal runaway and knock out the circuit. If that doesn't free us to wake, it still might set off sprinklers and fire alarm and bring help. Try?

Sure.

A surge. Spit of sparks, glow of fusing metal, stink of burning insulation, gooseflesh feel of wetness.

Buffalo soldiers of the Ninth Calvalry rode up and routed the redskin horde. The six survivors of the way-station massacre were safe. But when the smoke cleared, Oliver Embry lay slumped over his desk, an arrow through his chest, his hand still holding down the telegraph key.

Heehaw, heehaw.

Baby's putting us on!

Doesn't want to leave the womb, that's what. Equates the dream with the womb.

It can't stay in the womb forever. Show and tell.

A delivery room: Liza on the table, the others doctors, nurses, anesthesiologist. Ben held out a rubber hand. "Forceps." He shoved remote-control forceps up into Liza's uterus, watched the monitor, and wound the cord around the baby's neck.

Fear, as the noose tightened.

"Stop!"

"You see now what dying means? This thread's our only way out of the maze. Your only way too."

"You can't kid me. It's only a dream-happening. Hee—"

The delivery room washed away in a flood. The bag of waters burst. Air entered the womb and ballooned the lungs of the still-unborn baby. Through its mind they heard it listen to its own cries as it dashed again and again against the rock of the pubic arch.

Liza's in labor.

Can't be. Don't feel a thing. Still have a month to go.

We've been lying without nourishment who knows how long. Malnutrition brings on premature birth.

Help me!

Have to help yourself, kid. No one's out there or your uterine crying would've brought help by now.

Help me!

Do what we told you to do before.

I don't know if I can.

You have to.

Hold everything!

Dammit, Sue, why?

How can we be sure we're even alive? Our bodies may have died . . . out there. This may be our only reality, our immortality. If we shatter the dream—

Sue's right, we may break out into nothingness.

You too, Frank? Pay no mind to them, kid. *Try.*

A surge. Spit of sparks, glow of fusing metal, stink of burning insulation, gooseflesh feel of wetness.

They opened their eyes. Nothingness. Then they smiled; Liza too, though the labor pains were fierce. Nothingness was merely the darkness of their individual windowless cubicles, lights off to encourage slumber. Life still beat in them. Too weak to move, to tear off the wires and sit up, they lay gathering strength of will. They could relax, close their eyes.

Fear. Could they be sure they weren't dreaming they'd awakened?

Heehaw heehaw.

A siren? Had the fire alarm gone off and brought help?

Heehaw heehaw.

The sound grew.

They held their breath.

Geo. Alec Effinger

THINGS GO BETTER

"Look, Weinraub," I said, "you're going to have to be careful."

He laughed it off. He said, "Oh, you're exaggerating. I won't have any trouble. This is not a movie, this is real life. Oh, don't worry. I can take care of myself." You know how he is, you can just see the smile on his face, the knowing smile that he uses for everything. You know that he can't take care of himself.

The next thing I knew, he was flying westward on gossamer wings of song, his thumb outstretched to the great wide wonderful land that is our nation, ranging across the vast expanse of this, the Pennsylvanian Commonwealth, ever eager to meet new people, encounter new and fresher viewpoints, discovering America on all her rich and terrifying levels, his ridiculously long hair flowing behind, holding and pulling him back.

As he went, he sang. He sang of poverty, he sang of ignorance, and fear, and he sang of Puff, the Magic Dragon and where all the flowers had gone. He carried a twelve-dollar guitar, a Supaphone that he had bought in a Penny's basement in Harrisburg; he did not play it. One does not play on one's image, and you can be sure that Stevie knew what was image and what wasn't.

He stood on the side of the roads of our nation, every road and all roads, yes, and no roads, too, for he was everywhere at once with nowhere to go. He *was* our nation, the spirit of question, the spirit of adventure, the spirit of restless exploration that expanded our United States to their present maturity and slumber. And the myriad cars that passed him by, the thousands of rides that slowed only to hurl their empty cans of Carling's, these Philistines are the poorer for it, and I join Steve Weinraub,

wherever he is, in saying to them, "We cannot tolerate or condone such behavior."

Oh, and now I must tell of those adventures, although it pains me much, I must relate his only exploits, his bootless fame, if you will, and how those events tore from him his very heart and soul, and stabbed deep into his visceral privates to wrench there from the darkling roots of identity.

He was out there, old Steve, alone under the Pennsylvania skies and the Pennsylvania sun and moon. He stood by the way, humbly, talking to himself and whistling. You know how he is when he is all alone: he will do old movie scenes and whistle Christmas carols. He waited for a ride. He waited in Leeper, he waited in Indian Bog, he waited in South Eastwich. The great muddy chariots roared through the Allegheny night, streaming by him like giant silverfish. He waited for the rebirth of wonder.

And yet, every once in a while a car would stop. Sometimes it would be a rich fag in a dusty tan Saab. Sometimes it would be a Mustang with a college-age couple who wanted to hear Carolyn Hester songs; sometimes the guy and girl were pinned. Mostly, however, he was picked up by blue-haired little old ladies in red and white Dodge Chargers. When he got an old lady, he always told her he was a poet. She would, of course, ask for a poem. Here it is:

> What we're here for
> is death
> Somebody accidentally
> wound us up
> ("I *told* you
> to leave that alone")
> and we must
> wait
> to run down.
> Sex
> is a better than average way
> of killing the time.
> My mind holds death
> sometimes
> like sugar

on Satan's tongue dissolving
and life
seems but moments
of isolated
awareness—
leaves, insects discovered again
mistakes of beauty
made available by mistake:
Life
submerged in
living.

The old ladies invariably said, "That's very interesting." It seemed that their Roberts had been poets, too, before they had all passed on. The ladies always asked Steve how he felt about Edgar Guest; Steve answered that he liked him fine.

No one asked him if he was hungry. He was hungry, too, I know. No one said, "Why don't we stop here, kid; let me treat you to a Double Cheese." No one said, "Well, kid, where you going? Got anywhere to stay tonight?" No one asked; to them the free ride was enough. Weinraub marked it all down in his notebook. If only we could have that notebook, that priceless document of imperialist linoleum thinking. Then all your questions would be answered.

What did he eat? Nothing, and for a long time. Where did he stay? Nowhere, which is to say in little shady glens along scenic Route 80. Back and forth he traveled, back and forth across the ever-changing panorama of our Keystone State, looking and looking, and every person who picked him up told him where to find it all. Every car he rode in had it written somewhere, on a windshield sticker, on a fingerprint-smudged plaque bolted to the dashboard, on the bumper sticker from Fabulous Conneaut Lake Park. Everything said, "It's all happening in Gremmage." For a time Steve didn't believe it; but, as is the case in situations like this, the evidence piled up beyond the point where he could ignore it. But the idea of actually finding where it's at scared him. Steve lied a lot, but deep down inside he *knew* he couldn't take care of himself.

Steve went west on Route 80; he turned around and came back eastward. On some trips, when he passed through Stroudsburg, he called me on the phone to say hello. Then he would turn around again and head west. Somewhere in the middle, though, his trip required a decision. Frequently he took the northern detour, through a bland farm country, and he avoided the sight of even the Gremmage chimney smoke. At other times he took the southern detour (particularly in autumn, his favorite season), because it wound through a dense and silent State Park. But every once in a while, very rarely but always in early afternnon, every once in a while he drove straight through Gremmage.

There were always rides to Gremmage. When he took the detours he had to wait, oh, hours for a ride. When he decided to go through Gremmage the cars would line up on the highway's shoulder, anxious to have him aboard. As he rode through the town he watched, but no one seemed to be particularly unusual, nothing looked at all strange. He rode slouched down in his seat, he looked through the tightly closed window.

The flame of Gremmage drew him, the poor, doomed moth. Again and again he circled, back and forth he flew, above, below and, more and more often, through Gremmage.

And here the voice of reason whispers: one very cool night, starlight and moonlight bathing the strip mines with perverted ardor, Steve walks a lonely dirt road. He is entertaining himself with a scene from a hypothetical movie. "Colonel Rafferty, you can't send a boy up in a crate like that!" "This is war, Lieutenant. We must all make allowances, and we must all make sacrifices. That boy . . . that boy is my son!" "Your *son*! But, Colonel, I . . . I didn't know that you *had* a son." "Until thirty minutes ago, Lieutenant, I didn't know either."

"Help . . ."

With the good, clean Quaker State nothing around him, you can no doubt see the confusion in Steve's features. Someone has asked him for help. He *knows* that he can't even take care of himself.

"Help me, please . . ."

But we knew Steve, at least I did, and I know that he

was basically a good kid. He had come to that universal Good Samaritan turning point in his life.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Good . . . Good King Wenceslas looked down . . ."

Sitting here in our sanitary colonials, guarded by legions of little black iron coachboys holding lanterns, guarded by phalanxes of iron flamingos, sitting here in our homes, we can afford not to shudder. We can pretend to see that unvaried night with its road and Steve and wretch. We can delude ourselves into thinking we feel that ginger-ale effervescence at the base of Steve's spine. We're not going to have to do anything when Steve's own voice comes back to him from the swollen throat of the near-corpse by the side of the road, singing his own song.

"Oh, God," Steve said. His voice broke the occult silence, which was already punctured by cricket calls, bird sounds, and leaf rustles. "What should I do?"

Steve found him in a ditch, this poor guy, beaten and robbed and left to die. Crusts of blood, and dirt, and other . . .

"I . . . I . . ."

"Easy, old-timer," said Steve, "easy there. Don't try to talk."

"Beware . . ."

Did you feel another ripple of terror? No? Of course not.

"Beware of what, old-timer?"

The man coughed, the blood dribbled from the corners of his mouth just the way movies have taught us to expect. He told his story haltingly, painfully. He was the last beatnik, the last of the old Gregory Corso school of poets. He was looking for America, too. The rest, ah, it is so evident that it hurts.

"Thus . . . beware . . ."

"Beware *what*, old-timer?"

"Beware . . . beware . . . be . . ."

The old beatnik's legs tensed, his back arched, his neck muscles tightened. At last he relaxed and as he slumped back he whispered, "Gremmage." He let out his last breath with a wheeze, and the Allegheny midnight smoothed itself with silence.

Steve knelt, cradling the corpse in his arms. Perhaps he

wept (I like to think that he did); he set the man's body down again, and closed the dead eyes forever. "Do not go gentle into that good night," he said by way of benediction.

Yes, he could have guessed, and should have, as I did, that Gremmage had done this evil thing. He stood and shouted, loudly into the black *etwas* of sleeping Pennsylvania. He mourned, and he prayed, more than he had ever prayed before in his aimless life, and he screamed. "Quo vadis, America?" he screamed. Quo vadis, indeed, Steve. Never again would he venture near Gremmage.

Even as his vow echoed from the wooded mountains' majesty a night-grayed Saab pulled to a stop. A thin, neatly dressed man leaned across the seat and rolled down the window. Gracefully. "Hi there," he said, smiling. "Need a ride?"

"No."

"Well, then hop in! Julian's waiting supper."

They drove in strained silence for some minutes. At last Steve said. "Which way's Gremmage?"

"Back the other way, baby."

"Fine. Keep going."

The man let him out a short while later. Immediately the Mustang pulled up. The guy and girl in it smiled at Steve. The chick asked, "Going to Gremmage?"

"No," said Steve.

"Okay, get in."

He sat in the back seat and discussed old Ian and Sylvia albums until the couple had to leave the main road. Steve got out and was picked up by a little old lady in a red and white Dodge. She was delighted to learn that Steve was a poet. Her late husband had been one, too. Steve recited his poem. When he finished, the old lady turned to him and smiled. "That's very interesting," she didn't say. She didn't say that at all.

"All right. Here we are: Gremmage!" she said. Steve got out of the car and found a place to sleep.

"Yes," he swore the next day, "I will learn this town. I will discover every ugly sore it has to hide. I will bring it down about the ears of the Gremmagers. I'll take care of all of them."

He took the twelve-dollar guitar from around his neck

and put it on the sidewalk. He sat on the curb, his defenses inviolable, waiting for Gremmage to make its first move and its first mistake. When they come to hold me down and cut my hair and beard, I will kick their groins, he thought, I will karate chop their Adam's apples.

"Hey, kid, you new around here?"

Oh, Steve, he was smiling, the Gremmager was crossing Ridge Street, hand out, smiling, welcome, welcome! Steve! Sometimes you forgot that you knew that you couldn't take care of yourself.

"You got a place to stay, kid?"

Why, no, he didn't have a place to stay, hadn't had a real shower in a while, traveling a lot and all.

"You hungry, kid?"

"Yeah, well, you know. Yeah."

"Well, come on over to the diner. We'll buy you lunch. This is a friendly town we got here. Lots of towns around here, they wouldn't like one of you hippies wandering around and all. But here in Gremmage, why, doggone happy to have you."

See them now. See Steve hand his guitar up to one of the grinning locals, see him stand, see them all head off down Ridge Street to the diner, about nine Gremmagers and Steve. Can you listen? Can you catch Steve's nervousness, do you find fear in his words? No? Do you find fear in his bearing, in his easier laugh? No? I told you that he couldn't take care of himself.

He slides into a booth in the diner. The locals divide, so part of them sit with Steve and part take their own booths. They all look alike to Steve, so he does not find the one with his guitar. It does not matter, he guesses.

And then they talked. The waitress took their order, cheeseburgers and french fries; they laughed when Steve said pop instead of soda (or the other way around). They talked and laughed; the laughter wasn't forced, it was, beyond doubt, genuine. Steve was surprised, his defenses grew steadily more violable; he sort of liked the Gremmagers. They talked.

They talked about hair, of course. They did not say that he looked like Jesus. Steve thought that this in itself was worthy of being recorded in his notebook. A Gremmager laughed delightedly. Another suggested that Steve was

really the Apostle Paul: he had finished the First Corinthians, and the Second, and now he was working on the Honorable Mention Corinthians. Everyone laughed; Steve laughed too, that poor, dead dear.

When the cheeseburgers came the locals were still talking about hair. Steve was interested in the Gremmagers' point of view.

"I've never really had it explained so clearly," he said. "I never understood the objection to long hair before. But I can sympathize with your point." The Gremmagers smiled to each other.

If you squint just right, you can see the entire population of Gremmage crowded together on the sidewalk in front of the diner.

"You are right," said Steve, "on some people long hair looks horrible. But I always thought it filled out my thin face."

The diner is empty except for the group of Gremmagers that came in with Steve. The waitresses and the kitchen help have all gone outside to join the others on the sidewalk.

"I wish I could get this hair cut right now. I don't know how I ever thought it was decent for a grown man to wear it like this. I look like a damn faggot. Right after lunch you'll have to show me the barber shop."

The Gremmagers laughed. "No need to wait, if you don't want to," one of them said. "Matt here's a barber. Do it for you right here."

"Oh yes, please! Cut it off already; God, I hate it!"

You can look around, there's about twenty minutes now, nothing much happening except the haircut. The Gremmagers inside the diner and the Gremmagers outside slap each other's backs and laugh a lot. At last Steve's hair is tastefully short. With his beard he looks like D. H. Lawrence.

"You gonna keep the chin feathers, son?"

"Maybe you could trim the beard a little, neaten it up."

"You're gonna look like some regular professor or something."

"Yeah, you're right. Take it off."

"Hey, Don, I think it's time for the sign."

The Gremmagers were cheering. They cheered each other, they congratulated Steve. They gave him a new suit and a ten-dollar bill. Someone flipped a switch and a neon sign lit up above a dingy door at the back of the diner: A High-Pay, Fascinating Career Is Waiting For You In The Exciting, Wide-Open Field OF COMPUTER PROGRAMMING!!! Steve grabbed the doorknob. He turned back to the Gremmagers and smiled shyly. He never could take care of himself. As the town of Gremmage applauded he opened the door and went through.

Gary K. Wolf

DISSOLVE

DAVID: Good evening. David Dahlstrom here—on the air—around the world. My guest today—noted British psychiatrist, self-styled TVologist, and author of the recent best seller *Big Eye,* Dr. Bernice F. Trainner. *half turn. look at guest.* Hello, Dr. Trainner.

GUEST: Hello, David. *smile.* So nice of you to have me in.

DAVID: My pleasure. *return smile.* Tell me, Dr. Trainner—

GUEST: *shake head.* Please. Call me Bernice.

DAVID: nod. Thank you. Tell me, Bernice, exactly what do you mean here in your book *open book* when you say *read from book* "television dangerously altered our perception of the world around us"? *close book.*

GUEST: Quite simple, David, *turn slowly. face camera.* Television appeared to depict the real world. When, in fact, it never came anywhere near doing so.

DAVID: *Look puzzled.* It didn't?" *Tilt head to one side.* How do you mean that?

GUEST: Well, for instance. Take your typical television series. The quote good-guy-hero-what-have-you unquote never lost. He was always a winner. Now how realistic was that? For some guy to always come out on top every ti . . . *fade out picture, long, slow fade on sound. fade-in scene two and establish. open on wide-angle shot. interior of bombed-out television studio. pan around. two light bulbs hang from ceiling. video tape scattered all over. broken props everywhere. mobile, gas-powered generator parked against back wall. grubby, unshaven boy sits at desk. filthy girl in raggy clothes points television camera at him. girl pushes button. boy's face appears on television monitor in studio corner. boy sees himself. breaks into grin. fade-in sound.* "It works! Goddamn, it works! I'm on the air! Hot

shit! Keep the camera on me, and do what I tell you. Ready? Let's go. Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Creighton Moore here with the evening news. Brought to you tonight by Tone Tine, the world's finest sonic toothbrush. Bad breath turning your honey off in those close-up clinches? Use Tone Tine. Kill bad breath germs supersonically. Push the camera in. Closer. Come in right on my upper molar. Yeah, that's right. Use Tone Tine to be sure. And now for the news, Okay, Melissa, that's enough. Cut it off."

The girl pushes a button, and a video-tape recorder next to her slows to a gentle stop. Scotty, the boy, comes out from behind the desk trailing a microphone cord behind him.

"Goddamn," he says, "I was really on. Play it back so I can see it."

Melissa pushes the rewind button, lets the tape spin back for a few moments, stops it, then pushes the button marked play.

". . . Keep the camera on me and do what I tell you. Ready, Let's go. Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Creighton Moore here with . . ."

"Great. Cut it off."

Melissa pushes the stop button, and Scotty's face freezes in midsentence on the screen. She pushes the off button, and his face disappears.

"Damn, that's exciting. Aren't you excited, honey? Do you know what this means? Do you? Do you understand, sweetheart?"

Melissa looks at him quizzically, thinks for a moment, and finally shakes her head quickly.

Scotty smiles at her. She's gotten worse in the past few months. Lately he has to explain things to her several times before she understands them. But she'll be improving now. The TV will help her. Help her get smarter. Help her get better. More like she'd been. Before.

He looks at her tenderly, runs his hands over her cheek, down her side and over her young breasts, and explains to her again the significance of their achievement.

"Remember when we found this place?"

Melissa nods.

"And how much you enjoyed it when I figured out how

to play all those video tapes we found? The ones with those great TV shows on them?"

Melissa grins happily and nods again.

"And remember how sad you were that day after the big cloud blew over. The day when we came down here to play a tape and found there wasn't anything on any of them anymore?"

Melissa's face reflects her sorrow. She drops her head and raises it again. Slowly. Down. Up.

"Well, you're gonna be able to watch TV shows again. Because now we can make our own. Exactly the same as the old ones. You wait. You won't hardly be able to tell the difference. I know. It'll be just like it was before. See if it's not. We'll be able to watch anything we want. Better yet, we'll be in the programs, too. Won't that be super? We can be anything we want. You can be a dancer. A singer. Anything at all. As pretty and as smart as any girl who's ever been on television before. Won't you like that?"

Melissa's face brightens. She smiles the silly, sweet smile that Scotty so loves. And she nods her head. Of course, she doesn't say anything. She can't. Ever since the lump under her chin started swelling, four or five months ago, she hasn't been able to make a sound. No words. No laughter. No grunts. Not even a sigh or a whimper. But it doesn't matter. Not to them. Scotty can understand her. As now. As she comes to him. Hugs him to her. Tightly. Pulling him down. Down and over. Down and over and on . . .

long, gentle fade-out. fade-in scene three.

GUEST: . . . similar expectations in real life. You see, the medium's semidocumentary method of presentation blurred the distinction between fiction and . . .

He puts his gun back in its holster, steps over the body lying in the street, and walks to the saloon. He pushes open the saloon door, goes inside, and sits down at a table already occupied by a young, pretty girl. He speaks to her.

"You can go back to your ranch, now, Miss Linda. That Crayton fella ain't a-gonna bother you no more."

"Oh, Sheriff. How can I ever thank you?"

"Ain't no thanks necessary. Don't give it another thought, hear? And don't you fret none 'bout it, neither.

'Tweren't your fault. He was no good. The whole town's better off without him. Matter of fact, I been wantin' to do it for a long time, now. Glad he finally gave me a reason."

The girl looks at him, nods her head, gets up, throws her shawl over her shoulders, and starts for the door. Halfway there, she stops, runs back to the sheriff, gives him a hug and a tender kiss on the cheek, then hurries out.

The sheriff looks after her, touches his hand to his cheek, turns his back to the door, sits down at the table, and orders a beer.

show her pulling the trigger.
Bang.

one minute to air.
stand by. quiet in the studio. ready music. ready to fade-in camera one, cue music.
on the air.
cue talent. fade-in one.

"And now, brought to you direct from Radio City Music Hall in New York City, the Ed O'Hara Show with tonight's guest stars, the comedy team of Brecher and Fultz, young singing star Diana Phillips, Jack Markas doing a scene from his new movie, and, to top it all off, those folk-singing sensations, the Last Children. Now, here he is, in person, *ready two* Ed O'Hara.

take two.

"Thank you, thank you, ladies and gentlemen, thank you ever so much. Stick around awhile. You'll enjoy the show. Starting right off, let's have a big, big O'Hara hand for the young and lovely Miss Rhythum and Blues herself, here she is, Miss Diane Phillips."

pan in on the girl, from high up. catch a shot down the front of her dress. don't show enough to get the blue pencils on our backs. but work mr. sunday-night-viewer up a little.

Two spotlights pick up the girl as she stands there, radiant, capturing the entire audience and holding them in her hand with her awesome stage presence. She looks out, smiles, and begins to sing. The boom mike comes in low. Her body mike, hidden in the bosom of her low-cut eve-

ning gown, picks up the soft reverberations that give her voice its husky, sex-filled quality. The cameraman swoops in and out. Adding that old artsy-craftsy touch. A little blurred focus. Some double exposure shots. Quick zoom in. All counterbalanced by a lot of side-angle and high-up stuff. And through it all, above it all, she sings.

what a performer, a real natural. too bad she's got such a lousy voice.

