BERKLEY SCIENCE FICTION

HARLAN ELLISON • AVRAM DAVIDSON • R. A. LAFFERTY
KATE WILHELM • GARDNER R. DOZOIS • THOM LEE WHARTON
GENE WOLFE • LIZ HUFFORD • ROBERT F. YOUNG
ROBERT E. MARGROFF & ANDREW J. OFFUTT • CAROL CARR
PIP WINN • TED THOMAS • GRAHAM CHARNOCK

S1970 ★ 75¢

Fourteen stories especially written for

ORBIT 8

EDITED BY
DAMON KNIGHT

ORBIT 8

is the latest in this unique series of anthologies of the best new SF: fourteen stories written especially for this collection by some of the top names in the field.

—Harlan Ellison in "One Life, Furnished in Early Poverty" tells a moving story of a man who goes back in time to help his youthful self.

—Avram Davidson finds a new and sinister significance in the first robin of Spring.

—R. A. Lafferty reveals a monstrous microfilm record of the past.

—Kate Wilhelm finds real horror in a story of boy-meets-girl.

—and ten other tales by some of the most original minds now writing in this most exciting area of today's fiction are calculated to blow the mind.

OTHER ORBIT ANTHOLOGIES

AVAILABLE AS BERKLEY MEDALLION

PAPERBACKS

ORBIT 4

ORBIT 5

ORBIT 6

ORBIT 7

ORBIT 8

EDITED BY

DAMON KNIGHT

An Anthology
of New Science Fiction Stories

A BERKLEY MEDALLION BOOK
PUBLISHED BY
BERKLEY PUBLISHING CORPORATION

Published by arrangement with the editor

Originally published by G. P. Putnam's Sons

BERKLEY MEDALLION EDITION,
MARCH, 1971

SBN-01970-5

BERKLEY MEDALLION BOOKS are published by
Berkley Publishing Corporation
200 Madison Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10016

BERKLEY MEDALLION BOOKS ® TM 757,375

Printed in Canada

CONTENTS

ORBIT 8

\

GARDNER R. DOZOIS

HORSE OF AIR

Sometimes when the weather is good I sit and look out over the city, fingers hooked through the mesh.

—The mesh is weather-stained, beginning to rust. As his fingers scrabble at it, chips of rust flake off, staining his hands the color of crusted blood. The heavy wire is hot and smooth under his fingers, turning rougher and drier at a rust spot. If he presses his tongue against the wire, it tastes slightly of lemons. He doesn't do that very often—

The city is quieter now. You seldom see motion, mostly birds if you do. As I watch, two pigeons strut along the roof ledge of the low building several stories below my balcony, stopping every now and then to pick at each other's feathers. They look fatter than ever. I wonder what they eat these days? Probably it is better not to know. They have learned to keep away from me anyway, although the mesh that encloses my small balcony floor to ceiling makes it difficult to get at them if they do land nearby. I'm not really hungry, of course, but they are noisy and leave droppings. I don't really bear any malice

toward them. It's not a personal thing; I do it for the upkeep of the place.

(I hate birds. I will kill any of them I can reach. I do it with my belt buckle, snapping it between the hoops of wire.)

—He hates birds because they have freedom of movement, because they can fly, because they can shift their viewpoint from spot to spot in linear space, while he can do so only in time and memory, and that imperfectly. They can fly here and look at him and then fly away, while he has no volition: if he wants to look at them, he must wait until they decide to come to him. He flicks a piece of plaster at them, between the hoops—

Startled by something, the pigeons explode upward with a whir of feathers. I watch them fly away: skimming along the side of a building, dipping with an air current. They are soon lost in the maze of low roofs that thrust up below at all angles and heights, staggering toward the Apartment Towers in the middle distance. The Towers stand untouched by the sea of brownstones that break around their flanks, like aloof monoliths wading in a surf of scummy brown brick. Other Towers march off in curving lines toward the horizon, becoming progressively smaller until they vanish at the place where a misty sky merges with a line of low hills. If I press myself against the mesh at the far right side of the balcony, I can see the nearest Tower to my own, perhaps six hundred yards away, all of steel and concrete with a vertical line of windows running down the middle and rows of identical balconies on either side.

Nearest to me on the left is a building that rises about a quarter of the way up my Tower's flank: patterns of dark brown and light red bricks, interlaced with fingers of mortar; weathered grey roof shingles, a few missing here and there in a manner reminiscent of broken teeth; a web of black chimney and sewage pipes crawling up and across the walls like metallic creepers. All covered with the pale splotches of bird droppings. The Towers are much cleaner; not so many horizontal surfaces. Windows are broken in the disintegrating buildings down there; the dying sunlight glints from fangs of shattered glass. Curtains hang in limp shreds that snap and drum when a wind

comes up. If you squint, you can see that the wind has scattered broken twigs and rubbish all over the floors inside. No, I am much happier in one of the Towers.

(I hate the Towers. I would rather live anywhere than here.)

—He hates the Towers. As the sun starts to dip below the horizon, settling down into the concrete labyrinth like a hog into a wallow, he shakes his head blindly and makes a low noise at the back of his throat. The shadows of buildings are longer now, stretching in toward him from the horizon like accusing fingers. A deep grey gloom is gathering in the corners and angles of walls, shot with crimson sparks from the foundering sun, now dragged under and wrapped in chill masonry. His hands go up and out, curling again around the hoops of the mesh. He shakes the mesh violently, throwing his weight against it. The mesh groans in metallic agony but remains solid. A few chips of concrete puff from the places where the ends of the mesh are anchored to the walls. He continues to tear at the mesh until his hands bleed, half-healed scabs torn open again. Tiny blood droplets spatter the heavy wire. The blood holds the deeper color of rust—

If you have enough maturity to keep emotionalism out of it, the view from here can even be fascinating. The sky is clear now, an electric, saturated blue, and the air is as sharp as a jeweler's glass. Not like the old days. Without factories and cars to keep it fed, even the eternal smog has dissipated. The sky reminds me now of an expensive aquarium filled with crystal tropical water, me at the bottom: I almost expect to see huge eyes peering in from the horizon, maybe a monstrous nose pressed against the glass. On a sunny day you can see for miles.

But it is even more beautiful when it rains. The rain invests the still landscape with an element of motion: long fingers of it brushing across the rooftops or marching down in zigzag sheets, the droplets stirring and rippling the puddles that form in depressions, drumming against the flat concrete surfaces, running down along the edges of the shingles, foaming and sputtering from downspouts. The Towers stand like lords, swirling rain mists around them as a fine gentleman swirls his jeweled cloak. Preg-

nant grey clouds scurry by behind the Towers, lashed by wind. The constant stream of horizontals past the fixed vertical fingers of the Towers creates contrast, gives the eye something to follow, increases the relief of motion. Motion is heresy when the world has become a still-life. But it soothes, the old-time religion. There are no atheists in foxholes, nor abstainers when the world begins to flow. But does that prove the desirability of God or the weakness of men? I drink when the world flows, but unwillingly, because I know the price. I have to drink, but I also have to pay. I will pay later when the motion stops and the world returns to lethargy, the doldrums made more unbearable by the contrast known a moment before. That is another cross that I am forced to bear.

But it is beautiful, and fresh-washed after. And sometimes there is a rainbow. Rain is the only esthetic pleasure I have left, and I savor it with the unhurried leisure of the aristocracy.

—When the rain comes, he flattens himself against the mesh, arms spread wide as if crucified there, letting the rain hammer against his face. The rain rolls in runnels down his skin, mixing with sweat, counterfeiting tears. Eyes closed, he bruises his open mouth against the mesh, trying to drink the rain. His tongue dabs at the drops that trickle by his mouth, licks out for the moisture oozing down along the links of wire. After the storm, he sometimes drinks the small puddles that gather on the balcony ledge, lapping them noisily and greedily, although the tap in the kitchen works, and he is never thirsty—

Always something to look at from here. Directly below are a number of weed-overgrown yards, chopped up unequally by low brick walls, nestled in a hollow square formed by the surrounding brownstones. There is even a tree in one corner, though it is dead and its limbs are gnarled and splintered. The yards were never neatly kept by the rabble that lived there, even in the old days: they are scattered with trash and rubbish, middens of worn-out household items and broken plastic toys, though the weeds have covered much. There was a neat, bright flower bed in one of the further yards, tended by a bent and leather-skinned foreign crone of impossible age, but the weeds

have overgrown that as well, drowning the rarer blossoms. This season there were more weeds, fewer flowers—they seem to survive better, though God knows they have little else to recommend them, being coarse and ill-smelling.

In the closest yard an old and ornate wicker-back chair is still standing upright; if I remember correctly, a pensioner bought it at a rummage sale and used it to take the sun, being a parasite good for nothing else. Weeds are twining up around the chair; it is half-hidden already. Beyond is a small concrete court where hordes of ragged children used to play ball. Its geometrical white lines are nearly obliterated now by rain and wind-drifted gravel. If you look sharp at this clearing, sometimes you can see the sudden flurry of a small darting body through the weeds: a rat or a cat, hard to tell at this distance.

Once, months ago, I saw a man and a woman there, my first clear indication that there are still people alive and about. They entered the court like thieves, crawling through a low window, the man lowering the girl and then jumping down after. They were dressed in rags, and the man carried a rifle and a bandolier. After reconnoitering, the man forced one of the rickety doors into a brownstone, disappearing inside. After a while he came out dragging a mattress—filthy, springs jutting through fabric—and carried it into the ball court. They had intercourse there for the better part of the afternoon, stopping occasionally while the man prowled about with the rifle. I remember thinking that it was too bad the gift of motion had been wasted on such as these. They left at dusk. I had not tried to signal them, leaving them undisturbed to their rut, although I was somewhat sickened by the coarse brutality of the act. There *is* such a thing as *noblesse oblige*.

(I hate them. If I had a gun I would kill them. At first I watch greedily as they make love, excited, afraid of scaring them away if they should become aware of me watching. But as the afternoon wears on, I grow drained, and then angry, and begin to shout at them, telling them to get out, get the hell out. They ignore me. Their tanned skin is vivid against asphalt as they strain together. Sweat makes their locked limbs glisten in the thick sunlight. The

rhythmic rise and fall of their bodies describes parabolic lines through the crusted air. I scream at them and tear at the mesh, voice thin and impotent. Later they make love again, rolling from the mattress in their urgency, sprawling among the lush weeds, coupling like leopards. I try to throw plaster at them, but the angle is wrong. As they leave the square, the man gives me the finger.)

Thinking of those two makes me think of the other animals that howl through the world, masquerading as men. On the far left, hidden by the nearest brownstones but winding into sight further on, is a highway. Once it was a major artery of the city, choked with a chrome flood of traffic. Now it is empty. Once or twice at the beginning I would see an ambulance or a fire engine, once a tank. A few weeks ago I saw a jeep go by, driving square in the middle of the highway, ridden by armed men. Occasionally I have seen men and women trudge past, dragging their possessions behind them on a sledge. Perhaps the wheel is on the way out.

Against one curb is the overturned, burned-out hulk of a bus: small animals use it for a cave now, and weeds are beginning to lace through it. I saw it burning, a week after the Building Committee came. I sat on the balcony and watched its flames eat up at the sky, although it was too dark to make out what was happening around it; the street lights had been the first things to go. There were other blazes in the distance, glowing like campfires, like blurred stars. I remember wondering that night what was happening, what the devil was going on. But I've figured it out now.

It was the niggers. I hate to say it. I've been a liberal man all my life. But you can't deny the truth. They are responsible for the destruction, for the present degeneration of the world. It makes me sad to have to say this. I had always been on their side in spirit, I was more than willing to stretch out a helping hand to those less fortunate than myself. I always said so; I always said that. I had high hopes for them all. But they got greedy, and brought us to this. We should have known better, we should have listened to the so-called racists, we should have realized that idealism is a wasting disease, a cancer. We should

have remembered that blood will tell. A hard truth: it was the niggers. I have no prejudice; I speak of cold facts. I had always wished them well.

(I hate niggers. They are animals. Touching one would make me vomit.)

—He hates niggers. He has seen them on the street corners with their women, he has seen them in their juke-boxed caves with their feet in sawdust, he has heard them speaking in a private language half devised of finger snaps and motions of liquid hips, he has felt the inquiry of their eyes, he has seen them dance. He envies them for having a culture separate from the bland familiarity of his own, he envies their tang of the exotic. He envies their easy sexuality. He fears their potency. He fears that in climbing up they will shake him down. He fears generations of stored-up hate. He hates them because their very existence makes him uncomfortable. He hates them because sometimes they have seemed to be happy on their tenement street corners, while he rides by in an air-conditioned car and is not. He hates them because they are not part of the mechanism and yet still have the audacity to exist. He hates them because they have escaped—

Dusk has come, hiding a world returned to shame and barbarism. It occurs to me that I may be one of the few members of the upper class left. The rabble were always quick to blame their betters for their own inherent inferiority and quick to vent their resentment in violence when the opportunity arose. The other Apartment Towers are still occupied, I think; I can see the lights at night, as they can see mine, if there is anyone left there to see. So perhaps there are still a few of us left. Perhaps there is still some hope for the world after all.

Although what avail to society is their survival if they are as helpless as I? We may be the last hope of restoring order to a land raped by Chaos, and we are being wasted. We are born to govern, to regulate, prepared for it by station, tradition and long experience: leadership comes as naturally to us as drinking and fornication come to the masses of the Great Unwashed. We are being wasted, our experience and foresight pissed away by fools who will not listen.

And we dwindle. I speak of us as a class, as a corporate "we." But there are fewer lights in the other Towers every month. Last night I counted less than half the number I could see a year ago. On evenings when the wind grows bitter with autumn cold, I fear that I will soon be the only one left with the courage to hold out. It would be so easy to give in to despair; the quietus of hopelessness is tempting. But it is a siren goddess, made of tin. Can't the others see that? To give up is to betray their blood. But still the lights dwindle. At times I have the dreadful fancy that I will sit here one night and watch the last light flicker out in the last Tower, leaving me alone in darkness, the only survivor of a noble breed. Will some improbable alien archaeologist come and hang a sign on my cage: the last of the aristocracy?

Deep darkness now. The lights begin to come on across the gulfs of shadow, but I am afraid to count them. Thinking of these things has chilled me, and I shudder. The wind is cold, filled with dampness. There will be a storm later. Distant lightning flickers behind the Towers, each flash sending jagged shadows leaping toward me, striking blue highlights from every reflecting surface. Each lightning stroke seems to momentarily reverse the order of things, etching the Towers in black relief against the blue-white dazzle of the sky, then the brilliance draining, leaving the Towers as before: islands of light against an inky background of black. The cycle is repeated, shadows lunging in at me, in at me, thrusting swords of nigger-blackness. It was on a hellish night like this that the Building Committee came.

It was a mistake to give them so much power. I admit it. I'm not too proud to own up to my own mistakes. But we were tired of struggling with an uncooperative and unappreciative society. We were beaten into weariness by a horde of supercilious bastards, petty and envious little men hanging on our coattails and trying to chivy us down. We were sick of people with no respect, no traditions, no heritage, no proper ambitions. We were disgusted by a world degenerating at every seam, in every aspect. We had finally realized the futility of issuing warnings no one would listen to. Even then the brakes could have been ap-

plied to our skidding society if someone had bothered to listen, if anyone had had the guts and foresight to take the necessary measures. But we were tired, and we were no longer young.

So we traded our power for security. We built the Towers; we formed a company, turned our affairs over to them, and retired from the world into our own tight-knit society. Let the company have the responsibility and the problems, let them deal with the pressures and the decisions, let them handle whatever comes; we will be safe and comfortable regardless. They are the bright, ambitious technicians; let them cope. They are the expendable soldiers; let them fight and be expended as they are paid for doing; we shall be safe behind the lines. Let them have the mime show of power; we are civilized enough to enjoy the best things of life without it. We renounce the painted dreams; they are hollow.

It was a mistake.

It was a mistake to give them the voting proxies; Anderson was a fool, senile before his time. It was all a horrible mistake. I admit it. But we were no longer young.

And the world worsened, and one day the Building Committee came.

It was crisis, they said, and Fear was walking in the land. And the Charter specified that we were to be protected, that we must not be disturbed. So they came with the work crews and meshed over my balcony. And welded a slab of steel over my door as they left. They would not listen to my protest, wrapped in legalities, unvulnerable in armor of technical gobbledygook. Protection was a specific of the Charter, they said, and with the crisis this was the only way they could ensure our protection should the outer defenses go down; it was a temporary measure.

And the work crews went about their business with slap-dash efficiency, and the balding, spectacled foreman told me he only worked here. So I stood quietly and watched them seal me in, although I was trembling with rage. I am no longer young. And I would not lose control before these vermin. Every one of them was waiting for it, hoping for it in their petty, resentful souls, and I would let myself be flayed alive before I would give them the

satisfaction. It is a small comfort to me that I showed them the style with which a gentleman can take misfortune.

(When I finally realize what they are doing, I rage and bluster. The foreman pushes me away. "It's for your own good," he says, mouthing the cliché halfheartedly, not really interested. I beat at him with ineffectual fists. Annoyed, he shrugs me off and ducks through the door. I try to run after him. One of the guards hits me in the face with his rifle butt. Pain and shock and a brief darkness. And then I realize that I am lying on the floor. There is blood on my forehead and on my mouth. They have almost finished maneuvering the steel slab into place, only a man-sized crack left open. The guard is the only one left in the room, a goggled technician just squeezing out through the crack. The guard turns toward the door. I hump myself across the room on my knees, crawling after him, crying and begging. He plants his boot on my shoulder and pushes me disgustedly away. The room tumbles, I roll over twice, stop, come up on my elbows and start to crawl after him again. He says, "Fuck off, Dad," and slaps his rifle, jangling the magazine cartridge in the breech. I stop moving. He glares at me, then leaves the room. They push the slab all the way closed. It makes a grinding, rumbling sound, like a subway train. Still on my knees, I throw myself against it, but it is solid. Outside there are welding noises. I scream.)

There is a distant rumbling now. Thunder: the storm is getting nearer. The lightning flashes are more intense, and closer together. They are too bright, too fast, blending into one another, changing the dimensions of the world too rapidly. With the alternating of glare and thrusting shadow there is too much motion, nothing ever still for a second, nothing you can let your eye rest on. Watching it strains your vision. My eyes ache with the motion.

I close them, but there are squiggly white afterimages imprinted on the insides of my eyelids. A man of breeding should know how to control his emotions. I do; in the old circles, the ones that mattered, I was known for my self-discipline and refinement. But this is an unseasonable night, and I am suddenly afraid. It feels like the bones are

being rattled in the body of the earth, it feels like maybe It will come now.

But that is an illusion. It is not the Time; It will not come yet. Only I know when the Time is, only I can say when It will come. And It will not come until I call for It, that is part of the bargain. I studied military science at Annapolis. I shall recognize the most strategic moment, I shall know when the Time is at hand for vengeance and retribution. I shall know. And the Time is not now. It will not come tonight. This is only an autumn storm.

I open my eyes. And find my stare returned. Windows ring me on all sides like walls of accusing, lidless eyes. Lightning oozes across the horizon: miniature reflections of the electric arc etched in cold echoes across a thousand panes of glass, a thousand matches struck simultaneously in a thousand dusty rooms.

A sequence of flares. The sky alternates too quickly to follow. Blue-white, black. Blue-white. Black again. The roofs flicker with invested motion, brick dancing in a jerky, silent-movie fashion.

Oh God, the chimneys, humped against dazzle, looming in shadow. Marching rows of smoky brick gargoyles, ash-cold now with not an ember left alive. The rows sway closer with every flash. I can hear the rutch of mortar-footed brick against tile, see the waddling, relentless rolling of their gait. They are people actually, the poor bastard refugees of the rabble frozen into brick, struck dumb with mortar. I saw it happen on the night of the Building Committee, thousands of people swarming like rats over the roofs to escape the burning world, caught by a clear voice of crystal that metamorphosed them with a single word, fixing them solid to the roofs, their hands growing into their knees, their heels into their buttocks, their heads thrown back with mouths gaped in a scream, flesh swapped for brick, blood for mortar. They hump toward me on their blunt knees in ponderously bobbing lines. With a sound like fusing steel, nigger-black shadows humping *in* at me. Christ hands sealing my eyes with clay stuffing down my mouth my throat filling Oh God oh christ christ *christ*

It is raining now. I will surely catch a chill standing here; there are vapors in the night air. Perhaps it would be advisable to go inside. Yes, I do think that would be best. Sometimes it is better to forget external things.

—He crawls away from the mesh on his hands and knees, although he is healthy and perfectly able to stand. He often crawls from place to place in the apartment; he thinks it gives him a better perspective. Rain patters on the balcony behind, drums against the glass of the French windows that open into the apartment. He claws at the framework of the windows, drags himself to his feet. He stands there for a moment, face pressed flat against the glass, trembling violently. His cheeks are wet. Perhaps he has been crying. Or perhaps it was the rain—

I turn on the light and go inside, closing the French windows firmly behind me. It is the very devil of a night outside. In here it is safe, even comfortable. This place is only a quarter of my actual apartment of course. The Building Committee sealed me in here, cut me off from the rest of my old place, which occupied most of this floor. Easier to defend me this way, the bastards said. So this apartment is smaller than what I'm used to living in, God knows. But in a strange way the smallness makes the place more cozy somehow, especially on a piggish night like this when fiends claw the windowpane.

I cross to the kitchen cubicle, rummage through the jars and cans; there's some coffee left from this week's shipment, I think. Yes, a little coffee left in one of the jars: instant; coarse, murky stuff. I had been used to better; once we drank nothing but fine-ground Colombian, and I would have spat in the face of any waiter who dared to serve me unpercolated coffee. This is one of the innumerable little ways in which we pay for our folly. A thousand little things, but together they add up into an almost unbearable burden, a leering Old Man of the Sea wrapped leech-fashion around my shoulders and growing heavier by the day. But this is defeatist talk. I am more tired than I would allow myself to admit. Here the coffee will help; even this bitter liquid retains that basic virtue in kind with the more palatable stuff. I heat some water, slosh it over the obscene granules into a cup. The cup is

cracked, no replacement for it: another little thing. A gust of wind rattles the glass in the French windows. I will not listen to it.