DAVID: I'm sorry, Bernice, I'm having a bit of trouble hearing you. Could you speak up a little?

He is an honest, diligent, hardworking engineer, living happily with his wife and two children in a small but comfortable apartment in a middle-class, integrated, all-American neighborhood. He doesn't smoke. Doesn't drink. And would never take something he didn't earn, for, above all else, he's determined to get ahead on the merits of his own talents and his own talents only.

His wife is a senator's daughter. At the age of fourteen, she inherited twenty million dollars from a distant uncle. She's on a first-name basis with twelve prime ministers, eight dictators, a maharaja, the President of the United States, and a Haitian voodoo cult leader.

Join them this coming Friday night at 8 p.m. Eastern Standard Time and watch the fun as she tries to hide the fact she's hired the entire New York Philharmonic to entertain at their daughter's birthday party while he places the United States foreign policy in jeopardy by mistaking the Queen Mother for a cosmetics saleslady.

Don't forget. It will all be happening right here, this coming Friday at 8 p.m. Make sure you're here to watch it.

let's see if we can get it right on the first take. show her pulling the trigger.

Bang.

And now, a word from our sponsor.

That walking through the meadow, rolling in the hay freshness that you've been waiting for is here at last. At your drugstore. Ask for it by name, girls. Pussy Willow.

The finest douche money can buy. Available in six delightful flavors—strawberry, boysenberry, raspberry, orange, licorice, and vanilla. Pick up a snatch-pack. Today.

Now, back to our program.

run it again. i'll dub in your voice, and we'll hear how it sounds after we put it all together.

"Jason, I'm afraid it's all over between us. I've found someone else. Someone kind, and loving and generous. Someone, in short, entirely unlike you. Now, please, let's not make a scene. Let's part as friends. Agreed." She walks toward him, her hand outstretched. As she moves, the sunlight streaming through the window picks up the highlights in her gorgeous auburn hair (Lady Clairol, shade 44S). He can't resist. And doesn't.

He pushes her hand to one side and draws her to him, kissing her long and hard, holding her in a strong, masculine embrace. "Mirelle," he breaths softly into her ear, "my Mirelle. Can you really leave me? Can you even think of leaving me? After all we've had together? After you've borne me a child? And what is to become of him? Of little Gaston? Eh? Have you thought of that? We were to tell him next week. Tell him that we and not Steve and Tom are his true parents. What are we to do about that? Are we to go on letting him be brought up as a homosexual in that filthy hovel where he sleeps on the floor and eats insects? I beg of you. Stay with me. Please. If not for me, if not for yourself, then for Gaston. Stay with me. Please. Please. Please."

Mirelle disengages herself from him by shoving him roughly away. She looks at him for a moment, her breasts heaving up and down with the memory of almost-forgotten passions. She puts her hands to her face and starts to sob. "No. Oh, no. How can you do this to me? What strange, evil powers do you have over me? I'm so confused. I don't know what to do any longer. Where to turn. You're a wicked, sinister man, Jason, and I hope to God I never see you again." With large, sobbing gasps, she runs crying from the room.

Jason looks after her, a sneer on his face. He suspects she'll be back.

Tune in tomorrow, same time, same channel, and find out if he's right.

how are we for time?
right on schedule.

The cloud comes back, and with it the sickness. Scotty holds Melissa in his arms. Rocking her gently. Back and forth. Back and forth. Until the cloud goes away. And her crying stops.

what a scene! let's watch it again on instant replay.

The cloud comes back, and with it the sickness. Scotty holds Melissa in his arms. Rocking her gently. Back and forth. Back and forth. Until the cloud goes away. And her crying stops.

"Hellooooooooo, KIDDIES. It's me again. Cuckoobell the clown. Here to put a little fun, fun, fun in your lives. What do you say we get right to the cartoons. Would you like that? You would? Here they are, then. To make you laugh and chuckle. Your favorite little people. Wally Walrus and Bumble-Bee Bennie. Let's see what they're up to today."

Wally Walrus has it. A surefire way to steal Bumble-Bee Bennie's honey. Wally's put glue on all the flowers in the pasture next to Bennie's hive.

When Bennie and the other bees go out to gather honey, they stick to the flowers. Wally, hiding behind a rock at the edge of the pasture, grinningly watches the fun as the bees try to struggle loose. When he's sure they can't get themselves unfastened, he comes out into the open, teases them by tickling them under their little chins, does a fancy jig, then goes to their honey tree and, licking his lips, starts to climb.

He's only halfway up the tree when the first drop of water hits. Within moments, it's pouring down rain. And Wally knows what that means. Glue comes loose in water,

and when the glue on the flowers comes loose, the bees do too. He has to really hustle if he wants to get that honey.

He picks up speed. Climbs faster. Lickety-split. Moving like a demon. Until, at last, he makes it. To the top of the tree where, there it is, right in front of him. Mounds and heaps and gobs of beautiful, delicious, sweet and yummy honey. He dips his paw in, closes his eyes, and starts to take a big juicy lick. Then he hears it.

Buzz.

Off in the distance, but coming in fast.

BUZZ.

Almost here, now, and getting louder.

BUZZZZZZZZ.

He turns around in time to see the whole hive of bees at him. With Bumble-Bee Bennie leading the way.

Diving down at a fantastic speed, the bees form themselves into a huge fist in midair. Bam. They poke Wally a good one in the jaw. He falls off the tree and lands with a resounding WHUMP. The bees regroup themselves into a baseball bat. Bumble-Bee Bennie grabs the handle and starts whacking the living daylights out of Wally's head. The scene closes with Wally being pounded slowly into the ground. Now 12 inches showing. Now 9. Now nothing but the nubbly little bumps on top of his head.

The program is a huge success. The audience loves it. In fact, she laughs so hard, tears roll down her cheeks.

this is the big scene. let's see if we can get it right on the first take. here we go. cut to a close-up of the gun in her hand. show her pulling the trigger.

Bang.

. . . the news beat team live and in color. Tonight, Angela Thomas with the President in exile. Roger Porter covering the Vatican riots. And special direct reports from combat zone correspondents in Africa, Indochina, New England, and Alabama. All brought to you by the friendly folks at . . .

Ping-pong balls lie on the floor of a plastic cage. Abruptly, they start to move. To bounce. To collide. Caught by an air jet blowing into the cage. Suddenly,

whoosh, the jet blows one ball through a hole in the cage's top and into a short transparent tube. Another ball follows the first. Then another. And another yet. One by one. Into the tube. Until ten balls are lined up, trapped, inside.

A man flips open a little door in the tube, takes out the first ball in line, looks at it, picks up a microphone and says, "B-8."

A woman with twelve cards in front of her runs her finger down the B column of each card in turn, dropping corn kernels on six of the cards as she goes.

"I-21."

A young woman looks at her two cards, scowls, looks next to her at her husband's card, scowls again and points. With a sheepish look, he drops a kernel on his card.

"G-53."

An old man with bent, rickety fingers slides a kernel across his card. Across the I column. Across the N column. To the G column. To the number 53.

"N-34."

A woman gets excited. She needs only one more number to win. O-72. She sweeps all the kernels from her card and hugs it to her breast. She closes her eyes and mouths the number silently to herself. O-72. O-72. O-72. O-72.

"O-72."

She leaps up, waves her card, and shouts . . .

freeze action. catch her there. cue the announcer. voice over.

You can try to change your future this way. By wishing. You can try improving the world that way, too. There's only one problem. It doesn't always work. Join the Peace Corps.

hey, that was pretty good.

"Hi, ladies, it's me. Back for another edition of *Cooking with Carla.* Tonight's recipe is a little goody I picked up in an intimate little French place on the Côte d'Azur when I was dining there with my good friend—if you know what I mean—the Count. It' s a delightful little thing call Maïs grillé et éclaté à la brochette. And it's a snippy-snap to make. All you need is one plumeau, a half pound of brochettes, three green toma-

toes, two olives—peeled and pitted—a stalk of celery, three maple leaves, and a freshly skinned muskrat. To begin, coat the brochettes liberally with Granny Gump's Good Granular Gravy and set aside to dry. Then . . . aw, hell, this is cracking me up. *keep going. we can edit later.* Then, remove all the feathers from the plumeau. Implant the feathers into the tomatoes until you have something resembling a badminton shuttlecock. When you've finished, set them aside until it's your turn to serve. Next, take the . . . oh, crap, I'm laughing too hard . . . that last bit got me . . . I can't finish . . . turn it off . . . please turn it off . . .

cut it off. cut it off. this is the big scene. let's see if we can get it right on the first take. ready? here we go. cut to a close-up of the gun in her hand. come in. show her finger on the trigger. come in tight. don't stop. show her pulling the trigger.

Bang.

The pain has been getting worse. It's so bad tonight that every time Melissa dozes off, it jerks her awake.

Scotty can't bear seeing her in such agony.

He gets up, dresses, and goes to the TV studio. He puts on the tape that shows Dr. Sam Lafferty curing Melissa of her afflictions. He watches it once. Twice. Twelve times in all. The happy ending chokes him up again and again.

He returns to Melissa at dawn, pleased to see she's finally managed to go to sleep. He shakes her gently to wake her, then, smiling, takes her in his arms and hugs her as hard as he can. He holds her tightly to him and kisses her.

While she pounds on his back, screaming soundlessly, wild with pain, trying to get him to let her go.

But he doesn't notice.

that last bit didn't come across very well, we'd better redo it. cut out the symbolism and tighten up the continuity.

He takes it, rolls with it, and comes back swinging. Sock. Pow. No dippy spies can get the best of Mike McCale. He slams the fat one up against the wall. Turns,

picks up the little guy, and throws him into the other two sending all three to the floor in a big, sprawling heap. He kicks the fat man in the teeth for good measure, and leaves. To find—the girl.

He knows where she'll be. In his apartment. Waiting for the fat man to call. To tell her Mike McCale is dead. Is she in for a surprise.

He's lost his key in the scuffle, but that doesn't stop him. With a powerful kick, he demolishes the door to his apartment. He steps over the wreckage into his living room. She isn't there. He walks to the bedroom door, eases it open, and finds her. Lying in bed. Smiling. With a big .38 Smith and Wesson Police Special in her hand. Pointed right at his gut. She speaks. "I've been waiting for you, Mike."

"Have you?"

"Yes. I knew they'd never stop you. How did you guess it was me?"

"Simple, really. You slipped when you mentioned the doll. Only MasterMind could have known about that. When I put it all together, everything fit."

"I suppose it did. Too bad you're not going to live long enough to enjoy the results of your efforts."

"Don't be too sure about that. Inspector Blanchard is outside the window this very minute with a gun pointed at your head. Make a move to pull that trigger, and you'll be dead before you hit the pillow."

"Don't give me that old crap. You can't fool me. You're through, and there's nothing you can do about it. Say your prayers, big boy. This is it."

hey, hold it a second. cut it off. cut it off. this is the big scene. let's see if we can get it right on the first take. ready? here we go. cut to a close-up of the gun in her hand keep up the tempo. come in. keep up the pace. show her finger on the trigger. build up suspense. come in tight, don't stop. fast, now. do it! show her pulling the trigger.

Bang.

Mike pitches himself sideways the instant the gun goes off. He hits the floor, rolls over and pulls out his own gun all in one easy movement.

Bang.

She fires again. The bullet grazes his cheek. From a

crouch, he brings his gun into position and shoots her, Point blank. Right between the eyes. Her head explodes like a punctured balloon. He puts his gun away, turns, and walks out of the room as his theme music builds slowly up and over.

"Okay, Melissa. Beautiful job. Wow. I think that's one of the best we've ever done. What do you say we watch it. then go out and scrounge up some food? Melissa. Melissa, honey, are you asleep? Come on, let's take a look at it. Melissa, come on. What's the matter with you? Why don't you get up? Melissa, get up. Get up, get up, come on, get up . . .

DAVID: I'm terribly sorry Bernice couldn't stay for the whole program, but we'll be seeing her again. If not here, on some other programs. In another series. Or for sure on summer reruns. Won't we?

pan to shot of dead girl lying on bed in pool of blood. hold shot, cue music, roll credits, end on title. And dissolve.

Edward Bryant

DUNE'S EDGE

Except for us, only the wind and sand move. Intermittently the wind rises and flays us with tan curtains of sand. It would be a good penance if I were only guiltier.

We think we are climbing the east face of the dune. None of the five of us has any directional sense. The sun parcels our days by rising at our backs and descending beyond the dune's edge. We recall another sun, and call this shifting slope the eastern face.

The five of us:

Toby is—was—a dancer. She has no breasts; her hips are wide, her thighs very muscular. Her black leotard has frayed through at elbows and knees. She was born in New York City.

Albert is the fool. He is dressed in tweeds rather than motley, but he is the target of all our gibes. Albert has the physique of a professional wrestler.

Paula is my enigma. I know less about her than about any of my other companions. Her skin is copper stretched over fragile bones. Her face lacks expression. Paula is strikingly beautiful. She speaks with a Portuguese accent.

Dieter is the old man with the gun. He was here long before us other four. He wears a ragged uniform. The automatic rifle cradled in his arms is new; the wooden stock oiled, the metal shiny. He stares past us and mutters often.

Myself. What is there to say? I have forgotten my face. Paula says I have horseman's hands—fingers strong enough to use the reins well but tender to soothe a frightened animal. There is little point in self-description.

I scramble toward the summit of the dune, always slipping back frustrated, lungs burning. There is a woman I imagine to be beyond the dune. Her name is lost; neither

do I recognize her face. The keys of memory jangle painlessly when the locks have been lost.

It is getting toward dusk and the sky has turned purple. My sweating skin holds the dust. I lie spread-eagled so that no part of my body clings to any other part. Paula kneels beside me, to shade my face.

"I think we're allowed more rest periods," I say.

"No." She shakes her head slowly and sadly. "You think too wishfully." She moves her shoulders and for a moment the sun moves out of eclipse. I close my eyes against the dazzle, then open them again and watch the tiny translucent planets drift across her face.

"I like to shelter you," Paula says. She stretches her arms stiffly.

"Christ on the mountain." It is Dieter leaning over us, using the automatic rifle as a cane.

Paula looks up. "You know of him."

The old man smooths back his thinning white hair. "I know of him. Every morning when I left my apartment I would see him up there with arms spread wide in benediction." He laughs harshly, a dry ratcheting sound. "No benediction. All he gave down the mountainside was a shadow of superstition and ignorance. I often watched the gullible spending their centavos on candles rather than food. It was quite amusing."

"Is not redemption more important than a full stomach?" says Paula.

"I am skeptical of a redeemer who looks like nothing more than white plaster over chicken wire," answers Dieter.

Paula's green eyes turn toward me. "Were you ever in Rio?"

"No," I say. "I've seen movies. I've always wanted to visit Brazil."

"It is a green and wild country," she said, "and beautiful. In your movies, did you see the statue of Christ on the mountain, arms outspread, eyes turned toward Sugar Loaf?"

I nod.

"What of the *favelas,* do you remember them?"

"I think so. The slums on the mountainsides. Shacks of

wooden lath and corrugated metal roofing. There were scenes of the *favelas* dwellers dancing joyously. At the time I suspected it was a fabrication, like an American image of happy darkies singing in the cotton field."

"I remember the *favelas* very well," says Paula. "I was reared in one. Joy seldom came."

"What about your Christ?" says Dieter. "Did he not bring you joy?"

"My Christ? You're quick to attribute allegiances."

"My job, once."

"Old man, your memory seems clear. Let me test you. Do you know a bar in Ipanema called the Club Roca?"

"In Ipanema? Of course. I found many nights of diversion there."

"There was a woman you saw. Her name was Floriana."

"Yes." For the first time Dieter looks startled. His eyes flicker between Paula and me. They are clouded sapphire. "What about her?"

"Floriana was a very beautiful woman for a while. Did you know she was a *mestiço*?"

Dieter shrugs. "I knew. I didn't care. We must sometimes settle for what is available. The woman amused me."

"Isn't that cold-blooded?"

"I am not a warm man." He smiles without humor. "What is your interest in Floriana?"

There is a shout from above us: "He's going to make it!" Toby stands with legs wide apart, braced ankle-deep in the sand. "Albert, you're going to make it." Her cupped hands amplify the words. "Just a little further!"

Albert is only a few meters from the dune's crest. He scrambles up the final, steepest part of the slope, arms and legs moving like the limbs of an enormous spider. He scrabbles frantically in the sand, beginning to slip back.

"Albert, please." It is almost a prayer from Toby. Her hands clench.

"That's it!" I yell. "You're there, Al."

With a despairing screech, Albert falls. He topples backward and flip-flops down the dune like a weighted clown-toy. He pushes before him a landslide in miniature. The sand eddies around our ankles.

"Clumsy animal," says Dieter.

"Baby, poor baby," Toby croons, brushing sand away from Albert's eyes.

Albert is crying. Tears form in the corners of his eyes but are quickly clotted by the dust. "Had it almost paid off," he whispers. "Only a few months and mine. Paid."

He is both comic and pathetic. I've seen his headlong pratfalls too many times to be amused now. I feel an abstracted sympathy.

"He must be very hot in those tweeds," says Toby.

"Why not take them off?" suggests Paula.

Toby does not hear. "He must be very hot."

I look around for the old man. Dieter has left us and is climbing determinedly toward the summit. I wrinkle my nose. Dieter has left behind him a strong scent of decay: the smell of carrion in the sun.

I walk the beach, picking up bits of driftglass. Green and amber shards dry on my palm. The luster swiftly dulls.

Down the beach a low mist has settled over the headland. The morning is still chilly. The sound of the surf overpowers everything except the cries of gulls. The white birds wheel low over a mound on the wet sand.

At first I think it's a drowned animal washed up. I hurry closer and stop. The dress is striped red and blue; the waves have covered her face with the hem. I gave her the dress a birthday ago. She wore it last night.

I kneel and slowly pull the edge of her dress down. Her eyes are driftless. I let the cloth fall back. Then I am screaming into the surf, but I cannot hear myself.

Paula kisses my forehead, hugs me to her breast, repeats again and again, "It's all right; you're dreaming."

The incantation works. Gradually I stop shaking and stop crying. The base of my skull feels as though someone is tightening a garrote.

Paula's lips are cool. "Was it the same?"

"It was."

"Do you know her?"

"Yes. Not her name, but I know her." The pain begins to subside to its permanent background throb. I think of the girl on the beach and I feel sorrow. There is grief and pain, but no guilt. I should feel guilt.

"You will remember," says Paula.

I say nothing, but get to my feet. I rub my hands together for warmth. The nights are short but as cold as the days are hot. We have no protection other than our clothing. On the infrequent occasions when we can stand one another, the five of us huddle together for warmth.

"I'm going to try for the top," I say.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"This is a solo." Each of us has made many night attempts. Otherwise our only option is sleep. And to sleep is not to rest; only to dream.

I have spent nearly an hour watching Toby plait her black hair. She is meticulous, taking apart and redoing each braid at least a half dozen times. I sit behind her and watch the patterns form.

"Doesn't it bore you?" I ask.

"That's got to be the funniest thing anyone's said since I got to this place."

I hesitate. "Does it bother you, not dancing?"

She slowly turns to face me. "This is a dance, all of it. The choreography is clumsy. It's not like I'd do."

"How would you change?"

"Call an end, for one thing. Start over. Our choreographer is sticking with classical ballet. I hate that. It's far too structured. I would try something more contemporary."

I ask one of the questions we seldom use. "Where were you before you came here?"

"Salt Lake City. I was giving up the dance. For three days I'd lain in bed in my apartment staring at a photo of Lar Lubovich I'd tacked on the wall. I could never be *that* good, so I gave up."

"That simple?"

She impatiently ravels a braid. "Of course not. You want me to catalog all the sordid details of failure? Would you like a list of non-names I was going to give my miscarried children?"

"I'm sorry."

"The two most useless words."

I start to turn away. I *am* sorry, and I'm confused. Toby catches my elbow.

"Listen," she says. "I'm wrong. We shouldn't try to hurt each other."

But what she means lies fallow in my mind for the next ten thousand climbs.

ESSAY ON WHAT IT'S LIKE HERE. The essay is committed to memory as I have no pen or paper.

I can talk about the anomalies. For example, there is nothing here to eat or drink. We are continually tortured by hunger and thirst. Yet our bodies sweat curing the day and shiver away calories at night. Starvation cannot kill us.

There is the compulsion to climb the dune. Many times I have attempted to walk away at right angles from a direct path to the crest. I step off the meters carefully, my eyes searching for fixed reference points. Inevitably my counting becomes confused and I discover myself struggling toward the top of the dune as always. We climb and we fall back, and that process has become a constant.

Here are the basic quiestions: Who? Why? How? Where? The answers evade us. Each of us seems to have a pet theory as to the "where."

Hell has been suggested. So has purgatory. There are less philosophical speculations. Toby was once given a pet turtle for her birthday. She wonders if perhaps we have been abducted by hyperscientific aliens from another planet and imprisoned in something like a giant terrarium.

Dieter refuses to believe this is anything but a plot against him by his enemies among the technocrats.

I can come to no conclusion. I would like to believe this all a dream. But can a dream last this long?

It is time; I detour a few steps to avoid Albert who is squatting beside his latest castle. The sand is too dry to make a good construction material. Spires turn out low and blunted.

"Biggest credit corporations in niggertown," says Albert, cupping his hands around a minaret. "And no ceiling on interest rates." He takes his fingers away and the tower collapses. "God bless me, everyone."

Paula sits crosslegged watching Albert. She tilts her chin and gives me a sphinx look as I pass. I nod and smile.

Dieter is standing at parade rest, one hand shading his eyes from the sun. I nod; he grunts.

Beyond him Toby lies on her belly, puffing. She raises herself on both elbows and shakes her head. Sand sprays from her hair. "Closer," she says. "Little bit . . . I think."

"Good," I say, "One of us'll make it today." I've said that many times and I still believe it.

The grade steepens rapidly, almost geometrically. Once, years before, I skied at Sun Valley. One morning the electrical power for the lifts failed. I learned to herring-bone up the hills. I use the same technique now—it's the only time I'm glad I have size eleven feet. Feet sixty degrees apart, heels in, toes out. One foot ahead, then the other. Dig the inside edges of my feet into the sand. One, then the other.

Repeat.

One day my inevitable fall brings with it an epiphany. The answer is simple beyond belief. I wonder at my obtuseness.