Weary, I carry the steaming cup into the living room, sit down in the easy chair with my back to the balcony. I try to balance the cup on my knee, but the damn thing is too hot; I finally rest it on the chair arm, leaving a moist ring on the fabric, but that hardly matters now. Can my will be weakening? Once I would have considered it sacrilege to sully fine furniture and would have gone to any length to avoid doing so. Now I am too wrapped in lassitude to get up and go into the kitchen for a coaster. Coffee seeps slowly into fabric, a widening brownish stain, like blood. I am almost too tired to lift the cup to my lips.

Degeneration starts very slowly, so deviously, so patiently that it almost seems to be a living thing; embodied it would be a weaselike animal armed with sly cunning and gnawing needle teeth. It never goes for your throat like a decent monster, so that you might have a chance of beating it down: it lurks in darkness, it gnaws furtively at the base of your spine, it burrows into your liver while you sleep. Like the succubi I try to guard against at night, it saps your strength, it sucks your breath in slumber, it etches away the marrow of your bones.

There is enough water in the tank for one more bath this week; I should wash, but I fear I'm too tired to manage it. Another example? It takes such a lot of *effort* to remain civilized. How tempting to say, "It no longer matters." It does matter. I say it does. I will make it matter. I cannot afford the seductive surrender of my unfortunate brethren; I have a responsibility they don't have. Perhaps I am luckier to have it in a way. It is an awesome responsibility, but carrying it summons up a corresponding strength, it gives me a reason for living, a goal outside myself. Perhaps my responsibility is what enables me to hang on, the knowledge of what is to come just enough to balance out the other pressures. The game has not yet been played to an end. Not while I still hold my special card.

Thinking of the secret, I look at the television set, but the atmospherics are wrong tonight for messages, and it's

probably too late for the haphazard programming they put out now. Some nights I leave the test pattern on, enjoying the flickering highlights it sends across the walls and ceilings, but tonight I think it will be more comfortable with just the pool of yellow glow cast by the lamp next to my chair, a barrier against the tangible darkness.

Looking at the television always reawakens my curiosity about the outside world. What is the state of society? The city I can see from my balcony seems to have degenerated into savagery, civilization seems to have been destroyed, but there are contradictions, there are ambiguities. Obviously the Building Committee must still be in existence somewhere. The electric lights and the plumbing still work in the Towers, a shipment of food supplies rattles up the pneumatic dumbwaiter into the kitchen cubicle twice a week, there are old movies and cartoons on television, running continuously with no commercials or live programming, never a hint of news. Who else could it be for but us? Who else could be responsible for it but the Building Committee? I've seen the city; it is dark, broken, inhabited by no one but a few human jackals who eke out a brute existence and hunt each other through the ruins. These facilities are certainly not operated for them—the other Towers are the only lighted buildings visible in the entire wide section of city visible from here.

No, it is the Building Committee. It must be. They are the only ones with the proper resources to hold a circle of order against a widening chaos. Those resources were vast. I know: we built them, we worked to make them flexible, we sweated to make them inexhaustible. We let their control pass out of our hands. One never finishes paying for past sins.

What a tremendous amount of trouble they've gone to, continuing to operate the Towers, even running a small television station somewhere to force-feed us the "entertainment" specified in the Charter. And never a word, never a glimpse of them, even for a second. Why? Why do they bother to keep up the pretense, the mocking hypocrisy of obeying the Charter? The real power is theirs now, why do they bother to continue the sham and lip service? Why don't they just shut down the Towers and leave us to

starve in our plush cells? Is it the product of some monstrous, sadistic sense of humor? Or is it the result of a methodical, fussily prim sense of order that refuses to deny a legal technicality even when the laws themselves have died? Do they laugh their young men's laughter when they think of the once-formidable old beasts they have caged?

I feel a surge of anger. I put the half-emptied cup carefully down on the rug. My hand is trembling. The Time is coming. It will be soon now. Soon they will heap some further indignity on me and force my hand. I will not have them laughing at me, those little men with maggots for eyes. Not when I still have it in my power to change it all. Not while I still am who I am. But not just yet. Let them have their victory, their smug laughter. An old tiger's fangs may be blunt and yellowing, but they can still bite. And even an old beast can still rise for one more kill.

I force myself to my feet. I have the inner strength, the discipline. They have nothing, they are the rabble, they are children trying out as men and parading in adult clothing. It was we who taught them the game, and we still know how to play it best. I force myself to wash, to fold the bed out from the wall, to lie still, fighting for calm. I run my eyes around the familiar dimensions of the apartment, cataloguing: pale blue walls, red draw curtains for the French windows, bookshelves next to the curtains, a black cushioned stool, the rug in patterns of orange and green against brown, a red shaggy chair and matching couch, the archways to the kitchen and bath cubicles. Nothing alien. Nothing hostile. I begin to relax. Thank God for familiarity. There is a certain pleasure in looking at well-known, well-loved things, a certain unshakable sense of reality. I often fall asleep counting my things.

(I hate this apartment. I hate everything in this apartment. I cannot stand to live here any longer. Someday I will chop everything to unrecognizable fragments and pile it in the middle of the floor and burn it, and I will laugh while it burns.)

—He is wakened by a shaft of sunlight that falls through the uncurtained French windows. He groans,

stirs, draws one foot up, heel against buttock, knee toward the ceiling. His hand clenches in the bedclothes. The sound of birds reaches him through the insulating glass. For a moment, waking, he thinks that he is elsewhere, another place, another time. He mutters a woman's name and his hand goes out to grope across the untouched, empty space beside him in the double bed. His hand encounters only the cool of sheets, no answering warmth of flesh. He grimaces, his bent leg snaps out to full length again, his suddenly desperate hand rips the sheet free of the mattress, finding nothing. He wrenches to his feet, neck corded, staggering. By the time his eyes slide open he has begun to scream—

I will not allow it. Do you hear me, bastards? *I will not allow it.* I will not stand for it. You've gone too far, I warn you, too far, I'll kill you. D'you hear? Niggers and thieves. The past is all I have. I will not have you touching it, I will not have you sliming and defiling it with your shitty hands. You leave her out of it, you leave her alone. What kind of men are you using her against me? *What kind of men are you?* Rabble not worth breath. Defiling everything you touch, everything better than you finer than you. I will not allow it.

It is time. It is *Time.*

The decision brings a measure of calm. I am committed now. They have finally driven me too far. It is time for me to play the final card. I will not let them remain unpunished for this another second, another breath. I will call for It, and It will come. I must keep control, there must be no mistakes. This is retribution. This is the moment I have waited for all these agonizing months. I must keep control, there must be no mistakes. It must be executed with dispatch, with precision. I breathe deeply to calm myself. There will be no mistakes, no hesitations.

Three steps take me to the television. I flick it on, waiting for it to warm. Impatience drums within me, tightly reined as a rearing Arabian stallion. So long, so long.

A picture appears on the screen: another imbecilic movie. I think of the Building Committee, unaware, living in the illusion of victory. Expertly, I remove the back of the television, my skilled fingers probing deep into the maze

of wires and tubes. I work with the familiarity of long practice. How many hours did I crouch like this, experimenting, before I found the proper frequency of the Others by trial and error? Patience was never a trait of the rabble; it is a talent reserved for the aristocracy. They didn't count on my patience. Mayflies themselves, they cannot understand dedication of purpose. They didn't count on my scientific knowledge, on my technical training at Annapolis. They didn't count on the resources and ingenuity of a superior man.

I tap two wires together, creating sparks, sending messages into ether. I am sending on the frequency of the Others, a prearranged signal in code: the Time is now. Let It come. Sweat in my eyes, fingers cramping, but I continue to broadcast. The Time is now. Let It come. At last a response, the Others acknowledging that they've received my order.

It is over.

Now It will come.

Now they will pay for their sins.

I sit back on my heels, drained. I have done my part. I have launched It on Its way, given birth to retribution, sowed the world with dragon's teeth. And they laughed. Now It is irreversible. Nothing can stop It. An end to all thieves and niggers, to all little men, to all the rabble that grow over the framework like weeds and ruin the order of the world. I stagger to the French windows, throw them open. Glass shatters in one frame, bright fragments against the weave of the rug. Onto the balcony where buildings press in at me unaware of Ragnarok. I collapse against the mesh, fingers spread, letting it take my weight. No motion in the world, but soon there will be enough. Far north, away from the sight of the city, the spaceships of the Others are busy according to plan, planting the thermal charges that will melt the icecap, shattering the earth-old ice, liberating the ancient waters, forming a Wave to thunder south and drown the world. I think of the Building Committee, of the vermin in the ruins of the city, even of my fellows in the other Towers. I am not sorry for them. I am no longer young, but I will take them with me into darkness. There will be no other eyes to

watch a sun I can no longer see. I have no regrets. I've always hated them. I hate them all.

(I hate them all.)

—He hates them all—

A moaning in the earth, a trembling, a drumming as of a billion billion hooves. The Tower sways queasily. A swelling, ragged shriek of sound.

The Wave comes.

Over the horizon, climbing, growing larger, stretching higher, filling up the sky, cutting off the sunlight, water in a green wall like glass hundreds of feet high, topped with fangs of foam, the Wave beginning to topple in like the closing fist of God. Its shadow over everything, night at noon as it sweeps in, closes down. The Towers etched like thin lines against its bulk. It is curling overhead is the sky now there is no sky now but the underbelly of the Wave coming down. I have time to see the Towers snapped like matchsticks broken stumps of fangs before it hits with the scream of grating steel and blackness clogs my throat to

(I have destroyed the world.)

—The shadow of the mesh on his face—

Sometimes you can see other people in the other Tower apartments, looking out from their own balconies. I wonder how they destroy the world?

—He turns away, dimly remembering a business appointment. Outside the lazy hooting of rush-hour traffic. There is a cartoon carnival on Channel Five—

HARLAN ELLISON

ONE LIFE, FURNISHED IN EARLY POVERTY

And so it was—strangely, strangely—that I found myself standing in the backyard of the house I had lived in when I was seven years old. At thirteen minutes till midnight on no special magical winter's night, in a town that had held me only till I was physically able to run away. In Ohio, in winter, near midnight—certain I could go back.

Not truly knowing *why* I even wanted to go back. But certain that I could. Without magic, without science, without alchemy, without supernatural assistance; just *go back*. Because I had to, I needed to . . . go back.

Back; thirty-five years and more. To find myself at the age of seven, before any of it had begun; before any of the directions had been taken; to find out what turning point in my life it had been that had wrenched me from the course all little boys took to adulthood and set me on the road of loneliness and success that ended here, back where I'd begun, in a backyard at now-twelve minutes to midnight.

At forty-two I had come to the point in my life I had

struggled toward since I was a child: a place of security, importance, recognition. The only one from this town who had made it. The ones who had had the most promise in school were now milkmen, used-car salesmen, married to fat, stupid *dead* women who had themselves been girls of exceeding promise in high school. *They* had been trapped in this little Ohio town, never to break free. To die there, unknown. I had broken free, had done all the wonderful things I'd said I would do.

Why should it all depress me now?

Perhaps it was because Christmas was nearing and I was alone, with bad marriages and lost friendships behind me.

I walked out of the studio, away from the wet-ink-new fifty-thousand-dollar contract, got in my car and drove to International Airport. It was a straight line made up of inflight meals and jet airliners and rental cars and hastily purchased winter clothing. A straight line to a backyard I had not seen in over thirty years.

I had to find the dragoon to go back.

Crossing the rime-frosted grass that crackled like cellophane, I walked under the shadow of the lightning-blasted pear tree. I had climbed in that tree endlessly when I was seven years old. In summer, its branches hung far over and scraped the roof of the garage. I could shinny out across the limb and drop onto the garage roof. I had once pushed Johnny Mummy off that garage roof . . . not out of meanness, but simply because I had jumped from it many times and I could not understand anyone's not finding it a wonderful thing to do. He had sprained his ankle, and his father, a fireman, had come looking for me. I'd hidden on the garage roof.

I walked around the side of the garage, and there was the barely visible path. To one side of the path I had always buried my toy soldiers. For no other reason than to bury them, know I had a secret place, and later dig them up again, as if finding treasure.

(It came to me that even now, as an adult, I did the same thing. Dining in a Japanese restaurant, I would hide small pieces of *pakkai* or pineapple or *terriyaki* in my rice bowl and pretend to be delighted when, later in the meal,

my chopsticks encountered the tiny treasures down in among the rice grains.)

I knew the spot, of course. I got down on my hands and knees and began digging with the silver penknife on my watch chain. It had been my father's penknife—almost the only thing he had left when he died.

The ground was hard, but I dug with enthusiasm, and the moon gave me more than enough light. Down and down I dug, knowing eventually I would come to the dragoon.

He was there. The bright paint rusted off his body, the saber corroded and reduced to a stub. Lying there in the grave I had dug for him thirty-five years before. I scooped the little metal soldier out of the ground and cleaned him off as best I could with my paisley dress handkerchief. He was faceless now, and as sad as I felt.

I hunkered there, under the moon, and waited for midnight, only a minute away, knowing it was all going to come right for me. After so terribly long.

The house behind me was silent and dark. I had no idea who lived there now. It would have been unpleasant if the strangers who now lived here had been unable to sleep and, rising to get a glass of water, had idly looked into the backyard. *Their* backyard. I had played here and built a world for myself here, from dreams and loneliness. Using talismans of comic books and radio programs and matinee movies and potent charms like the sad little dragoon in my hand.

My wristwatch said midnight, one hand laid straight on the other.

The moon faded. Slowly, it went gray and shadowy, till the glow was gone, and then even the gray afterimage was gone.

The wind rose. Slowly, it came from somewhere far away, and built around me. I stood up, pulling the collar of my topcoat around my neck. The wind was neither warm nor cold, yet it rushed, without even ruffling my hair. I was not afraid.

The ground was settling. Slowly, it lowered me the tiniest fractions of inches. But steadily, as though the layers of tomorrows that had been built up were vanishing.

My thoughts were of myself: *I'm coming to save you. I'm coming, Gus. You won't hurt anymore . . . you'll never have hurt.*

The moon came back. It had been full; now it was new. The wind died. It had carried me where I'd needed to go. The ground settled. The years had been peeled off.

I was alone in the backyard of the house at 89 Harmon Drive. The snow was deeper. It was a different house, though it was the same. It was not recently painted. The Depression had not been long ago; money was still tight. It wasn't weather-beaten, but in a year or two my father would have it painted. Light yellow.

There was a sumac tree growing below the window of the dinette. It was nourished by lima beans and soup and cabbage.

"You'll just sit there until you finish every drop of your dinner. We're not wasting food. There are children starving in Russia."

I put the dragoon in my topcoat pocket. He had worked more than hard enough. I walked around the side of the house. I smiled as I saw again the wooden milk box by the side door. In the morning, very early, the milkman would put three quarts of milk there, but before anyone could bring them in, this very cold winter morning in December, the cream would push its way up and the little cardboard caps would be an inch above the mouths of the bottles.

The gravel talked beneath my feet. The street was quiet and cold. I stood in the front yard, beside the big oak tree, and looked up and down.

It was the same. It was as though I'd never been away. I started to cry. Hello.

Gus was on one of the swings in the playground. I stood outside the fence of Lathrop Grade School, and watched him standing on the seat, gripping the ropes, pumping his little legs. He was smaller than I'd remembered him. He wasn't smiling as he tried to swing higher. It was serious to him.

Standing outside the hurricane fence, watching Gus, I was happy. I scratched at a rash on my right wrist, and smoked a cigarette, and was happy.

I didn't see them until they were out of the shadows of the bushes, almost on him.

One of them rushed up and grabbed Gus's leg, and tried to pull him off the seat, just as he reached the bottom of his swing. Gus managed to hold on, but the chain ropes twisted crazily and when the seat went back up, it hit the metal leg of the framework.

Gus fell, rolled face down in the dust of the playground, and tried to sit up. The boys pushed through between the swings, avoiding the berserk one that clanged back and forth.

Gus managed to get up, and the boys formed a circle around him. Then Jack Wheeldon stepped out and faced him. I remembered Jack Wheeldon.

He was taller than Gus. They were *all* taller than Gus, but Wheeldon was beefier. I could see shadows surrounding him. Shadows of a boy who would grow into a man with a beer stomach and thick arms. But the eyes would always remain the same.

He shoved Gus in the face. Gus went back, dug in and charged him. Gus came at him low, head tucked under, fists tight, arms braced close to the body. He hit him in the stomach and wrestled him around. They struggled together like inept club fighters, raising dust.

One of the boys in the circle took a step forward and hit Gus hard in the back of the head. Gus turned his face out of Wheeldon's stomach, and Wheeldon punched him in the mouth. Gus started to cry.

I'd been frozen, watching it happen, but he was crying—

I looked both ways down the fence and found the break far to my right. I threw the cigarette away as I dashed down the fence, trying to look behind me. Then through the break and I was running toward them the long distance from far right field of the baseball diamond, toward the swings and seesaws. They had Gus down now, and they were kicking him.

When they saw me coming, they started to run away. Jack Wheeldon paused to kick Gus once more in the side; then he, too, ran.

Gus was lying there, on his back, the dust smeared into

mud on his face. I bent down and picked him up. He wasn't moving, but he wasn't really hurt. I held him very close and carried him toward the bushes that rose on a small incline at the side of the playground. The bushes were cool overhead and they canopied us, hid us; I laid him down and used my handkerchief to clean away the dirt. His eyes were very blue. I smoothed the straight brown hair off his forehead. He wore braces; one of the rubber bands hooked onto the pins of the braces, used to keep them tension-tight, had broken. I pulled it free.

He opened his eyes and started crying again.

Something hurt in my chest.

He started snuffling, unable to catch his breath. He tried to speak, but the words were only mangled sounds, huffed out with too much air and pain.

Then he forced himself to sit up and rubbed the back of his hand across his runny nose.

He stared at me. It was panic and fear and confusion and shame at being seen this way. "Th-they hit me from in back," he said, snuffling.

"I know. I saw."

"D'jou scare'm off?"

"Yes."

He didn't say thank you. It wasn't necessary. The backs of my thighs hurt from squatting. I sat down.

"My name is Gus," he said, trying to be polite.

I didn't know what name to give him. I was going to tell him the first name to come into my head, but heard myself say, "My name is Mr. Rosenthal."

He looked startled. "That's *my* name, too. Gus Rosenthal!"

"Isn't that peculiar," I said. We grinned at each other, and he wiped his nose again.

I didn't want to see my mother or father. I had those memories. They were sufficient. It was little Gus I wanted to be with. But one night I crossed into the backyard at 89 Harmon Drive from the empty lots that would later be a housing development.

And I stood in the dark, watching them eat dinner.

There was my father. I hadn't remembered him being so handsome. My mother was saying something to him, and he nodded as he ate. They were in the dinette. Gus was playing with his food. *Don't mush your food around like that, Gus. Eat, or you can't stay up to hear* Lux Presents Hollywood.

But they're doing "Dawn Patrol."

Then don't mush your food.

"Momma," I murmured, standing in the cold, "Momma, there are children starving in Russia." And I added, thirty-five years late, "Name two, Momma."

I met Gus downtown at the newsstand.

"Hi."

"Oh. Hullo."

"Buying some comics?"

"Uh-huh."

"You ever read *Doll Man* and *Kid Eternity*?"

"Yeah, they're great. But I got them."

"Not the new issues."

"Sure do."

"Bet you've got *last* months. He's just checking in the new comics right now."

So we waited while the newsstand owner used the heavy wire snips on the bundles, and checked off the magazines against the distributor's long white mimeographed sheet. And I bought Gus *Airboy* and *Jingle Jangle Comics* and *Blue Beetle* and *Whiz Comics* and *Doll Man* and *Kid Eternity*.

Then I took him to Isaly's for a hot fudge sundae. They served it in a tall tulip glass with the hot fudge in a little pitcher. When the waitress had gone to get the sundaes, little Gus looked at me. "Hey, how'd you know I only liked crushed nuts, an' not whipped cream or a cherry?"

I leaned back in the high-walled booth and smiled at him.

"What do you want to be when you grow up, Gus?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

Somebody put a nickel in the Wurlitzer in his booth, and Glenn Miller swung into "String of Pearls."

"Well, did you ever think about it?"

"No, huh-uh. I like cartooning, maybe I could draw comic books."

"That's pretty smart thinking, Gus. There's a lot of money to be made in art." I stared around the dairy store, at the Coca-Cola posters of pretty girls with pageboy hairdos, drawn by an artist named Harold W. McCauley whose style would be known throughout the world, whose name would never be known.

He stared at me. "It's fun, too, isn't it?"

I was embarrassed. I'd thought first of money, he'd thought first of happiness. I'd reached him before he'd chosen his path. There was still time to make him a man who would think first of joy, all through his life.

"Mr. Rosenthal?"

I looked down and across, just as the waitress brought the sundaes. She set them down and I paid her. When she'd gone, Gus asked me, "Why did they call me a dirty Jewish elephant?"

"Who called you that, Gus?"

"The guys."

"The ones you were fighting that day?"

He nodded. "Why'd they say elephant?"

I spooned up some vanilla ice cream, thinking. My back ached, and the rash had spread up my right wrist onto my forearm. "Well, Jewish people are supposed to have big noses, Gus." I poured the hot fudge out of the little pitcher. It bulged with surface tension for a second, then spilled through its own dark-brown film, covering the three scoops of ice cream. "I mean, that's what some people *believe*. So I suppose they thought it was smart to call you an elephant, because an elephant has a big nose . . . a trunk. Do you understand?"

"That's dumb. I don't have a big nose . . . do I?"

"I wouldn't say so, Gus. They most likely said it just to make you mad. Sometimes people do that."

"That's dumb."

We sat there for a while and talked. I went far down inside the tulip glass with the long-handled spoon, and finished the deep dark, almost black bittersweet hot fudge. They hadn't made hot fudge like that in many years. Gus

got ice cream up the spoon handle, on his fingers, on his chin, and on his T-shirt. We talked about a great many things.

We talked about how difficult arithmetic was. (How I would still have to use my fingers sometimes even as an adult.) How the guys never gave a short kid his "raps" when the sandlot ball games were in progress. (How I overcompensated with women from doubts about stature.) How different kinds of food were pretty bad-tasting. (How I still used ketchup on well-done steak.) How it was pretty lonely in the neighborhood with nobody for friends. (How I had erected a façade of charisma and glamor so no one could reach me deeply enough to hurt me.) How Leon always invited all the kids over to his house, but when Gus got there, they slammed the door and stood behind the screen laughing and jeering. (How even now a slammed door raised the hair on my neck and a phone receiver slammed down, cutting me off, sent me into a senseless rage.) How comic books were great. (How my scripts sold so easily because I had never learned how to rein in my imagination.)