The hummock which was Albert's sand castle finally stops my fall.

Toby helps me to my feet. I grab her shoulders and whirl her around. Her braids fly out straight. "I've got the answer," I babble. "We're going to the top."

"Work together?" says Dieter. "You overwhelm us with your simplicity."

"I'll try it," says Toby. "Why not?"

Paula's eyes catch the sunlight and are unfathomable. "It will work," she says quietly.

"Albert?"

Albert is again building a sand castle.

"Albert."

Paula walks over to him and touches his shoulder. He recoils. He looks up at her, face contorted. "I dreamed, last night. You're a savage god! you—" His screams compete with the wind.

The flat sound of her slap does not echo. Paula slowly takes her hand away and Albert bends forward from the waist. His forehead rests on the keep of the castle and he begins to weep.

"Albert will help us," she says.

"But I will not." Dieter's voice is dry and without inflection. "I see no reason to do this thing."

"If we cooperate," I say, "we can reach the edge of the dune. We will discover what the compulsion has driven us toward."

"Then the four of you will cooperate. I have no desire to see what is beyond the crest."

"It is impossible," I answer. "My plan requires five."

"No." Dieter raises the automatic rifle and points the muzzle at my chest.

"Dieter . . ." Paula walks slowly toward him. I move to stop her but she motions me back. The old man swivels the gun to cover her.

"Don't come any closer, Paula. I don't know whether a gun can kill you, but I will try."

The girl faces him across a meter of sand. "You cannot shoot me, Dieter, but the fault will not be with the gun. You are incapable of face-to-face killing."

His face tightens.

"How many were you accused of exterminating? Four hundred thousand? A half million? You killed them with a pen, with requisitions and directives. You never saw a single corpse."

"I'll kill you," he says. "Stop it."

"I love your flash of anger," says Paula. "It's a reflection of your gypsy blood."

"What . . ." His skin pales to bone and he backs two steps away. "You lie."

"Look at us, Dieter. All of us, mongrels. *All* of us. Did your maternal grandmother never tell you of the incredible night she once spent in a gaily painted wagon outside Ingolstadt?"

Dieter appears stunned. Paula continues to speak to him as the rest of us watch and listen. She talks and the old man crumbles under the subtly erosive destruction that only women can bring to bear.

Finally Paula stops and begins to turn away. She pauses. "One thing more, Dieter. Do you remember the Club Roca and the woman Floriana?"

There is silence.

"*Do you?*"

Dieter slowly nods.

"Did you know of Floriana's pregnancy? Did you know of her prayers beneath the Christ on the mountain? Of her clumsy, hesitant walk to the butcher in the seventh month?"

Like a small boy, the man looks down at the sand.

"Her friends finally left her there on the table. She lay as bloody as the carcass of a slaughtered hog in the market. But the baby lived."

Dieter moans.

"I lived, Dieter."

The old man sinks to his knees and rocks back and forth.

I take the gun from unresisting fingers and remove the clip. There are no shells.

The beach is the same, except for the mist which has crept close from the headland. The waves still thunder. The gulls still dive and shriek.

I bend over the drowned woman and examine her face. The flesh is bluish, swollen, and cold.

She waded into the surf sometime during the night, taking one last look at the stars. Then she lay down and let the waves cover her. Deliberately she breathed the water in, panicking only in that one unbearable moment of suffocation.

Why did she take her own life?

That question is the one I cannot face and so I awaken, sweating even in the chill night and gasping for breath.

As she has so often, Paula is holding me tightly. My cheek fits neatly against the curve of her throat.

"Was it the same?" she says.

"The same, and more. I know now that she committed suicide."

"Do you know why?"

"No. I don't want to know."

Paula strokes the back of my head, gently massaging the taut muscles.

"I'm suspicious of you," I say. "I wonder whether you're player or pawn. You're not the same as the rest of us."

"Does it matter that much to you?" There is no change

in the pressure of her fingers.

I consider it. "No," I finally say. "It doesn't. Not so long as we reach the top tomorrow." I deliberately pause. "You won't stop us?"

"No," and it's a sigh. "No, I won't hinder you." A moment later she whispers four words, nearly too soft to hear: "I wish I could."

I have explained the plan to everyone. In varying degrees they should understand and comply. But I am optimistic.

"The day is great for climbing," says Dieter. We laugh dutifully; all the days have been great for climbing.

No more conversation or uneasy laughter. I pick up the automatic rifle and we start for the summit. The sun is still behind us and our shadows stretch ahead. The climb seems somehow easier; none of us is winded when we gather in a knot about twelve meters below the dune's crest. I think we're all in good physical shape.

"First step," I say. The rifle is our only tool. I carry it uphill until I begin to slide. I point the muzzle of the gun down and jam it into the sand. Pounding with doubled hands moves it a little deeper. I twist the gun like an auger. Eventually not quite half the length is buried. I stand up, my back stiff. "This won't do."

A shadow moves and Albert stands beside me. Without a word he bends over the walnut stock and begins to pound it with the heel of his hand. Powerful, sledgehammer blows. Centimeter by centimeter the rifle drives into the dune. Albert remains silent, even as we hear the small bones in his hand crack and splinter.

"That's good, stop."

Albert takes away a bloody hand. The gun is securely buried. About four inches of stock protrude above the sand.

"Step two." Quickly! Quickly, though there's no deadline.

Albert is the first and the strongest. One foot is braced against the rifle stock as he lies on the slope. I'm next, scrambling up beside Albert, letting him help me with his uninjured hand. Then I'm standing with my face against the dune, my feet on Albert's shoulders.

Third is Dieter; then Paula; finally Toby. By some miracle, our human tower is assembled on the first attempt. This in spite of accidental kicks and clawings. The combined weight is unbelievable; I can hardly imagine what it must be like for Albert. "Toby!" I call "How close are you?"

"Very. Less than a yard. I'm reaching but nothing's up here to grab."

Dieter groans, legs shaking with strain; I feel the vibration on my shoulders. I don't think he can stand this for long. Then I feel Albert's body twisting beneath me.

"We're going, Toby! Jump. Damn it, jump!"

Our bodies tumble like jackstraws. I have one quick glimpse of the summit and a black-clad leg disappearing. "Made it!" I yell as we roll and slide down the dune, half buried in hot sand.

The winds shrill a coda, I hope.

We stare motionless at the crest of the dune, waiting. We listen vainly for a shout, a cry of discovery, a reaction.

"A savage and alien god," says Albert. He hugs himself and breaks into high-pitched giggles.

"Quiet, you black ape," says Dieter.

"Where is she?" I say. "She must have found something."

Paula slowly turns and looks past my shoulder. I follow her eyes. A human figure toils toward us from the foot of the dune.

"Oh, Jesus . . ." I whisper. I feel the sand slipping away beneath my feet.

Paula touches my cheek and I swing back to her. She says nothing, but her face reveals infinite weary compassion. Her eyes burn like the sun. When I can no longer bear their heat I turn away . . .

And watch Toby struggle up to us through the sand.

Jack M. Dann

THE DRUM LOLLIPOP

The argument had been going on for an hour. It ebbed, rushed forward, then ebbed again—a steady calculated rhythm. The flow began for the last time; it carried an echo, as if it were being mouthed in a whisper somewhere else.

Frank Harris remained a little ball while the rest of him screamed at his wife. "I can't love you like that. I just don't have it. It isn't there." His voice became strident. "You want something I just can't give you. And I won't." A wand lifted him from his seat and pushed him toward the door, into the hall, past the sunken dining room, and through the pantry.

His wife rushed after him, calling, crying, pleading. She overtook him as he fumbled with the screen-door latch. Slipping her arms around his stomach, she dropped to her knees, her fingers wrapped around his belt for support. It would be useless for him to pull himself out the door; she would hang on, crying, and he might hurt her trying to wrench free. It was an old ploy; it had worked before. The argument was over. Whimpering, she would follow him into the den and tell him that she loved him more than anything in the world.

Upstairs, Maureen put her pick-up sticks away in her toy chest, deep inside, past the toys she did not care about, but she could not find space for the drum. The wands were safe, but the drum, she thought, the drum. Hide it in the closet, in the hamper, under the bed.

"Maureen," her mother called from the foot of the stairs. "Dinner will be ready soon. Clean up your room and come down. Everything's all right now, baby. So come downstairs."

It's broken. A rivulet bubbled under the skin, cracking

the taut drumhead. Leave it on the bed. It's broken. She centered it on the pillow, controlled her tears, and calmly went downstairs to eat.

They ate quietly. Maureen played with her food, drawing circles in the corn, and thought about her drum. It would be better to leave it there and make something else. She would never touch it again; she would curl around it when she slept and protect. it.

She looked at her father, who was ponderously eating a muffin. She never protected him. She wasn't supposed to. He was supposed to protect her. *I want you to love me the way I love you.* "What's that mean, mommy?" The wands sang in the toy chest.

"What's what mean, honey?" she asked as she stacked the plates. "Give me your plate."

She's cold. She's like that dead lizard. The drum on the bed. The drum is on the bed. "Nothing. Can I go back to my room and play?"

"No, dear. You've been in your room too long today. You should go out for a little while, at least. It won't be dark for another two hours yet."

Her father left the table.

"Okay." Maureen left everything as it was before. The drum was heavy on the bed. The pick-up sticks hovered in their nook. The dolls were faceless, carelessly thrown about the room. They would be all right. But the drum was cracked. The air pushed inside it.

She could leave the house, but this time she would not build a bridge as she left. She reconsidered: a very small one without spoke, or beams, or spongy girders.

She could feel the tension grow behind her. She sat down under a tall oak in the back yard and stared at the white stucco house. Dumbly, it stared back at her through its second-story windows.

But I love you. In my own way. I have always thought of our relationship as something beautiful, something sacred. But I can't love you that way. You're like a daughter to me.

Start with a fence, a white picket fence. Draw a fence around the house. No, that isn't any good. Okay. Eight dogs in the driveway with pointed teeth to protect the house. She laughed: she could not visualize a dog. They

looked like horned doughnuts. Pointed teeth, not square teeth.

Closing her eyes, she let her thoughts form around the drum, puffing air each time she slapped it. She shuddered. It was not the drum. It was not a wand. She had drawn something she had never seen. It escaped from her. It settled in the living room, hiding behind transparent walls. The fence collapsed and she stood up. She could not see it; she did not want to see it. She took a step toward the house. And then another: it was fun to be scared.

It was not in the pantry. She passed the washing machine and opened the door into the kitchen. The kitchen was empty. The hall, to the right, down three stairs, there it was. A half image of its substance was concentrated in a tiny puddle. It oozed and grew and contracted. It tossed stimuli of coagulation, vomit, and infection at her as it settled into a scarred asterisk. It was brown, then ocher flecked with black. It grew tentacles and digested itself.

Maureen turned away from it. It pulled her back, enticing her, flooding her. She hated it; it grew fangs.

She could not hear anyone in the house. They were probably upstairs. But why didn't she know? The puddle turned her around and began to disappear, leaving only an aura of warmth. It expanded, engulfing Maureen in a thousand pinpoints of heat. She was free; it did not hold her. But she did not want to go. There was no need. She could stay. She was in love. It had changed; it smelled pretty.

She felt warm and concealed. The aura was a fire to protect her and color the room. It followed her, tracing patterns in the air, up to her room. There, it spun a web from the walls and cradled the bed, careful not to touch the drum.

She heard a creak from the next room. It was the bed. She visualized her parents clutching each other and jarring the springs. She had never heard that before. They had not done it since she was born.

She listened and fell asleep. The web thickened, then turned into a cocoon.

She was up early the next morning. Her room smelled musty, as if the warmth pouring through the open window

had not yet evaporated the dampness. The toy chest was hidden under the bed, its stuffed sunflower head ripped off and lying upside down beside the torso.

Holding her breath, she tiptoed down the stairs and jumped three steps into the living room. She could not make out the image of movement that had held her last night. She concentrated on the wavering lines; they became more distinct. She closed her eyes, allowing it to sketch its form on her dark retinal field.

It was a drum. Opening her eyes, she glimpsed the dank puddle decaying in the rug. It changed shape, became a bubbling star. It vibrated and emitted a thin glint of warmth. It was a drum pounding. She reached out and caught it with her finger, pressed it into her palm, and imbibed it slowly. She was happy. But it passed quickly.

She waited. Ordering it into being was futile; begging, coaxing, singing did not work either. She took a few steps toward it; it dimmed into an outline. She imagined it had grown another tentacle. It had.

The drum, get the drum and cover the pick-up sticks. The drum was on her bed, but she could not touch it. She had promised. It is not a drum anymore. She ran out of the living room and up the stairs. Secure in her room, she picked up the drum and examined the torn head. It could not be fixed. She slapped it angrily. A flood of revulsion cascaded up the stairs and into her room. She threw the drum on the bed and held her palms tightly against her eyes. The smell dissipated.

Tapping the drum carefully, she listened for a pop of air. It was not an old drum. It should not have ripped. A glimmer sneaked into the room, a very tiny ray of warmth. She could not see it, but she knew it was close to her. Tapping her drum, she watched the door; she concentrated; she giggled; she tried not to urinate in her pajamas. She had not made the drum and she could not fix it. Another drum would not be the same; she could never make another one like it.

Another glint. But softer, a bit wider. She shuddered as it passed through her.

They were awake. She sensed her parents' blurred awareness. The sensation dissolved. She put the drum on top of her toy chest and stared out the window as they

quietly got dressed. The sunlight splashed on the floor, then escaped into the suspended stiffness of the house. She breathed mass around the dust motes that floated in the yellow liquid. Invisibly, they dropped into the cracks in the floor.

Her mother was downstairs first. The smell of margarine, a whiff of ozone, then eggs, toast, the clatter of the icebox door, the gurgle of water in the pipes. Maureen could not see any of this, but she was happy.

It was dead. Her drum was on the chest. The puddle in the living room couldn't work without the drum. The drum couldn't work without her. She heard her father swear in the bathroom and a slight odor of nausea swept the room. If you cry it will get worse; it will turn black and gore into the rug. She combed her hair back into a ponytail and admired herself in the mirror. The odor thickened. She leaned out the window to feel the warm air, to see the bright morning. Don't think about the drum. Leave it on the chest. Torn. Leave it alone. It's not there.

She could not smell the cooking odors—they were lost in the heavy waves of nausea rolling into the room. Thicker. Pulling her into the room, stabbing into her mouth and nose, plucking her insides until they strained to vomit. But she could not vomit. She could not take her eyes from the drum, now wavering in sympathy. She could rake the drum, pull its head off, tear the wood into splinters, crack the plastic shoulder strap into red squares.

She lunged toward the toy chest, but found she was still by the window. She was crying, then laughing, then clenching her teeth, dreaming of fangs, and hating everything in the room, especially the drum. She felt her mother forced into her. She could not close her pores; they were gaping holes. She was naked. Her mother, A swill of anger and screaming, a flattened mask of tenderness. A doll yellowed with years, cracking, pulling taut. She screamed at everything that had been taken away. Inside, her mother swelled, tantalizing with promises of depth, promises of emotions yet unfelt, thoughts to tingle her spine, sensations greater than herself. But they were only surface reflections.

Forcing her mother out, she reached for her father. She shrank back and he did not embrace her. He was heavy; he

would have smothered her. She snatched at his face, clawing off a piece of withered skin. She gouged at him, concentrating her hatred into her fingers. Stop it. Go away. She looked at the clawed image of her father and began to cry. Go away. She concentrated on the drum; it reflected the puddle downstairs. Change into something else. She visualized animals, trees, designs on bedspreads, dolls' faces, colored pictures. The clot of substance in the living room remained unaffected. You can't change it; you didn't make it. The clot wavered and distorted the wall behind it. I did, she thought, I made it, I made it. She grabbed the drum and ran out of the room. I didn't make the drum; I don't care about it.

She stood on the stairs, her drum nestled in her arm. She could not make the puddle disappear. Concentrating on its imagined shape, she destroyed it in her mind. It remained unaffected. Have to make it go away. She wanted to scream, cry, run to her mother basking in the smells of the kitchen.

She looked at the drum. She was calm, suddenly very old. It bubbled; she snatched at it and it popped. She was very warm and sad. She sat down on the stairs, her legs extended. A golden thread crawled up the stairs and she caught it between her fingers and imbibed it with a pop.

Thoughts of crying and shouting became remote. It was a game. It was fun to be scared. She was flooded with warmth. Loving threads crawled up the stairs, flashing, protecting her, laughing with her, suddenly sad, but pleasantly sad.

"Call your father; breakfast is ready." Her mother stood in the hall below. She looked relaxed; a slight smile twitched at the corners of her lips and then dissolved. "When did you break your drum? It's almost brand-new, and you've already broken it. Were you banging it with a stick? It's made to be hit only with your fingers, not a stick. Well, it's not any good now. Take it downstairs and throw it away."

"Okay. But do I have to do it now?"

"Now. This minute. Throw it in the wastebasket in the kitchen."

She could not throw it away yet. It would start all over again: the vomit, the smell, teeth, claws, kicking, pulling,

hitting, crying, punching, hating. No, I won't throw it away.

She threw it away, her mother before her, her father behind her. And in a rush.

Nothing happened. She ate breakfast and went out to play under a tree, ate her lunch, studied the puddle in the living room—now a tan stain in the rug—played under the tree for a few more hours, tried to draw things in her mind, thought about the drum and the protean stain. The stain was still there, bubbling unnoticed, but the drum—that was hidden in the garbage.

Maureen waited for something to happen. She spent each day under the tree and watched the house. The stain remained in the living room, unobserved by the rest of the family, including Uncle Milton who dropped over at least once a week. She did not think about the drum anymore; she had not made it.

She forgot about being scared. It was a game, like the others, and she had used it up. But she could not make anything, not even a bridge or a fence. The smear in the living room had taken everything from her. Now she could only work with tangibles. It muffled everything around her; she could not sense words or people.

Slowly things began to change. There were no more marital clashes; her mother and father were falling in love. They held hands, whispered in the bedroom, bounced on the springs, and went out on Saturday night. Even Uncle Milton began dropping in more often; he claimed it was the only place where he could relax.

The laundryman came twice that week, he said he had forgotten that he already collected the laundry.

And the telephone man repaired the wires twice.

And the stain assumed an honest shape. Maureen had been outside when it became active. She had learned to use her hands, but it was not the same. The drum was lost: She had relinquished all control. She was making mud pies in the rain. This would be her last mud batter: she was getting too old for mud pies.

Shouting, "Mother, come and see," she ran into the house, her hands and lacquered boots covered with mud. Through the pantry, kitchen, dead-end in the den, up three stairs into the hall, and there they were in the living room.

Why hadn't she looked there first? Because it's there now. It's working. She shrugged off a familiar sensation; everything seemed clearer.

The room was red—she had not noticed that for a long time. A fake stone fireplace was propped against the far wall for decoration. A large mirror hung directly above it, reflecting a fat velvet sofa and an oil painting of the family. A glass table, chairs, a few pieces of crystal, maroon curtains, and a red plush carpet completed the scene.

The tentacled asterisk was visible. It palpitated in front of the fireplace. It had grown four more tentacles, and its black speckles had turned to crusted sores oozing goo into the air. It was radiating long thin yellow spokes of love all over the room. It threw a few wisps at Maureen, but she stepped aside, only to see her mother and father sitting sleepily on the companion rocking chairs near the entrance to the dining room. Bathing in love, they held hands across the doorway.

A wisp of yellow settled on Maureen's braid, hung loose, dropped to her shoulder, and disappeared into her crinoline dress. She felt a burst of security, a cushion of warmth. As she stepped into the living room, the doorbell rang.

"Darling," her mother said, "would you get the door?"

Maureen opened the door for Uncle Milton. He marched into the house, beads of sweat gleaming on his bald pate. Skimming a line of perspiration from his barely visible mustache, he said, "How's my Maureen? Jesus, what the hell happened to you? Fall into a hole? You've ruined that pretty dress. Better go tell your mother. Wait a minute. You're getting tall, almost as tall as me." He puffed his stomach out. "Where's Mom and Dad? In the den?"

She shook her head and pointed toward the living room. She stood in the hall; she did not want to go into the room just yet. And the mud was sticky.

"Maureen," her mother said, "go upstairs and take a bath. And leave that dress in the bathroom. You can put your pajamas on when you're done. Then you can come down and join us."

Yes, Mommy, I'm covered with fuzz, closed in the

room, I don't care. Into the bath, peel off the mudskin, no bra yet, red dress in the hamper. A few threads wiggled under the door to keep her company and burst in her hair.

She washed quickly, jumped into her pajamas, and tiptoed into the living room. No one noticed her entrance. The room had turned grey, but it was gradually build-up strength. She breathed strength into it. She could feel, taste, hear.

"You know," Uncle Milton said, "I don't know what it is, but I feel so comfortable here lately."

"Sure you do," her mother said, her smile drawing back her thin lips.

"Well, there were a few times when I thought I would have to let you sign those separation papers."

Everyone laughed. It did not have to be funny: it felt good. Maureen sat on the rug, her blond hair untied, enjoying the feel of everything and everyone.

Outside, the noises trickled in. Maureen heard them first. *Leggo, oh, here, eat it then. Too warm tonight, doesn't matter—feels good. I don't know why, just felt like coming over. Relax. Get dark in a while. Put that dirty handkerchief away.*

"Mommy, hear the people outside the house? They're on our lawn. Sounds funny. Hey, Johnny Eaton's mother's out there. Johnny's coming too."

"I don't hear anything," Uncle Milton said, staring at the new tentacles growing out of the asterisk. It readied itself for another burst of energy, its suckers grasping for support. It emitted a gurgling noise, but no one seemed to notice. Contracting, it threw off a puddle of phlegm and radiated full force. The yellow bars passed through the soft walls and wallowed in the grass and people outside. Uncle Milton poured himself another drink, spilling a jigger as a strong wisp passed into his throat.

"Four more people, Mommy. Mr. Richardson and his kid Wally and Mr. and Mrs. Allen from Snow Street. Remember them? They gave us all those vegetables last summer."

It grew, then fell back on itself, preparing for another surge through friendly streets and houses.

Maureen closed her eyes and drew pictures. She could see the lines clearly, only a little fuzz where she could not

remember a color. Johnny, look in your pocket, fingers around it, matches there too, don't worry how, let it go, under the tree, there. The colors were darker than she imagined. It's getting late.

"That sounded like a firecracker, didn't it?" her father said. "Sounded like a pretty big one too."

"Could have been a backfire," Uncle Milton said. He leaned back into the couch, hands folded, eyes closed. He inhaled a flood of love, soft clouds perspired by the asterisk. He giggled with contentment.