We talked about a great many things.

"I'd better get you home now," I said.

"Okay." We got up. "Hey, Mr. Rosenthal?"

"You'd better wipe the chocolate off your face."

He wiped. "Mr. Rosenthal . . . how'd you know I like crushed nuts, an' not whipped cream or a cherry?"

We spent a great deal of time together. I bought him a copy of a pulp magazine called *Startling Stories* and read him a story about a space pirate who captures a man and his wife and offers the man the choice of opening one of two large boxes—in one is the man's wife, with twelve hours of air to breathe, in the other is a terrible alien fungus that will eat him alive. Little Gus sat on the edge of the big hole he'd dug, out in the empty lots, dangling his feet, and listening. His forehead was furrowed as he listened to the marvels of Jack Williamson's "Twelve Hours to Live," there on the edge of the fort he'd built.

We discussed the radio programs Gus heard every day: *Tennessee Jed, Captain Midnight, Jack Armstrong, Super-*

man, Don Winslow of the Navy. And the nighttime programs: *I Love a Mystery, Suspense, The Adventures of Sam Spade.* And the Sunday programs: *The Shadow, Quiet, Please, The Mollé Mystery Theater.*

We became good friends. He had told his mother and father about "Mr. Rosenthal," who was his friend, but they'd spanked him for the *Startling Stories,* because they thought he'd stolen it. So he stopped telling them about me. That was all right; it made the bond between us stronger.

One afternoon we went down behind the Colony Lumber Company, through the woods and the weeds to the old condemned pond. Gus told me he used to go swimming there, and fishing sometimes, for a black oily fish with whiskers. I told him it was a catfish. He liked that. Liked to know the names of things. I told him *that* was called nomenclature, and he laughed to know there was a name for knowing names.

We sat on the piled logs rotting beside the black mirror water, and Gus asked me to tell him what it was like where I lived, and where I'd been, and what I'd done, and everything.

"I ran away from home when I was thirteen, Gus."

"Wasn't you happy there?"

"Well, yes and no. They loved me, my mother and father. They really did. They just didn't understand what I was all about."

There was a pain on my neck. I touched a fingertip to the place. It was a boil beginning to grow. I hadn't had a boil in years, many years, not since I was a . . .

"What's the matter, Mr. Rosenthal?"

"Nothing, Gus. Well, anyhow, I ran away, and joined the carny."

"Huh?"

"A carnival. The Tri-State Shows. We moved through Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Missouri, even Kansas . . ."

"Boy! A carnival! Just like in *Toby Tyler or Ten Weeks with the Circus?* I really cried when Toby Tyler's monkey got killed, that was the worst part of it, did you do stuff like that when you were with the circus?"

"Carnival."

"Yeah. Uh-huh. Didja?"

"Something like that. I carried water for the animals sometimes, although we only had a few of those, and mostly in the freak show. But usually what I did was clean up and carry food to the performers in their tops—"

"What's that?"

"That's where they sleep, in rigged tarpaulins. You know, tarps."

"Oh. Yeah, I know. Go on, huh."

The rash was all the way up to my shoulder now. It itched like hell, and when I'd gone to the drugstore to get an aerosol spray to relieve it, so it wouldn't spread, I had only to see those round wooden display tables with their glass centers, under which were bottles of Teel tooth liquid, Tangee Red-Red lipstick and nylons with a seam down the back, to know the druggist wouldn't even know what I meant by Bactine or Liquid Band-Aid.

"Well, along about K.C. the carny got busted because there were too many moll dips and cannons and paperhangers in the tip . . ." I waited, his eyes growing huge.

"What's all *thaaat* mean, Mr. Rosenthal?"

"Ah-ha! Fine carny stiff *you'd* make. You don't even know the lingo."

"Please, Mr. Rosenthal, please tell me!"

"Well, K.C. is Kansas City, Missouri . . . when it isn't Kansas City, Kansas. Except, really, on the other side of the river is Weston. And busted means thrown in jail, and . . ."

"You were in *jail*?"

"Sure was, little Gus. But let me tell you now. Cannons are pickpockets and moll dips are lady pickpockets, and paperhangers are fellows who write bad checks. And a tip is a group."

"So what happened, what happened?"

"One of these bad guys, one of these cannons, you see, picked the pocket of an assistant district attorney, and we all got thrown in jail. And after a while everyone was released on bail, except me and the Geek. Me, because I

wouldn't tell them who I was, because I didn't want to go home, and the Geek, because a carny can find a wetbrain in *any* town to play Geek."

"What's a Geek, huh?"

The Geek was a sixty-year-old alcoholic. So sunk in his own endless drunkenness that he was almost a zombie . . . a wetbrain. He was billed as The Thing, and he lived in a portable pit they carried around, and he bit the heads off snakes and ate live chickens and slept in his own dung. And all for a bottle of gin every day. They locked me in the drunk tank with him. The smell. The smell of sour liquor, oozing with sweat out of his pores, it made me sick, it was a smell I could never forget. And the third day, he went crazy. They wouldn't fix him with gin, and he went crazy. He climbed the bars of the big freestanding drunk tank in the middle of the lockup, and he banged his head against the bars and ceiling where they met, till he fell back and lay there, breathing raggedly, stinking of that terrible smell, his face like a pound of raw meat.

The pain in my stomach was worse now. I took Gus back to Harmon Drive and let him go home.

My weight had dropped to just over a hundred and ten. My clothes didn't fit. The acne and boils were worse. I smelled of witch hazel. Gus was getting more antisocial.

I realized what was happening.

I was alien to my own past. If I stayed much longer, God only knew what would happen to little Gus . . . but certainly I would waste away. Perhaps just vanish. Then . . . would Gus's future cease to exist, too? I had no way of knowing; but my choice was obvious. I had to return.

And couldn't! I was happier here than I'd ever been before. The bigotry and violence Gus had known before I came to him had ceased. They knew he was being watched over. But Gus was becoming more erratic. He was shoplifting toy soldiers and comic books from the Kresge's and constantly defying his parents. It was turning bad. I had to go back.

I told him on a Saturday. We had gone to see a Lash La Rue Western and Val Lewton's *The Cat People* at the

Lake Theater. When we came back I parked the car on Mentor Avenue, and we went walking in the big, cool, dark woods that fronted Mentor where it met Harmon Drive.

"Mr. Rosenthal," Gus said. He looked upset.

"Yes, Gus?"

"I gotta problem, sir."

"What's that, Gus?" My head ached. It was a steady needle of pressure above the right eye.

"My mother's gonna send me to a military school."

I remembered. *Oh, God,* I thought. It had been terrible. Precisely the thing *not* to do to a child like Gus.

"They said it was 'cause I was rambunctious. They said they were gonna send me there for a *year* or two. Mr. Rosenthal . . . don't let'm send me there. I didn't mean to be bad. I just wanted to be around you."

My heart slammed inside me. Again. Then again. "Gus, I have to go away."

He stared at me. I heard a soft whimper.

"Take me with you, Mr. Rosenthal. Please. I want to see Galveston. We can drive a dynamite truck in North Carolina. We can go to Matawatchan, Ontario, Canada, and work topping trees, we can sail on boats, Mr. Rosenthal!"

"Gus . . ."

"We can work the carny, Mr. Rosenthal. We can pick peanuts and oranges all across the country. We can hitchhike to San Francisco and ride the cable cars. We can ride the boxcars, Mr. Rosenthal . . . I promise I'll keep my legs inside an' not dangle 'em. I remember what you said about the doors slamming when they hook'm up. I'll keep my legs inside, honest I will. . . ."

He was crying. My head ached hideously. But he was *crying!*

"I'll *have* to go, Gus!"

"You don't care!" He was shouting. "You don't care about me, you don't care what happens to me! You don't care if I die . . . you don't—"

He didn't have to say it: *you don't love me.*

"I do, Gus. I swear to God, I do!"

I looked up at him; he was supposed to be my friend. But he wasn't. He was going to let them send me off to that military school.

"I hope you die!"

Oh, dear God, Gus, I am! I turned and ran out of the woods as I watched him run out of the woods.

I drove away. The green Plymouth with the running boards and the heavy body; it was hard steering. The world swam around me. My eyesight blurred. I could feel myself withering away.

I thought I'd left myself behind, but little Gus had followed me out of the woods. Having done it, I now remembered: why had I remembered none of it before? As I drove off down Mentor Avenue, I came out of the woods and saw the big green car starting up, and I ran wildly forward, crouching low, wanting only to go with him, my friend, me. I threw in the clutch and dropped the stick into first and pulled away from the curb as I reached the car and climbed onto the rear fender, pulling my legs up, hanging onto the trunk latch. I drove weaving, my eyes watering and things going first blue then green, hanging on for dear life to the cold latch handle. Cars whipped around, honking madly, trying to tell me that I was on the rear of the car, but I didn't know what they were honking about, and scared their honking would tell me I was back there, hiding.

After I'd gone almost a mile, a car pulled up alongside, and a woman sitting next to the driver looked down at me crouching there, and I made a *please don't tell* sign with my finger to my freezing lips, but the car pulled ahead and the woman rolled down her window and motioned to me. I rolled down my window and the woman yelled across through the rushing wind that I was back there on the rear fender. I pulled over and fear gripped me as the car stopped and I saw me getting out of the door, and I crawled off the car and started running away. But my legs were cramped and cold from having hung on back there, and I ran awkwardly; then coming out of the dark was a road sign, and I hit it, and it hit me in the side of the face, and I fell down, and I ran toward myself, lying there, crying, and I got to him just as I got up and ran off into the

gravel yard surrounding the Colony Lumber Company.

Little Gus was bleeding from the forehead where he'd struck the metal sign. He ran into the darkness, and I knew where he was running . . . I had to catch him, to tell him, to make him understand why I had to go away.

I came to the hurricane fence and ran and ran till I found the place where I'd dug out under it, and I slipped down and pulled myself under and got my clothes all dirty, but I got up and ran back behind the Colony Lumber Company, into the sumac and the weeds, till I came to the condemned pond back there. Then I sat down and looked out over the black water. I was crying.

I followed the trail down to the pond. It took me longer to climb over the fence than it had taken him to crawl under it. When I came down to the pond, he was sitting there with a long blade of saw grass in his mouth, crying softly.

I heard him coming, but I didn't turn around.

I came down to him, and crouched behind him. "Hey," I said quietly. "Hey, little Gus."

I wouldn't turn around. I wouldn't.

I spoke his name again, and touched him on the shoulder, and in an instant he was turned to me, hugging me around the chest, crying into my jacket, mumbling over and over, "Don't go, please don't go, please take me with you, please don't leave me here alone . . ."

And I was crying, too. I hugged little Gus, and touched his hair, and felt him holding onto me with all his might, stronger than a seven-year-old should be able to hold on, and I tried to tell him how it was, how it would be: "Gus . . . hey, hey, little Gus, listen to me . . . I *want* to stay, you *know* I want to stay . . . but I can't."

I looked up at him; he was crying, too. It seemed so strange for a grown-up to be crying like that, and I said, "If you leave me *I'll* die. I will!"

I knew it wouldn't do any good to try explaining. He was too young. He wouldn't be able to understand.

He pulled my arms from around him, and he folded my hands in my lap, and he stood up, and I looked at him. He was gonna leave me. I knew he was. I stopped crying. I wouldn't let him see me cry.

I looked down at him. The moonlight held his face in a

pale photograph. I wasn't fooling myself. He'd understand. He'd know. I turned and started back up the path. Little Gus didn't follow. He sat there looking back at me. I only turned once to look at him. He was still sitting there like that.

He was watching me. Staring up at me from the pond side. And I knew what instant it had been that had formed me. It wasn't all the people who'd called me a wild kid, or a strange kid, or any of it. It wasn't being poor or being lonely.

I watched him go away. He was my friend. But he didn't have no guts. He didn't. But I'd show him! I'd really show him! I was gonna get out of here, go away, be a big person and do a lot of things, and some day I'd run into him someplace and see him and he'd come up and shake my hand and I'd spit on him. Then I'd beat him up.

He walked up the path and went away. I sat there for a long time, by the pond. Till it got real cold.

I got back in the car, and went to find the way back to the future, where I belonged. It wasn't much, but it was all I had. I would find it . . . I still had the dragoon . . . and there were many stops I'd made on the way to becoming me. Perhaps Kansas City; perhaps Matawatchan, Ontario, Canada; perhaps Galveston; perhaps Shelby, North Carolina.

And crying, I drove. Not for myself, but for myself, for little Gus, for what I'd done to him, forced him to become. Gus . . . Gus!

But . . . oh, God . . . what if I came back again . . . and again? Suddenly, the road did not look familiar.

AVRAM DAVIDSON

RITE OF SPRING

"The winter meat is about all *gone,*" said Mrs. Robinson.

"So's the winter, for that matter," her husband said. "Al*most* . . ."

". . . *and* the potatoes . . ."

Mr. Robinson got up rather quickly and looked in the bin. "Guess there's enough, though. I can do without greens with my meat. If I have to. But I sure hate to do without potatoes."

"Yes," she said, drily. "I've noticed."

He looked at her, as though for a moment mildly surprised or puzzled. Then, with a faint smile, he put his arm around her. For a moment she stood there, her head bent and touching his. With a little sound of content, next, she moved away. She gestured toward one of the cabinets. "There'll be all *that* to do."

He nodded. "Not time *yet,* though . . . Alice . . ."

"Yes?"

Mr. Robinson coughed. "Boy was trying to get in the girl's room again last night."

She whirled around, quicker than you might have

thought. A look of alarm or concern faded from her face. "He didn't, though . . ."

Mr. Robinson shook his head. "Scuttled off quick enough, he heard me coming." And did quick brief mimicry of himself, bleary-eyed, clutching an imaginary bathrobe, coughing a rheumy, old-man's-nighttime cough, and shuffling along noisily. Abruptly he stopped and straightened up, ceased to be an ill and probably querulous old man, was once again stalwart, thickset, and vigorous, for all his grey hairs. He and his wife chuckled.

"Well," he said, "it's natural enough. Healthy young boy. Pretty young girl."

"*That,*" she said, "is beside the point— You speak to him, now, Henry. I'll speak to her."

"Done and done and Bradstreet," said Mr. Robinson. He looked out the tightly closed windows. "Getting to be about that time of the season. Fact, it *is* that time of the season. Oh, I shouldn't be surprised . . . any day now . . . Boy out to the shed?"

His wife nodded. As he started getting into his sweater and jacket, she said, "Button up warm now."

Mr. Robinson stepped out the back door and started across the yard. The remnants of last year's vegetable garden lay stark and dead beneath his feet. Looking down, he said, "Well, old friend, we'll put new life into you very soon now." He pushed open the door of a weathered and sturdy old outbuilding. Its smell was cold and faint. Hanging from a beam was a block and tackle and rope and chain. Mr. Robinson pulled, tested, made adjustments, grunted his approval, and went out.

The sound of sawing and chopping ceased as he appeared in the door of the shed. "You doing pretty good, Roger," he said. "Yes, sir, you doing pretty good, Mr. Ames."

Roger picked up an armful of wood and carried it over and stacked it. He wiped his face. He had on it a few freckles and a few pimples and a few hairs. Mr. Robinson put a hand on the boy's biceps and doubled up the boy's arm. "That's good, too," he said. "Better than lifting dumbbells."

A sudden look of cunning came over Roger's stolid face. He swiftly seized the older man in a wrestling hold, heaved. They swayed together for a moment. Then, suddenly, Roger lay on the sawdusty floor and Mr. Robinson was pinning his shoulders to it. "Can't do it yet, can you?" he asked.

"Hey," said Roger. The grip relaxed, the boy started to get up, Mr. Robinson flopped him down again. "Pretty good for an old man with one foot in the grave and another on a banana peel . . . *Now* . . . I got something to tell you, young Roger Ames, and you are going to listen to it, too. You were trying to sneak into Betty's room last night. Weren't you. Yes you were." Roger's face, only faintly flushed, still, from the wrestling, now flooded as red as his shirt. "Now you listen. I am not some old prune who doesn't know that females are built different from men. I know all about that. You ever learn as much about that as me, you be doing pretty well. *I* know what's fun and natural between the sects. *But.* And here's the point, you see, boy. There is a *time.* You been *told* that. And when that time comes, why fine. That's what makes the world go round. That's what makes the grasses grow. The flowers bloom. But that time has not yet come for you. You just *wait,* now, till it does. *I* waited. It won't kill you." He got up.

Roger scrambled up as well. He looked embarrassed and, at the same time, respectful. And, for the present moment, just a bit uncertain. Mr. Robinson said, "Well, now. You've cut wood. You've wrestled. So now let's see you practice catching for a while." And for a while there, in the winter-stale garden between the old house and the outbuildings, he watched and instructed Roger as Roger practiced catching. Somewhere in the house a little bell rang.

Mrs. Robinson was putting things on a tray with attention and dispatch at the same time as she was speaking with Betty. "Toast, butter, jam, honey, cocoa," she counted. "Bless me, *how* that woman does eat. It's a pleasure to behold . . . cookies . . . is there any piece of crisp bacon, cold, from breakfast? She is *very* fond of that . . . What was I saying . . . Oh, there's always so much to

think about and to *do* at this time of the year . . ."

"About Roger and, *you* know," Betty said: a slim young girl, rather blossomy about the bosom, with a pale-and-pink and shiny face. "Well, I never encouraged him. I don't even . . . well . . . oh . . . I guess I do *like* him okay, but, oh, sort of like a brother, if you know what I mean, Grandma Robinson." The little bell rang and rang.

Grandma Robinson said that she did know what Betty meant. A little smile crinkled the corners of her mouth and eyes. "As for 'a brother,' well, my, many a girl says that, until a certain time comes, and *then* her mind gets changed quick enough." She deftly laid a neatly ironed napkin over the tray and picked it up. Betty went ahead and opened doors. "Oh, I've no reason to complain of you, dear," said the older woman. "You've been as nice as any girl who's ever lived with us. And I'm sure your mother will be pleased, too. Because it's just as she *said,* child, it's just as she *said.* It's hard raising children right, in the city, teaching them the right ways, the old ways, the things to *know* . . . to *do* . . . and, for *that* matter, *not* to do . . ."

Betty said, "And all those things, you know, in the woods, too . . ."

Mrs. Robinson turned her face, slightly creased with the effort of carrying the tray, and nodded over her shoulder. Betty knocked on the last door. There was a noise from inside, and she opened the door, standing aside for the other to go in.

"Well, Mrs. Machick," said Grandma Robinson, cheerfully, "and here we are, with your half-past ten snack." The room was clean, but it did not smell so.

"Half-past *ten*? You mean more like half-past *twelve,*" the woman sitting on the bed said. She was fat. She was very, very fat. Betty deftly pulled up a little table. Mrs. Robinson set the tray down. "No, dear, it's only half-past ten," she said.

"*Sure* it is," said Mrs. Machick, in a low, tight voice. "Oh, sure." She had a small, tight, tiny-tiny mouth, set into the middle of a vast, loose face. Her eyes darted quickly between the lady of the house and the girl, but she didn't

meet their own eyes, and then she had eyes only for the tray and what was on it.

"Now. Is that all right?" Mrs. Robinson cocked her head.

"Could you spare it?" the woman on the bed asked. Her brows made quirky little motions. She sighed. She shrugged. All down the front of her nightgown were food stains.

"Now, if there's anything else you'd like, just ring your little bell for it," Mrs. Robinson said, without the slightest trace of annoyance. "If we have it, we'll be glad to bring it to you."

"*Sure* you would," Mrs. Machick said. "*Oh,* yeah." She fluttered her nostrils with the breath of the long-suffering, gave her frowzy head a little shake, and began to feed.

Betty and Grandma closed the door and exchanged faint sighs. They were halfway across the front room when a low whistle was heard from outside. They looked at each other, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, then turned and tip-toed swiftly to the windows, not touching the lace curtains. A bird was on the ground in front of the house, investigating the sere remains of last year's grass. Out from behind an evergreen came Roger. It was a marvel how, body crouched, on the tips of his toes, hands out just so, how swiftly and how silently he sped; for all his size and all.

It was over in a matter of seconds.

Everybody cried out, but not very loudly. Roger, followed by Mr. Robinson, turned toward the house. Grandma and Betty bustled about, taking things from drawers and closets. The men came in, Roger with a wide and surprised-silly grin on his face. "Welcome, welcome, first harbinger of spring," said Mrs. Robinson; and, "Sir, we bid you welcome," her husband said, with a slight bow. She poured wine into a silver goblet. The bird's head peeped out between the boy's fingers. He held them over the goblet, as though he were offering the bird a drink. Mr. Robinson took its head between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand and with his right hand he took the shears Betty gave him and cut off its head. The bright

blood made little swirls in the pale wine, till Mrs. Robinson, with a silver spoon on the handle of which were quaint and curious engravings much more than half-obscured, stirred the goblet. Then the liquid turned pink. She gave everybody a spoonful of it.

For a moment the house was utterly still.

Then Betty gave her lips an absentminded smack. Then she went absolutely pale. Her eyes flew to Roger. From her now white lips came a sound like the rim of a glass being squeaked. His mouth fell open. His eyes bulged. She fled the room in an instant. The door to the hall slammed behind her. Then another door slammed—the back one. But in between the two times, Roger, uttering a noise between a growl and a howl, had begun his pursuit. There was a crash. ("Didn't even *try* to open *that* one," Mr. Robinson said.) There was a cry, first shrill, then full-throated. There were two noises, quick together, as it might be thud-*thump* or thump-*thud.*

"Well, now," said Mr. Robinson, gently. "He did wait. And it didn't kill him." There were some more noises. A lot more. "Isn't killing *her,* either, presumably," he added.

"It always pays to do things right," his wife said. "You'll get some good greens and potatoes and garden truck *this* year, I shouldn't wonder."

He gave a slow, reflective nod. "You decided what kind of annuals you want out front?" he asked. She started to reply; then, with a tongue click of self-reproof, flung open the front door and emptied the goblet in a wide-scattered toss. Her lips moved. "*There,*" she said, after a moment, closing up. The two older people looked at each other in quiet contentment. They sighed. Nodded briskly.

"Plenty to do," he said. "Even before *those* two are ready to help us. Got to get all those knives and cleavers out of the cabinet and sharpen— Oh. *Oh,* yes. Before I forget." He fetched a pad and an envelope, ink bottle and pen, sat. "To the Editor, Dear Sir," he wrote, in his neat, slow hand. "This morning at"—he pursed his lips, consulted his pocket watch, considered—"at about a quarter-to eleven we sighted the first robin of spring in our front yard. Wonder if this is any kind of a record for recent

years? Would be glad to hear from any devoted 'robin-watchers' and followers of other good old ways and customs, who may write me directly if they care to."

In her room across the other side of the house, fat Mrs. Machick rang her little bell.

THOM LEE WHARTON

THE BYSTANDER

Harry Van Outten was sitting on the tall stool behind the bar at Decline And Fall when the chunky man with the straw snap-brim and the attaché case came in. He stood blinking as his eyes got used to the dark, and Harry got a good long look at him and decided who he was. The man ambled over to the bar and Harry took the usual deep breath and waited. The case was put down gently between the man and Harry, and of course the man did not sit down.

"If it's about the fire policy, you'll have to go see Pardie in the Maritime and Commercial Building. Suite H, tell him I sent you."

"Mr. Van Outten?"

"Doctor. DDS. No matter. Listen, I'd like to help you, but the lawyer said I wasn't to mess around with this insurance mess."

"Dr. Harry Van Outten, Orthodontic Surgeon, NLP, 22053 Oceanic Avenue, Bournemouth, N.J." (He said it "EnJay.") "This address."

"NLP?"

"No Longer Practicing."

"How'd you know that? Would you like a drink?"

"My name is Roseboom," said the chunky man, and pulled out a little vinyl card case with his picture and thumbprint set into it. The card had "Federal Bureau of Investigation" printed across the top.

"*Oh,* yeah," said Harry, leaning forward on the stool. "What can I do for you, Mr. Rosenbloom?"

"That's Rose-boom." The man looked at Harry's hand and took it and shook it.

"Sorry," said Harry. "Drink?" He clinked the rocks in his gin-gin.

"Maybe later." He looked closely at Harry for a moment. "You know, Doctor . . . Mister. . . ."

"Call me Harry," said Harry.

"You know, Doctor, you don't look very much like your description."

"I've been sick. What description?"

"Bureau files description."

"Why would the FBI have a description of me?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised," said Roseboom vaguely. "Could I talk to you? For a while?"

"How long? What about?"

"A while. Some of your . . . associates."

"Which?"

"Your business associates."

"You mean Joe the Nuts?"

"I hoped you'd come to the point."

"We'll come to the point of an icepick in here," said Harry in a raspy whisper, "this place is bugged to the ears. We'll go for a ride."

Roseboom led the way out the door by several yards, and Harry gimped across the parking lot after him. "Slow down," he called, "this hot blacktop is murder."

"You could've gotten your shoes. I'd wait."

"Never wear 'em. Here." Harry jumped up on the running board of an absolutely mint 1934 Packard Twin Six Phaeton, in buff aluminum with red piping and gray watered-silk upholstery. He twitched his scorched toes for a few seconds and scraped his feet on the running board,

then deftly swung the door open and fell behind the towering wheel. "Come on."

Roseboom walked cautiously around the beast and climbed up and in the passenger's side. Harry piloted the big silver car out of the parking lot and turned north on Oceanic Avenue. Roseboom craned his neck to look behind, then slowly turned again to the front.

"That second windshield keeps the wind off your neck if you're riding in front and is vital if you're in the back." Roseboom looked over the dash, which was real ebony, taking in the expanse of dials and instruments. "This hickey here is a stopwatch for testing your speedometer, this is a brake fluid gauge, this is a . . . now what the hell is this? Might be a manifold pressure gauge, but then again. . . ."

"What would a car like this cost?"

"Invaluable. Priceless. There *aren't* any more, you see."

Roseboom looked straight ahead through the tall windshield. "You are a successful orthodontist," he said. "Yet most of your income comes from that gin mill we just left. You command a very great deal of money. But I think a toy like this might be beyond even you." He looked over at Harry.

"The car was a gift," said Harry.

"From whom, may I ask?"

"Why?"

"I'm wondering—this is for the record—if any taxes were paid on this gift."

"I honestly wouldn't know," said Harry, glancing back at Roseboom for an instant. The agent narrowed his eyes but saw no guile in Harry's face. "My lawyer takes care of the money."

"Which brings us back to the source of the gift."

"Oh, Joe saw the thing at the opera one night—parked outside the opera house, that is—in Hollywood, I think it was. Said it reminded him of *The Untouchables*." Harry gave one soundless snicker.

"And he bought it then."

"I've got a bill of sale, title, everything's in order."

"I know," said Roseboom after a time. He sat quietly,

watching the honky-tonks on Oceanic Avenue fly past. Shortly, Harry noticed that the agent was inspecting him again.

"Something the matter?"

"This nags at me. There are only two elements of the description we have of you that jibe with your actual appearance. The height. The glasses. Now, it says here"—and he was not looking at any paper—"six feet, two thirty-five, brown hair, gray eyes—"

"Gray is right," said Harry.

"If you like. And you are about six feet. The stoop fools you. *White* hair now, and you weigh"—a pause and a sidewise glance—"about one sixty, one fifty-five."

"I told you I was sick."

"Also, the beard. And mustache."

"I quit shaving when I sold my practice. Only psychiatrists get away with beards. Who brings their kids to a dentist with a beard? You know, that poopsheet you have on me sounds like about four, five years ago."

"At date of compilation, subject forty-two years of age."

"I'm forty-six. This birthday." He thumped the wheel with the heel of his hand. "You must've gotten that stuff from my driver's license or something."

"Mmmm," said Roseboom, nodding vaguely, "I concede that you were sick."

"*Oh,* yeah," said Harry.

"What with?"

"Gastroenteritis," said Harry, after a pause. "Recurrent. Gets worse as you get older, I guess."

"I knew dysentery was recurrent. I never heard that about gastro-whoozis. When contracted?"

"You sound like a doctor."

"Small talk. I don't care—professionally—what you've got. What *illness.*"

"I picked it up in the Caribbean about four years ago," said Harry, softly. "Somebody forgot to wash their hands Before Leaving This Rest Room and went and put together our hors d'oeuvres."

" 'Our'?"

"My wife and boy. They died of it. The boy on the island, my wife in Miami. After she heard. Never eat raw fish."

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks. I mean it," he added quickly.

"To get back to Joe the Nuts," said Roseboom.

"Just a minute," said Harry. There was a pause of ten or fifteen seconds, then Harry braked the car to a near stop and turned sharply to the right, up a dirt road that was really only two ruts through a vacant lot overgrown with brown marsh grass. They breasted a low hill—really a sand dune, Roseboom realized—and saw the ocean. Harry let the car roll ahead a little into softening sand and then stopped it and turned off the motor. "Come on," said Harry. They got out of the car. Roseboom sank to his ankles in soft, hot sand. "Leave your shoes and socks." Roseboom sat on the wide running board and pulled them off. He knocked the shoes together, sending a cloud of sand downwind. "Don't get it on the car," called Harry.

Roseboom caught up with him, and they trudged together through the sand and grass tufts toward a tall oblong structure half on the beach and half in the low surf. There was a rusty metal ladder set in its landward side. Harry shouldered ahead, heaved himself up, and continued to climb without a word. Roseboom saw him disappear into a low doorway about twenty feet from the ground and then followed him. Roseboom heaved himself into a low-celinged room about thirty feet square and saw Harry on the seaward side, looking out a narrow horizontal window. The walls, Roseboom saw, must have been a foot thick. There were pocks and cracks in them, and bits of rusty reinforcing skeleton were visible here and there. He guessed that the thing must have been fifty feet high altogether. "What's upstairs?"

"Another room like this. Roof. We could go up there now, but it's like a frying pan this time of day." He intercepted Roseboom's look. "Watchtower left from War Two. There were a lot of tankers getting sunk off this coast. There'd be six or eight guys in here, Coast Guard, all weathers, looking for submarines, smoke, like that."

Roseboom looked at him with a grin. "Not bugged?"

"Someday the thing'll fall into the water. Anyway, I don't think anybody knows the way I come here. At least nobody ever followed me or was here, except some kids who come to roast marshmallows and screw and like that."

"You come here often."

"*Oh,* yeah. I like to watch the sea," he said simply, looking out the view slit again.

"How did you know your own place was bugged?"

"Well, I did it myself. Early in the game, that was. Then somebody, I don' know, maybe Christmas Angel, some of the boys, added some little hickeys of their own. You can hear 'em on the phones. Lights dim out every once in a while. You'd be surprised—no, I guess you wouldn't—at what goes on in those back rooms some nights." Roseboom nodded and continued to look straight at Harry, who wiped his rust-stained palms on his spotless white bell-bottomed slacks, looked once around the room, then back out at the ocean.

"You bought into Decline And Fall in nineteen sixty-six," prompted Roseboom.

"*Oh,* yeah. I came back here, tried to pick up my practice. You know. I had this big-ass house down the coast, in Lochmere, on the Bay. Hundred'n a quarter thousand. Pool. Heated pool. Vacuum cleaners in the baseboards. Boat dock. Big playroom. You know how I felt when I saw that playroom. Jesus Christ.

"Well, I tried to stick it out there. The place wasn't quite paid off, I had a good practice, lots of consulting work, my own lab, four bright young kid associates, going to all be partners someday. Whole floor in a new building. Eight chairs, little operating theater, even. Mostly just for show.

"And. I never had much time to indulge myself, really, just in that upper-middle suburbs kind of way. The lawn. The parties. The concerts. Running the pie throw at the church fair. You know. I really didn't know how to go about it any other way.

"I tried. I had the people from Dunhill's come down and survey the place, turn the next-to-biggest bathroom into a room-size humidor. Bought three thousand Royal

Jamaica Churchills. Ever smoke a Churchill?" Roseboom shook his head. "Here. Buck twenty-five a crack."

Roseboom did not smoke. He took the big cigar anyway.

"Then I called Frederick Wildman. I don't mean Frederick Wildman's goddamn secretary, I mean Frederick. Wildman. He came down. Him. We put together a wine and cordial cellar. He also sold me a couple of barrels of scotch. Glenlivet Waters, it's called. Apparently they don't bottle it at all. That's how Decline And Fall got such a reputation for wines and brandies, by the way. That's *my* cellar down in the cellar. If you follow me.

"I *drank* the scotch," he added after a pause.

"Then I had a few more alterations made. A sauna. A seven-foot-deep bathtub. That just about killed my wife's insurance. Turned the Buick in on a Cad with a few refinements. Mostly a bar.

"I got myself a maid after the first couple of big dinner parties I gave to dispel the . . . what? It wasn't *gloom,* exactly. . . . A maid, after a decent period of mourning. Lives-in-gives-out, as the saying goes. *That* was a little girl. Between her and that fountain of booze, I wouldn't have lasted long. It was that empty, empty house. And I hadn't even gotten *started* on drugs yet." He was talking quietly, conversationally, but Roseboom saw that he was wringing his hands very slowly and very hard.

"Then one night. I think it was New Year's, sixty-six, I was driving along Oceanic Avenue, blitzed out of my mind, as usual, when all of a sudden, this fire engine comes blasting by me on the *right.* Of course I was probably driving on the left anyway. Well, this aroused some atavistic drunk-ass response in me, so I took off chasing it. Now that was a wild ride. I should mention that there were a bunch of others behind me. I kept those red lights in sight up ahead and drove. Spray was coming over the seawall and freezing in the air, and that road was just like glass. Anyway, I stayed alive until I came up on the place that was burning. I spun out turning into the lot—hit the big marble seal by the exit sign—and crumpled the Cad up a little.

"Anyway, I was out there looking over the damage,

freezing to death and staggering and falling on my face, half from ice and half from booze, up comes this little guy with tears running down his face, yelling, 'No insurance! No insurance! No insurance even for fires! You might's well go away, no money for you here!'

"Well, I told him I wasn't going to sue, it was my fault, I was drunk, and so on for about a minute. After the third time I said 'drunk,' his face lit up, and he grabbed me and hugged me and said 'Me, too!' And be damned if he didn't have half a Pinch bottle under his apron.

"So then, we got in the Cad and watched the fire and butchered the Pinch. What he'd left. The place didn't burn badly, just a lot of decor and the kitchen wiped out. And there were some fur coats and so on that they were going to be liable for. Just for the record, his name was Tibor Telredy, and the place was called Ungaria, Goulash Our Specialty. Telredy was a Hungarian Freedom Fighter who'd gone into his family pretty deep to set up the place; his mother did the cooking, his father played violin and so on, besides their life savings on the line. He just hadn't had anything left over for insurance.

"I don't know if it was booze, boredom, or genius, but I started to talk the deal right then and there. Him being drunk didn't hurt any. Anyhow, we worked it out, sitting there in that bunged-up Cadillac with the heater running fit to roast your ass off, guzzling raw booze right from that bulky bottle. My collar was wilted next morning from what ran down my chin that night. Anyhow, we worked it out. I'd cover all his liabilities, pay for incidentals like legal fees and so on, and buy him out for . . ." Harry looked appraisingly at the FBI man for a second. "If you want to know, I guess you could find out. Ninety thou. Go on, you say it if you want. Others have accused me of setting bombs in orphanages.

"I had to sell the house to cover it all, which wasn't a bad idea. Didn't take much of a loss. It cost me about forty to cover liabilities—there were a few cars on fire behind the place that he neglected to point out at the time—and about another sixty to get the place fixed up the way I wanted. The way it is now. With my penthouse on the third floor, the pool tables, the stage and all. You

know, I looked up the original title on that land and house. Decline And Fall is a restaurant, bar, cocktail lounge, grill, and cabaret with occasional dinner-theater, which can seat four hundred people on two floors and in the Wine Cellar Room. It was built in nineteen ten as a *summer* house for *one* family! We've lost something somewhere."

"What happened to the former owner?"

"I got a postcard from him about a year ago. He's teaching Slavic history at Southern California. Asked if I wanted to join the Minutemen."

"Did you?"

"Why should I? When I've got the Mafia?"

They looked each other in the eye for a little while, and then Harry looked back out to sea.

"Well, Decline And Fall opened, all right. I handed over the practice to the boys—taught them how to incorporate, first—and arranged for them to pay me a percentage for ninety-nine years or until my death, whichever happens first. Then I moved in on the third floor and tended bar and washed glasses. Didn't even get help, at first. But this resort-area trade just keeps coming and coming. I got tired out at last. But it took time to build up a clientele, especially without a working kitchen—I didn't know much about the business then—and I had some problems."

"Such as what?"

"I'll skip over the little ones, because you want to hear about Joe and the Family. Anyway, that summer, there was a motorcyle gang hit town. Remember?"

"No."

"Well, they hit it. First it was just messing around a lot in the streets. Then the cops got on 'em and they had to go to ground someplace." Harry looked over his shoulder at the FBI man. "Usually it's a bar they pick."

"And it was yours."

"You bet it was. My regular customers—gone! The furniture was crumbling. The bastards never drank anything but draft beer and they'd get on a jag where they'd break glasses after each round. Then they dragged some woman in off the street and just about gangbanged her on the pool

table before I got back from upstairs with the shotgun. I kept it under the bar after that."

"Got a permit?"

"You be damned. Anyhow, that cooled them down a little. Things were halfway back to normal. Things looked good, I was meeting expenses and beating trade out of the other locals. Then. Then one night the Big Sprocket or whatever they call him got paroled and crushed into town from California. The whole bunch came in and set up a long course of getting pie-eyed for themselves. They chased off the other customers in about five minutes.

"Except for a bunch of guys sitting in the back. In the big booth. These were guys I'd never seen before, off a charter boat. They were the usual fishing types—baseball caps, polo shirts, three-day beards—you know. They weren't paying any attention to what was going on up front, and the Big Sprocket saw that they weren't. He hitched up his jeans and walked back there and told them to buy a round for the house or get the hell out. One says, 'Can we drink up before we leave?' but Big Sprocket had wandered away.

"I guess somebody must've gone to the phone. I don't know who or when. Anyway, a half hour later, Big Sprock remembered them, and he went back with a mug of beer in each hand and said, 'Are you mutherfuckers still here?' And the first guy he'd talked to stood up, very soft-spoken and almost fatherly, and said, 'We better take this discussion outside,' and Big Sprocket says, 'You bet your ass we better,' and he led the way out, with his whole mob following him. And those fishing types.

"By that time, *I* was on the phone, but somebody'd popped the wires out. So I had a gin-gin and I got the shotgun and filled my pockets with shells and started for the porch. By then, there were sounds of a real, earnest difference of opinion to be heard issuing from the front parking lot." Harry grinned and smacked his lips at the memory.

"I opened those swinging doors and walked out like Long John Silver onto that quarterdeck," said Harry, "and there was quite a rumble out there. But it was just about

over. Down at the end of each driveway, somebody had parked a dump truck. In the middle of the lot there was a big pile of motorcycle parts. There were four or five guys down there, taking their time about tossing these little bits of motorcycles onto the one truck, the one parked in the 'enter' driveway. Then there were four or five guys with sledgehammers and spud bars tearing what must've been the last few motorcycles apart and throwing the bits and pieces onto the pile. And right in front of the big front steps were forty or fifty guys with baseball bats, brass knucks, sandbags, blackjacks, loaded canes, and what-all, just beating the living hell out of Big Sprocket and his mob.

"I just sort of stood there. Frozen, you know, at the sight. I thought I was really going to have to shoot somebody, and I was so relieved that I didn't have to, at least right away, that I just fell into one of those big rattan chairs. You saw 'em, the ones on the front porch for the neckers and honeymooners, moon over the vasty sea, and all that. Then, somebody put a hand on my shoulder. I practically had a stroke. Then I looked over beside me. There were those fishermen, sitting in these chairs, taking their lordly ease, sipping fresh boozes—and I don't know where they came from, I didn't serve 'em—watching the show just like they'd watch the Wednesday night fights.

" 'Here, old buddy,' says one of them, the one closest to me, who'd put his hand on my shoulder. 'Have a drink. These are almost as good as yours.' And I took it. What it was, I couldn't tell you. I made it go in three seconds, and he grinned at me, and squeezed my shoulder really buddy-buddy and handed me another one.

"Well, to keep from boring you, those guys in the lot and in the driveway finished beating those motorbikers to a bloody pulp and disposing of their mounts at the same time. Some of them took a whack or two at some of the bodies, then started to throw the remains onto the other truck, the one parked in the exit.

" 'Hey, Frank!' the guy beside me calls out. One of the batmen turned and came a few paces toward us. 'Dump 'em in the quarry. My quarry, not yours. Show 'em the Hand.' And the guy nodded and laughed and went about

his business. Then the guy next to me turned and said, 'And now a gentleman can drink in peace,' and he drained his drink. Then he said, 'You've got one of the best places I ever saw. Come on back in and build us some more.' Then he said, 'You like Italian food?' "

Harry looked at Roseboom. "I guess that was the first hint I ever had." Roseboom nodded.

"We got back into the bar," said Harry, "and I was setting them up for the house—the fishermen and about five others—when he introduced himself. 'I'm Joe Nucci,' he said, and I told him who I was. He nodded and said, 'Uh-huh. Glad to meet you.' Then he told me who the other guys were." Harry looked at Roseboom again. "All out-of-towners, except Christmas Angel."

"Yeah," said Roseboom.

"Well, we all socked 'em down with both hands for about two hours, and a couple of guys all covered with dust, T-shirts, work pants, you know, came in, and they looked at Joe and he lifted his eyebrows and they just nodded and sat down at the other end of the bar. I just served them two triples and they said 'Thank you,' and 'Thank you.'

"I guess it was that 'Italian food' business that got Joe and I talking about . . . business. 'Goddamn it, Harry old buddy,' he kept saying, 'a guy who runs such a hell of a bar has got to have a kitchen, too! And what could it be with a name like that but a *guinea* kitchen?' And I explained how I was going to get the kitchen running early next year, with help and all, and hire a pianist, and have a free lunch in the bar, and he kept pounding on the bar and hissing, 'Yeah! Right! Great!' Hell, I told it to him just like it is now—you saw it. And he nodded, and grinned, and kept punching me in the shoulder, and I never had a chance to think about closing time, so they stayed till four thirty. But somebody thought to shut off the sign." Harry stared off at the sea, remembering. "We were telling each other our life stories all night. Then he waved from the front porch, wiggled his fingers, he still had a drink in each hand, and he yelled, 'Don't forget what I said, Harry, boy!' and he said, 'Don't worry any more about that dentist shit! You're a *community service* now!' " Harry turned

around. "And you know, I'm as good a restaurateur as I ever was an orthodontist?"

"What then?" asked Roseboom.

"Well, I started to get phone calls. This designer. That manufacturer. Beautiful terms. If I sounded reluctant, why, they'd come down a few thousand! I couldn't afford *not* to get that goddamn kitchen all outfitted and working! Then, when the stuff was all installed, and painted, and the drawers full of knives and like that, and we had lots of flour and all around, this fat guy comes walking in one day. 'I am Ercole Barone,' he says. 'Where is my kitchen?' " Harry paused. "You don't know who Ercole Barone is."

"No," said Roseboom. "Should I?"

Harry sighed. "Vulgarian," he said. "I shouldn't say that, because I didn't know myself. All I knew was that this huge guy who looked like Oliver Hardy, if Oliver Hardy had been born in Rome, had come in and started to turn out these unbelievable meals. There was one sent to me on the third floor, every day, nine a.m., three thirty, and nine p.m., unless I sent word to hold it. My God," said Harry, remembering.

He recovered himself. "Ercole Barone is the master chef of a well-known restaurant in New York whose name I dare not divulge. He plans the menus for a shipping line and four airlines on the side. He works in town nine months out of the year." Harry looked at Roseboom, saw he was not impressed, and scowled. "The other three, he works for me. The Italian legation and the Italian Mission to the UN drives here once a week, summers, in DPL-licensed cars, to eat Barone's cooking. I have seen a silver-haired diplomat weeping into a plate of *scampi Fra Diavolo,* and there is hardly a man among them who is not in tears when he has to leave.

"Then there is the little old lady who comes in every day to make the pasta dough and pizza crusts. She does not speak a word of English. She arrives in a rented limousine. She turns out more starch than the farms of Idaho, finishes at four p.m., walks to the back door, and Barone gives her two twenty-dollar bills I have given him for this purpose. I ask why only forty bucks? Why two

twenties? And I always get the same reply: 'Twenty for pay, twenty for carfare.' She comes in by private plane from *somewhere,* is met by a limousine, driven to my doorstep, and then every day at four, driven back to meet her plane at the local airport.