"No," her mother said, standing inside the curtains and peering out the jalousied window into the front yard. "Why, it's that Johnny Whatshisname. He's playing with firecrackers. And no one's even paying attention to it."

"Johnny Eaton," Maureen said.

"Yes, Maureen's right; there are over twenty people on our lawn. Look, Mr. Logos is waving at me. It's a regular picnic. They've even got blankets and radios."

Maureen watched the slick tentacles growing out of the asterisk. Better not wait, do it now. Be too late soon. Where's the drum?

The room turned yellow with love, thick strong rays that rolled over the carpet, too heavy to float. And out through the walls. Uncle Milton was asleep. He turned over, burying his face in the soft velvet of the sofa.

"Strange we're in the living room," her father said. "Usually I prefer the den."

Sandra Harris sat down on the floor beside her husband's chair, rested her head on his knee and said, "I guess it doesn't matter if they stay on the lawn. I'm too lazy to bother. Frank, I'm glad everything's settled. Better than before. Frank. Do you see something on the rug? There, in the middle of the room, in front of the fireplace. Jesus, it's ugly Frank. Frank. I think I can smell it. Can you smell it?"

Maureen faced the wall and stared through minute cracks into other cracks that led outside. Don't look or it'll happen. Can't happen behind me, isn't there. Can't see it.

It equalized the pressure in the room and bathed Sandra Harris. She rested her head on her husband's lap and said, "I love you."

He didn't flinch. Stroking her face, he said, "I know you

do. And I love you too." He yawned and fell asleep. It was dark outside. A few candles flickered in the yard and the street light glowed dimly.

Uncle Milton stayed the night. He slept on the sofa, clutching a pillow. He said he felt so good he would stay another day. And another night. Until it turned into a week. And the front yard population grew until it covered the back yard. They brought pup tents, Coleman stoves, guitars, a green water hose, and more relatives and friends. They packed themselves into the yard until everyone was in some sort of physical contact with the others. No one minded. It was good. It was pure. It was in friendship and love.

Maureen's mother and father tacitly agreed not to talk about the neighbors that had suddenly moved in. The neighbors pressed their faces against the windows and smiled. Uncle Milton periodically yelled at them in good humor.

Maureen did not like it. She knew the ending, only she did not realize it.

Until the next day. It was early in the morning; breakfast was bubbling in a greased frying pan, sunlight was streaming in the kitchen windows, and Maureen was catnapping in the living room. Uncle Milton had been ordered to sleep in her room, cutting off access to the pick-up sticks and drum, almost grown.

Her mother stepped into the living room as she untied her red apron. The asterisk became active; it stretched its tentacles across the carpet. "Come on, honey. Help Mommy get the food on."

"Do I have to do it now?" she asked. Don't let her look at it. It wants her to see it. Protect her. But she moves, she walks, she say things. Something's burned out or burned in. Not real enough.

"Is that a stain on the rug over there? What is it?"

Maureen was locked into the room. The asterisk bubbled, smiled at her by raising its tentacles, passed a beam into her, a shaft of glass connecting her to it. She loved her mother now, very clearly. All the fond remembrances became real; they flowed through the beam. A reassuring drum thumped upstairs. Her mother was beautiful. All her age lines were lifted; her hair faded into grey.

"It's ugly." Her mother watched it spellbound. "I seem to remember seeing it last night. Like a dream. Fell asleep with your father. I can't think." She stepped backward and screamed. It drew itself into a ball, squelched half its substance to the side, stank, decayed a bit, and shot a beam of love right into her heart. It thickened and held her by the liver and collarbone.

"Mother, don't touch it. Leave it alone." She changed the picture. Nothing happened. She could not move. Mother is beautiful, she thought. Long beautiful hair. "Mother, you are beautiful. I have long hair just like yours. Yours is prettier. Daddy loves your hair. I know he loves your hair."

Her mother's hand sank into the porous putrescent mass, into the heart of it. She looked at her daughter, her face a landscape of disgust and fear. She smiled her special loving smile and retched as it took her arm with its tentacles.

"Mother, I love you," Maureen cried. She felt too content to move. Her mother smiled at her again, overcome with love and revulsion. She was halfway into it: half mother, half blob. She became a distorted Greek legend squirming with love. Her face snapped in rictus, a mask of fright and love. Maureen could only watch. She loved her mother. "You are beautiful, Mother."

It belched and flattened itself on the rug. She could not smell it.

She finished the picture. Father came downstairs and tripped over a tentacle, waving bye-bye. She drew it quickly. It was easier that way. She could construct the memory later. She wanted the full bloom of love now.

Uncle Milton departed with a loving frown. She did not say good-bye. He had never really been.

The asterisk was perfect, fully grown, carefully tended by its retinue of self. It spurted pus into the air. It was a cereal-box sun radiating cereal-box love.

The drum was upstairs. She ran into her room, found the drum on her toy chest, and carried it downstairs. Before she could reach the living room, it disappeared.

It was late. She had to get on with it. Now. For Mother. And Father. And maybe Uncle Milton.

Outstretching her palms, she walked toward the

trembling star, measuring her steps with its palpitations. Sliding her hands under it, she lifted it into the air. It hung between her fingers.

She took it inside her; she ate it, she osmosed it; she transformed it. She felt it in her eyes, a heaviness, a largeness that could span anything, envision everything—with love.

Dream the dream, paint the picture. It's all in the cereal box ready to eat. Can't be changed now. The drum's disappeared again. You had the chance.

She opened the door carefully, squinting her oval eyes at the morning sun.

And everyone was there. Standing. Smiling. Laughing.

Gardner R. Dozois

MACHINES OF LOVING GRACE

Dawn was just beginning to color the sky. She huddled inside the small bathroom—door closed, bolt slid and locked—sitting on the toilet lid and hugging her knees. Her head was tilted and hung down, chin almost on breast, and her eyes were nearly closed. She had wrapped her hands around her ankles. Her fingers were turning white. There was no noise in the empty apartment, not even the scurry of a cockroach. She had stopped crying hours ago.

There was noise beyond the window on her left, beyond plaster and glass, outside the vacuum of bedroom-kitchen-livingroom-guestroom-bath: a frozen automobile horn had been honking steadily for the last hour, occasionally traffic whined on the asphalt below, earlier in the evening there had been radios in nearby buildings, tuned to the confusion of a dozen different stations and fading one by one toward morning. She didn't pay any attention to these noises. The silence inside her apartment was too loud.

She opened her hands, flexed her stiff fingers, let her legs uncurl. One of them had gone to sleep, and she stamped it softly, automatically, to restore circulation. The floor was cold under her bare feet. Gooseflesh blossomed along her arms and she ran her hands down over them to smooth it. She had put on a new half-slip for the occasion. She shifted her weight; the toilet lid had been chilly at first, but now it had grown hot and stickly with the heat of her body. She leaned in closer to the hot-water pipe that descended from ceiling to floor—it was still warm to the touch. The dull paint had flaked off it in jigsaw pieces. There was a dingy grey toilet brush leaning against the base of the pipe. The bristles were broken and matted down. All this without thinking at all.

To be free, she thought, to keep my sanity.

Her head came up; eyes snapped open, closed to slits, opened again, wider.

The muscles in her neck had started to cord.

Her head jerked to the left. She stared out the window. Dawn was a growing red wash across the horizon, clustered buildings blocky beast-silhouettes, a factory plume of smoke etched black against tones of scarlet. Lights far away and lonely. A television antenna like a cross of stark metal. Her head turned back to center, wobbling: the string cut.

For a while she did not think. The shaving mirror on the wall over the sink, clutter on the shelves to the right of the basin: empty bottles of mouthwash, witch hazel, deodorant, the cardboard center from a roll of toilet paper, crumpled toothpaste tube, box of vaginal suppositories. The burlap curtains, frayed edges polarizing in the new light. Cracked and chipped plaster around the edges of the windowsill, streaks of white on the walls where paint had run thin. The closed door, the whorls in dark wood: beyond were the cluttered kitchen, the empty bedroom. They pressed in against the door. The door hinges were made in five sections.

I'm going to go crazy, she thought.

She reached out and flicked off the light switch. It was bright enough now to see: a gritty, hard light; harsh, too much grain and contrast. She had begun to tremble. The noise of the horn in the background was a steady buzz through her teeth. She picked up the razor blade from the window ledge. The horn stopped abruptly. In the silence, she could hear pigeons fluttering and cooing on the adjacent roof.

She turned the razor blade over in her fingers. The blade was smooth and sharp. No nicks in it, like the ones she used to shave her legs. She'd saved this one special. Orange sunlight refracted along the honed edge of the blade.

The bathtub was only inches away on her right, its head to the toilet. Without getting up, she leaned over, turned on the hot-water tap. Let the water run. This early it was reluctant: the water sputtered, the pipes knocked. But after a while it began to run hot. A thin wisp of steam. She

put her arm under the hot water and sliced her wrist, holding the razor between thumb and forefinger. Clumsily, she switched hands and sliced her other wrist. Then she dropped the blade. Her wrists stung dully, and she felt a spreading warmth and wetness. She lifted her arms away from the water. Blood, welling up in thick clots, running down her arms toward the elbows.

She sat with her arms held over the tub, palms up. Already it was better; the pressure that had been trying to turn her into someone else was receding. She wouldn't go crazy this time. She tilted her arms up to help the flow. She noticed that the shower curtain had a pattern of yellow swans and fountains on it, that there was a quarter-full plastic bottle of shampoo and a bit of melted soap in the bath shelf. A big glob of blood splattered against the porcelain bottom of the tub. The flowing water stretched it out elastically, tugged at it, swept it loose and swirled it down the drain.

Too slow. The Lysol had been faster.

She fumbled for the razor blade, dropped it, wiped her hand dry on the shower curtain, picked it up again. She tilted her head back, felt for the big vein in her throat, located it with a finger. Very carefully, she positioned the razor blade. Then she closed her eyes and hacked with all her strength.

The control light flittered on the Big Board: green dulled to amber, died to red, guttered out completely. A siren began to scream. The duty tech put down his magazine, winced at the metallic wailing, and touched the arm of his chair. Pneumatics hissed, the chair moved up and then sideways along the scaffolding, ghosting past thousands of unwinking green eyes set in horizontal rows, rows stacked in fifty-by-fifty-foot banks, banks filling the walls of the hexagonal Monitoring Complex, each tiny light in the walls in the banks in the rows representing the state of the life-system of one person in this sector of the City.

The tech found the deader easily: one blank spot in a solid wall of green—like a missing tooth, like the empty eye socket of a skull. He read the code symbols from the plaque above the dead light, relayed them through his

throat mike to the duty runner down on the floor. "Got that?" "Check." Below, in Dispatching, the runner would be feeding the code symbols into a records computer, getting the coordinates of the deader's address, sending a VHF pulse out to the activated monitor in the deader's body, the monitor replying with a pulse of its own so that the computer could check by triangulation that the deader was actually at his home address and then flash confirmation to the runner. The whole process took about a minute. Then the runner, fingers racing over a keyboard, would relay the coordinates to the sophisticated robot brain of the meat wagon, flick the activating switch, and the pickup squad would whoosh out over the private government monorail system that webbed the City's roofs.

The duty tech hung from the scaffolding, twenty feet above the floor, three feet away from the banked lights of the Big Board. He settled back against the black leather cushions of his chair, waiting for the official confirmation. The siren had been cut off. He was bored. He nudged at the blank light with the toe of his shoe. Idly, he began to read the code symbols again. Somehow they seemed familiar.

The runner's voice buzzed in his head. "Dispatched." "Confirmed," the tech replied automatically, then still tracing the symbols with his finger: "Christ, do you know who this is? The deader? It's her again. That crazy broad. Christ, this is the third time this month."

"Fuck her. She's nuts."

The tech looked at the dead light, shook his head. The chair eased back down into its rest position before the metal desk. He squirmed around to get comfortable, drank the dregs of his coffee, rested his feet on the rim of the desk and settled back. The whole thing had taken maybe eight, maybe ten minutes. Not bad. He reached out and found the article he'd been reading.

By the time they brought her back, he was deep in the magazine again.

They carried her in and put her into the machines. The machines kept her in stasis to retard decay while they synthesized blood from sample cells and pumped it into her, grew new skin and tissue from scrapings, repaired the

veins in throat and wrists, grafted the skin over them and flash-healed them without scar. It took aboot an hour and a half, all told. It wasn't a big job. It was said that the machines could rebuild life from a sample as small as fifty grams of flesh, although that took a few weeks—even resurrect personality/identity from the psychocybernetic records for a brain that had been completely destroyed, although that was trickier, and might take months. This was nothing. The machines spread open the flesh of her upper abdomen, deactivated the monitor that was surgically implanted in every citizen in accordance with the law and primed it again so that it would go off when her life-functions fell below a certain level. The machines sewed her up again, the monitor ticking smoothly inside her. The machines toned up her muscles, flushed out an accumulated excess of body poisons, burned off a few pounds of unnecessary fat, revitalized the gloss of her hair, upped her ratio of adrenaline secretion slightly, repaired minor tissue damage. The machines restarted her heart, got her lungs functioning, regulated her circulatory and respiratory systems, then switched off the stasis field and spat her into consciousness.

She opened her eyes. Above, a metal ceiling, rivets, phosphorescent lights. Behind, a mountain of smoothly chased machinery, herself resting on an iron tongue that had been thrust out of the machine: a rejected wafer. Ahead, a plastic window, and someone looking through it. Physically, she felt fine. Not even a headache.

The man in the window stared at her disapprovingly, then beckoned. Dully, she got up and followed him out. She found that someone had dressed her in street clothes, mismatched, colors clashing, hastily snatched from her closet. She had on two different kinds of shoes. She didn't care.

Mechanically, she followed him down a long corridor to a plush, overstuffed office. He opened the door for her, shook his head primly as she passed, closed it again. The older man inside the office told her to sit down. She sat down. He had white hair (bleached), and sat behind a huge mahogany desk (plastic). He gave her a long lecture, gently, fatherly, sorrowfully, trying to keep the perplexity out of his voice, the hint of fear. He said that he was con-

cerned for her. He told her that she was a very lucky girl, even if she didn't realize it. He told her about the millions of people in the world who still weren't as lucky as she was. "Mankind is free of the fear of death for the first time in the history of the race," he told her earnestly, "at least in the Western world. Free of the threat of extinction." She listened impassively. The office was stuffy; flies battered against the closed windowpane. He asked her if she understood. She said that she understood. Her voice was dull. He stared at her, sighed, shook his head. He told her that she could go. He had begun to play nervously with a paperweight.

She stood up, moved to the door. "Remember, young lady," he called after her, "you're free now."

She went out quickly, hurried along a corridor, past a robot receptionist, found the outside door. She wrenched it open and stumbled outside.

Outside, she closed the door and leaned against it wearily. It was full daylight now. In between dirty banks of clouds, the sun beat pitilessly down on concrete, heat rising in waves, no shadows. The air was thick with smoke, with human sweat. It smelled bad, and the sharper reek of gasoline and exhaust bit into her nostrils. The streets were choked, the sidewalks thick with sluggishly moving crowds of pedestrians, jammed in shoulder to shoulder. The gray sky pressed down on her like a hand.

Dave Skal

THEY COPE

Time went fast. It was nearly five when I reached the lip-reading clinic where Sharon worked as a part-time assistant. I had been delayed at the office; the hectic teletype flashes from the Australian front had nearly overloaded the machinery, not to mention the manpower. The input had been too much for the boss, who had given me a two-day bonus vacation, ostensibly as a reward for a job well done, but really so I wouldn't have the pleasure of watching him crawl the walls for the next few days. Toning down all that grisly stuff for public consumption was a bitch, but I managed, beautifully. *I* could cope.

I hurried up the dingy marble stairs, thinking, don't those street cleaners *ever?* then stopped, realizing that the grubbiness of the building was a psychological ploy. Dirt meant age, and age was permanence. Security, catch?

I opened the door, noticing a garish sticker sloppily plastered across the shatterproof glass: *Helen Keller Died for Your Sins.*

A bit hysterical, perhaps, but significant. I went inside.

The vestibule was deathly still, an unnerving reminder of the anechoic chamber I had been confined to for the few weeks following my last crack-up. I *do* cope, but then we all have our own ways. I can stay relatively stable for moderately long stretches, but eventually I end up in a chamber. So that's my vice. I'm used to it now, although I envy those people who can get by with nothing more than sunglasses or insulated gloves.

Sharon stood across the foyer under a day-glo "QUIET" sign. She wasn't pretty—too much face and a chin that jutted out like one of those-nut scoops used by the blind peanut vendors on Montessori Avenue. Her hips were full, her legs too fat. She was dressed in a voluminous

jumpsuit that challenged the legal limit—a bright, shocking magenta. But after all, that was Sharon.

And she was crying.

"Sherry—" I said. She turned to me, all tears, those familiar fool's-gold eyes red-rimmed with pain. "They fired me," she said, pulling a tissue out of the old gas-mask bag she used for a purse.

"What—?"

"They said I couldn't pace myself with the students, that I was going too fast, God *knows* that I tried—" She was shaking uncontrollably. I knew it was more than the job. "I don't know why it should bother me, really. I'm just a selfish bitch anyway. I was only in it for the money."

"It wasn't that way, Sherry." (A sudden twinge of doubt, about Sherry, myself, our relationship. But no. Sharon was just a talented, down-and-out girl doing her best to help those poor bastards who had no other escape than to put out their eyes, plug their ears. But what could you expect from a society so flooded with sensory and informational input, so paranoid that it was necessary to have a "QUIET" sign in a clinic for the deaf?)

The first time I saw Sherry, she was yelling at the top of her lungs. A fish-faced sea of flesh stared back. "Make noise!" she screamed, "Laugh, cry, anything! I can't do it alone!"

It was an art exhibit, Sherry's first—an entire room sensitive to body heat, noise, alpha waves. "Scream, you idiots!"

"Let's go, Greg," said the petite girl at my side. She clutched my hand. "I don't like this."

I paid her no attention; I was much too fascinated by the charismatic young woman at the center of the gallery. Impulsively, I yelled out something, anything, it didn't matter what.

Sherry's eyes flashed at me for the first time as the room came to glowing life. I yelled again, and Sherry yelled back, all in front of a skyburst cyclorama of color and sound. The girl at my side faded away, with the others, and later, after love with Sherry, there was only blue susurrating equilibrium.

"They're closing the exhibit tomorrow," she said matter-of-factly. "A public nuisance, they say. Some old woman tried suing the gallery—she said it aggravated her neurasthenia."

"What will you do now?"

"Something. Something exciting and challenging." She laughed.

Some of us felt responsibility—others, like Sherry and myself, thrived on the very madness of our overloaded, crumbling world. We were quicker, smarter—she as an artist and I as a news "editor." *We* could cope.

"That girl," Sharon asked me once. "Why did you drop her?"

"She bored me."

"Is that all?"

"Well, if you must know, she was a slug. A leech. She held me down and she knew it was coming anyway."

Sunlight streamed down in diagonal streaks across the acoustic mall. People walked barefoot; others had inch-thick soles of foam rubber on their canvas sandals. The streets were filled with silent bicyclers.

We walked quietly down the Boulevard for a block. Sherry was still shivering. I didn't notice as she stepped off the curb against the "DON'T WALK" sign. A woman in horseblinders on a Schwinn Deluxe veered in her direction, and there was the heart-stopping, rocket-sled shriek of rubber on road as her bike skidded to a perpendicular halt. "*Damn you!*" screamed Sharon in a voice I had never heard before.

The air froze as a hundred pairs of eyes flashed in our direction. Hidden eyes. Frightened eyes of the people with static-charged clothing that would jolt you at the slightest touch.

The woman with the blinders threw her arms around her head and sobbed pitifully, her parcels of gimcracks and toiletries strewn across the pavement like broken toys.

A cop came, looking like a deep-sea diver in his padded, pressurized uniform, faceless behind a mask of gradient density glass. I felt a vague, swelling anger at the blatant impersonality of his costume, although I knew the reasons

for the heavily insulated suit. Day-to-day existence was difficult enough without the added sensory bombardment a law officer would have to undergo.

"What's the trouble here?" he asked, the filtered voice sounding like a long-distance phone call.

"Look," I said quietly, producing my press credentials. "This young lady just lost her job and she's very upset. If you'd just let me—"

"You realize that this kind of disturbance is a serious misdemeanor, punishable by law?"

Sharon nodded, shaking, sobbing, not looking at the cop. A crowd had gathered to console the other sobbing woman with soft words and sign language.

The cop shifted nervously, then started waving the crowd back with his anesthetic billy. Then, to Sharon: "Are you on medication?"

"Yes."

My stomach turned into a knot.

"Listen," said the cop in an electronic *sotto voce*. "I'll let you go this time." To me: "Watch her." *Click*. Over and out.

"Bitch!" hissed the woman in the horseblinders before she was lost in the crowd.

The subsonic relaxamusic thrummed throughout the little restaurant, like low-key bat radar.

"So you're taking the Cure?"

Yes again.

"How long?"

"Six months. I would have told you earlier only I was afraid that—"

She was starting up again. I leaned over the counter, whispered. "For God's sake, Sherry, calm down!"

The waitress brought our coffee, placing the soft squeeze tubes on the padded table with robotlike precision. She was blind. I looked away.

"Energizers," she went on. "They started with B-12, adrenalin." She started to cry again, but not about the job or the accident.

"But, God, Sherry—wasn't there any other way? You could have spent a year on one of those farms, relaxed—"

She laughed, almost hysterically. "Relaxation? Is that

what you call it? I *need* activity. I'm an artist—at least I *was*. Those farms would be stagnant hell for me! Don't you understand?"

I understood. I should have known before; the symptoms were all there. The books, piled high in her soundproof apartment. Three, four a night. "Speed reading," she called it. Her increased sexual demands. It was all there.

She sipped her black coffee. Caffeine. The tip of the metabolic iceberg. I should have known.

"It's not like I'm dying or anything," she said. "It's not like I won't have a full life."

Full to her, perhaps, rewarding in its richness and productive complexity. But what about me? I knew what would happen next—she'd stay on a little longer, but as the therapy began taking hold, she would become a frenetic gibbering thing to me, I a sluggish animal to her. Finally she would go off to a colony of her own kind, speaking their language of clicks and whirs, ultimately learning to hate the slow, static, paralyzed world outside. And in ten short years—

Already she was more animated. Already the injections were taking effect, and it was with effort that she spoke, with forced distinctness and painful clarity.

"Come on," she said.