"Then there's the clientele. And the entertainment. The old days of serving gin and tonics to the beach bums are long gone. Sure, we let the suntanned, windblown crowd in afternoons, but at night, it's different. If we ever had a fire like poor Telredy's, the bill for the furs in the checkroom would be bigger than the cost of the whole building, burned flat. We don't just get the gold-plate trade from the trotting track, and the wanderers from the city! There were plates from nineteen states in that parking lot one night!"

Harry caught himself and lowered his voice. "The entertainment. Yeah. We don't *have* any. It's taxed. But what do we do when a truck rolls up one afternoon, delivers us a very special concert piano, and at nine that night, a certain blind jazz pianist shows up for dinner and then kids on the keys for a few hours afterward? Or when a British rock group comes for *fettucine Alredo* and gigs until five the next morning? Now, this is not every day. The everyday stuff is Joe the Nuts singing Verdi, or his buddies singing . . . what they sing. What *he* sings."

Roseboom started to speak, and Harry put up his hand wearily. "I'm not naming any names." He scratched his chest reflectively. "One night he even had his *daughter* with him. Nobody even thought to turn out the sign that night.

"And then there's Joe. He's really pretty good. And he puts his heart into it, it's as much fun to watch as to listen. You know how he worked as a singing waiter when he was a kid. Do you know one thing that preys on Joe's mind? That he's never been able to get Franco Corelli to come in for a few days. Corelli is his idol."

"A *capo don* of the Mafia," said Roseboom, "working as a singing waiter. Dear God, no!"

"We don't say 'Mafia,' " said Harry. " 'Mafia' is a bad word. Old hat. It's usually 'the Family,' or 'the Honored Society,' or—this is Joe talking—'We the People.' "

Roseboom gave him a hard look. "When were the firm financial arrangements made?"

"Weren't," said Harry.

"You keep no records? I think, just speaking off the top of my head, that you people are all in trouble."

"Records? My taxes are in order. I'm not a vital industry, subject to audits by state or federal governments. As somebody or other once said, as long as the law can't require me to be a literate, it can't make me keep records. They tell me I've got a pretty good tax lawyer."

"Don't you know for sure?"

"I'm in pretty good shape," said Harry, quietly. "I'm rich, and I'm not in jail. I'm enjoying life for the first time . . . in a long time."

Roseboom was silent for a while. Then he said, "I was going to ask you—I *do* ask you to testify at some future date, to a grand jury soon to be constituted, against your Mafia connections."

"Why?" said Harry.

"Why?" yelled Roseboom. "They've taken over your business, they've put you under their thumb—"

"How's that? *I* run my business. And I do a good job. What they're doing is throwing business my way and helping me keep on top. And, mister, it's pure cream." He paused reflectively. "Now, it is true that Joe put a safe in my office that only he and Christmas Angel know the combination to, and that the Angel handles the receipts. But the Angel is Joe's employee, and Joe is my friend. My own take has gone up every year, and I can't see anything significant being drained off."

" 'Thou shalt not muzzle the ox, when that he treadeth out the grain,' " said Roseboom, through his teeth. "What do you mean by 'significant'?"

"I mean that two places have changed hands on that strip this year. Nothing to do with the Family. They just couldn't hack it. If I was being milked the way you seem to think I am, I'd be in the street myself. As it is, I was asked to bid on one of them. By the owner's lawyer, not by the Family. And as far as being under any thumbs," Harry continued, "I went to Martinique last spring to visit my son's grave. To Miami to visit my wife's. I visited my

uncle in Chicago, he's a surgeon. I went to St. Petersburg to look into some real estate stuff I got into in the fifties. I could've run out any time, if I wanted to. Your point eludes me."

"Listen to me," said Roseboom. "Joe the Nuts, born Giuseppe Nucci, known as Joseph Nucci, is a *capo don.* He is a big, big gangster, if I may use an old-hat word." He sneered just the slightest bit. "He has operated all over the country as a special representative of the Mafia, gouging small businessmen into signing over their livelihoods to his . . . organization."

"Did you ever hear of the Supreme Protective Agency in New York?" asked Harry. "They go around hitting shopkeepers for ten bucks a month, for 'protection.' Now, that is *really* old hat. And all they do for that ten is to string tape around the edges of the shopwindows, you know, like a burglar alarm, but without alarm wires in it."

"Well?" said Roseboom.

"But it *works,*" said Harry. "That green tape is like a danger signal. Joe described it to me once in very memorable terms. He said, 'Those storefronts are *Territory.*' " He paused. "Maybe what you're saying is that I'm Territory, too."

"Yes," said Roseboom, between his teeth, "I guess you are."

"And there's another thing," said Harry. "Joe Nucci is my friend. Now, I've had friends who were drunks. Queers. *Cruel* people, both men and women, and that's the worst of all. Joe is just a nice little guy who loves singing and booze and screwing and who takes pleasure keeping his house in order. That could be *me,* except I can't sing. When I compare him to some of the other friends I've had, he comes out pretty good.

"And now you come in here and tell me that I've got to chuck away my livelihood, my friend, and put myself in criminal suspicion, just because somebody sent you a report or a memo or what the hell to that effect. 'Casino owner'—these places like mine are always 'casinos' in your language—'with Mafia connections,' that's what I'll be for the rest of my life."

"Wait a minute," said Roseboom.

"No. Let me finish with the most cogent argument I've got, again, so as not to stretch this interview out unduly. Now, suppose I *am* a Mafia patsy. What happens? I'm caught between them and you, remember. They come to me and they threaten to cut off my balls, pull out my tongue, kill me, sink me in a block of cement into the bottom of New York Harbor. Kill a few of my friends, burn my house—and my business, they're in the same building—poison my cats, sink my boat . . . and so on.

"Now, what do you threaten? You threaten to put me in *jail*." Harry looked at Roseboom for a long time. Roseboom was looking at the floor. "I'm afraid, Mr. Roseboom, that the Mafia is leading in the bidding for my ass."

"Don't you know we can protect you?" asked Roseboom, but Harry could see that he was tired, and he himself knew that he spoke without conviction.

"Thirty years?" asked Harry. "I might live thirty years. But the chances are against it if I listen to you."

Roseboom stood up and automatically brushed a cloud of cement dust off the seat of his pants. He moved toward the doorway, turned and faced Harry, then stepped gingerly down onto the ladder.

Harry took one last look at the sea, sighed deeply, and followed him down.

* * *

Sleet and snow were racketing at the front windows of Decline And Fall, and Harry looked up, and then curled closer to the blaze in the new fireplace in the empty cocktail lounge. He guessed that he had another hour before the first of the wintertime regulars pulled in—if they came out at all on a night like this. The floodlit pillar Joe the Nuts had sent from Leptis Magna was sheathed in ice. Harry looked out at it and grinned to himself. "Good for the image," Joe had said. God knew it was phallic and classic and Roman enough for anybody. Harry had his sixth gin-gin of the evening at hand and was feeling no pain, literally. The small of his back had begun to bother him late in the fall. He pulled out the letter that had arrived with the pillar and read it again.

Dear Harry:

Thanks for the news about Uncle Freddie once again. Everybody needs a vacation. But you know them bastards wouldnt even let me in to SICILY? Then when I left Palermo I couldnt get into Rome. Anyway I got the pillar for you then, dont ask me how, you keep your nose clean like always. Beirut was nice but I like Spain much better. This is just a little fishing village Harry the name of which I will divulge when you call at Wagon-Lits Internationales, Barcelona. There are lots of Swede college girls here, made me think of my man the DUTCHMAN. Im making out OK with the wife of the local boss of guardia civil, thats state cops. Harry the wine here is as good as real Vino Rosso and is thirtyfive cents a quart. Oops thats a leter here in the old country. I never was as happy traveling for the family as I am here. To tell you the truth Harry I think them bastards are just as happy if I stay over here indefinitely. I didnt mention I get to sing in the local bar, what they call a bodega! And for money! Its the greatest moment of my life, more fun than when I was a kid. You know I love to sing. All I really need to die happy is to get paid to sing in your place Harry with Corelli beside me. But its real good here too. When are you coming over Harry? It isnt going to be too cool for you now that theres been all that noise around there. Frankie Buttons was pulled in to a special grand jury they convened just for him. You remember Frank. Come over here Harry, well have a ball. Between the two of us theres nothing we cant do.

Joe (The Nuts)

Harry refolded the letter and put it back in his breast pocket. He was glad Joe had gotten out. Of course, he thought, it would be easy anywhere for Joe. He was like a cat, always landed on his feet. Now, he, Harry . . . But that was water under the bridge. Harry drained the gin-gin. He got up—it took him a distressingly long time—and walked to the bar. The barman came to him, but he continued around behind it. "Never mind," he said. "I'll build my own."

He sat on the high stool—his high stool—as he worked. He could not feel the rung of the stool under his feet, and knew that his ankles and feet must be swelling again. Sitting there reminded him of the previous summer, when Inspector Roseboom had finally appeared, as Harry had known he, or some other, would.

Roseboom had been blown to tatters by the bomb under the floorboards of his car two days after the interview with Harry. Then an anonymous call had sent FBI men from the local office after one Angelo Christofori, known as Christmas Angel, who was suspected of killing an agent. The Angel might have gotten clear if he hadn't locked his car. As he stood there, panting, trying to work the lock on his Lincoln Continental, two agents had come up on him and shot him eleven times, as he attempted to escape and/or resist arrest. The coroner noted that no single one of these bullets lodged in a vital spot.

After that, it had gone back and forth, for five months or more. An agent here, two or three torpedoes there, killed, bombed, wounded, taken into custody. A file of documents confiscated. An informer made to disappear. A little war, up and down the Jersey coast from the storm center at Decline And Fall. Harry thought that what he had done was better than what Roseboom had wanted him to do. First Harry had warned the Family, through Joe, that the FBI was interested in Decline And Fall. Joe had escaped, Roseboom was murdered, and Harry had blown the whistle on Christmas Angel. By then both sides were at each other, and Harry saw in each day's papers how the battle raged around him. Each morning's edition was delivered by special courier to Decline And Fall at eleven fifteen the previous night. Harry liked a head start on the news.

He had known for fourteen months that he was dying. The back pains had been cancer of both kidneys. It was a while before he could handle his gin-gins altogether comfortably. But Harry persevered. He had been a dentist, and a good one, all his life, except for a few timid and colorless childhood years. His student days were a blank to him once they had passed. He had never been able to get close to any woman but his dead wife. The passing of the

boy who had been partly his wife and partly himself had burned something out of him. He reflected that he had not lied completely to Roseboom when he laid his sickness to a plate of pickled fish on a hot night in Martinique. Then he had bought Decline And Fall; he had discovered that his only pleasure was in making, rather than merely doing. He had made Decline And Fall well, and it would be his monument. With Joe's help, he had made it good beyond his dreams. Then came the thing that would unmake him and his creation, and he had done a bit of unmaking himself. Except for Joe, they were all expendable; and he would live—he would—to see the outcome of the battle that he had posed between his enemies as it raged around his house.

He finished the mixing and laid the long spoon down carefully, took up the fresh gin-gin and walked slowly back to his chair by the fire. The paper boy was on his way out but came back for his tip. Harry sat down gently and opened the paper, flipping it so that the pages stood by themselves, the headline boldly exposed. He could hardly wait to see what he had done tonight.

R. A. LAFFERTY

ALL PIECES OF A RIVER SHORE

It had been a very long and ragged and incredibly interlocked and detailed river shore. Then a funny thing had happened to it. It had been broken up, sliced up into pieces. Some of the pieces had been folded and compressed into bales. Some of them had been rolled up on rollers. Some of them had been cut into still smaller pieces and used for ornaments and as Indian medicine. Rolled and baled pieces of the shore came to rest in barns and old warehouses, in attics, in caves. Some were buried in the ground.

And yet the river itself still exists physically, as do its shores, and you may go and examine them. But the shore you will see along the river now is not quite the same as that old shore that was broken up and baled into bales and rolled onto rollers, not quite the same as the pieces you will find in attics and caves.

His name was Leo Nation and he was known as a rich Indian. But such wealth as he had now was in his collec-

tions, for he was an examining and acquiring man. He had cattle, he had wheat, he had a little oil, and he spent everything that came in. Had he had more income he would have collected even more.

He collected old pistols, old ball shot, grindstones, early windmills, walking-horse threshing machines, flax combs, Conestoga wagons, brass-bound barrels, buffalo robes, Mexican saddles, slick horn saddles, anvils, Argand lamps, rush holders, hay-burning stoves, hackamores, branding irons, chuck wagons, longhorn horns, beaded serapes, Mexican and Indian leatherwork, buckskins, beads, feathers, squirrel-tail anklets, arrowheads, deerskin shirts, locomotives, streetcars, mill wheels, keelboats, buggies, ox yokes, old parlor organs, blood-and-thunder novels, old circus posters, harness bells, Mexican oxcarts, wooden cigar-store Indians, cable-twist tobacco a hundred years old and mighty strong, cuspidors (four hundred of them), Ferris wheels, carnival wagons, carnival props of various sorts, carnival proclamations painted big on canvas. Now he was going to collect something else. He was talking about it to one of his friends, Charles Longbank who knew everything.

"Charley," he said, "do you know anything about 'The Longest Pictures in the World' which used to be shown by carnivals and in hippodromes?"

"Yes, I know a little about them, Leo. They are an interesting bit of Americana: a bit of nineteenth-century back country mania. They were supposed to be pictures of the Mississippi River shore. They were advertised as one mile long, five miles long, nine miles long. One of them, I believe, was actually over a hundred yards long. They were badly painted on bad canvas, crude trees and mudbank and water ripples, simplistic figures and all as repetitious as wallpaper. A strong-armed man with a big brush and plenty of barn paint of three colors could have painted quite a few yards of such in one day. Yet they are truly Americana. Are you going to collect them, Leo?"

"Yes. But the real ones aren't like you say."

"Leo, I saw one. There is nothing to them but very large crude painting."

"I have twenty that are like you say, Charley. I have

three that are very different. Here's an old carnival poster that mentions one."

Leo Nation talked eloquently with his hands while he also talked with his mouth, and now he spread out an old browned poster with loving hands:

"The Arkansas Traveler, World's Finest Carnival, Eight Wagons, Wheel, Beasts, Dancing Girls, Baffling Acts, Monsters, Games of Chance. And Featuring the World's Longest Picture, Four Miles of Exquisite Painting. This is from the Original Panorama; it is Not a Cheap-Jack Imitation."

"So you see, Charley, there was a distinction: there were the original pieces, and there were the crude imitations."

"Possibly some were done a little better than others, Leo; they could hardly have been done worse. Certainly, collect them if you want to. You've collected lots of less interesting things."

"Charley, I have a section of that panoramic picture that once belonged to the Arkansas Traveler Carnival. I'll show it to you. Here's another poster:

"King Carnival, The King of them All. Fourteen Wagons. Ten Thousand Wonders. See the Rubber Man. See the Fire Divers. See the Longest Picture in the World, see Elephants on the Mississippi River. This is a Genuine Shore Depictment, not the Botches that Others show."

"You say that you have twenty of the ordinary pictures, Leo, and three that are different?"

"Yes I have, Charley. I hope to get more of the genuine. I hope to get the whole river."

"Let's go look at one, Leo, and see what the difference is."

They went out to one of the hay barns. Leo Nation kept his collections in a row of hay barns. "What would I do?" he had asked once, "call in a carpenter and tell him to build me a museum? He'd say, 'Leo, I can't build a museum without plans and stuff. Get me some plans.' And where would I get plans? So I always tell him to build me another hay barn one hundred feet by sixty feet and fifty feet high. Then I always put in four or five decks myself and floor them, and leave open vaults for the tall stuff.

Besides, I believe a hay barn won't cost as much as a museum."

"This will be a big field, Charley," Leo Nation said now as they came to one of the hay-barn museums. "It will take all your science in every field to figure it out. Of the three genuine ones I have, each is about a hundred and eighty yards long. I believe this is about the standard length, though some may be multiples of these. They passed for paintings in the years of their display, Charley, *but they are not paintings.*"

"What are they then, Leo?"

"I hire you to figure this out. You are the man who knows everything."

Well, there were two barrel reels there, each the height of a man, and several more were set further back.

"The old turning mechanism is likely worth a lot more than the picture," Charles Longbank told Leo Nation. "This was turned by a mule on a treadmill, or by a mule taking a mill pole round and round. It might even be eighteenth century."

"Yeah, but I use an electric motor on it," Leo said. "The only mule I have left is a personal friend of mine. I'd no more make him turn that than he'd make me if I was the mule. I line it up like I think it was, Charley, the full reel north and the empty one south. Then we run it. So we travel, we scan, from south to north, going upstream as we face west."

"It's funny canvas and funny paint, much better than the one I saw," said Charles Longbank, "and it doesn't seem worn at all by the years."

"It isn't either one, canvas or paint," said Ginger Nation, Leo's wife, as she appeared from somewhere. "It is picture."

Leo Nation started the reeling and ran it. It was the wooded bank of a river. It was a gravel and limestone bank with mud overlay and the mud undercut a little. And it was thick timber to the very edge of the shore.

"It is certainly well done," Charles Longbank admitted. "From the one I saw and from what I had read about these, I wasn't prepared for this." The rolling picture was certainly not repetitious, but one had the feeling that the

riverbank itself might have been a little so, to lesser eyes than those of the picture.

"It is a virgin forest, mostly deciduous," said Charles Longbank, "and I do not believe that there is any such temperate forest on any large river in the world today. It would have been logged out. I do not believe that there were many such stretches even in the nineteenth century. Yet I have the feeling that it is a faithful copy of something, and not imaginary."

The rolling shores: cottonwood trees, slash pine, sycamore, slippery elm, hackberry, pine again.

"When I get very many of the pictures, Charley, you will put them on film and analyze them or have some kind of computer do it. You will be able to tell from the sun's angle what order the pictures should have been in, and how big are the gaps between."

"No, Leo, they would all have to reflect the same hour of the same day to do that."

"But it *was* all the same hour of the same day," Ginger Nation cut in. "How would you take one picture at two hours of two days?"

"She's right, Charley," Leo Nation said. "All the pictures of the genuine sort are pieces of one original authentic picture. I've known that all along."

Rolling shore of pine, laurel oak, butternut, persimmon, pine again.

"It is a striking reproduction, whatever it is," Charles Longbank said, "but I'm afraid that after a while even this would become as monotonous as repeating wallpaper."

"Hah," said Leo. "For a smart man you have dumb eyes, Charley. Every tree is different, every leaf is different. All the trees are in young leaf too. It's about a last-week-of-March picture. What it hangs on, though, is what part of the river it is. It might be a third-week-in-March picture, or a first-week-in-April. The birds, old Charley who know everything, why don't we pick up more birds in this section? And what birds are those there?"

"Passenger pigeons, Leo, and they've been gone for quite a few decades. Why don't we see more birds there? I've a humorous answer to that, but it implies that this thing is early and authentic. We don't see more birds be-

cause they are too well camouflaged. North America is today a bird watchers' paradise because very many of its bright birds are later European intrusions that have replaced native varieties. They have not yet adjusted to the native backgrounds, so they stand out against them visually. Really, Leo, that is a fact. A bird can't adapt in a short four or five hundred years. And there are birds, birds, birds in that, Leo, if you look sharp enough."

"I look sharp to begin with, Charley; I just wanted you to look sharp."

"This rolling ribbon of canvas or whatever is about six feet high, Leo, and I believe the scale is about one to ten, going by the height of mature trees and other things."

"Yeah, I think so, Charley. I believe there's about a mile of river shore in each of my good pictures. There's things about these pictures though, Charley, that I'm almost afraid to tell you. I've never been quite sure of your nerves. But you'll see them for yourself when you come to examine the pictures closely."

"Tell me the things now, Leo, so I'll know what to look for."

"It's all there, Charley, every leaf, every knob of bark, every spread of moss. I've put parts of it under a microscope, ten power, fifty power, four hundred power. There's detail there that you couldn't see with your bare eyes if you had your nose right in the middle of it. You can even see cells of leaf and moss. You put a regular painting under that magnification and all you see is details of pigment, and canyons and mountains of brush strokes. Charley, you can't find a brush stroke in that whole picture! Not in any of the real ones."

It was rather pleasant to travel up that river at the leisurely equivalent rate of maybe four miles an hour, figuring a one to ten ratio. Actually the picture rolled past them at about half a mile an hour. Rolling bank and rolling trees, pin oak, American elm, pine, black willow, shining willow.

"How come there is shining willow, Charley, and no white willow, you tell me that?" Leo asked.

"If this *is* the Mississippi, Leo, and if it is authentic,

then this must be a far northern sector of it."

"Naw. It's Arkansas, Charley. I can tell Arkansas anywhere. How come there was shining willow in Arkansas?"

"If that is Arkansas, and if the picture is authentic, it was colder then."

"Why aren't there any white willow?"

"The white willow is a European introduction, though a very early one, and it spread rapidly. There are things in this picture that check *too* well. The three good pictures that you have, are they pretty much alike?"

"Yeah, but not quite the same stretch of the river. The sun's angle is a little different in each of them, and the sod and the low plants are a little different."

"You think you will be able to get more of the pictures?"

"Yeah. I think more than a thousand miles of river was in the picture. I think I get more than a thousand sections if I know where to look."

"Probably most have been destroyed long ago, Leo, if there ever were more than the dozen or so that were advertised by the carnivals. And probably there were duplications in that dozen or so. Carnivals changed their features often, and your three pictures may be all that there ever were. Each could have been exhibited by several carnivals and in several hippodromes at different times."

"Nah, there were more, Charley. I don't have the one with the elephants in it yet. I think there are more than a thousand of them somewhere. I advertise for them (for originals, not the cheap-jack imitations), and I will begin to get answers."

"How many there were, there still are," said Ginger Nation. "They will not destroy. One of ours has the reel burned by fire, but the picture did not burn. And they won't burn."

"You might spend a lot of money on a lot of old canvas, Leo," said Charles Longbank. "But I will analyze them for you: now, or when you think you have enough of them for it."