We tried to make love in my apartment, but it ended in tears. One of her heavy thighs rested across my body, and she nestled her head under my chin. I ran my fingers through her sandy-blond hair, noting the room, the particular aroma of scented candles and incense, freshly made love and Sherry. The room was very quiet. Sharon's eyes, gold-flecked and desperate.

"You won't leave me," she pleaded. *A petite girl long ago, holding my hand at an art show, terrified—*

"No," I said.

But after that, things went pretty quickly.

Joe W. Haldeman

COUNTERPOINT

Michael Tobias Kidd was born in New Rochelle, N.Y., at exactly 8:03:47 on 12 April 1943. His birth was made as easy as the birth of a millionaire's son can be.

Roger William Wellings was born in New Orleans, La., at exactly 8:03:47 on 12 April 1943. His prostitute mother died in giving birth, and his father could have been any one of an indeterminate number of businessmen she had serviced seven months before at a war matériel planning convention.

Michael's mother considered herself progressive. She alternated breast-feeding with a sterilized bottle of scientifically prepared formula. An army of servants cared for the mansion while she lavished time and affection on her only son.

Roger's wet nurse, a black woman hired by the orphanage, despised the spindly pink premature baby and hoped he would die. Somehow, he lived.

Both babies were weaned on the same day. Michael had steak and fresh vegetables laboriously minced and mortared and pestled by a skilled dietician on the kitchen staff. Roger had wartime Gerber's, purchased by the orphanage in gallon jars that were left open far too long.

In a sunny nursery on that glorious morning of 16 March 1944, Michael said "Mama," his first word. It was raining in New Orleans, and unseasonably cold, and that word was one that Roger wouldn't learn for some time. But at the same instant, he opened his mouth and said "No" to a spoonful of mashed carrots. The attendant didn't know it was Roger's first word, but was not disposed to coax, and Roger went hungry for the rest of the morning.

And the war ground on. Poor Michael had to be without

his father for weeks at a time, when he journeyed to Washington or San Francisco or even New Orleans to confer with other powerful men. In these times, Mrs. Kidd redoubled her affection and tried to perk up the little tyke with gifts of toys and candy. He loved his father and missed him, but shrewdly learned to take advantage of his absences.

The orphanage in New Orleans lost men to the armed forces and the stronger women went out to rivet and weld and slap grey paint for the war. Roger's family winnowed down to a handful of old ladies and bitter 4-F's. Children would die every month from carelessness or simple lack of attention. They would soil their diapers and lie in the mess for most of the day. They would taste turpentine or rat poison and try to cope with the situation without benefit of adult supervision. Roger lived, though he didn't thrive.

The boys were two years old when Japan capitulated. Michael sat at a garden party in New Rochelle and watched his parents and their friends drink champagne and kiss and laugh and wipe each other's tears away. Roger was kept awake all night by the drunken brawl in the next room, and twice watched with childish curiosity as white-clad couples lurched into the ward and screwed clumsily beside his crib.

September after Michael's fourth birthday, his mother tearfully left him in the company of ten other children and a professionally kind lady, to spend half of each day coping with the intricacies of graham crackers and milk, crayons and fingerpaints. His father had a cork board installed in his den, where he thumbtacked Michael's latest creations. Mr. Kidd's friends often commented on how advanced the youngster was.

The orphanage celebrated Roger's fourth birthday the way they celebrated everybody's. They put him to work, Every morning after breakfast he went to the kitchen, where the cook would give him a paper bag full of potatoes and a potato peeler. He would take the potatoes out of the bag and peel them one by one, very carefully making the peelings drop into the bag. Then he would take the bag of peelings down to the incinerator, where the colored janitor would thank him for it very gravely. Then he would return to wash the potatoes after he had

scrubbed his own hands. This would take most of the morning—he soon learned that haste led only to cut fingers, and if there was the slightest spot on one potato, the cook would make him go over all of them once again.

Nursery school prepared Michael quite well for grade school, and he excelled in every subject except arithmetic. Mr. Kidd hired a succession of tutors who managed through wheedling and cajoling and sheer repetition to teach Michael first addition, then subtraction, then multiplication, and finally long division and fractions. When he entered high school, Michael was actually better prepared in mathematics than most of his classmates. But he didn't understand it, really—the tutors had given him a superficial facility with numbers that, it was hoped, might carry him through.

Roger attended the orphanage grade school, where he did poorly in almost every subject. Except mathematics. The one teacher who knew the term thought that perhaps Roger was an *idiot savant* (but he was wrong). In the second grade, he could add up a column of figures in seconds, without using a pencil. In the third grade, he could multiply large numbers by looking at them. In the fourth grade, he discovered prime numbers independently and could crank out long division orally, without seeing the numbers. In the fifth grade someone told him what square roots were, and he extended the concept to cube roots, and could calculate either without recourse to pencil and paper. By the time he got to junior high school, he had mastered high school algebra and geometry. And he was hungry for more.

Now this was 1955, and the boys were starting to take on the appearances that they would carry through adult life. Michael was the image of his father; tall, slim, with a slightly arrogant, imperial cast to his features. Roger looked like one of nature's lesser efforts. He was short and swarthy, favoring his mother, with a potbelly from living on starch all his life, a permanently broken nose, and one ear larger than the other. He didn't resemble his father at all.

Michael's first experience with a girl came when he was twelve. His riding teacher, a lovely wench of eighteen, supplied Michael with a condom and instructed him in its use,

in a pile of hay behind the stables, on a lovely May afternoon.

On that same afternoon, Roger was dispassionately fellating a mathematics teacher only slightly uglier than he was, this being the unspoken price for tutelage into the mysteries of integral calculus. The experience didn't particularly upset Roger. Growing up in an orphanage, he had already experienced a greater variety of sexual adventure than Michael would in his entire life.

In high school, Michael was elected president of his class for two years running. A plain girl did his algebra homework for him and patiently explained the subject well enough for him to pass the tests. In spite of his mediocre performance in that subject, Michael graduated with honors and was accepted by Harvard.

Roger spent high school indulging his love for mathematics, just doing enough work in the other subjects to avoid the boredom of repeating them. He applied to several colleges, just to get the counselor off his back, but in spite of his perfect score on the College Boards (Mathematics), none of the schools had an opening. He apprenticed himself to an accountant and was quite happy to spend his days manipulating figures with half his mind, while the other half worked on a theory of Abelian groups that he was sure would one day blow modern algebra wide open.

Michael found Harvard challenging at first, but soon was anxious to get out into the "real world"—helping Mr. Kidd manage the family's widespread, subtle investments. He graduated *cum laude,* but declined graduate work in favor of becoming a junior financial adviser to his father.

Roger worked away at his books and at his theory, which he eventually had published in the SIAM *Journal* by the simple expedient of adding a Ph.D. to his name. He was found out, but he didn't care.

At Harvard, Michael had taken ROTC and graduated with a Reserve commission in the infantry, at his father's behest. There was a war going on now, in Vietnam, and his father, perhaps suffering a little from guilt at being too young for the first World War and too old for the second, urged his son to help out with the third.

Roger had applied for OCS at the age of twenty, and

had been turned down (he never learned it was for "extreme ugliness of face"). At twenty-two, he was drafted; and the Army, showing rare insight, took notice of his phenomenal ability with numbers and sent him to artillery school. There he learned to translate cryptic commands like "Drop 50" and "Add 50" into exercises in analytic geometry that eventually led to a shell being dropped exactly where the forward observer wanted it. He loved to juggle the numbers and shout orders to the gun crew, who were in turn appreciative of his ability, as it lessened the amount of work for them—Roger never had a near miss that had to be repeated. Who cares if he looks like the devil's brother-in-law? He's a good man to have on the horn.

Michael became a company commander, leader of seventy infantryman who patrolled the verdant hills and valleys of the Central Highlands, each one cursing and killing and sweating out his individual year. He hated it at first; it scared him and put a great weight on his heart when he ordered men out with the certain knowledge that some of them would come back dead and already rotting, and some screaming or whimpering with limbs or organs shattered, and some just grey with horror, open-mouthed, crying . . . but he got hardened to it and the men came to respect him and by 9 June 1966 he had to admit that he had come to enjoy it, just a little.

Roger wasn't disappointed when he got orders for Vietnam and was relieved to find that, once there, they let him do what he enjoyed most: taking those radioed commands and translating them into vernier readings for his gun crew, a group of men manning a 155-millimeter howitzer. In the Central Highlands.

Michael's company had settled into a comfortable routine the past few weeks. They would walk for a day and dig in, and he'd let them rest for a day, setting out desultory ambushes that never trapped any enemy. The consensus of opinion was that Charlie had moved out of this area, and they were getting a long-deserved rest. Michael even found time to play some poker with his men (being careful to keep the stakes down), even though it was strictly against regulations. It increased his popularity tremendously, as he was also careful to lose consistently.

It was 9 June 1966 and he had been in Vietnam for five months.

It was 9 June 1966 and Roger had been with his gun crew for six months. They liked him at first, because he was so good. But they were getting distant now—he spent all of his free time writing strange symbols in a fat notebook, he never took leave to go into Pleiku and fuck the slope whores, and the few times they had invited him to play poker or craps he had gotten that funny look on his face and taken all their money, slowly and without seeming to enjoy it. Most of the guys thought he was a faggot, and though he said he'd never been to college, everybody knew that was a lie.

It was 9 June 1966 and Michael was dealing five-card stud when he heard the rattle of machine-gun fire on his southern perimeter. His educated ear separated the noises and, before he dropped the cards, he knew it was one M-16 against two Chinese AK-47's. He scrambled out of the bunker that had provided shade for card playing and ran in the direction of the firing. He was halfway there when fire broke out on the western and northern quadrants. He checked his stride and returned to the command bunker.

Roger was amusing himself with an application of pointset topology to stress analysis of concrete structures when the radio began to squawk: "One-one, this is Tiger-two. We're under pretty heavy contact and need a coupla dozen rounds. Over." Roger dumped his notebook and carried the radio to his gun crew. He had to smile—Tiger-two, that was Cap'n Kidd, of all the unlikely names. He hollered into the radio as he ran. "Tiger-two, this is One-one. We got your morning coordinates on file and we'll drop a smoke round by you. You correct. Okay? Over."

Michael rogered Roger's suggestion; he would look and listen for the harmless smoke round and tell him how much to drop or add.

The fire to the south had stepped up quite a bit now, and Michael was pretty sure that was where the enemy would make his play. The smoke round came whining in and popped about a hundred meters from the perimeter. "Drop seventy-five, one HE," Michael yelled into the radio.

Roger had worked with this Captain Kidd before and

found him to be notoriously conservative. Which wasted shells, as he walked the artillery in little by little toward the action. So Roger yelled out the string of figures for one hundred meters' drop instead of seventy-five. His crew set the verniers and the charge and pulled the lanyard that sent the high explosive round, "one HE" singing toward Michael's position.

It landed smack on the perimeter, in a stand of bamboo right next to a hardworking machine-gun bunker. The two men inside the bunker died instantly, and the two men in a bunker on the other side were knocked out by the concussion. The bamboo exploded in a flurry of wooden shrapnel.

Before Michael could react, a six-inch sliver of bamboo traveling with the speed of a bullet hit him one inch above the left eyebrow and buried itself in his cerebral cortex. He dropped the binoculars he had been holding, put a hand to his head, and fell over in a state of acute tetanic shock; muscles bunched spastically, legs working in a slow run, mouth open wide saying nothing.

A medic rushed to the captain and was puzzled to find no apparent wound save a scratch on the forehead. Then he took Michael's helmet off and saw a half inch of bamboo protruding from the back of his head. He told a private to tell the lieutenant he was commander now.

The lieutenant got on the horn and asked who the fuck fired that round, we have at least two killed, landed right on the perimeter, gives us some more but for Chrissake add fifty.

The gun crew overheard and Roger told them not to worry, he'd cover for them. Then he gave them the appropriate figures and they sent a volley of six HE rounds that providently landed right in the middle of the enemy force grouping for the attack. Then he put volleys to the west and north, knocking out the diversionary squads. By the time air support arrived, there were no live enemy targets left. Roger got a commendation.

Michael was evacuated by helicopter to Banmethuot, where they couldn't do anything for him. They flew him to Bienhoa, where a neurosurgeon attempted to extract the bamboo splinter but gave up after an hour's careful exploration. They sent him to Japan, where a better, or at

least more confident, surgeon removed the missile.

There was a board of inquiry where Roger testified that his men could not possibly have made such an elementary error and, after demonstrating his own remarkable talent, suggested that it had been either a faulty round or an improper correction by the captain. The board was impressed and the captain couldn't testify, so the matter was dropped.

After a few month's Michael could say a few words and his body seemed to have adjusted to being fed and emptied through various tubes. So they flew him from Japan to Walter Reed, where a number of men experienced in such things would try to make some sort of rational creature out of him again.

Roger's esteem was now very high with the rest of the artillery battery, and especially with his own crew. He could have dumped the whole mess into their laps, but instead had taken on the board of inquiry by himself.

Michael was blind in his right eye, but with his left he could distinguish complementary colors and tell a circle from a square. The psychiatrists could tell because his pupil would dilate slightly at the change, even though the light intensity was kept constant.

A company of NVA regulars took Roger's fire base by surprise and, in the middle of the furious hand-to-hand battle, Roger saw two enemy sappers slip into the bunker that was used to store ammunition for the big guns. The bunker also contained Roger's notebook, and the prospect of losing eight months' worth of closely reasoned mathematical theorizing drove Roger to take his bayonet, run across a field of blistering fire, dive in the bunker and kill the two sappers before they could set off their charge. In the process, he absorbed a rifle bullet in the calf and a pistol wound in his left tricep. A visiting major who was cowering in a nearby bunker saw the whole thing, and Roger got a medical discharge, the Congressional Medal of Honor, and fifty percent disability pension. The wounds were reasonably healed in six months, but the pension didn't stop.

Michael had learned to say "mama" again, but his mother wasn't sure he could recognize her during her visits, which became less and less frequent as cancer

spread through her body. On 9 June 1967, she died of the cervical cancer that had been discovered exactly one year before. Nobody told Michael.

On 9 June 1967, Roger had finished his first semester at the University of Chicago and was sitting in the parlor of the head of the mathematics department, drinking tea and discussing the paper that Roger had prepared, extending his new system of algebraic morphology. The department head had made Roger his protégé, and they spent many afternoons like this, the youth's fresh insight cross-pollinating the professor's great experience.

By May of 1970, Michael had learned to respond to his name by lifting his left forefinger.

Roger graduated *summa cum laude* on 30 May 1970 and, out of dozens of offers, took an assistantship at the California Institute of Technology.

Against his physician's instructions, Mr. Kidd went on a skiing expedition to the Swiss alps. On an easy slope his ski hit an exposed root and, rolling comfortably with the fall, Michael's father struck a half-concealed rock which fractured his spine. It was June 1973 and he would never ski again, would never walk again.

At that same instant on the other side of the world, Roger sat down after a brilliant defense of his doctoral thesis, a startling redefinition of Peano's Axiom. The thesis was approved unanimously.

On Michael's birthday, 12 April 1975, his father, acting through a bank of telephones beside his motorized bed, liquidated ninety percent of the family's assets and set up a tax-sheltered trust to care for his only child. Then he took ten potent pain-killers with his breakfast orange juice and another twenty with sips of water and he found out that dying that way wasn't as pleasant as he thought it would be.

It was also Roger's thirty-second birthday, and he celebrated it quietly at home in the company of his new wife, a former student of his, twelve years his junior, who was dazzled by his genius. She could switch effortlessly from doting *Hausfrau* to randy mistress to conscientious secretary and Roger knew love for the first time in his life. He was also the youngest assistant professor on the mathematics faculty of CalTech.

On 4 January 1980, Michael stopped responding to his name. The inflation safeguards on his trust fund were eroding with time and he was moved out of the exclusive private clinic to a small room in San Francisco General.

The same day, due to his phenomenal record of publications and the personal charisma that fascinated students and faculty alike, Roger was promoted to be the youngest full professor in the history of the mathematics department. His unfashionably long hair and full beard covered his ludicrous ears and "extreme ugliness of face," and people who knew the history of science were affectionately comparing him to Steinmetz.

There was nobody to give the tests, but if somebody had they would have found that on 12 April 1983, Michael's iris would no longer respond to the difference between a circle and a square.

On his fortieth birthday, Roger had the satisfaction of hearing that his book, *Modern Algebra Redefined*, was sold out in its fifth printing and was considered required reading for almost every mathematics graduate student in the country.

Seventeen June 1985 and Michael stopped breathing; a red light blinked on the attendant's board and he administered mouth-to-mouth resuscitation until they rolled in an electronic respirator and installed him. Since he wasn't on the floor reserved for respiratory disease, the respirator was plugged into a regular socket instead of the special failsafe line.

Roger was on top of the world. He had been offered the chairmanship of the mathematics department of Penn State, and said he would accept as soon as he finished teaching his summer postdoctoral seminar on algebraic morphology.

The hottest day of the year was 19 August 1985. At 2:45:20 p.m. the air conditioners were just drawing too much power and somewhere in Central Valley a bank of bus bars glowed cherry red and exploded in a shower of molten copper.

All the lights on the floor and on the attendant's board went out, the electronic respirator stopped, and while the attendant was frantically buzzing for assistance, 2:45:25 to be exact, Michael Tobias Kidd passed away.

The lights in the seminar room dimmed and blinked out. Roger got up to open the Venetian blinds, whipped off his glasses in a characteristic gesture and was framing an acerbic comment when, at 2:45:25, he felt a slight tingling in his head as a blood vessel ruptured and quite painlessly he went to join his brother.

Steve Herbst

OLD SOUL

Alice Costin went in to check on the patient at two in the morning. At that time the hall was quiet. Mr. Wile awoke when she came in. His eyes followed her around the room. Alice looked down at him.

"Mr. Wile, you should be sleeping. Is everything all right?"

Painfully, eyes wet and sad, Mr. Wile nodded. He watched her empty his bedpan and rinse it out. Watched her straighten the sheet over him. Alice went out, closed the door, left him in darkness.

"Good night."

She was a young black woman; her brown eyes shone. She could not think about his whiteness, his dying paleness. Mr. Wile's private doctor was still prescribing treatments. Useless. Mr. Wile was doing very poorly.

There was a man in the hall with a machine, polishing the floor. The circular smears shone. The man said, "Long night, ain't it?" Alice waved at him and walked until she came to a stairwell. Downstairs by her locker, she took the rubber band out of her hair, took off her white uniform and stockings and put on a skirt and sweater. Didn't want to wear the uniform home.

Noise came from other lockers, the owners of which she could not see. Without saying hello to anybody, Alice went upstairs and all the way down a corridor to a side door.

She was glad to be outside. Thanked God to be able to leave.

The bus came right away. Inside, it was brightly lit. Riding it home, Alice saw what she had seen times without number before. At two thirty all the apartments were dark,

and all the phone-booth lights were broken. Very few people were on the street; the ends of their cigarettes were the only things anywhere that were not blue. Warm breeze came through the bus window.

Alice was not at all sleepy. If her husband was home now, she could crawl sweaty into bed with him and hear his rough breathing. In the morning after he had left for his job, she would go back to sleep. At noon she would see Trudy and Michael back from school. That was plenty of time to sleep, and be up all afternoon. Spend the afternoon, hot and busy, with her sister. Go back to work. . . .

The bus let her off and she walked, watched, two blocks to her apartment. The kitchen light was on; she came up the back way and unlocked the door. Everybody was asleep. She turned off the light. In bed, quiet enveloped her. Only the faint sound of a car on the street below broke the silence. Her husband was not there. Alice drew the cool sheet around her.

By the stream there are ducks, but to run toward them would be to make them swim away. In the moonlight and waiting for bedtime, everything is awkward. There is nothing comfortable to say. The girl bends over the stream to wet her hands. Standing up she brushes hair out of her eyes. Fingers run down the sides of her face. Behind her is the bridge, and against the dark-blue sky is the farmhouse, painted red with white borders. It is almost time to go back.

The next night Alice was asked to look after an emergency case. She was sorry that she could do so little for him. The young man had been in a knife fight. He had been pounding the streets angry, and another man had challenged him. The emergency case had stuck his own knife in himself, in a spiteful rage. Now he was waiting wordless on a metal bench to be healed. A doctor bandaged him up and he was moved to a bed. Alice changed the washrag on his forehead, while he writhed from the pain in his chest muscles.

She left him with his mouth hanging open and not yet asleep and went to the basement commissary. There she bought a Radar Shake from a machine and sat at a table with two other nurses.

"Yeah, Mae, it sure is. That's a fact."

"I swear, nobody comes in anymore."

"That's true," Alice said. "First of the two orderlies, y'know, was telling me he don't like the way this place treats their help. So he quit."

"Boy's picking me up after work, four o'clock. How about that?"

The others nodded.

"He really hot for me, dig." The girl shook her head, showed her teeth in a smile, laughed for the sake of her friends. The grandfather clock rang with crystal all around. Alice finished her Shake and sat back, cheerful, while her friends talked. In the corridors, laundry carts rolled back and forth. The voices of attendants followed them.

"I'm gonna get me some more coffee."

"No, Mae, wait till we go upstairs. Just a few more minutes." The girl stretched her legs under the table. The long purple scarf wrapped all the way around and felt nice and warm. Snow was clinging to it and melting. All wind came from the direction of the hewn white mountains, whole slopes of which gleamed in the sunlight. Stretching off toward the mountains was the ski lift. Sitting on one of the seats, no skis on, there was indeed the incredible sensation of flying.

"Alice B., you look lost in thought."

"No."

"Yeah, dear, yeah. What's on your mind?"

Mr. Wile was asleep; Alice only had to change his bedpan. His eyes were open when she brought the pan back. Alice had nothing to say but, "Feeling all right?" She felt sorry for him, but more than that . . .

His eyes were not the least bit clouded. He looked extremely unhappy. If he talked he would be likable; now, Alice could only try not to pity him. His face was very wrinkled and how had all the wrinkles gotten there?

Alice had very little to say to Mr. Wile, except to apologize that she was bothered that night, and confused. She knew that he forgave her for being bothered. Until Mr. Wile fell asleep again, Alice sat with him and was especially quiet.

Worse. Sitting by a window in the hot afternoon, cornfield golden crisp in her mind, Alice made a frown. Outside, her own kids were playing with their friends. They kicked a blue plastic ball up and down the sidewalk, scraping. Trudy's pudgy black arms shook when she clapped her hands. Behind the façade of hard buildings, Alice saw only more hard buildings and years of them. The blues with strings that played on the kitchen radio made the whole thing a dance. A stumpy dance, endless.