"Wait till I get more, Charley," said Leo Nation. "I will

make a clever advertisement. 'I take those things off your hands,' I will say, and I believe that people will be glad to get rid of the old things that won't burn and won't destroy, and weigh a ton each with reels. It's the real ones that won't destroy. Look at that big catfish just under the surface there, Charley! Look at the mean eyes of that catfish! The river wasn't as muddy then as it is now, even if it was springtime and the water was high."

Rolling shore and trees: pine, dogwood, red cedar, bur oak, pecan, pine again, shagbark hickory. Then the rolling picture came to an end.

"A little over twenty minutes I timed it," said Charles Longbank. "Yes, a yokel of the past century might have believed that the picture was a mile long, or even five or nine miles long."

"Nah," said Leo. "They were smarter then, Charley; they were smarter then. Most likely that yokel would have believed that it was a little less than a furlong long, as it is. He'd have liked it, though. And there may be pieces that are five miles long or nine miles long. Why else would they have advertised them? I think I can hit the road and smell out where a lot of those pictures are. And I will call in sometimes and Ginger can tell me who have answered the advertisements. Come here again in six months, Charley, and I will have enough sections of the river for you to analyze. You won't get lonesome in six months, will you, Ginger?"

"No. There will be the hay cutters, and the men from the cattle auctions, and the oil gaugers, and Charley Longbank here when he comes out, and the men in town and the men in the Hill-Top Tavern. I won't get lonesome."

"She jokes, Charley," said Leo. "She doesn't really fool around with the fellows."

"I do not joke," said Ginger. "Stay gone seven months, I don't care."

Leo Nation did a lot of traveling for about five months. He acquired more than fifty genuine sections of the river and he spent quite a few thousands of dollars on them. He went a couple of years into hock for them. It would have

been much worse had not many people given him the things and many others sold them to him for very small amounts. But there were certain stubborn men and women who insisted on a good price. This is always the hazard of collecting, the thing that takes most of the fun out of it. All these expensively acquired sections were really prime pieces and Leo could not let himself pass them by.

How he located so many pieces is his own mystery, but Leo Nation did really have a nose for these things. He smelt them out; and all collectors of all things must have such long noses.

There was a professor man in Rolla, Missouri, who had rugged his whole house with pieces of a genuine section.

"That sure is tough stuff, Nation," the man said. "I've been using it for rugs for forty years and it isn't worn at all. See how fresh the trees still are! I had to cut it up with a chain saw, and I tell you that it's tougher than any wood in the world for all that it's nice and flexible."

"How much for all the rugs, for all the pieces of pieces that you have?" Leo asked uneasily. There seemed something wrong in using the pieces for rugs, and yet this didn't seem like a wrong man.

"Oh, I won't sell you any of my rugs, but I will give you pieces of it, since you're interested, and I'll give you the big piece I have left. I never could get anyone much interested in it. We analyzed the material out at the college. It is very sophisticated plastic material. We could reproduce it, or something very like it, but it would be impossibly expensive, and plastics two-thirds as tough are quite cheap. The funny thing, though, I can trace the history of the thing back to quite a few decades before any plastic was first manufactured in the world. There is a big puzzle there, for some man with enough curiosity to latch onto it."

"I have enough curiosity; I have already latched onto it," Leo Nation said. "That piece you have on the wall—it looks like—if I could only see it under magnification—"

"Certainly, certainly, Nation. It looks like a swarm of bees there, and it is. I've a slide prepared from a fringe of it. Come and study it. I've shown it to lots of intelligent

people and they all say 'So what?' It's an attitude that I can't understand."

Leo Nation studied the magnification with delight. "Yeah," he said. "I can even see the hairs on the bees' legs. In one flaking-off piece there I can even make out the cells of a hair." He fiddled with low and high magnification for a long while. "But the bees sure are funny ones," he said. "My father told me about bees like that once and I thought he lied."

"Our present honeybees are of late European origin, Nation," the man said. "The native American bees *were* funny and inefficient from a human viewpoint. They are not quite extinct even yet, though. There are older-seeming creatures in some of the scenes."

"What are the clown animals in the piece on your kitchen floor?" Leo asked. "Say, those clowns are big!"

"Ground sloths, Nation. They set things as pretty old. If they are a hoax, they are the grandest hoax I ever ran into. A man would have to have a pretty good imagination to give a peculiar hair form to an extinct animal—a hair form that living sloths in the tropics do not have . . . a hair form that sloths of a colder climate just possibly might have. But how many lifetimes would it have taken to paint even a square foot of this in such microscopic detail? There is no letdown anywhere, Nation; there is prodigious detail in every square centimeter of it."

"Why are the horses so small and the buffaloes so big?"

"I don't know, Nation. It would take a man with a hundred sciences to figure it out, unless a man with a hundred sciences had hoaxed it. And where was such a man two hundred and fifty years ago?"

"You trace your piece that far back?"

"Yes. And the scene itself might well be fifteen thousand years old. I tell you that this is a mystery. Yes, you can carry those scraps with you if you wish, and I'll have the bale that's the remaining big piece freighted up to your place."

There was a man in Arkansas who had a section of the picture stored in a cave. It was a tourist-attraction cave,

but the river-shore picture had proved a sour attraction.

"The people all think it is some sort of movie projection I have set up in my cave here," he said. " 'Who wants to come down in a cave to see movies,' they say. 'If we want to see a river shore we will go see a river shore,' they say, 'we won't come down in a cave to see it.' Well, I thought it would be a good attraction, but it wasn't."

"How did you ever get it in here, man?" Leo Nation asked him. "That passage just isn't big enough to bring it in."

"Oh, it was already here, rock rollers and all, fifteen years ago when I broke out that little section to crawl through."

"Then it had to be here a very long time. That wall has formed since."

"Nah, not very long," the man said. "These limestone curtains form fast, what with all the moisture trickling down here. The thing could have been brought in here as recent as five hundred years ago. Sure, I'll sell it. I'll even break out a section so we can get it out. I have to make the passage big enough for people to walk in anyhow. Tourists don't like to have to crawl on their bellies in caves. I don't know why. I always liked to crawl on my belly in caves."

This was one of the most expensive sections of the picture that Nation bought. It would have been even more expensive if he had shown any interest in certain things seen through trees in one sequence of the picture. Leo's heart had come up into his mouth when he had noticed those things, and he'd had to swallow it again and maintain his wooden look. This was a section that had elephants on the Mississippi River.

The elephant (*Mammut americanum*) was really a mastoden, Leo had learned that much from Charles Longbank. Ah, but now he owned elephants; now he had one of the key pieces of the puzzle.

You find a lot of them in Mexico. Everything drifts down to Mexico when it gets a little age on it. Leo Nation was talking with a rich Mexican man who was as Indian as himself.

"No, I don't know where the Long Picture first came from," the man said, "but it did come from the North, somewhere in the region of the River itself. In the time of De Soto (a little less than five hundred years ago) there was still Indian legend of the Long Picture, which he didn't understand. Yourselves of the North, of course, are like children. Even the remembering tribes of you like the Caddos have memories no longer than five hundred years.

"We ourselves remember longer. But as to this, all that we remember is that each great family of us took a section of the Long Picture along when we came south to Mexico. That was, perhaps, eight hundred years ago that we came south as conquerors. These pictures are now like treasures to the old great Indian families, like hidden treasures, memories of one of our former homes. Others of the old families will not talk to you about them. They will even deny that they have them. I talk to you about it, I show it to you, I even give it to you because I am a dissident, a sour man, not like the others."

"The early Indian legends, Don Caetano, did they say where the Long Picture first came from or who painted it?"

"Sure. They say it was painted by a very peculiar great being, and his name (hold onto your *capelo*) was Great River Shore Picture Painter. I'm sure that will help you. About the false or cheap-jack imitations for which you seem to have contempt, don't. They are not what they seem to you, and they were not done for money. These cheap-jack imitations are of Mexican origin, just as the shining originals were born in the States. They were done for the new great families in their aping the old great families, in the hope of also sharing in ancient treasure and ancient luck. Having myself just left off aping great families of another sort, I have a bitter understanding of these imitations. Unfortunately they were done in a late age that lacked art, but the contrast would have been as great in any case: all art would seem insufficient beside that of the Great River Shore Picture Painter himself.

"The cheap-jack imitation pictures were looted by gringo soldiers of the U.S. Army during the Mexican War, as they seemed to be valued by certain Mexican families.

From the looters they found their way to mid-century carnivals in the States."

"Don Caetano, do you know that the picture segments stand up under great magnification, that there are details in them far too fine to be seen by the unaided eye?"

"I am glad you say so. I have always had this on faith but I've never had enough faith to put it to the test. Yes, we have always believed that the pictures contained depths within depths."

"Why are there Mexican wild pigs in this view, Don Caetano? It's as though this one had a peculiar Mexican slant to it."

"No. The peccary was an all-American pig, Leo. It went all the way north to the ice. But it's been replaced by the European pig everywhere but in our own wilds. You want the picture? I will have my man load it and ship it to your place."

"Ah, I would give you something for it surely—"

"No, Leo, I give it freely. You are a man that I like. Receive it, and God be with you! Ah, Leo, in parting, and since you collect strange things, I have here a box of bright things that I think you might like. I believe they are no more than worthless garnets, but are they not pretty?"

Garnets? They were not garnets. Worthless? Then why did Leo Nation's eyes dazzle and his heart come up in his throat? With trembling hands he turned the stones over and worshiped. And when Don Caetano gave them to him for the token price of one thousand dollars, his heart rejoiced.

You know what? They really were worthless garnets. But what had Leo Nation thought that they were in that fateful moment? What spell had Don Caetano put on him to make him think that they were something else?

Oh well, you win here and you lose there. And Don Caetano really did ship the treasured picture to him free.

Leo Nation came home after five months of wandering and collecting.

"I stand it without you for five months," Ginger said. "I could not have stood it for six months, I sure could not have stood it for seven. I kidded. I didn't really fool

around with the fellows. I had the carpenter build another hay barn to hold all the pieces of picture you sent in. There were more than fifty of them."

Leo Nation had his friend Charles Longbank come out.

"Fifty-seven new ones, Charley," Leo said. "That makes sixty with what I had before. Sixty miles of river shore I have now, I think. Analyze them, Charley. Get the data out of them somehow and feed it to your computers. First I want to know what order they go in, south to north, and how big the gaps between them are."

"Leo, I tried to explain before, that would require (besides the presumption of authenticity) that they were all done at the same hour of the same day."

"Presume it all, Charley. They *were* all done at the same time, or we will assume that they were. We will work on that presumption."

"Leo, ah—I had hoped that you would fail in your collecting. I still believe we should drop it all."

"Me, I hoped I would succeed, Charley, and I hoped harder. Why are you afraid of spooks? Me, I meet them every hour of my life. They're what keeps the air fresh."

"I'm afraid of it, Leo. All right, I'll get some equipment out here tomorrow, but I'm afraid of it. Damn it, Leo, *who was here?*"

"Wasn't anybody here," Ginger said. "I tell you like I tell Charley, I was only kidding, I don't really fool around with the fellows."

Charles Longbank got some equipment out there the next day. Charles himself was looking bad, maybe whiskeyed up a little bit, jerky, and looking over his shoulder all the time as though he had an owl perched on the back of his neck. But he did work several days running the picture segments and got them all down on scan film. Then he would program his computer and feed the data from the scan films to it.

"There's like a shadow, like a thin cloud on several of the pictures," Leo Nation said. "You any idea what it is, Charley?"

"Leo, I got out of bed late last night and ran two miles up and down that rocky back road of yours to shake myself up. I was afraid I was *getting* an idea of what those

thin clouds were. Lord, Leo, who was here?"

Charles Longbank took the data in to town and fed it to his computers.

He was back in several days with the answers.

"Leo, this spooks me more than ever," he said, and he looked as if the spooks had chewed him from end to end. "Let's drop the whole thing. I'll even give you back your retainer fee."

"No, man, no. You took the retainer fee and you are retained. Have you the order they go in, Charley, south to north?"

"Yes, here it is. But don't do it, Leo, don't do it."

"Charley, I only shuffle them around with my lift fork and put them in order. I'll have it done in an hour."

And in an hour he had it done.

"Now, let's look at the south one first, and then the north one, Charley."

"No, Leo, no, no! Don't do it."

"Why not?"

"Because it scares me. They really *do* fall into an order. They really could have been done all at the same hour of the same day. Who was here, Leo? Who is the giant looking over my shoulder?"

"Yeah, he's a big one, isn't he, Charley? But he was a good artist and artists have the right to be a little peculiar. He looks over my shoulder a lot too."

Leo Nation ran the southernmost segment of the Long Picture. It was mixed land and water, island, bayou and swamp, estuary and ocean mixed with muddy river.

"It's pretty, but it isn't the Mississippi," said Leo as it ran. "It's that other river down there. I'd know it after all these years too."

"Yes," Charles Longbank gulped. "It's the Atchafalaya River. By the comparative sun angle of the pieces that had been closely identified, the computer was able to give close bearings on all the segments. This is the mouth of the Atchafalaya River which has several times in the geological past been the main mouth of the Mississippi. But how did he know it if he wasn't here? Gah, the ogre is looking over my shoulder again. It scares me, Leo."

"Yeah, Charley, I say a man ought to be really scared

at least once a day so he can sleep that night. Me, I'm scared for at least a week now, and I like the big guy. Well, that's one end of it, or mighty close to it. Now we take the north end.

"Yes, Charley, yes. The only thing that scares you is that they're real. I don't know why he has to look over our shoulders when we run them, though. If he's who I think he is he's already seen it all."

Leo Nation began to run the northernmost segment of the river that he had.

"How far north are we in this, Charley?" he asked.

"Along about where the Cedar River and the Iowa River later came in."

"That all the farther north? Then I don't have any segments of the north third of the river?"

"Yes, this is the farthest north it went, Leo. Oh God, this is the last one."

"A cloud on this segment too, Charley? What are they anyhow? Say, this is a pretty crisp scene for springtime on the Mississippi."

"You look sick, Long-Charley-Bank," Ginger Nation said. "You think a little whiskey with possum's blood would help you?"

"Could I have the one without the other? Oh, yes, both together, that may be what I need. Hurry, Ginger."

"It bedevils me still how any painting could be so wonderful," Leo wondered.

"Haven't you caught on yet, Leo?" Charles shivered. "It isn't a painting."

"I tell you that at the beginning if you only listen to me," Ginger Nation said. "I tell you it isn't either one, canvas or paint, it is only picture. And Leo said the same thing once, but then he forgets. Drink this, old Charley."

Charles Longbank drank the healing mixture of good whiskey and possum's blood, and the northernmost segment of the river rolled on.

"Another cloud on the picture, Charley," Leo said. "It's like a big smudge in the air between us and the shore."

"Yes, and there will be another," Charles moaned. "It means we're getting near the end. Who were they, Leo? How long ago was it? Ah—I'm afraid I know that part

pretty close—but they couldn't have been human then, could they? Leo, if this was just an inferior throwaway, why are they still hanging in the air?"

"Easy, old Charley, easy. Man, that river gets chalky and foamy! Charley, couldn't you transfer all this to microfilm and feed it into your computers for all sorts of answers?"

"Oh, God, Leo, it already is!"

"Already is what? Hey, what's the fog, what's the mist? What is it that bulks up behind the mist? Man, what kind of blue fog-mountain—?"

"The glacier, you dummy, the glacier," Charles Longbank groaned. And the northernmost segment of the river came to an end.

"Mix up a little more of that good whiskey and possum's blood, Ginger," Leo Nation said. "I think we're all going to need it."

"That old, is it?" Leo asked a little later as they were all strangling on the very strong stuff.

"Yes, that old," Charles Longbank jittered. "Oh, who was here, Leo?"

"And, Charley, it already is *what*?"

"It already *is* microfilm, Leo, to them. A rejected strip, I believe."

"Ah, I can understand why whiskey and possum's blood never caught on as a drink," Leo said. "Was old possum here then?"

"Old possum was, we weren't." Charles Longbank shivered. "But it seems to me that something older than possum is snuffing around again, and with a bigger snufter."

Charles Longbank was shaking badly. One more thing and he would crack.

"The clouds on the—ah—film, Charley, what are they?" Leo Nation asked.

And Charles Longbank cracked.

"God over my head," he moaned out of a shivering face, "I wish they *were* clouds on the film. Ah, Leo, Leo, who were they here, who were they?"

"I'm cold, Charley," said Leo Nation. "There's bone-chill draft from somewhere."

The marks . . . too exactly like something, and too big to be: the loops and whorls that were eighteen feet long. . . .

GENE WOLFE

SONYA, CRANE WESSLEMAN, AND KITTEE

The relation between Sonya and Crane Wessleman was an odd one, and might perhaps have been best described as a sort of suspended courtship, the courtship of a poor girl by a wealthy boy, if they had not both been quite old. I do not mean to say that they are old *now*. Now Sonya is about your age and Crane Wessleman is only a few years older, but they do not know one another. If they had, or so Sonya often thought, things might have been much different.

At the time I am speaking of every citizen of the United States received a certain guaranteed income, supplemented if there were children, and augmented somewhat if he or she worked in certain underpaid but necessary professions. It was a very large income indeed in the mouths of conservative politicians and insufficient to maintain life according to liberal politicians, but Sonya gave them both the lie. Sonya without children or augmentation lived upon this income, cleanly but not well. She was able to do this because she did not smoke, or attend any public entertain-

ment that was not free, or use drugs, or drink except when Crane Wessleman poured her a small glass of one of his liqueurs. Then she would hold it up to the light to see if it were yellow or red or brown, and sniff it in a delicate and ladylike way, and roll a half teaspoon on her tongue until it was well mixed with her saliva, and then swallow it. She would go on exactly like this, over and over, until she had finished the glass, and when she had swallowed it all it would make her feel somewhat younger; not a great deal younger, say about two years, but somewhat younger; she enjoyed that. She had been a very attractive girl, and a very attractive woman. If you can imagine how Debbie Reynolds will look when she attends the inauguration of John-John Kennedy, you will about have her. With her income she rented two rooms in a converted garage and kept them very clean.

Crane Wessleman met Sonya during that time when he still used, occasionally, to leave his house. His former partner had asked him to play bridge, and when he accepted had called a friend, or (to be truthful) had his wife call the friend's wife, to beg the name of an unattached woman of the correct age who might make a fourth. A name had been given, a mistake made, Sonya had been called instead, and by the time the partner's wife realized what had occurred Sonya had been nibbling her petits fours and asking for sherry instead of tea. The partner did not learn of his wife's error until both Crane Wessleman and Sonya were gone, and Crane Wessleman never learned of it. If he had, he would not have believed it. The next time the former partner called, Crane Wessleman asked rather pointedly if Sonya would be present.

She played well with him, perhaps because she was what Harlan Ellison would call an empath—Harlan meaning she gut-dug whether or not Crane Wessleman was going to make the trick—or perhaps only because she had what is known as card sense and the ability to make entertaining inconsequential talk. The partner's wife said she was cute, and she was quite skillful at flattery.

Then the partner's wife died of a brain malignancy; and the partner, who had only remained where he was because of her, retired to Bermuda; and Crane Wessleman stopped

going out at all and after a very short time seldom changed from his pajamas and dressing gown. Sonya thought that she had lost him altogether.

Sonya had never formed the habit of protesting the decisions of fate, although once when she was much, much younger she had assisted a male friend to distribute mimeographed handbills complaining of the indignity of death and the excretory functions—a short girl with blond braids and chino pants, you saw her—but that had been only a favor. Whatever the handbills said, she accepted those things. She accepted losing Crane Wessleman too, but at night when she was trying to go to sleep, she would sometimes think of Crane Wessleman among The Things That Might Have Been. She did not know that the partner's wife was dead or that the partner had moved to Bermuda. Nor did she know how they had first gotten her name. She thought that she was not called again because of something—a perfectly innocent thing which everyone had forgotten in five minutes—she had said to the partner's wife. She regretted it, and tried to devise ways, in the event that she was ever asked again, of making up for it.

It was not merely that Crane Wessleman was rich and widowed, although it was a great deal that. She liked him, knowing happily and secretly as she did that he was hard to like; and, deeper, there was the thought of something else: of opening a new chapter, a wedding, flowers, a new last name, a not dying as she was. And then four months after the last game Crane Wessleman himself called her.

He asked her to have dinner with him, at his home; but he asked in a way that made it clear he assumed she possessed means of transportation of her own. It was to be in a week.

She borrowed, reluctantly and with difficulty, certain small items of wearing apparel from distant friends, and when the evening came she took a bus. You and I would have called it a helicopter, you understand, but Sonya called it a bus, and the company that operated it called it a bus, and most important, the driver called it a bus and had the bus driver mentality, which is not a helicopter pilot mentality at all. It was the ascendant heir of those cheap

wagons Boswell patronized in Germany. Sonya rode for half because she had a Golden Age card, and the driver resented that.

When she got off the bus she walked a considerable distance to get to the house. She had never been there before, having always met Crane Wessleman at the former partner's, and so she did not know exactly where it was although she had looked it up on a map. She checked the map from time to time as she went along, stopping under the infrequent streetlights and waving to the television cameras mounted on them so that if the policeman happened to be looking at the time and saw her he would know that she was all right.

Crane Wessleman's house was large, on a lot big enough to be called an estate without anyone's smiling; the house set a hundred yards back from the street. A Tudor house, as Sonya remarked with some pleasure—but there was too much shrubbery, and it had been allowed to grow too large. Sonya thought roses would be nicer, and as she came up the long front walk she put pillar roses on the gas lantern posts Crane Wessleman's dead wife had caused to be set along it. A brass plate on the front door said:

C. WESSLEMAN
AND
KITTEE

and when Sonya saw that she *knew.*

If it had not been for the long walk she would have turned around right there and gone back down the path past the gas lamps; but she was tired and her legs hurt, and perhaps she would not really have gone back anyway. People like Sonya are often quite tough underneath.

She rang the bell and Kittee opened the door. Sonya knew, of course, that it was Kittee, but perhaps you or I might not. We would have said that the door was opened by a tall, naked girl who looked a good deal like Julie Newmar; a deep-chested, broad-shouldered girl with high cheekbones and an unexpressive face. Sonya had forgotten about Julie Newmar; she knew that this was Kittee, and

she disliked the thing, and the name Crane Wessleman had given it with the whining double *e* at the end. She said in a level, friendly voice, "Good evening, Kittee. My name is Sonya. Would you like to smell my fingers?" After a moment Kittee did smell her fingers, and when Sonya stepped through the door Kittee moved out of the way to let her in. Sonya closed the door herself and said, "Take me to Master, Kittee," loudly enough, she hoped, for Crane Wessleman to hear. Kittee walked away and Sonya followed her, noticing that Kittee was not really completely naked. She wore a garment like a short apron put on backward.