While the children in her head, small boy and small girl, ran in the corn and turned their heads up to be dizzy at the sky. Leaves brushed their tan faces; they circled and collapsed on the ground. A smell of warm dry earth came up. The boy: falling playfully, a whole corn plant under him.

Black children through the open window were the same as ever. Two of them were Alice's own. Alice's sister came up behind her and touched her shoulder.

"Want to get some sleep before work tonight?" the sister said.

"No thank you, Annie. And you don't have to stay around here."

"All right, I'll go for a walk. Listen, honey, you okay? Because all those things you been telling me about . . ."

"I won't tell you about no more. I'm fine."

The sun was going down. People sat on their front steps and in windows. Time was passing very quickly. When it was time to take the bus to work, Alice felt sad. All the way on the bus, while lone studs gave her the eye, memory of cornfields and a small freckled girl forced itself upon her. She didn't want it; it hurt.

Dr. Teagrade was sympathetic. He explained that he would rather have her off work for a while if something was bothering her than for her to be pushed and making mistakes. Alice went in to check on the knife-wound patient who was no longer an emergency case; the stitches were holding. So were the hinges on the stamp collection.

Someone had put a bottle at Mr. Wile's bed and a tube feeding into his arm. Veins in the one exposed arm bulged. Mr. Wile looked up and Alice returned his stare.

"I see that someone thinks you're not eating enough, Mr. Wile. You better watch out, hear, cause they're after you."

No reading the eyes.

"Are you cold in here?" He had the sheet pulled up to his neck. Mr. Wile nodded. Alice turned up the thermostat. She crossed the room and reached for the bedclothes.

Mr. Wile had a long purple scarf, old and faded, wrapped around his neck. One touch, and Alice was shocked. She remembered the scarf. At once she could sense his concern. She put her hand on the scarf; he was a scared little boy, caught. And what could he say?

Please. Please. Let me stay, for I need you to hold on to. I need you.

Solid. Please. I need you.

What could she say?

Don't stay.

A dozen graying men sat in the oak-walled chamber. Napkins and glasses of water were on the table. As he watched, two more men came in carrying briefcases. One of them, a large man with a blond mustache, walked to the head of the table and put his case down on it. There was an important stock option to discuss; already the water glasses were half empty. He tried to concentrate.

"You awake?" Her husband's voice startled her. A car went by below.

"Yes."

"What's been wrong with you? You driving me crazy, you know that."

A balding man scrawled something on his pad of paper. He looked up just as a fresh pitcher of water was brought in, and smiled.

"No, Chad, I can't help it."

"You know what it is I mind. Only what you been telling the children. Now listen to me, woman. You going to stop telling them stories. Else I'll assume you're crazy."

"I won't." Had to concentrate on what the mustached man was saying. There was a decision to be made. A very important one.

"No more, Chad. No more to the kids. But I've got to tell somebody. Let me tell you, Chad."

"Don't tell me no stories, I don't want to hear no stories."

"Chad, they're *in my head!* What do I do?"

"Don't tell me no stories."

The mustached man took papers from his case. And if a mistake was made, there could be disastrous consequences. Had to concentrate. Had to know. "Chad."

Chad turned over on his stomach. Alice was shaking; she hugged him and pressed her face against his shoulder. A fresh pitcher of water was brought in. Suddenly the table rose up, the room spun, the old men started shouting. "Chad."

Lights in the ceiling flashed brilliantly and the paneled room flushed white suds. Alice winced; tears fell from her eyes onto the pillow. When the phone rang, she waited to catch her breath before answering.

"Mrs. Costin?"

"Yes, Doctor, what is it?"

In nurse's uniform, Alice walked to Mr. Wile's room. The door was open. Dr. Teagrade was inside. Mr. Wile's eyes caught Alice at the door, and his neck muscles strained. He was breathing hard, spasmodically. He followed Alice with his pleading gaze as she crossed the room.

Mr. Wile had tears; Alice had tears for Mr. Wile. He wanted her help. The briefest sign of panic touched his face. He shuddered, trying to hold on. With a rush of energy that she could feel, he sent all of himself out to her.

But what Alice saw stopped her and she was unable to respond. Unable to say anything or to accept the thoughts. What Alice saw was a young black woman, herself.

It was his picture of her. It was so unlike what she knew of herself that she could not keep the revulsion down. His angel of mercy, see what she looked like. A good black woman. And she recoiled.

Saw only his horrified expression.

The hold was broken. She began to cry and was interrupted by a sensation that chilled her every bone. Mr. Wile was dying, and she felt it.

The fear, the futility of holding on. Skin on the skull was peeling away. Muscle burned. Gastric acid came up hot to fill the mouth, choke it. Plastic shot through the arteries to plug them; all canals were stuffed.

Green mold grew on the decaying head, because the

head was forced free of caring. It belonged to the centuries. Blood gurgled in its throat, the last breaths. Teeth tore free of the lips, exploded in a fan. Around the stringy neck, the long purple scarf was rapidly tightening. Up to the chin and higher.

Alice felt it around her neck, the hot wool breath, the squeeze. She pulled at it with her hands and hands did not help. She opened her mouth and the woolen muffler filled it. It crept down her.

She coughed it up. Air filled her lungs. Death left her. She lay on top of Mr. Wile, on his bed.

Mr. Wile was dead. He had been thrust out, shaken from his last hold. Alice stood up slowly. She saw; she held his head in her hands and cried.

Dr. Teagrade said nothing. The private doctor hung his head.

"Ask the nurse to back off, will you?" the private doctor said.

"I think she liked him," said Dr. Teagrade.

Alice backed off. She wiped her face with a Kleenex. How could she keep from crying, all the way home, about the old man? What could she have done? Alice asked no questions of herself on the way home. There were too many.

She climbed into her sleeping husband's bed and waited for morning. All night she cried.

He stood in wet sneakers at the side of the stream and felt tadpoles between his fingers.

Charles Platt

NEW YORK TIMES

That morning the sky was bright blue and things had happened during the night. The apartment buildings had fallen. The traffic was all over the street. The supermarket stock had multiplied in the darkness and groceries were spilling out in mounds across the sidewalk, like bread swelling out of an oven. I saw a crowd of pedestrians trying to pull free from a fire hydrant; the crosstown bus's wheels were in the asphalt up to their axles.

Blankets rumpled. Sunlight streaming in. Plants on the windowsill twisting, thrusting up virile cancerous-brown shoots. Central heating knocking, gurgling, steaming, rattling against the wall.

Last night she had taken one of the 16-ounce, screw-top, nonreturnable Pepsis from the $2.40 8-pack in the fridge. She didn't really want it, drank two absentminded sips, left the bottle uncapped on the floor beside the bed. Undrinkable, this morning. Step over it, when you walk out to the kitchen.

Grab handfuls of cereal; burrow into the box for the special offer coupon; slop vitamin D milk; stack the bowl with other dirty dishes where roaches scuttle in and out over last night's watermelon.

Turn on the radio, leave it on, loud. Go in the other room and forget it. Wipe tissues over mouth, cheeks, eyes, ears, anus, armpits. Ball them all up.

Pick up clothes from the unswept floor. Glance out of grimy windows while spraying face, hair, breasts with plastic. Awake, now, it's morning.

What really happened last night? A new split in one of the door panels. Window gate padlock's been tampered with. What went on on the fire escape? In the parking lot behind the brownstones? Where did those old mattresses come from?

No one knows. It's daytime now.

That spring morning everyone in the city turned off the heat, plugged in the air conditioners. It forced the outside temperature up by ten degrees, made it good to get inside to the coolness.

The office blocks at the top of Sixth Avenue had grown again, like crystal cultures, feeding on chemicals carried on the heavy air. Multifaceted, they glittered sleek in the sun. Inside, secretaries drifted over furry floors while the elevators chimed.

A quick orgasm alone in the 42nd Street movie booth watching the hippie pull his girl's skirt off and get her legs open for the camera to zoom in. Outside again bright and dusty day washed that brief trace of night from my mind. Squashy roll, tenderized beef, crunchy coleslaw, ice water, aluminum foil, crumpled dollar bills, the textures of eating.

And what did she do? Got on the wrong train, had to take a cab to reach the doctor in time for her checkup, lost the prescription, too late for the job interview but that one hadn't paid much anyway, best off without it. So she caught up on lunch, bought a women's magazine, sat reading in Madison Square Garden for an hour. Went home, showered, fresh clothes, makeup, another two sips from another 16-ounce, 8-pack, nonreturnable, screw-top Pepsi, discovered the radio still blaring, tuned it to a different station, left it to go watch TV and read another women's magazine—left the last one on the subway. Decided which movie to see that night, redecided, reredecided, called a friend and talked long-distance for half an hour, went and retouched her makeup (waste basket overflowing with tissues now), put a record on and stared out of the window.

After the movie. Walking past Central Park. The reptile-cars are cruising in and out, headlights bleaching the broken asphalt. Sentient, predatory, closing on an awkward, stumbling pedestrian. A glimpse of gnarled hands up in front of etched face, glint of dusty-crumpled metal, restless rumbling exhausts.

A smothered cry.

Furtively, from windows scattered in the monoliths, shadowy faces peer out through broken Venetian

blinds, around rusting air conditioners; background peeling room interiors flicker TV-blue.

Dust and fumes mingle as the cars drink the depleted air. Oxygen used up. Movement slows, engines die. The cars jerk and spasm, like a cluster of asphyxiated roaches. Headlights fade to yellow. Springs sag, tires deflate. A creak, a clang of cooling metal.

Out of the subway walking home on First Avenue. Almost empty even at the allnite grocery marts. The night is taking hold, gripping hard.

A foretaste: heavy figures approaching me on the sidewalk. The pair of them space out either side of me as they come closer.

—Do we hit him, Frank?

The long space of three footsteps.

—No.

They pass. Into the darkness.

Along the black-and-blue canyon of 10th Street, skirting tumbled garbage, congealed womit, rusting fenders, Coke bottles, iron bars, smears of excrement dehydrated and brittle on the dead concrete.

The footsteps start behind me and I run, fire escapes rusty trees skeletal hands parading overhead under the smeared moon. The tripwire gets me across the shins, bites in, scrapes the skin off like pink apple peel. My face goes down mashing into a rusty can. Studded boots march braille into my back.

Inside the building, past the broken-open mailboxes, the junkie slithers out from under the stairs, trembling knife point aimed at my throat. I stumble-run up the stained steps, lungfuls of urine-tainted air, lightbulbs dancing, chest aching, slam the steel-paneled door behind me with a heart-beat to spare.

Lying on the dusty floor of my empty apartment where the furniture used to be. Dream-images of half-sleep. Then I sit up tense and alert, burglar's hacksaw carving through the window bars, one lunge and I get him in the throat with my sawn-off pool cue. He tilts slowly like a high diver off the ten-meter board, falls turning, splashes onto the hard black road.

Down there, streetlights glint on upturned eyes of ten

thousand criminals and hoodlums, gathered together silently gazing up hungry and waiting.

And even as I try to slide the iron bar of the police lock into its catch, the door shudders in against my palms and clumsy fingers let the bar slip. Doorknob in the groin punches me backward. His broken bottle carves my chest, blood welling up like water rising in grooved wet sand.

They strip me as they strip an automobile: clothes, wristwatch, shoes, teeth, eyes, ears, scalp, fingers, limbs, spleen, heart . . .

Gutted, they cram me through a drain grating into the sewers. I slide easy, into the slimy, greasy, fetid water of the river; roll into the riverbed in a flowering puff of powdered excrement that settles back down in an even blanket, softening, blurring, obliterating.

The sun was bright and clear when I awoke the next morning. I left her still sleeping, went and poured fresh pasteurized orange juice, cereal with vitamins enough for another twenty-four hours of my existence.

I felt good.

I looked outside. Sunlight had miraculously erased the darkness again. Night's black ocean tide had withdrawn, leaving only an occasional piece of driftwood on the sidewalk shore: a bloodstained shoe, length of bent water pipe, a crushed hypodermic.

The radio news said the Empire State was bombed out again; the black surface of 7th Avenue had turned to jelly, clogging the subway beneath; and we were warned of intermittent showers of blood in the late afternoon.

John Barfoot

THE CRYSTALLIZATION OF THE MYTH

The first thing we see is a view of the desert from an immense height. It is simply a flat, reddish surface, huge cloud-shadows racing across it, filling the whole of our vision. Through its center cuts the sparkling silver ribbon of the highway. We move downward with increasing speed in a great curve which brings us out above the surface of the highway, moving quickly along its length. The signposts flicker past, the desert slides by like a backdrop, the yellow lines of the thirty lanes arrow straight to the horizon. The highway is empty, we are traveling down its center.

Ahead, we can see that the point on the horizon where the road narrows and disappears is slowly suffusing with a brown color; the brittle-feeling, softly rough color of dead leaves. The brown stain leaves the horizon and travels down the road toward us, and we can see that it covers the whole width of the highway. Behind it a long brown tail unfolds, covering half the lanes, occasionally straying across into the other half.

We slow down as it approaches us, until we stop gently before it. Our view straight ahead is of splintered glass around the edge of a frame, buckled metal, yellowed and decayed rubber. The brown color is rust.

We rise and slowly move over the great expanse of rusted metal, hesitantly, as visitors in a great cathedral move. And as cathedrals seem to breathe a cool silence of stone, so does this object seem to exude a dry, rasping silence of heat. There does, indeed, seem to be an unnatural stillness and a *held* feeling, a tightness of the stomach, caught in the air above and around it.

We move slowly and from this close, subjective standpoint it seems to assume a vastness in the mind, although

if seen from two miles up it would hardly be visible. The air above the brown surface is warped with heat and wreathed with sun-smoke, and the force of our passage dislodges tiny particles of rust, which hang and spin in suspension for moments at a time.

We reach the edge of the main bulk and look straight along the rusty tail of metal to the horizon. Immediately in front of us, a bundle of white sticks protrudes from an oblong aperture in the metal, seeming not part of this, but a separate thing, a thing out of place in the great expanse of rusted metal. Now that we have seen this one we see others. There are quite a few of these bundles of sticks glimmering in the brown.

We cross the highway, moving over the striped safety barriers, stopping in midair. Below us, the sand is covered with small, isolated blots of brown, fallen from the main mass. A huge steel pillar thuds unmovingly into the ground at the edge of the pattern of blots, supporting the flat, raised surface of the road. We fall slowly to the ground. Above us, some sixty feet above, the highway arches, stiffspanning the earth, the metal fountaining outward and outward, a still steel river, a tense spring, caught in the insect legs of metal supports. On the other side of its width, through the cool shadow beneath it, other brown objects can be seen. One is surrounded by bundles of splintered white sticks.

We imagine the creation of the thing. We see in our minds the panic, the fear, the desperate, terrifying flight, the awful sound of the roaring engines, the screaming horns, the jangling, discordant rupture into fractured reality, lights, sounds, flashes, the flight from . . . what? All the lines meeting in this brown mass, time lines starting at different points in time, stopping, starting, moving on, from different origins, crossing and diverging, lives in all their complexity, moving forward with the irresistible pressure of predestination behind them, moving on into the blindness of time and the incomprehensible image of space. And then this strange meeting. This decaying knot of lifelines, this brown blob which is the manifestation of the intersection, the binding together of the spidering separate lines, the web of the incomprehensible, enigmatic accident.

The thing seems to us to be a work of art, an attempt at communication, as if the poet despaired of making himself understood by direct attacks on his meaning and attempted the touching of intellects indirectly. The enigma of the poem.

And perhaps, perhaps it *is* a work of art, by an artist incomprehensible to us. One who weaves the strands of fate and time, one who moves the lives of men; world-strider, he, stars his jeweled footsteps. Perhaps there is a standpoint, a way of looking at the object, a state of mind, perhaps, from which the pieces will fall into place, turn and spin with the eye, and reveal. . . .

Perhaps something which will have duration in a world of sputtering stars, dying planets, fading gaseous life.

We move, trying to find the standpoint.

Cut / broken glass / Cut / twisted steel / Cut / melted rubber / Cut / tarnished silver mascot.

There is no such standpoint. All we see is the vast sun-welded structure of wrecked cars and bones.

We rise and turn toward the brown tail, following it to its origin, skimming over the almost unrecognizable hulks of the automobiles. A brown stain appears on the horizon. It grows and grows, vast, vaster. Buildings, towers, spreading sideways in the distance. We move toward the myth leaving behind us its crystallization.

Hank Davis

TO PLANT A SEED

In a dark place which is filled with light, but none for seeing, are nine figures. They do not move.

People have been known to voice opinions:

1) "The seed? Well, I don't know, now. Never had a garden myself. What kind of seed do you mean?"

2-6) Omitted because of similarity to 1).

7) "Sure, I've heard of the Seed. Can't see any reason for it. Why should they spend so much money for something that nobody will live to see? That's what I say. We've got enough problems to solve right now without throwing money away on something billions of years in the future."

8) "If those people want to commit suicide together, it's all right with me, but why use my tax money to do it? Even the people working on the Seed admit that there's no way it can benefit anybody now living or anybody who will ever live in this universe."

9) "Never mind basic research, because there is no information to be gained. And I really am not concerned about the money required, not because I don't think that it *could* be put to a better use, but because I don't think it *would* be put to a better use, Seed or no Seed. My objection is that this project is the last gasp of the notion that man is master of the universe and the cosmos belongs to him. That notion nearly made the Earth uninhabitable in the last century and we're better off without it. If we want to build a Seed and give the next universe the dubious gift of human inhabitants, why such a hurry? We have billions of years ahead of us. For once in our thoroughly botched career, let's take time to think it over."

Dust does not fall, air currents do not flow, sound is not heard. The molecules of the air do not move.

The Seed was explained:

MODERATOR: But do you really think, Dr. Cullins, that anyone would dare to shut himself off from the world that he knows, never to see it again, not knowing where he was going?

DR. CULLINS: Certainly. People have set out to colonize in the past, not really understanding what they were facing. People have to set out to explore, not knowing what they would find or if they were coming back. And the Seed is even more fundamental in its thrust, calling out not merely to see something new that none have seen before, or to the desire for living space, but to the very survival of the human race. The drive to survive is potent in our instincts. This form of race survival is more abstract and must appeal to the intellect, but I believe that the drive to survive is as potent in the intellect as it is in the blood.

MR. GRAY OF THE NEW YORK TELEFAX: Still, Dr. Cullins, this proposal of yours is hardly pressing us, for we literally have all the time in the world to prepare such an, ah seed, while more pressing matters concern us on our own planets.

DR. CULLINS: We may have all the time in the world and we may not. We don't know everything about stars and our own star might become nova in the next five minutes. Then it will be too late. In fact, far from having all the time in the world, our clear priority is the planting of the Seed which might take, at most, five years. Then we can return the resources that were temporarily diverted to the Seed back to the general pool of resources—though I doubt that such a comparatively small drop in the pool will affect those pressing matters that Mr. Gray mentioned, particularly since those matters have been pressing us for several centuries.

MR. MEISENHEIMER OF WORLDWEEK TELEZINE: But even if we don't have unlimited time, the question remains: why should we do it at all? To spread at a reasonable pace through our corner of the galaxy is a sensible endeavor. This is our universe, for we evolved in it. As long as we displace no other intelligent beings, surely we may colonize other planets, even in other stellar systems. But another universe

would have nothing at all to do with us. It would belong to those beings which evolved in it and to plant your seed would be a—a new form of imperialism, usurping the rightful inhabitants. Let us stay in our rightful domain.

DR. CULLINS: Take any man now living, Mr. Meisenheimer, and in his place might stand a horde of other animals. Just by being alive, you have concentrated a quantity of organic materials in one place and removed them temporarily from the life cycle. If that is evil, then you and I and every other human being should immediately commit suicide. If it is evil to send men into the next universe, then why is it right to send them to other stellar systems? The next universe is simply a continuation of this universe and man is as much a creature of that universe as this one.

Excerpt from transcript of *Meet the Media*

. . . and one of the hardest spooks to exorcise is the notion that Man Was Not Meant to Outlive the Universe, though it is never stated in that explicit form. A century ago, or even later, the objection would have taken the form: we are going against God. Society is too secularized now for it to be so expressed, of course. I would, in fact, prefer to battle God rather than the faceless formless commandment that exists in the minds of so many. He would be specific and I could cite the absence of specific injunctions against the Seed in scripture or employ extracts for my own cause. (I have some in mind, just in case.) And the old view of man as subduer of the earth is more favorable to the Seed than the modern one of Man the Destroyer. How can I fight this faceless spirit, ruler of cavemen who fear the open sky?

From a letter written by Cullins to Cain shortly after the former's appearance on *Meet the Media.*

Q: Is that letter of Cullins' noble or merely pompous?

A: Both.

Q: I noticed a moment of hesitation back there when he said that the drive to survive is as potent in the intellect as in the blood. Why was that?

A: He was being very careful not to say what he says in private: that the drive to survive is as strong between the ears as it is between the legs.

INSIDE THE TIME REFRIGERATOR

Does the McJunkins field work because of a flaw in the law of conservation of temporal momentum? Not really, any more than the operation of a refrigerator disproves the fundamental principle of thermodynamics which states that heat tends to disperse. Translating the intricate mathematics of the McJunkins field of equations into plain English, the average time within the field remains constant. Just as a refrigerator makes the air within its walls cold by raising the temperature of the air outside by an equal amount, the McJunkins field stops time within its enclosed volume while speeding time up elsewhere.

The amazing thing about the McJunkins field is that the region of speeded-up time is confined entirely to the surface of the field—*a two-dimensional space!*

FOREVER IN A FEW SECONDS

When the field generator is switched on, a field is created and its size is determined by the power applied to the generator. Expanding from the center of the field is a sphere of slowed time. Like a balloon being blown up inside another balloon, the sphere of slow time expands and the hollow sphere of fast time decreases in volume. When the two volumes are equal, a clock in the slow zone would be running only half as fast as it would in the fast zone; and the same clock, taken outside the field, would run one-third faster than it would in the slow zone.

The changing of times in the two zones, as well as the rate of expansion of the slow field, slows as the thickness of the fast zone approaches zero. The rate of change is what scientists call *asymptotic.*

For an example of an asymptotic rate of change, consider a grasshopper that is trying to cover a distance of two feet. On the first jump, he covers half the distance, landing a foot from his goal, but he now is tired and his next jump covers only half a foot. He has still less energy this time

and his third jump will take him forward just one-fourth of a foot.

When will the grasshopper reach his goal? Never, obviously, although he can get as close to it as he likes. Likewise, the thickness of the field of fast time should never reach zero and the time flow in the slow zone should never come to a full halt.

This, however, is a mathematically pure situation. Obviously, the grasshopper can continue to make smaller jumps only if his body shrinks with each jump and can shrink without limit, which cannot happen. Similarly, the time flow will slow down without ever reaching zero only if time can be divided into ever smaller intervals. It cannot. We know that a piece of metal cannot be divided forever without finally being reduced to one atom, which must be divided into subatomic particles, which particles can be divided into quarks but no further—for quarks cannot be divided into anything smaller! There simply is no particle of matter which is smaller than a quark. Similarly, the quantum is the smallest possible amount of energy that can exist. As we have known since Samuel Soto's electrotemporal equations were experimentally verified, both space and time likewise have a quantum structure. If you divide a second into two halves, then into quarters, then continue, you will reach a unit of time which cannot be divided.

Dividing a second may sound like a fanciful notion, but the McJunkins field is constantly dividing time into smaller units. And, as the zone of slow time expands, the moment comes when the rate of slow time flow is one time quantum away from being zero. At the same time, theory indicates, the thickness of the hollow shell of fast time is one space quantum thick. The next expansion of the field shrinks the hollow ball to zero thickness and time stops completely within the field. A process that mathematically, should take forever is completed in a few seconds!

. . . The McJunkins effect does not invalidate the principle of Einstein's Relativity that simultaneity is meaningful only for reference systems at rest with respect to each other. The rate of time flow in—or rather on—the surface

of a McJunkins field is not infinite and it will apparently vary according to the Einstein transformations.

WHAT GOOD IS IT?

Can the McJunkins field ever be more than a scientific curiosity? The final answer is not yet clear. The possibilities would seem endless—perfect suspended animation for starship crews or victims of incurable diseases, an impenetrable barrier, even an ideal refrigerator—but the simple fact is that we know of no way to turn off a McJunkins field once it has been created. For all practical purposes, the field, once established, will last forever. It might still have use as a weapon. A McJunkins field generator could be turned on and "freeze" an enemy for all time.

But this proposal, while possible, is impractical. Interestingly enough, the power requirement for establishing a McJunkins field is less dependent on the size of the field than on the total mass enclosed. The energy of several AN-bombs would be required to freeze even a small city. Small wonder that the first (and, to date, the only) McJunkins field established was not only small, but enclosed nothing but the field generator and a sphere of air!

In fact, only one proposal has been put forward for the use of the McJunkins effect—and that proposal is little short of fantastic! It is so fantastic that one might be tempted to dismiss it as the suggestion of a crackpot. But the proposal comes from Dr. Roy M. Cullins and Dr. E. John Cain, both respected men in their fields.

We have known for three decades that the universe is cyclic in nature, Dr. Cullins points out. That is, our universe was preceded by another one which collapsed under its own gravity and was compressed almost into a geometrical point, then exploded in what has for a century been called the Big Bang. The matter expanded from the explosion and filled space, condensing into galaxies of stars. Our universe is still expanding, but the galaxies will, at some time in the distant future, cease their outward flight and begin the long fall back to the point where the universe was born, to fuse together again into an unbearably small space, then explode outward in a new Big Bang, giving birth to a new universe. This cycle had no

beginning and will continue without end. And it is inconceivable that man, should he still exist in that far future, should survive the contraction of the universe.

A LIFEBOAT FOR DOOMSDAY?

Or it was inconceivable until the discovery of the McJunkins Effect. The proposal of Cullins and Cain is that a standard starship be fitted with a McJunkins generator powerful enough to create a field surrounding the ship. That ship could survive the collapse of the universe, for not even the weight of the collapsing universe could force anything into a zone where there is no time, hence no motion. When the new universe expanded and condensed into new galaxies, the ship would still be unscathed in its field and the crew would not have aged even a second from the moment that the field was established.

As had been stated earlier, for all practical purposes a McJunkins field lasts forever—but only from the standpoint of a human lifespan.

Actually, a McJunkins field, left to itself, will not last forever. For every field established, a time would eventually come when the field would break down as quickly as it had been established. The time between creation and collapse of the field is a function of the mass within the field. A field which enveloped the mass of a star would collapse almost as soon as it was generated. The field that Dr. McJunkins created in his experiment enclosed five pounds of generator and less than a pint of air and would last several hundred times the span of a cycle of the pulsating universe. By carefully measuring the mass of the starship within the field, Cullins and Cain observe, the field could be timed to collapse as little as a few billion years after the new Big Bang.

In this way, they argue, the human race could survive the death of the universe itself.

And the McJunkins effect, far from being a trivial curiosity, would have been proven to be the most important discovery in the history of the human race.

From the article, "The Incredible Field That Stops Time," written by Roy Cullins under the pseudonym of David Lester for the telezine *Popular Technology Monthly.*

If one could observe them, the electrons in their vague orbits would be stilled, their positions no longer fuzzy zones of probability, but as definite as rigid crystal. But, though stripped of the cloak of the uncertainty principle, they are not revealed in their nakedness, for with time stopped, no medium of transmission can carry the message that they do not move.

Seeds have grown in skulls:

Roy Cullins said this "I think that the real cause of the opposition is that most people are afraid to risk it and face a strange new universe, but at the same time don't intend to stand by and see somebody else survive the death of the universe." Unfortunately, he said it at the wrong time. A light statement, it weighed no more than a straw on the back of a camel. A door was slammed and he could no longer look down and see a face on the pillow.

What he needed, he decided, was a cold shower. After drying, he disconnected the phone in the hotel room and attached his own illegal phone with built-in scrambler, then whistled for Elfred Cain.

"It's got to be you, Cullins. Nobody else would call me at this time of the morning, not even my mother if my father was dying, or vice versa. You're a dead man now, Cullins. My trained hamster with the poison-tipped fangs will be on your trail and you're as good as six feet under. I would send him after your ass right now, but he needs his sleep too. Good night, dead man." Click.

On the eighth call, before which the unleashing of the hamster was threatened six more times, each time with exactly the same wording, the real Cain answered the phone; "Mmmmmmggglpf?"

"Nice try, E. J., but I wasn't fooled. You might be that banal at this time of the morning, but you would have been too dopey to organize the message that well. All you're losing is a little sleep. I may have lost Erika."

"Whopened?"

"Remember, she said that if I mentioned anything having to do with the Seed during one of *those* times once more, she would split that minute? I'm afraid that I said—"

"Did she put her clothes on before she left?"

"Hmmmmm." Pause. "I don't see them anywhere."

"Well, she won't be back for that reason. The. Yawn. The least she could have done was wait until you got your rocks off."

"Well, actually this was the sixth time tonight—"

"Cullins, are you sure that she left over the *Seed?*"

"Roll it. Do you really have a killer hamster?"

"No, the hamster is a clever fabrication so that your mind will be diverted and my Tyrannsaurus Rex will take you completely off guard when he pounces."

"Seems to me that she would understand that I have a lot on my mind. The vote on the appropriation for the Seed comes up in the A. U. Senate next week."

"*You're* worrying? The Senate currently consists only of Senators whom you have charmed over to our side and those whom you are blackmailing, like that one from Massajeryork Complex who has the secret mistress. . . ."

"Yes, I was able to convince him that the hard core of his Americas Homosexual Party would take a dim view of her. About Erika—"

"You don't want to talk about Erika, Cullins. You just want to talk. If you can't swing one kind of ejaculation, you settle for another. By the way, you should give me a list of the Senators on our side. If I have to testify before that damned committee one more time, I'll go berserk and start rending senators all around me. Sure wouldn't want to kill the ones on our side."

"You know, I've explained to her that it's natural for the Seed to occupy my mind at such times. It's all part of the same instinct. The urge that the race survive the death of the individual. And for the race to survive the death of the individual universe is the next logical step."

"And that instinct is why you are balling a gal who's on the vaccine?"

"Well, the instinct easily satisfied on the emotional level, and on the intellectual level I realize that there are too many people reproducing already for the size of the solar system. But the Seed cries out on both levels to be born. And I'm more of a mother than a father to it."

"In that case, you had better get Erika to make an honest man out of you."

"Ha. Ha."

"Outstanding. When you can't think of a comeback, you've stopped feeling sorry for yourself. Take a cold shower and go to bed. After you dry off, that is."

"I've had one already."

"Then I'll have one. Good night. *And quit calling me!*"

"Get an unlisted number."

"*This* number is supposed to be unlisted."

"Get a listed number. You'll throw me off the track."

"I'll throw you off something higher if you keep phoning in the dead of the night." Click.

Cullins took another cold shower.

Q: When one man calls another, seeking counsel regarding an emotional disturbance, is it common for the other to greet him with levity?

A: It is when the disturbed caller averages one point two three calls per night not earlier than one thirty a.m. and not later than four thirteen a.m.

Q: Still, does this not indicate a certain insensitivity and even cruelty on the part of callee?

A: It might indicate that the counselor has his own problems and is using levity to conceal them and remain uninvolved. Look at this:

She had black hair and blue eyes of the sort that do not really seem to be part of the face they are in. Cain liked the way the muscles in her legs moved when she walked. (Sociological context: Hemlines were in the rising phase of their cycle that year.)

He had been watching the way she moved for a month and a half now. Today he managed to head for the computer programming department where she worked and to keep moving in that direction without veering off and breathing a sigh of relief, hating himself at the same time. He informed her, clumsily, that there was a good show in town and maybe. . . .

She was busy that night.

He mumbled his way from the computer programming department and knew that he would never work up the nerve to speak to her again.

Maybe some other girl. . . .

In talking to himself (mentally, fortunately, rather than audibly) he often used that word: maybe.

Q: These two emotional cripples are the ones working to save the human race from extinction?

A: Irrevelant. The nobility-ignobility of a cause is not determined by the suitability of its adherents as models after which one might pattern one's life. Moreover, it is possible that a more well-adjusted or more self-confident person might be completely uninterested in fighting for such a near-abstract cause.

Q: I reject that notion.

A: You may be correct, but you are supposed to be asking questions, not advancing opinions.

Beyond the orbit of Pluto the Seed orbits, dimly shining with the light of stars, including the sun, which is only slightly brighter than the other pinpoints of light. The surface of the McJunkins field is a perfect sphere and a perfect reflector, for no light can enter the field of timeless space. Contained in the zone of the field when it was activated was a starship. To speak of anything being inside the field now is to speak gibberish. Nothing can penetrate the field to determine what is within and no statement about the interior can be verified. Therefore there is no interior. Thus speaks positivism. In no way can it be proven that the nine figures still exist within and that they do no move.

The Seed is not yet fully explained:

Billions thought this: Dr. Roy Cullins is speaking. Cullins himself, while watching and listening with the billions, thought this: a pattern of phosphor dots excited by electricity forms an image resembling me while other electrical impulses create sounds similar to my voice and both sets of impulses are controlled by sensitized molecular layers in a block of alloy, which is a recording made of my image and voice a few hours ago.

When he was very young, Roy Cullins had developed the habit of thinking that way. He thought it was the mark of a precise, analytical mind. He still thought that.

Cain thought this: Cullins is speaking. Again.

Erika's thoughts were not of the stereovision screen. She wanted to get laid. Again.

The pattern of phosphor dots, etc., said, "It is necessary that the Seed be a starship. The cosmic egg will explode and the cosmic debris will fill the small but expanding universe with hydrogen gas which will condense into planets, stars, and nebulae. The new universe will not have been expanding as long as our older one has and will contain less empty space in proportion to solid matter, but the distances between spiral nebulae will still be immensely greater than between stars in our present galaxy. And, though it is not impossible that the Seed will be in the midst of an infant galaxy when the McJunkins field collapses, its most likely location at that time will be in intergalactic space. The average distance between galaxies in our universe is about three million light-years, though the galaxy M33 in Andromeda and the galaxy M31 are closer than that to our galaxy, and we have taken into consideration that the Seed may have to travel across such intergalactic gulfs. If the crew find themselves between galaxies, they will simply select the closest one and accelerate in that direction, using the del Gatto field drive, until they are traveling at a velocity which is within a hairsbreadth of the speed of light. Though the voyage will take more than a million years from the point of view of an observer in the galaxy ahead, only a few weeks will have elapsed from the viewpoint of the crew, as a consequence of the usual effects of Classical Relativity. At an appropriate distance within the galaxy they will begin deceleration, at the same time using the usual methods of selecting a sunlike star that has planets."

"Then they will colonize that planet, Dr. Cullins?" That came from another pattern of phosphor dots, etc., which was an analog of the reporter doing the interviewing.

"Not necessarily. The first star selected might lack planets at the proper distance for a reasonable temperature. Or the planet might be at the right distance but have such a slow rotation period that the extremes of temperature would be too great. In that case, they would accelerate again and try another likely star. With the del Gatto drive, a suitable planet could be found in a few

months. But there is also the possibility that the planets would not yet have cooled enough to develop life. In that event, the crew would send the Seed away from the planet and travel at near light speed until sufficient time has passed and the planet has cooled and oceans have formed. Then spore pods will be discharged into the oceans."

'Spore pods, of course, are containers of primitive one-celled life forms which have a DNA structure like that of terrestrial life forms but which were artifically constructed to approximate the first life forms that appeared on our planet. And your hope, Dr. Culllins, is that these forms of earthlike life will flourish in the seas of the new planet and evolve into more complex life forms not greatly different from those of the earth. Is that correct, Dr. Cullins?"

"Hell no, man! Where do you get all these weird ideas?" said the nonphosphorus Cullins.

"Yes," agreed the Cullins of the phosphors. "Of course the evolution will certainly take several billion years, during which time the crew of the Seed will spend time on another round trip at near light speed. When they return, an earth-like ecology should be present, allowing a hospitable environment in which present terrestrial plants and animals could function. And they will have fertilized seeds and ova preserved by freezing and the equipment for nurturing them. The new world will have both familiar and strange life forms on it, but all will be children of Earth."

"What if the crew finds a suitable planet which already has life on it, Dr. Cullins?"

"Precisely the same thing that we will do as we spread our colonies through the galaxy. They will land and determine if they and the terrestrial life forms can survive alongside the alien life forms. If they cannot, they will have to search elsewhere."

"Isn't the crew rather small for such an undertaking, Dr. Cullins?"

"Bastard!" said the dotless Cullins, speaking the thought aloud that he had kept silent when the recording had been made.

The Cullins of the phosphor dots was apparently calm and genial. "As is the usual case with starships, the majority of the crew exist as frozen fertilized human ova

which will be thawed at an opportune time and grown in artificial wombs, then educated by the adult crew members and by the ship computer. This is the most economical way to colonize the galaxy and the same holds true for colonizing the next universe."

"But the usual size for the adult and conscious crew of a starship is fifty, Dr. Cullins, not nine. Is there a reason for this?"

"You're hurting me," Erika protested.

"Sorry," said the dotless Cullins, releasing his grip on her hand.

"As you know," began the Cullins of the phosphors, "this is a starship of standard design and the standard starship wasn't designed with a McJunkins field generator as part of the structure. And a McJunkins generator is a rather bulky piece of hardware. Therefore, space is less abundant and the number of adult crew members had to be reduced."

"I didn't want to have to admit that—" said the dotless Cullins, "that we had been unable to get funds enough to build a special ship and had to be content with the ship that was built for the ninth interstellar probe. That ship is not even close to being an optimum design. It cheapens the project. And might make it hard for us to get a special ship for the next Seed."

"*If* there is another Seed," said the only and dotless Cain. "You're ignoring the point that you just talked around in that interview. The Seed could carry a crew of fifteen in spite of the McJunkins generator. But we could only find nine who were fitted to be the nucleus of a new race and wanted.to go. We had to drive off the crackpots, and the ones who were suited only to be janitors, with threats of violence, but could only find nine volunteers who had the talents and the mental stability."

"Which only shows that this is a decadent age. But the reality of the first Seed will grow in the public consciousness and reverse the trend. Even if this century doesn't launch them, more Seeds will come."

The Cullins of the phosphors had vanished from the screen. There was more to the interview, but the scene in the steevee screen had been shifted to an announcer behind the usual bare desk. "And now we switch to live

coverage of the launching of the Seed, beamed from beyond Pluto to our relay on Titan, then from Titan to our relay satellite, then down to our studios. I remind you again that Pluto is never closer to Earth than three billion two hundred million miles, and, though our signals from the Seed travel at the speed of light, they take five hours, thirty-four minutes, and twenty-seven seconds to travel from our transmitter near the Seed to the Earth. Consequently, though our transmission shows the Seed prior to its launching, and this is a live broadcast, not a molecording, the Seed has, in fact, already been launched upon the seas of time."

"Ouch," said the only Cullins in sight.

"Many brave hearts are asleep in the deep," Cain sang softly.

The announcer with the household word for a name beamed through his glasses in an extrovertedly intellectual way, then faded, leaving only his voice. The starship was visible on the screen. Not visible were the batteries of search-lights that were necessary to illuminate the starship for the benefit of the steevee cameras. The older TV cameras could have been operated with the addition of an image intensification circuit which would give them a sensitivity appropriate to the faint light of the distant sun, but the networks wanted to cover the event not just in color but in living depth as well. "It is now T minus one minute and counting. We cut to the Seed for a final word with the mission commander, David Kandt." Cut they did, to an unsmiling, obviously nervous mission commander.

"In your last seconds in this universe, what are your thoughts, Commander?" asked the voice of a new announcer, this one sounding just as extrovertedly intellectual as the first.

"Well, nothing, uh, complicated. Just good-bye. And we will carry on in the next universe." Obviously, the speech had been rehearsed, but not enough.

"Thank you, Commander Kandt," said the voice of the first announcer, though he was on Earth and Kandt could not hear him. "I remind you again that the Seed has already begun its multibillion-year mission, but the transmissions are only now reaching us, due to the great distances involved." The starship was on the screen again.

"Ten seconds, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one—field on." The starship vanished, replaced by a mirrored sphere in which the images of the searchlights could be seen, as could the distorted image of the steevee camera. "And now the plaque will be placed on the Seed." Figures in pressure suits drifted in around the sphere, guiding three wide bands of fabric which joined at a center. The three cloth tendrils snaked around the mirrored horizon like living tendrils, almost as if they were thrusting forward the tiny men on their tips rather than being pulled by them, as if the men were specialized handling organs at the tips of the three limbs. The tips came together and were secured. The men drew back from the sphere, and a metal plaque, brightly polished but dull against the perfectly reflecting surface of the McJunkins field, was visible at the juncture of the three fabric strips.

Cullins, Cain, and Erika realized simultaneously that the thing looked like an enormous athletic supporter. Looking at it made Erika hornier than ever.

The sphere grew on the screen, filled it. "Our camera is closing on the plaque that has been secured to the Seed. I remind you again that the transmissions are only now . . ." The plaque filled the screen. Superimposed over a spiral nebula was the figure of a man, nude but with his crotch emasculated by a shadow. (Maybe it's his jock strap around the Seed, Cain thought.) In his right hand was the flag of the Americas Union. In his left was an hourglass. Inscription: On this day of September 9, 2043, men of this universe set forth for a universe not yet born. "The inscription reads," the announcer began, then read the inscription that the audience had already read. "For the first time, man has sent himself into the future that his race might not die in the collapse of the universe billions of years from now."

Cain suddenly gave the little twitch that signified something had occured to him. "He said 'for the first time.' But it might not be the first time for *anyone*. Suppose in the universe before this one a race put forth a Seed. Then they could exist somewhere in this universe, a race billions, maybe trillions of years old. We would be like children compared to them."

"If they put out a Seed before, they would probably do

it again, storing their knowledge in records on the Seed or Seeds. So they would always be a universe ahead of us, universe after universe, having an edge of knowledge on us. Bad if they didn't want to see any other races surviving the contraction periods. Uh-oh."

"Well?" That was Cain. Erika was sulking, silent.

"The universe pulsates," Cullins said, "so it will never have an end and it never had a beginning. So anything that could possibly happen will have happened, having had an infinite time to happen. So if anybody was going to put out a Seed, they would have done it. And if a Seed was going to succeed, say a Seed launched by the Oofians, it would have done so an infinite time ago. And the Oofians have had an infinite time to keep on surviving universe after universe, launching more Seeds each time, putting their entire population in Seeds, their population growing each cycle until it fills the universe. So why aren't we armpit deep in Oofians on this planet? And, since we are not, why isn't the Seed possible?"

Cain watched the screen. They were not showing the Seed anymore. This was harder to cover than a starship takeoff. A starship keeps on traveling into empty space, going somewhere. Fade out. The Seed came instantly into being, stayed put, did nothing; and would keep doing it for many billion years.

"If anything that can happen has happened, then somewhere along the line a race arose capable of challenging the Oofians, because of higher intelligence, say. Both races were wiped out. Or maybe every race that does this tires eventually and stops putting out Seeds."

"Something like that, maybe," Cullins said. "The Seed *has* to work." He began to caress Erika, too gently to suit her.

Cain left, though they would have paid no attention to him anyway.

Q: This circus is the salvation of the race?

A: I refer you to my previous answer concerning the nobility-ignobility of ends versus means. Moreover, journalists and politicians have generally been the worst of the race, not the best, and this fête is of their staging. I might add that you are judging by those who have been

left behind, fated to persist in their own deaths, even before the death of the universe, and not by those who have been sent into the future.

Q: But that Erika . . . she is the female companion of the instigator of the Seed but behaves like a nymphomaniac, caring nothing about the Seed. Why cannot he have a Brünnhilde at his side?

A: One more question like that and I will suspect you of harboring a perverted desire to see women burned alive. Her behavior is hardly surprising, for she *is* a nymphomaniac, and one with an IQ of ninety. She meets Cullins' needs, so there is no cause for worry. Perhaps he throws the energy that others use in creating a normal sexual relationship into fighting for the Seed. Perhaps he is incapable of a normal relationship and this is his adjustment. It is more of an adjustment than Cain has made. The main point is that you are judging them by their more pitiable failings and not by their nobler aspects.

Q: Speaking of nobler aspects, why weren't we shown the crew of the Seed?

A: Because they are a very stable and dull lot.

Hearts caught in midbeat, lungs in midcycle. The blood, unmoving, fills arteries and veins as if it were stone. Life processes are caught in midstride, reactions not reacting chemical equilibrium replaced by stasis. A stable and dull lot they may be, but two of the crew, a man and his wife, have spurned the festivities and retired to their quarters, where now lurks the beast with two backs. Through experience and familiarity gained long ago, and with an eye on the chronometer, they have carefully timed the conclusion of their cooperation to coincide with the launching of the Seed. A hairsbreadth away from fluid eruptions, they are now motionless, ready to greet the new universe with the oldest challenge to death. Only an instant ago they moved with careful frenzy, but now they do not move.