The house was large and dirty, although the air filtration units would not allow it to be dusty. There was an odor Sonya attributed to Kittee, and the remains of some of Crane Wessleman's meals, plates with dried smears still on them, put aside and forgotten.

Crane Wessleman had not dressed, but he had shaved and wore a clean new robe and stockings as well as slippers. He and Sonya chatted, and Sonya helped him unpack the meal he had ordered for her and put it in the microwave oven. Kittee helped her set the table, and Crane Wessleman said proudly, "She's wonderful, isn't she." And Sonya answered, "Oh yes, and very beautiful. May I stroke her?" and ran her fingers through Kittee's soft yellow hair.

Then Crane Wessleman got out a copy of a monthly magazine called *Friends,* put out for people who owned them or were interested in buying, and sat beside Sonya as they ate and turned the pages for her, pointing out the ads of the best producers and reading some of the poetry put at the ends of the columns. "You don't know, really, what they were anymore," Crane Wessleman said. "Even the originators hardly know." Sonya looked at the naked girl and Crane Wessleman said, "I call her Kittee, but the germ plasm may have come from a gibbon or a dog. Look here."

Sonya looked, and he showed her a picture of what seemed to be a very handsome young man with high cheekbones and an unexpressive face. "Look at that smile," Crane Wessleman said, and Sonya did and noticed

that the young man's lips were indeed drawn back slightly. "Kittee does that sometimes too," Crane Wessleman said. Sonya was looking at him instead of at Kittee, noticing how the fine lines had spread across his face and the way his hands shook.

After that Sonya came about once a week for a year. She learned the way perfectly, and the bus driver grew accustomed to her, and she invented a pet of her own, an ordinary imaginary chow dog, so that she could take a certain amount of leftover meat home.

The next to last time, Crane Wessleman pointed out another very handsome young man in *Friends,* a young man who cost a great deal more than Sonya's income for a year, and said, "After I die I am going to see to it that my executor buys one like this for Kittee. I want her to be happy." Then, Sonya felt, he looked at her in a most significant way; but the last time she went he seemed to have forgotten all about it and only showed Sonya a photograph he had taken of himself with Kittee sitting beside him very primly, and the remote control camera he had used, and told her how he had ordered it by mail.

The next week Crane Wessleman did not call at all, and when it was two days past the usual time Sonya tried to call him, but no one answered. Sonya got her purse, and boarded the bus, and searched the area around Crane Wessleman's front door until she found a key hidden under a stone beneath some of the shrubbery.

Crane Wessleman was dead, sitting in his favorite chair. He had been dead, Sonya decided, for several days, and Kittee had eaten a portion of his left leg. Sonya said aloud, "You must have been very hungry, weren't you, Kittee, locked in here with no one to feed you."

In the kitchen she found a package of frozen *mouton Sainte-Menebould,* and when it was warm she unwrapped it and set it on the dining-room table, calling, "Kittee! Kittee! Kittee!" and wondering all the time whether Crane Wessleman might not have left her a small legacy after all.

LIZ HUFFORD

TABLETS OF STONE

After months in flight, the crew of the merchant ship was happy to land *almost* anywhere: Galen was an exception. When they learned that a repair stop on the planet was unavoidable, morale dropped. "Solitary confinement" was the captain's wry comment to Lorn Newent, the other unmarried crewman. Lorn, the ship's communications man, contacted the stationmaster just as he had three years before. He focused the image on the screen.

"Hello . . ."

This time the station operator was female. She looked very young, and pretty enough for Lorn to term fragile. He usually described her race as scrawny nondescripts.

"Communicator Newent. Have received your request: permission granted. We sympathize with your mechanical difficulties. Three weeks is an extended tour; however, regulations must be maintained. Please order the crew to remain within the restricted area. We apologize for the limited facilities, but unfortunately no more space is available. Any requests may be registered with me. We

will, of course, expect reimbursement for the extra two-week occupancy."

"Yes," he said, struggling with the language, "we are prepared to unload three times the usual amount of nutrient."

The tip of her small tongue appeared for a moment at corner of her mouth. She wouldn't be half bad if you fattened her up a little.

"I have a request," Lorn said as he leaned across the desk.

The girl's shoulders tightened as she refused to acknowledge him.

"I said I have a request."

She turned, unsure in her response and angry because of it.

"Mr. Newent, you *always* have a request. My position requires that I serve the crew. I am not personally responsible for your individual happiness."

"Would you like to be?" he asked with his most earnest expression.

"Would I like to be what?" she replied. "Mr. Newent, for a communications expert you are quite inept. I have no idea what the literal content of this conversation is!"

"That's all right," he muttered apologetically, "I don't think it has any. It's all subjective: I like to talk to you."

She blushed. "It's just that I have other work to do. I'm planning the use of this field until it is again needed for a landing."

"That pushed for room?" he asked. "I thought the population was being controlled."

"For the moment," she said, "but only for the moment."

"About my request," he continued, "would you like to use the recreational facilities with me?"

She frowned.

"Okay, okay, you're very busy. I just thought sometime . . ." He paused, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and looked toward the climbing white housing modules and narrow, teeming streets of Galen. "I don't suppose you could give me an ashore?"

"Sorry," she said.

"Well, maybe sometime we could walk down to the fence and talk to the guards or do sit-ups together in the exercise room." He turned to leave. She watched him, glanced at the papers on her desk, and rose.

"Mr. Newent . . ."

Lorn reached for her hand and again she was angry.

"That's immoral, Lorn," she said.

"Immoral," he chuckled. He was beginning to develop his own theory of relativity.

"Yes," she replied firmly, "it would be the beginning of evil. If you touch my hand, you will want to touch more of me. If you touch more of me, I would probably want you to touch *more* of me. Do not think that I am foolishly ignorant of these things, but it would be evil. I would deserve death."

"Death!" Lorn was suddenly alert.

"How do you stop evil on your planet?" she asked.

Lorn watched as the planet Galen dotted, specked, and finally winked its way into oblivion. He wondered how much hell he'd catch. At least there would be no fine. He had told Tessca he would not see her until she had been discovered. He would deny knowledge of her act: she would claim it was her own idea. No one could prove him accomplice. The crew was composed of three couples, the captain, and himself. Surely sympathy would lie with the "star-crossed lovers."

"Lorn!"

He whirled around. "Captain?"

"Tessca's on board."

Lorn screwed up his face and tilted it quizzically. "Sir?"

"Come off it, Lorn," the captain said, "you know damn well she's here."

"Sir, you know I wasn't anxious to leave, but surely you don't think . . ."

"Like hell I don't. You know we carry extra supplies, although not many, I assure you. *Authorized Personnel Only.*" The captain drummed his fingers on the regulations book. "I have a professional crew and you bring in a

pretty little bitch from a crowded, worthless planet we know next to nothing about. Now I could understand if it were one of those broads from . . ."

He paused to reflect on some enjoyable leave spent on a still-unnamed planet. "Still, she was a charming little thing. I should have said something, but no, I thought, the kid needs a bit of fun. Didn't think you'd do a fool thing like this. I can't throw her off. We're not turning back. By God . . ."

The captain bit the side of his mouth. A moment passed before he spoke.

"I suppose you'll want me to do the honors."

Lorn looked at the darkness where Galen had been.

"Well, if you would, sir."

"Your ways are very strange, Lorn," she said. "He says those words and it's all right. I will not be evil."

"That's right," Lorn smiled.

"We never tried that," she said.

"You would have been a frustrated old maid if it weren't for me."

Lorn placed his hands on her shoulders and steered her to the bunk.

Tessca was pregnant. The captain shuddered at the thought of explaining two stowaways, but the imminence of life renewed everyone's spirits. Everyone but Tessca. Pregnancy did not agree with her. Her face was haggard. She moved slowly and complained of being tired.

"I am going to be evil, aren't I, Lorn?" she whimpered.

"Evil," he said, "no, you're just the most wretched moralist I've ever seen. I've explained to you our custom. We are married. That means it won't be evil. You should be happy to have a child."

"A child," she said, thoughtfully pulling her hair. "But I still look and feel to myself very evil."

He pulled her on his lap.

"I love you, Tessca."

When Tessca gave birth, two of the wives assisted. When she saw it *was* evil, Tessca let herself die. The women shrieked their way from the birthplace.

LOGBOOK ENTRY: "There were about fifty of the tiny infants. From what we deduced about Tessca's aging process, their approximate growth rate was calculated. The oxygen will not hold out. By the time we realized what must be done some of them could crawl. The women could not bring themselves to help us. We have not finished the task. Some of them have found their way into the nutrient chambers.

"Lorn has hung himself."

ROBERT F. YOUNG

STARSCAPE WITH FRIEZE OF DREAMS

The orbital shipyards of Altair IV are both a source of beauty and a source of prosperity to the planet's inhabitants. The beauty derives from the reflective quality of the orbiting spacewhales that are being converted into spaceships; the prosperity, from the employment afforded by the conversion process and from its perennial need of supplies.

Although the number of these huge, asteroidlike creatures varies, there are seldom fewer than twelve of them in orbit at any given time, for generally as soon as one of them becomes a full-fledged ship and is deorbited, another arrives to take its place. The night skies of Altair IV are the richer for their presence. Like bright Venuses they rise at uneven intervals in the east, climb rapidly to zenith, then slide down the dark slope of the heavens and set in the west. The interested observer can watch the passage of these lovely moonstars the whole night through, and speculate, if he is so inclined, on how far

back into the past they have traveled; for the present, as every schoolboy knows, is only the surface of the space-time sea, and a living spacewhale can dive beneath this surface and sojourn in times past, can return, if it so desires, to the primordial moment when the cosmos was born.

The shipyards are sometimes referred to as the Spacewhale Graveyard, but in the connotative sense of the term this is a misnomer. Spacewhales do not come here of their own free will or because they wish to die. They are brought here by the whalers who have pursued them and by the Jonahs who have deganglioned them. They are dead upon arrival—

Or at least they are presumed to be.

The curtain rises upon a man who once upon a time was a Jonah himself. *Name:* John Starfinder. *Race*: Naturalized Terraltairan. *Occupation*: Drive Tissueman.

The scene is the belly of one of the orbiting whales. It is a pleasant scene, because this particular whale is nearing apotheosis, which is to say that most of its honeycombed interior has been converted into compartments, holds, corridors, and companionways, that its fissured and meteor-cratered skin has been inlaid with numerous portscopes and burnished to the smoothness of a woman's thigh, that its asymmetrical lines have been made symmetrical, that locks have been installed in its transsteel flanks, and that artificial gravity and a thermostatically controlled atmosphere now supplant near weightlessness and an absolute-zero vacuum.

An alien image has come unbidden into Starfinder's mind and has caused him to pause in the phosphorescent corridor along which he has been walking. The corridor runs the length of the lowest deck and gives access to the two major holds, the machine shop, a dozen compartments, and three storage areas. In addition, it gives access to the drive-tissue chamber where Starfinder has been working all day adapting the whale's natural propulsion unit to an outside power source. He has been working on the drive tissue ever since conversion began, and it will take him at least another week to finish the job.

The image that has appeared in his mind can be indicated thus:

((*))

Starfinder is nonplussed. He has been thinking of the angel Gloria Wish, and he can see no connection between ((*)) and his thoughts.

Presently ((*)) fades away, and he resumes walking down the corridor toward the companionway which leads up to the main deck and the boarding locks. The twelve-hour workday is done, and like Jonah he is eager to be regurgitated from the belly of the whale; eager to see the angel and ride down with her on a starbeam to the city he has come to call Home.

Perhaps this is why the image has appeared in his mind. Because he is tired from too much work and too much Gloria Wish. Perhaps this is why it appears again, this time in duplicate:

((*)) ((*))

Again Starfinder comes to a halt. He is abreast of the machine-shop door; the base of the companionway is just around a bend in the corridor. He knows fear now, as well as mystification. He has had good reason once before to doubt his sanity; now he doubts it again.

The double ((*)) does not remain long, but no sooner does it fade than it is replaced by another. This one is slightly different:

°((*))° ((*))

Moreover, words accompany it; but the words come from within Starfinder's mind:

> Morning a thousand Roses brings, you say; Yes, but where leaves the Rose of Yesterday? And this first Summer month that brings the Rose Shall take Jamshyd and Kaikobád away.

The first image, then, denotes a rose; the second, two roses; and the third, a dead rose and a living one. Starfinder's subconscious knows what the hieroglyphs stand for, if Starfinder does not.

His subconscious supplys yet another clue:

Roses are blue.

Starfinder is staring at the machine-shop door now. The machine shop formerly constituted the whale's ganglion chamber. Here in its ganglion the whale kept its memories; here the whale thought its thoughts; here the whale made its decisions; here the whale dreamed its dreams. And the ganglion, like all such ganglions, was shaped like an enormous rose—

An enormous *blue* rose.

It makes sense now. Roses *are* blue.

Breaking free from his inertia, Starfinder rounds the bend in the corridor and starts up the companionway steps. By the time he arrives on the main deck the heiroglyphs have faded completely from his mind. None come to take their place; nevertheless, he is still shaken when he joins the other converters, all clad in gray coveralls like his own. One of them is the shift leader. He stands nearest the locks, awaiting like the others the arrival of the angel Gloria Wish. Starfinder does not like him. The shift leader is aggressive, domineering, and insensitive. No doubt this is why he is a shift leader.

The arrival of Gloria Wish is greeted with cheers, although she appears every evening at this time to post the watchguard and to take the converters home. Starfinder has slept with her; so have most of the other converters whom she ferries to and from their whales. But with Starfinder it is different, because it is he whom she has chosen to be made 1 with. Her silvery skin-tight coveralls enhance the fullness of her breasts, the paps of which protrude through little peepholes made especially for the purpose. She has wide but wiry hips and long slim legs. Her ageless face is of classic cut; beauty radiates from its smooth clear skin, iridesces in her eyes. Her hair is coiffed

to form a sunbright halo round her head.

Not only does she own her own shuttle service, but she is a major stockholder in the company that owns the shipyards. This is not unusual on Altair IV. Terraltairan women have climbed the evolutionary ladder faster than Terraltairan men and during the ascent have acquired not only surpassing beauty but surpassing business acumen as well. Unfortunately, the faster they climbed the more of them fell off, and on Altair IV the males now outnumber the females four to one, which makes premarital promiscuity a must. Few men on Altair IV have the good fortune to be able to call a woman exclusively their own, as Starfinder shortly will be able to do. In less than a week now one of his ribs will be removed and fashioned into a circlet for Gloria Wish's neck as a symbol of their 1-ness.

The converters file through the boarding tube into the shuttleship, and the watchguard takes over the whale. The angel sends the little ship dropping dizzily toward the blue-greenness of Altair IV; on all sides pulse the stars, and up above the whale turns into an ovoid moon; down, down, down falls the ship out of heaven, and the cities of the plain can be seen sparkling beyond Altair IV's twilight belt, and now the belt advances to meet the plummeting ship, and there, advancing also, is Starfinder's city; but he has no eyes for it, he is looking up through the overhead spacescope at the dead whales in the sky and at the stars beyond them blooming in the space-time night. In the vast distances forget-me-nots grow, and parsecs to their right glow daffodils; over there are bluebells, lilies of the valley . . . *Someday I will go a-Maying in the heavens—touch a bluebell, breathe the fragrance of a lily, pluck a* ((*)) . . .

The angel Gloria Wish sees him home in her late-model flyabout as she does every night. She has offered to buy him a flyabout of his own, but he has refused. This is because he is new to Terraltairan culture and has not wholly accepted its ways. But sooner or later he will accept them.

At the base of the tall bright building where he lives she bids him good-night and tells him she will see him later on after she has totaled the day's receipts. He waves goodbye to her as she flits away.

His apartment comprises three rooms, but they share a single ceiling, as the partitions are only waist-high. The ceiling is the sky. Like all the other ceilings in the building it is televised from the building's roof, but the picture is flawless and indistinguishable from the reality. Centered in it at the moment is the faint yellow pinpoint of the Earth Mother. Earth herself of course is not visible, but she can be sensed if not seen. Even Starfinder, who has never laid eyes on her, senses her presence. An umbilical cord light-years long stretches from his navel to her storied shores; like all his contemporaries he is as much of Earth as though he had been born there; they and he are the children of Earth—the inheritors of her ethos.

He undresses, showers, shaves, dons a lounge-around ensemble. He sits down and dials his evening meal. The apartment's 3V screen has come on the minute he walked in the door; as he dines, he glances at it now and then. In it, a man and a woman are copulating, but he hardly sees them. Instead, he sees the rose—

((•)) . . .

"So, whale, you are not dead after all," he says to the four walls and the three half-walls of the subdivided room.

After his meal, he lies down on the bed and stares up at the televised heavens. A whale has risen in the east and is climbing toward zenith. It transits the Earth Mother, begins its downward journey. However, it is not Starfinder's whale. It is a different leviathan.

He thinks of the final hieroglyphs, pictures them in his mind—

°((•))° ((•)) . . .

The message is clear enough. The whale, unknown to the Jonah who deganglioned it, had two ganglions. The Jonah destroyed only one of them. The other?

Clearly, it was damaged. Else the whale would have dived long ago and resurfaced elsewhere.

Starfinder has heard of biganglioned whales. They are

extremely rare, but they exist. But the ganglions in the cases he has heard of have been located side by side, and when one was destroyed, the other was destroyed also. Obviously this whale's second ganglion is in a different compartment from the first—a natural chamber that has gone undiscovered by the converters. Probably it is close to the machine shop, though not necessarily. The Jonah's explosives could have damaged the second ganglion by shock waves alone, regardless of its location.

However, Starfinder has never heard of a whale trying to communicate with a human being. It is an established fact that they can and do communicate with each other, sometimes across light-years. But with a human being? It is unthinkable.

Still, this whale has had a long time to mull things over. Maybe it has decided there are worse ignominies in the universe than asking one of its mortal enemies to repair its ganglion. Death, for instance.

Suddenly Starfinder grins. "What will you give me, whale, if I fix it for you?"

Abruptly he realizes what the whale *can* give him, and a tightness afflicts his throat and he lies immobile on the bed, staring starward. But he does not see the stars, they are occulted by a leviathan vessel that is part spacewhale and part spaceship; he sees himself standing on the bridge of the great whale vessel and he hears himself say, "Dive, whale—dive!" . . . and the whale plunges beneath the surface of the space-time sea and plummets into the past; the stars move backward in the spacescopes and the constellations subtly change . . . down, down, down into the mists of mankind's yesterdays the whale travels, and then, as suddenly as it began, the dive ends and the whale surfaces light-years away and eons ago, and nearby in the black vastness the golden Earth Mother glows, her brood not far away; he sees the blue Earth wearing her filmy nightgown of clouds, he glimpses the naked moon, he says, "Go in closer, whale—I want to see the clods who called themselves kings, the ancient empires; I want to see the armored elephants of Carthage, Hadrian at work on his wall, I want to see Attila riding over a hill, his hideous

horde behind him . . . I want to see all the things I read about when I was blind—when *you* blinded me, whale—no, not you, your brother."

Sweat shines on Starfinder's forehead; there is a terrible ache in his chest. "If you would give me *that,* whale—"

A chime sounds, and a cathode tube comes to life. In it is the radiant face of the angel Gloria Wish. "Let me in, my love. I've brought you a basket of kisses."

She is wearing skin-tight gossamer lace through which her paps peep like a pair of roses. With goddess mien she sweeps into the room, putting the drab appointments to shame. She deactivates her single garment and it slips from her to the floor. She is like a table spread before him, and he is a traveler from a far land, eager to taste the viands upon which he gorged himself the night before.

She extinguishes the lights and takes him in her arms; the stars look coldly down upon their lovemaking. As coldly when, her lover spent, she takes one of the priapean hypodermics she always carries with her and injects its contents into his bloodstream . . . insatiably she climbs upon him, goddess-beast, angel fallen from heaven, this is the day of Starfinder; thus womankind has become.

This is the way it is with Starfinder: as a cabin boy on an ore freighter that was once a whale he was blinded by 2-omicron-vii radiation seeping from the residue of an incompletely destroyed ganglion, and he stayed blind for two years, during which time he learned Braille and, ironically, read all the books he had ignored when he could see, and he swore that when his sight returned he would kill all spacewhales, and when it did return he became a Jonah and entered into the bellies of many whales and deganglioned them, which is to say blew out their brains, but the killing affected him strangely, afflicting him with a malaise of the mind from which he recuperated only after a certain experience caused him to give up killing spacewhales, but he could not give them up altogether, because they were all he knew, so he came to Altair IV and went to work in the orbital shipyards, and lo!—an angel appeared in the heavens and Starfinder fell in love.

Gorged, yet strangely empty, Starfinder sinks into a fitful sleep. During it, he dreams an atavistic dream that he has dreamed increasingly often of late. In the dream he is a Cro-Magnon savage walking weaponless across a starlit plain. Just ahead of him and to his right is a small shadow-filled copse. He dreads the copse and wishes to give it a wide berth, but he seems to have no control over his legs and continues walking in a straight line. As he comes abreast of the copse a huge saber-toothed tiger leaps out of the shadows and bears him to the ground. It crouches above him, its massive forelegs resting on his chest, shutting off his breath, its horrible tusked face grinning down into his own. Growls emanate from deep in the beast's bowels; its fetid breath overwhelms him. Slowly the jaws part. They part to an incredible width to accommodate the long yellowed tusks. Slowly the face descends—

Starfinder knows that in a moment he will be dead, and yet he cannot move. This, far more than the tiger, constitutes the nightmarish quality of the dream. This numbing paralysis that grips him, that makes it impossible for him even to try to save himself. His arms lie like lead at his sides. He cannot so much as lift a single finger. All he can do is lie there helplessly and wait for those gaping jaws to complete their relentless journey, and close.

He wills his arms to rise; he wills his fingers to sink into the tiger's tawny throat. But his arms do not stir; his fingers do not even tremble. The great face occults the entire heavens. The jaws, which have opened to a 45° angle, begin to close. One of the tusks pricks Starfinder's jugular vein, wrenching him awake—

He wakes sweating. Beside him, Gloria Wish sleeps. Above him pulse the stars.