Some of the things that Roy Cullins and Elfred John Cain worried about:

1) The crew of the Seed loses heart, daunted by the new universe in which they are lost, and turns the McJunkins

generator back on, preferring to try the *next* universe. They are daunted by that universe and use the generator again, trying their luck with still another universe. Daunted by that universe, they use the generator again. . . .

2) The universe, though oscillating, is gradually running down and each expansion is smaller than the one before and the cosmos will eventually contract and not expand again. This time, maybe. Tough luck, Seed.

3) The universe, though oscillating, explodes more violently each time and will eventually expand without limit and never contract again. This time, maybe. Sorry about that, Seed.

4) The Oofians are real and wait until each intelligent race put forth a Seed, then moves in and wipes out the race, colonizes the sterilized planets, and puts each Seed in a museum of Seeds.

5) The estimated time of contraction-expansion of the universe is incorrect and the McJunkins field will collapse in the midst of the fiery contraction or explosion. Good-bye, Seed.

6) The natural laws of the new universe will be different from this one's and the chemical processes of human life will not be able to function. Sleep on, Seed.

7) Men of the future will discover a way to turn off a McJunkins field, decide that the Seed is a cruel and evil waste of life, and release the crew.

8) Exposure to the McJunkins field makes humans sterile.

9) The events in each universe are exactly duplicated in the one before and will be triplicated in the one after and this repetition can be extended infinitely into the past and future; and an infinite number of Cullinses and Cains have launched an infinite number of Seeds an infinite number of times before and will continue to launch them forever; and they have always failed and will always fail, for the survival of a Seed would make the next universe different from the one before, therefore a contradiction, therefore. . . .

A crewman, to smother his nervousness, was smoking a cigarette when time stopped. Now the smoke is baroquely wreathed about him, more rigid than any metal, sculpted by the air currents which were once blown by the air con-

ditioner until time stopped. Now, in a Now which does not cease, the air currents themselves are rigid and the fans of the air conditioner are poised. The life of the ship depends on many systems which must never stop moving. But now they do not move.

The one thing that Roy Cullins and Elfred John Cain should have worried about:

The electromagnetic radiations which man can see or detect and measure and which he has learned to use to interpret the structure of reality can carry information which causes pleasure, awe, fear, pain, despair. The radiation carrying one type of information need be no different from that carrying another. For over a year a station on Pluto had been gleaning information from quanta that came hurtling in from the farthest outposts of the realm of matter. The information existed in a normative vacuum at first, but a context would soon be supplied.

When it was supplied, the crew of the Seed had been frozen in a perpetual Now for a little less than three years.

When the research team published its results, several days elapsed before several popular science writers realized the significance of the discovery.

The quanta said this: the universe does not pulsate. The gravitational potential of all the matter in the universe is not sufficient to overcome the outward kinetic energy of that matter. The nebulae will never cease their outward flight, will never come hurtling back to fuse into a new cosmic egg. And certainly there have been no previous universes that have contracted to reexplode and give birth to the present one. This universe is the only one that has ever been and the only one that ever will be.

The Seed had been sown on barren ground.

Cain had seriously considered suicide. He had not completely dismissed the possibility, but he wanted to communicate with Cullins, who shared the quilt. I did not do this alone, he had kept telling himself. He had thought that the sight of Cullins would underline that defense.

Instead, he found that the sight of Cullins made it worse. This is the man I followed, he now thought. My decision. Why?

Sometimes the banal is inevitable. "Have you heard the news?"

"That the universe will never contract? Of course. What do you want, Jack? You have the hangdog look of somebody who needs to be forgiven. I can't do it. Only the crew could do it. And they knew that the Seed was a risk. A step into the unknown always is."

Cain, in spite of his tendency to laugh off unpleasant matters, had admiration for dramatic gestures; therefore the small pistol in his coat pocket contained only one dart, which he had tipped with poison himself, rather than the usual anesthetic, and which he had intended for his own neck. At this moment he was tempted to put it to another use. "You don't care. You've killed those nine people and you don't care."

"Not to mention the several thousand fertilized ova. But I do care. And I didn't murder them. They believed in the Seed, just as I did. And at that time I thought that more Seeds would come. If I had known that no more funds would be given to us, I would have been on that first Seed. But I'm not and there is nothing I can do for them. And it won't help them if I send myself out—yes, the bulge in your jacket is obvious."

"Nine people, lost. They aren't dead, but they will never live again. Nothing you say can change that. We put them there." Cain was trembling, but from an internal cold, perhaps the absolute zero within the Seed.

"I won't share your guilt, Jack. We made a decision after considering all the available data, then acted on that basis. And that's all anyone can ever do. The only alternative is not to act at all. Stop making decisions and acting on them and you're as frozen as you would be in a McJunkins field and just as dead; and it isn't as clean a death. We couldn't have waited until all data was in, because there is no way that we can ever know we have it all. Even now, we don't know that. Maybe next year more data will show that the universe pulsates, after all. Or the old steady state theory might be correct."

"You make the Seed sound noble!" Cain shouted. "Not now, not anymore, because it isn't a seed, it's a tomb. We didn't just make a mistake because of erroneous data,

Cullins. We were playing with human lives."

"Which you have to do throughout your life unless you live in a cave by yourself. Understand this, Jack: if I had known that the universe was not a pulsating one, I would have stopped the project at all costs, even if I had to blow up the Seed. But, without that knowledge, the project was right. Everything I did was right. And if the human race ever stops acting on the basis of what it thinks it knows, paralyzed by the fear that its knowledge may be wrong, then Homo sapiens will be making its application for membership in the dinosaur club."

"You really believe you were right."

"I do."

"I can't. I'm guilty. I know I'm guilty."

"I know that you can't believe it. And I'm sorry."

Q: You should know. Will the universe ever contract or will it keep expanding?

A: No hope there. The nebulae will hurtle outward forever, even as the heat death overtakes them and entropy triumphs.

Q: Perhaps some method will be found of collapsing a McJunkins field and the nine can be released. How about it?

A: No such method will ever exist.

Q: How can you know for certain?

A: Take it from me.

Q: Is Roy Cullins right? Was the launching of the Seed the right thing to do? Was it what had to be done?

A:

Q: Didn't you hear me?

A: Yes.

Q: Aren't you going to answer my question?

A: No.

In a dark place which is filled with light, but none for seeing, are nine figures. They do not move. They never will.

Kate Wilhelm

ON THE ROAD TO HONEYVILLE

Father died in April. In July Mother said, "We're going home."

Like that. We're going home. Over the next four weeks, through the packing and sorting and getting rid of, and real estate people, and prosective buyers, through it all I kept coming back to those words. Montauk was home, the only one I'd known, although Eleanor said she remembered a city apartment, and Rob insisted he did too, lying, because he was only a baby when they bought the Montauk house.

"You mean Lexington?" Rob asked.

Horses, rolling pastures, the old Widmer farm where Grandma still lived.

"No. I mean Salyersville."

I was washing dishes. Eleanor was dashing around getting ready for a date and Rob was fixing the stereo, across the counter in the family room. There was a long quiet waiting time after Mother said Salyersville. Eleanor broke it. "Why? I thought you'd have to be carried back there, words to that effect."

"Things change."

"Well, not me. I have to be in Ithaca by the end of August, and . . ."

"Of course," Mother said. "We'll get you settled in school first."

"Are we broke?" Rob asked.

"Not completely. Near enough. Too broke to keep this house. I'll work, but even so . . ."

He had a wreck the first day of March and died April 6, and in between he had two operations and never left the hospital. I saw myself on the starched sheet, pale, hovering between life and death, the doctors thick around me,

the first such case they'd ever seen. And such a pretty girl, so brave.

"I won't go either. Those hick schools!"

"Rob!"

"I won't!"

I turned from the sink to see her standing at the table looking at me. I knew that if I said no, too, we wouldn't go. I knew that. She was waiting, not moving. Maybe not even breathing. And I thought, I can't decide. I'm not old enough. I don't understand enough. She waited, and I knew that I was afraid, not like in the movies, or from reading a horror story, not like anything I'd ever felt before. I nodded.

So Eleanor went to college and Rob went to live with our uncle and Mother and I began the long drive home. I took a test once, along with some of the girls. It was a scientific personality survey to gauge the chances of your having a happy marriage. Joanne found it in a true love magazine. One of the questions was, "Are your parents (1) estatic together, (2) happy, (3) neutral, (4) unhappy, (5) miserable?" I checked number one. My score showed that I would have a much better than average marriage. They never fought, and it seemed natural to walk into a room where they were and see his arms about her, or see them kissing, or something like that. I couldn't really believe they'd still be interested in sex, he was already forty and she was nearly there. At that time I thought they'd had sexual intercourse in the past because they had wanted a family, and I forgave them for it.

It rained almost every day in April. Toward the end of the month on a day when the sun finally came out I kneeled on the big red chair with my chin on the back, not thinking, not really looking out even. And suddenly I was crying, and I hated the day for being sunny and the air for being warm, and Rob for having a band practice and Eleanor for having a part-time job.

"Elizabeth, honey." She put her arm around my shoulders and I hated her because she wasn't crying.

I pulled away, but I couldn't stop crying. That night I woke up and went to the kitchen for a drink. As I went by the living room, I saw her, in the same chair, the same position, and beyond her the moon was lighting up the

back yard. I kept thinking of that afternoon and night on our way to Salyerville. I hadn't gone to her because I had known she'd pull away from me just exactly the same way I had pulled from her. We had both cried in his chair, hopelessly, unable to stop or be consoled. And now we were going to do something about it. I didn't know what. But I felt certain we were on our way to do something about it.

I wouldn't go to church or Sunday school after he died. The minister came out to talk to us all, and he kept saying things like God's ways are mysterious, and death is but a transition from this life to a better one, and Jesus would save us all from damnation, if we would admit him to our hearts and not be bitter over God's will being done on Earth. Rob kept saying "Yeah," and "I guess so," to his questions. Eleanor treated him like special company. "Wouldn't you like more coffee, or another piece of cake?" Mother didn't say much. She was knitting Eleanor a vest, and she watched her needles and the yarn, although her hands could do it alone. I glanced at her once or twice, then away again, afraid she'd see me looking. I was embarrassed for her.

"Elizabeth, won't you come back to us Sunday? Let us help you in this difficult time. Let God help you."

I stared at the cake I was holding.

"Elizabeth!" Eleanor's voice, the voice she used if I tagged along when she didn't want me. The voice she used when I mimicked one of her boyfriends.

I shook my head.

"Elizabeth, God will help you."

I looked at the minister then. He was sincere, his eyes were bulging a little and his cheeks were very pink and moist. I shook my head again. He reached out for me and I drew back. I didn't want him to hold my hand while he prayed God to comfort me. Eleanor had held still for it, I wouldn't. I drew back and stood up, holding the dessert plate very carefully. "Daddy didn't believe in God. I don't either. And if I did, I'd hate Him!"

Rob wanted to belt me. Another hour, he must have been thinking. Later, his glance threatened. I'll fix you later. Eleanor was humiliated and ashamed of me. She'd want to fix me later too. Mother put the vest on the

table and stood up. "Excuse us, will you please. Come along, Elizabeth." And she took me out, down the hall to my door, and gave me enough of a nudge to get me started inside. I was still carrying the cake, but now I was shaking. She reached out and took the dish and put it down on my dresser. No one ever mentioned the incident to me again. The minister didn't come back.

After the interstate highway the state road we took was like something you might see a stagecoach on at any time. Originally built too narrow, it was trimmed even more by eroding shoulders. We were in hills that became steeper as we drove. The road twisted and turned to conform to the valleys as much as possible and although it was September each valley was a heat trap, holding moist heavy air.

I glanced at Mother from time to time. She was wearing a little white head scarf to keep her hair from blowing, but strands of hair had pulled loose and they were curling about her face. I thought what a pretty profile she had. I had always simply accepted her prettiness without thinking about it, this appreciation of her profile and the curling bits of hair below her ear and against her cheek wasn't like that. I studied her face, examined it closely for flaws and good points, the same way I'd do a new girl at school, or one of Eleanor's new boyfriends. My mother was very pretty.

"What's the matter, honey?"

"Is it always this hot?"

"Of course not. Feels like a storm might come up."

The sky was deep blue, cloudless. I stared at the road. She was humming, very low, probably didn't even know she was doing it. I got out the road map and began adding up the miles from the highway to Salyersville. We were only doing about forty. One hundred ten miles, about.

"I don't think it's very accurate," she said. "See how far it is to Honeyville, will you?"

"This road?"

She swerved around a pothole and for the next few minutes was too preoccupied to answer. Our speed dropped to thirty.

"I guess no one goes there from the north anymore," she said finally, when we made a sharp curve and came out on a straight road that was relatively smooth.

We had been on the road for two hours, it was almost five. There was a break in the hills westward, and through the gap I saw the sky. It was grey on black, and moving. Mother looked at the sky and braked hard; for what seemed like a long time we watched the roiling clouds through the opening in the hills, like looking at a fight through a keyhole. There was a tension in Mother that hadn't been there before, not even when a passing truck swung in ahead of us and nearly forced us off the road early in the day. She stared at the clouds, then turned to look at the road we'd come over, and then squinted at the long valley before us. It was a narrow valley, the road went over a couple of bridges, then seemed to end at the base of a steep rocky hill. I knew that was just another of the sharp turns, that after it the road might continue at the base of the hills that had become mountains, or we might start climbing yet another chilling mountain road, pot-holed, with no guardrails. I didn't want to be on a road like that when the storm broke. There was no sound in the valley, and with the thought I knew I was wrong. Water. A stream off to the right, hidden by bushes and low trees, but now I could hear it faintly. The clouds had completely filled the gap. It was like watching the creation of a new mountain range, the upward thrust of darkness. The air was as hot and heavy as ever, more so since we weren't making our own breeze, but suddenly I shivered.

Mother lighted a cigarette, and that added to my fear; she smoked very seldom. Being afraid when you don't know why is the worst kind of fear, I thought, and tried to find a reason.

"Well, we can't go back. Can't turn around here, and I don't have nerve enough to back up over that last stretch. And we can't stay here. So, onward. Right?"

"Why can't we just wait for it to storm and be done with it?"

She started the car and accelerated to sixty, then had to brake hard for the first of the bridges. "Look at it, honey. If there's a downpour, that little stream will almost fill this valley." The bridge was like many others we had crossed, posted *Narrow Bridge. 10 M.P.H.* Rickety, ancient, its sides close enough to brush us, four, five, six times the width of the tiny stream it crossed. I glanced toward the

west and now it looked as if a grey-black mountain range had grown up to the sky and was advancing eastward.

"That was pretty dumb of them," I muttered, looking at the crumbling road ahead, obviously much flooded in the past. "Why'd they make the road so low? Why didn't they raise it or something?"

She concentrated on driving and I watched the road and bridges also. It wasn't that the bridges were so ancient, I decided. It was their design; they had been built for a different kind of traffic, not wide swift automobiles. We got out of the valley only minutes before the storm broke and we stopped on the road that began to climb into the mountains again. I twisted to watch the streams turn into torrents; the water swirled and boiled over the road in several places. It became very hot in the car quickly, and it seemed that the rain was from all directions at once. There was no window that we could open without having rain blow in, and in spurts it came down so hard that it was like being parked under a waterfall, and only the pounding roar of water could be heard. Then a lightning streak would illuminate everything, the hills, the blowing trees, the rocks that appeared turned to glass under the sheen of water, all would flash into sight with painful intensity followed by the equally painful blast of thunder.

After the storm, night came suddenly. Driving was even more treacherous because all the holes had been filled with water. I searched the map for a turnoff, another road, anyplace to spend the night. Nothing. Sometimes we passed other roads, deeply rutted gravel or dirt roads that intersected ours, vanished among the rocks of the hills. We didn't turn onto any of them. It would have been stupid to exchange bad for worse. Occasionally we smelled wood smoke. Cooking stoves, Mother said. She was smoking a lot now, more than I'd ever seen before. Our road got worse, the surface was crushed rock, and it was narrower.

I dozed and dreamed of being in bed, warm, and comfortable, listening to the light murmur of Mother's voice, and the deeper growly tone of Father's. I woke with a jerk, "Are you all right?" I asked her, as if she had been the one to doze.

"I'm fine." Her voice was tight.

"Maybe we should just stop and sleep in the car."

"The mosquitoes would eat us up." She pushed in the cigarette lighter and groped in her bag for her cigarettes. "We surely will get to Honeyville before long now."

I found the cigarette pack for her, a new one. It was after eight and I was getting hungrier and hungrier. "I hope there's a restaurant there." This was part of it, I thought, glancing at her as the tip of her cigarette brightened. There had to be a better way to get to Salyersville. A better road, even if it meant going out of the way a bit. We should have been there by six, according to our pre-trip estimate. Seven at the latest. I didn't fall asleep again, but everything got more and more dreamlike. A mist lay low in the valleys and that was right too. It had to be hard and dangerous and seemingly endless. It couldn't be just another trip. Orange eyes hung above the mist straight ahead.

"Betty, flick your dimmers, tap the horn. It's paralyzed, hypnotized by the headlights."

I hit the floor hard and my fingers clenched, ready to whip the car around the animal. The mist swallowed it. I wet my lips and opened my hands and looked at her. She was too rigid, as frightened as I was. If we had a wreck, no one would find us. No one would know. There hadn't been another car, truck, nothing. I stretched my legs to ease a cramp in my right foot, my braking foot. I tried to imagine how cramped she must be feeling, the soreness of her calf, her shoulders, the stiffness in her neck. She reached up and rubbed the back of her neck.

"Remember that time we were on our way back from Canada?" she said, almost shrilly. "Your father . . . We saw a deer on the road that night too. He said . . ."

"I remember."

It had been a long time since our road had crossed another road. I strained to see the map under the dashlight, but it didn't help. I had no idea where we were any longer. "Mother, why Honeyville? I can't even find it."

"It's on a side road. I can't remember the number. It was just the road to Honeyville." She pushed herself back in the seat, stretching. "I know some people there. We could spend the night. My cousin and I used to exchange visits. Aunt Tattie lived there."

Before I could ask who she was, Mother said, "Not really my aunt. Or anyone else's, far as I know. She could take off warts."

I couldn't stop my left hand from jerking, as if trying to hide all by itself. The warts on my little finger and ring finger felt larger than ever. "Will we see her?" I had read about people like that who could do things.

"Oh, honey, she was an old woman when I saw her the last time, twenty-five years ago." We came to a crossroad then. She hesitated a moment, then shook her head and drove on. It was ten thirty. The fog or mist was denser now. We were creeping along in a white cylinder that grew higher and more solid as I watched. Beyond the walls the world was strange and unknown here, and invisible. It might have been nonexistent, and only the fog cylinder and the car real.

"Was Aunt Tattie a healer?"

"No. Oh, warts, and some said other kinds of skin blemishes, birthmarks, and the like. My father didn't believe in such things. We weren't really allowed to talk about her, or to see her. But we all did at one time or another."

Like Father and my Tarot cards, I thought, and the magazine horoscopes and the palmist who put up a sign at the beach a few years ago. I tried to imagine Mother twenty-five years ago. Long hair? Like mine? Father always said I looked like her, same red-brown hair, same size and shape. "I just hope someone has something to eat," I said and studied the fog.

We turned at the next intersection. It had to be wrong, I thought. We bounced along on a dirt road that went up and down and back and forth. Mother's hands were very tight on the steering wheel and she stared straight ahead. She wasn't smoking at all now. Suddenly I was jolted out of the dreamlike state that I kept slipping into by her voice. I thought she had cried out. She laughed harshly. "I'm sorry, honey. I yawned. You'd better talk to me, I'm getting pretty sleepy."

The road was worse, but the fog was lifting, and off to the right I could see the dim shape of a barn. Farmland here. Maybe here the radio would pick up a station. There'd been nothing but static since leaving the interstate

highway that morning. I gave it up after a minute or two. Still nothing.

"Nothing has changed here at all," Mother said, adroitly skirting a hole. "Did I mention to you after this year, after the insurance is settled and everything is straightened out, I'm going back to the university for my Ph.D.?"

"What for?" I stared at her, but she was still looking straight ahead, only now I thouht her lips were curved in a faint smile.

"You know that I was just two credits short of my master's degree. Then Eleanor came along, and . . . well, I always thought that some day I'd finish up and go into research psychology. There are so many things . . ."

I clenched my hands, wanting to scream at her, No! That isn't what we're coming back for! But I didn't know why we were coming back, so I didn't say anything, and then I saw the first lights. Honeyville.

Much of the town was dark. There were three dim street lights, and a few old cars parked along the street, but it seemed that almost everyone was in bed already. Then Mother said, in an excited voice, "For heaven's sake! There's Aunt Tattie's house!" She slowed down, then stopped. "She'll know if Emma is still here. Come on." We got out of the car and went up the sidewalk to the frame house with a wide porch. A bare light bulb hung from a chain on the porch. Mother had started up before me, but she stopped and I caught up with her. She turned back toward the car, "You go on and knock. I left my purse in the car."

I took several more steps toward the door; it was open and I tried to see inside without entering. Then I heard a grumbling voice. "Don't hold the screen open. Mosquitoes thick as dust in here. "I went inside. An old woman was sitting at a small table. She beckoned to me without looking up. "Don't be skittish, girl. I don't eat young'uns." She was unbelievably old, her skin was brown and thin, transparent on her hands. She reached out and took my left hand, then rubbed her thumb over the warts, mumbling in a barely audible monotone. "Rub a seed potato over them, then bury it where the moon will shine on it and when the potato rots the warts will be gone." She

raised her head and the brilliant blue eyes that studied me were young eyes with dancing lights in them. I don't know how long I stood with my hand in that ancient hand, staring at those young eyes. Emma's voice roused me, broke the tableau. I pulled my hand away.

"What did she tell you?" Emma asked, walking home. "I heard the part about a better than average marriage, and three kids. What else?"

I looked up and down the quiet dirt road, and the dark little town. There was nothing to see, "I don't remember," I said. Then I did. "She said that I'd become a famous scientist, or something." We giggled over that for a long time after we went to bed, until Aunt Janie told Emma she'd send her Pa in if she heard anything else out of us.

I didn't go to sleep. I stared at the ceiling and felt a fear that I couldn't explain or rid myself of as if somehow the world had shifted and nothing was what I had thought it was. But I couldn't describe why it frightened me so. And under the fear, waiting for it to ease, there was an overwhelming sadness that finally seized me and I buried my face in the pillow and wept, and didn't know why.

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