He lets his gaze roam the body of the woman he loves, and presently the last dregs of the dream dissolve. What masochistic quirk of his subconscious, he wonders, caused it to occur?

Gloria Wish's eyes have opened, and she is smiling at him in the starlight. Suddenly he remembers the whale, and realizes that he must tell her it is not dead. As a major

stockholder in the company that owns it she is responsible for the potential danger its second ganglion represents. Besides, there should be no secrets between them, for soon they will be 1.

But he doesn't tell her, lying there beside her in the starlight, nor does he tell her afterward as they loll before the 3V screen and chat. Tomorrow he will tell her, he promises himself—after he makes certain that the whale really does have a second ganglion.

Or better yet, he will tell the shift leader. But first he must make sure that his mind is not playing him false.

Back in the belly of the whale the next morning, Starfinder descends the companionway to the lowest deck, just as he does each working day. He is tired, but no more so than usual. The only aspect of his appearance that betrays both his fatigue and his suppressed excitement is the slightly heightened color of the 2-omicron-vii scar on his right cheek.

He enters the machine shop warily. Little is known about 2-omicron-vii radiation save that it is deadly, as his erstwhile blindness and the scar on his cheek testify. But clearly the second ganglion is safely sealed off from the rest of the whale; if it were not, he and the other converters would have long since been reduced to ashes.

He closes the machine-shop door behind him. He "listens." He "hears" nothing. Then he concentrates on the whale's first message, visualizing it in his mind—

((*))

At first, he receives no answer. Then:

)))∘ ((*))

Starfinder concentrates again: *Where?*

This time there is no response.

Starfinder is not surprised. How can a mere word convey anything to a spacewhale? So for the moment Starfinder forgets words and concentrates successively on the nearest hold, on the nearest compartment, and finally on the drive-tissue chamber, visualizing each with a ((*)) in it. Then he blanks his mind and waits.

He feels a shadow. It is pale, and cold as death, and vanishes the moment he becomes aware of it. He has no difficulty interpreting it. It is fear. Desperation has driven the whale into revealing the existence of its second ganglion, but desperation is not enough to overcome its distrust of man.

Strategy is called for. Starfinder must somehow trap the whale into revealing the location of the second ((*)). So he visualizes the whale much as he visualized it in his daydream the previous night, fully converted, except for its drive tissue, and with himself in full command. "Now dive," he says in his mind, cementing the words in the whale's awareness. "Damn you, whale—dive!" And in his mind the whale dives, bearing him, its sole passenger, into the past. "Resurface, whale!" he says. "Return to when we were," and the whale does so, reemerging into the present.

Next, Starfinder visualizes the whale as the freighter it is destined to become in the near future. He pictures its holds brimful of raw materials, and he pictures a surly commander standing on its bridge, a beetle-browed mate pacing its main deck, an obese astrogator poring over charts in its chartroom, a sullen chef cooking in its galley, and a slovenly crew scattered throughout its interior. Finally, to make certain the whale gets the message and understands that of the two alternatives the first is far preferable to the second, Starfinder visualizes the drive-tissue chamber as it will look after the outside power source has been installed and is in operation—concrete proof, were any needed, that man will have taken over and that the whale will be dead.

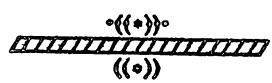
Then he waits.

As he waits, he realizes belatedly that he has made a bargain with the whale. He has implied that if it will reveal the location of the second ((*)), he, Starfinder, will repair whatever damage has been done to it, and that in return the whale must become his personal property and obey his every command. In his eagerness to trap the whale, he has trapped himself.

But this is ridiculous. Men cannot enter into bargains with animated asteroids that however human they may

sometimes seem are nothing of the sort. Besides, how can a spacewhale—any more than a man—be trusted? And all of this is futile speculation anyway, because the whale will not accept such bondage, no matter how desperate it may be, no matter how reluctant to die—

The hieroglyphic image that abruptly appears in Starfinder's mind can be indicated thus:



Starfinder is stunned.

The whale *will* enter into bondage.

Clearly, death to a spacewhale is as dreadful a prospect as death is to a man.

The second ganglion is located just beneath the first in a natural chamber the converters have overlooked, probably because of its proximity to the whale's skin. Now that he knows its location, Starfinder must tell the shift leader. Any other course of action would be insane.

Since the machine shop itself is close to the whale's skin, the deck separating the shop from the chamber below cannot be more than three or four feet thick. Transsteel, which constitutes the whale's subtissue, is a super-hard organic-metallic two-phase material, but it yields readily to the hyperacetylene flame which the Altair IV shipyards developed to cope with it. Since the deck is of a much softer material, burning through it will take but a few minutes; blasting the rose into extinction will require but a few more. It is one thing to dream of commanding a spacewhale and holding the past in the palm of your hand; it is quite another to make such a dream a reality when to do so will mean ostracizing yourself forever from your adopted society and alienating yourself completely from the woman you adore. Starfinder realizes that up until this moment he has been quite mad. Now, thankfully, sanity has returned.

Starfinder quits the machine shop and seals the door behind him. It is his intention to seek out the shift leader

and reveal that the whale is not dead. Why, then, does he turn right instead of left and continue down the corridor to the drive-tissue chamber? The reason is that the shift leader can just as well be apprised of the second ganglion during the lunch break as now, because in its present condition it does not represent a true hazard.

Starfinder resumes work where he left off yesterday. It is his job to adapt the original structure so that those aspects of it which are incomprehensible to man can be bypassed. This requires a certain amount of hyperacetylene surgery (none of which he has performed as yet) and it is a terribly complicated operation.

As Starfinder works, he thinks of how the ancient Carthaginians used to convert elephants into war machines. How they attached armor to the beasts' flanks and forelegs; how they built towers atop the beasts' ungainly backs; how they taught the huge animals to charge and trample the enemy.

For some reason he cannot get these Carthaginian elephants out of his mind, and he thinks of them all morning long. When the lunch-break bell sounds over the intercom, he leaves the drive-tissue chamber and walks down the corridor toward the foot of the companionway. He hurries past the machine-shop door, but not quite fast enough to avoid having a pair of roses implanted in his mind—a living and a dead one.

The dining room is on the second deck, directly above the galley. The galley has been stocked for the ship-to-be's trial voyage, but the working crew's fare is meager. However, Starfinder isn't hungry and hardly notices. There are elephants milling about in his mind, trampling his thoughts, and every now and then a rose appears incongruously among the huge ungainly beasts, and he knows he cannot go on like this, that he must either get rid of his burden or shoulder it in earnest, and since that is out of the question, he approaches the shift leader, who has finished eating and is sitting at his personal table, picking his teeth.

Starfinder has every intention of stopping at the table, and he very nearly does so. But at the last moment the shift leader glances up at him, and Starfinder is reminded

by those bleached blue eyes that the shift leader is not only aggressive, domineering, and insensitive, but is frustrated as well. There is nothing that would please him more than to have Starfinder tell him that the whale is still alive, because then he would be able to relieve that frustration, temporarily at least, by destroying the second ganglion.

But Starfinder wants the second ganglion destroyed by someone other than himself, doesn't he? Apparently not, for he walks past the shift leader without a word and descends the companionway to the third deck. Here, in the main supply room, he procures an anti-2-omicron-vii suit. Both the supply room and the third-deck corridor are deserted, and in moments he has reached the lowest deck and is heading for the drive-tissue chamber. He drops off the suit by the machine-shop door, picks up his hyperacetylene torch and tanks in the drive-tissue chamber, and returns. Then he is in the machine shop, the door sealed behind him.

He marks off the center of the shop, dons the anti-2-omicron-vii suit and begins burning through the deck.

The machine-shop door is constructed of transsteel filched from the whale's subtissue and is six inches thick. Even radiation from a healthy ganglion would be unable to penetrate it; hence Starfinder has no fears on that score.

Hyperacetylene does not melt metal—it vaporizes it. A depression three feet in diameter begins to take shape.

Starfinder's mind wanders as he burns . . . The towers the Carthaginians built atop their war beasts housed bowmen, and when the enemy was within range the bowmen unleashed their arrows from the safety of their portable forts, killing many of their foes and wounding others. Astride each elephant's neck sat a pilot armed with a sledgehammer, with which to smash the animal's vertebrae should it panic and go berserk. The Carthaginians were master converters. They thought of everything.

Much later in his history, as he grew more civilized, man devised subtler means of converting animals. The dolphins are a classic example. While publicly making friends with a few of them, man privately trained others to

carry explosives to the hulls of enemy ships and to detonate both the explosives and themselves at exactly the right moment. The Technologists were master converters too.

Thoughts of the dolphin lead ineluctably to thoughts of the whale that once flourished in the seas of Earth. For a time, Starfinder's mind dwells upon *Moby Dick,* which he read while he was blind, and he wonders whether Melville meant evil to be symbolized by the whale, as so many scholars seem to think, or by Captain Ahab?

What does *this* whale symbolize?

Freedom? Death? Both?

What do *I,* Starfinder, symbolize?

Burn, Starfinder—burn! Leave your soul alone. You did not create the elephant. You did not create the dolphin. You did not create the whale. You did not create *this* whale. And above all, *you did not create man.* Burn, burn, burn!—and when you see the rose, burn that too!

But when he sees the rose he does not burn it. Instead, he extinguishes the torch and lowers himself into the second-ganglion chamber. It is surprisingly large, and its walls emit the same pale phosphorescence that illumines the rest of the whale's interior. The rose is huge, but although its radiation is still deadly, its blueness is not the blueness of the other roses he has known—the roses he has killed . . .

Starfinder kneels, and examines the stem. It is cracked—probably from the shock waves of the explosion that destroyed the first ganglion—and the energy stored in the whale's transsteel subtissue cannot reach the rose in sufficient quantities to sustain it.

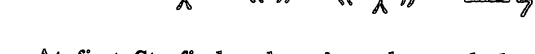
But the injury is a minor one. Starfinder can repair the damage in a matter of minutes. Both the stem and the rose consist of transsteel: all he needs to set them right are a welder and a packet of transsteel welding rods, both of which items are no farther away than the drive-tissue chamber.

But, damn it!—he didn't come here to fix the rose. He came to destroy it.

Why, then, didn't he bring the special explosives that alone can do the job? Only Jonah's charges can ef-

fectively eradicate a rose, and there is a whole box of them in the supply room.

Slowly Starfinder straightens. As though to make his burden heavier yet, the whale transmits a new combination of hieroglyphs:



At first Starfinder doesn't understand the meaning of the message. Then he realizes that the whale is referring to their bargain. ((*)) represents the rose in its present damaged condition; the stickman represents Starfinder. ((*)) stands for the rose after Starfinder shall have repaired it, and  the resultant oneness of Starfinder and the whale  can mean only one thing; spacetime, the three-sided figure  signifying space, and  , with its abrupt descent, time.

There is a long silence. Then the whale, as though afraid it has failed to make itself clear (and perhaps growing desperate because it is so close to death) discards its pride and spells out its acceptance of the bargain in a single hieroglyph which Starfinder cannot fail to understand:

And Starfinder? He climbs out of the second-ganglion chamber, picks up his hyperacetylene torch and tanks, quits the machine shop and seals the door behind him. Then he returns to the drive-tissue chamber, removes the anti-2-omicron-vii suit and goes back to work. Somehow he manages to get through the rest of the day.

Lying abed, hands clasped behind his head, Starfinder gazes up at the celestial ceiling of his room. His whale is the evening star.

It is distinguishable from the others because its surface is burnished, causing it to reflect even more of the rays of Altair than its dead brothers. It is the brightest object in the heavens.

Lying on his bed, waiting for the angel Gloria Wish, he watches it rise and set, and he wonders how he will be able to live with himself after he tells her that the whale is still alive and that he has made a bargain with it.

He does not need to wonder how she will react when he does tell her. He knows. She will say, "Starfinder, are you insane? Get hold of the shift leader and go up there and kill it at once!"

And Starfinder will say, "Very well, Gloria Wish—I will do as you command."

He will say this because Gloria Wish is stronger than he. She is neither god nor goddess, but she comes very close to being both. It has taken only three centuries for modern Terraltairan woman to evolve, but she is the culmination of everything womankind ever wanted to be. She is the glory of womankind incarnate. To look at a Terraltairan woman is to fall in love.

But seldom is that love returned in kind. It cannot be on a planet where there are so many men. Starfinder knows how lucky he is, and he is grateful. It is true that Gloria Wish will outlive him, then she will become 1 with many lovers after he is dead. But right now she is his, and his alone. Only he can have her. The appeasing of her appetite is his responsibility alone.

But *can* he appease that gargantuan appetite? Can he alone—even with the assistance of priapean injections —perform a task that up till now has required the energies of twenty men?

There are two sayings on Altair IV that crop up regularly during barroom conversations and appear periodically on rest-room walls. The first one rises to poetic heights of a sort, and goes like this:

> With this rib I do thee wed;
> In ten more years I shall be dead.

The second is a simple statement of fact, and goes like this:

The only old men on Terraltair are queers.

Lying on his bed waiting for Gloria Wish, Starfinder stares straight up into the black and infinite immensities where yesterday is the sparkle of a distant star and tomorrow the twinkle of another and today a drop of darkness; he sees the climbing into heaven of the dead whales, the sad promenade of the ((*)) less leviathans across the face of  ; he sees the yellow mote of the Earth Mother and he visualizes the filmy-nightgowned Earth waiting with all her treasures—Earth Past, the great green orb with all her seas and the ships upon them, and the ancient armies marching over her lands; the pith of history, queens and kings, a pageant colorful and cruel—*all this I hold in the palm of my hand; all this is mine for the taking—*

Enter Gloria Wish, bearing a basket of kisses: "Starfinder, my starfinder—why are you so pale?"

She divests herself of gossamer lace, puts out the lights and sits down on the edge of the bed. Her breasts are like twin pale hills looming above him, and beyond them hovers her face. Its beauty intensifies as he looks up at it, outshines the stars themselves. She is like a wind that has come up from the south, and the wind is warm upon him as the pale hills descend toward his face. Famished, he feeds. And now the wind grows warmer, enveloping him and lifting him into the sky, the stars shine brightly as they pinwheel in the night, and the wind lifts him higher yet, and now he is among the pinwheeling stars. One by one, they nova around his head and fall like flowers past his face, down, down, down . . . Dimly he feels the faint prick of the first hypodermic, wakes to the quickening of his blood; the wind, a hot and searing blast now, whips him aloft again, and now there are supernovas in the heavens, he can see them from the Aurignacian plain across which he is walking, weaponless and alone. Once again the great gaunt beast leaps out of the shadows of the copse and

bears him to the earth. Once again the Cyclopean jaws spread wide. Foul saliva drips upon his face. His lungs are a holocaust of pain. Growls of anticipation reverberate in the beast's throat as it lowers its face for the feast.

If he could but move. He tries to break the invisible bonds that hold him helpless to the earth. He tries with every shred of himself, with every molecule, with every atom—break! break! break! . . . and suddenly there is a terrible rending within him, a spasm of incomprehensible pain, and then his arms are free and rising, his fingers are sinking into the tawny throat. Deeper still, and deeper, and now the growls have given way to screams; but the screams do not remain long, Starfinder's fingers drive them away. He rises to his feet with a strength that amazes him, and shakes the dying sabertooth as though it were an empty sack. And shakes and chokes and shakes and chokes. Then he realizes that his eyes are tightly closed, and opens them . . . and sees the face of the angel Gloria Wish, and even then his fingers do not fall away, although the blueness of her face testifies that she is dead.

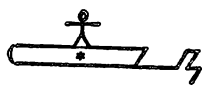
Up the ladder into heaven climbs Starfinder once again. This time he climbs alone.

He docks the shuttleship against the flank of the whale and passes through the boarding tube into the whale's belly. He overpowers the watchguard and carries him back into the shuttleship. He programs the automatic pilot to orbit the ship three times and then go in for a landing. He reenters the belly of the whale and proceeds directly to the lowest deck. He waits till his hands have stopped trembling; then he repairs the rose.

After sealing the machine-shop door from the outside, he makes his way to the bridge. He gives the rose time to absorb the energy it needs, then says, "Deorbit, whale —break free!" And the whale disengages itself from the orbital shipyards of Altair IV, which are both a source of beauty and a source of prosperity to the planet's inhabitants, and parts company forever with its dead brothers.

Ravenous after months of starvation, it feeds upon the dust and debris of space. Its interior phosphorescence takes on a brighter hue; a throbbing comes from below as

its drive tissue comes to life. Replenished, the whale floats upon the surface of the sea. "Now," Starfinder says, and the whale gathers itself for the plunge. "Now, whale." The throbbing of the drive tissue becomes a powerful pulse. "Dive!" And the whole dives, deep into  , and  and the  go free.



ROBERT E MARGROFF
AND ANDREW J. OFFUTT

THE BOOK

The book lay on a rough stone shelf, its pages and golden script unfaded by the sun. To the near-man crouched over the pages he really could not comprehend, the book seemed the answer to all wants and longings.

He crouched there, drooling slightly from the corners of his mouth. His skin was goosefleshed from the morning cold; his joints were swollen. His name was Brandon.

He went back on his heels to cough and choke. From the cave's entrance, greasy smoke had backed to fill his lungs and redden his eyes.

Brandon bellowed his anger. "Dammit, Jilly! Put out that fire!"

Slowly the smoke cleared.

But the only vision it had concealed was that of Jilly's broad face and pendulous udders. Her mouth opened to reveal the yellowed stubs of her teeth.

"Can't bake a snake without a fire."

Brandon tried to glare. "*Move* the fire, woman! Over to the cliff's edge!"

"You want someone see? You want them come take me?"

Brandon considered. It wasn't as if a woman were always easy to find, and he would miss Jilly on cold nights. In the old days when the world was not-old, there had been more people than was good for Brandon's ease of mind. He had been very strong in body, so strong that every male he had challenged had given up what he wanted, whether it was a woman, a haunch of deer or a bigger club. He had taken other men's women, and their brains. Remembering, Brandon licked his lips. But as the years passed it had become harder to swing the club; the book was safer. He had retreated to this valley and raised his deadfalls.

Jilly was insisting: "Brandon?"

He straightened, his spine making a snapping sound. He tried to walk to the cave's mouth as a young warrior walks. It was an absurdly short journey.

The tree branch with its knobbed end was leaning against the cave wall at the entrance. He took it up, raised it and feinted at Jilly.

"Move it far enough," he said. "Far enough; not too far. You hear, woman? Must I bash dirt loose from your ears?"

"N-no, Brandon. I move it." She was not really frightened of him any longer. Brandon returned to the book.

He had often thought, *How to build a better deadfall? How to trap more game?* And because he had brooded long over the open pages, answers had come to him. Sometimes they made little sense, those thoughts that tortured his slow mind. Why did it work for him? He did not know. He did not know.

There had been a time:

His young muscles straining against the boulder that had concealed the cave's entrance. It moved, because everything moved to his shoulder, then. Inside was the book, with all its magic. It took him long to learn its use: concentrating, staring, watching the lines crawl and gradually, gradually become a thought for him. For him only.

He wondered, sometimes, why he stared at the book for

so many hours each day. Time not spent picking the fruits and berries that crowded each other in this valley; time not spent in spearing fish in the chuckling stream, or in setting animal traps, or in watching for strangers. It had first occurred to him while staring at the book that he might stay here and protect himself. A new thought: traps for defense. But why should he not eat of certain roots, and why should Jilly eat of them? Why should they make clay vessels to hold their food? Why should they plunge into the stream at least every moon to scrub the dirt from their sides, rubbing a rough, foaming root all over their bodies?

It was unmanly, this slavery to the book. It had kept him from the fresh air, stooped his back, dimmed his eyesight. Because of the book, he had done things that would have provoked the young Brandon to howls of outrage. It had persuaded him to keep but one wife, to send away the children of his own seed and the women he could not protect—send them away from the valley, rather than destroy them. Why save a woman for another man? Why raise young if not to satisfy his own appetites?

That reminded him: Jilly had been acting strangely.

"Jilly," he said. "You carrying again?"

She scowled at him. Her hand went to the bit of sharp flint in her hair. "You will not sacrifice it," she said fiercely. "You will not kill this one on the Sun stone! You will not eat of its brain and make me eat!"

"No," Brandon said, frowning at the book. "No. It is written here, in gold."

"Written?" Her voice was suspicious. "What is 'written'?"

"These . . . marks" he told her. "They are *written.* Made. Someone put them here so they would mean something to someone else." The thoughts and the phrasing of them threatened to split his brain. "They mean what I need them to mean." He touched his chest. "I read them. You can read too."

Shaking her head, she backed to the cave wall. Her hand rose again to the flint. "No!"

Brandon shrugged. He could force her, of course, but there was no desire in him to make her behave as a man.

A woman, after all, was just a woman. If she were to learn to read, let her next mate—

Her next mate! With a growl, he seized his club. Blood pounded behind his eyes and in his wrists. Her eyes went wide, then narrow as she crouched. Her flint was out and ready, her teeth bared. She expected him to kill her, he saw. It would be no more than a natural act, for no man wishes to enter the shadow-world without at least one wife to accompany him and serve him there.

He raised the club. His muscles quivered. He had to! It was the book's fault!

Jilly fell to her knees. "The new one!" she pleaded.

He paused. Had she knowledge of his thought?

"What new one?" he demanded.

"Here," she said in a small voice, touching her belly. "New one kick. Don't hit me now. I learn if you want."

But he knew she would not, and he did not care. Nor did he want to kill her. But if she should live after him, for long. . . . Brandon stopped. Hating her, hating himself, hating the book, he stopped. Hating the book most of all.

He picked up her shard of flint and walked to the book. He raised a sharp edge above the pages. His hand trembled. Before his eyes the symbols seemed to twist and writhe, begging him: *Do not strike me! Do not strike me!* How could he destroy what had been so good to him?

His arm still quivered. He tried. Slowly he brought the flint down until it touched the page. Averting his face, he gripped the flint strongly and pushed it down. The sharp edge gouged, twisted—and slipped from his fingers.

He lifted his hand to stare. Blood. It was his blood, not the book's. The page remained unmarked. Even his blood ran off without leaving a trace. And Brandon knew fear.

He told himself that he would wait until after the child was born, after Jilly had known the happiness of it. He pictured her on the rock ledge outside, singing and crooning to the new one, her breasts big and her belly flat and wrinkled again. He would have to destroy it then, before it demanded the little new one.

But now Jilly was sobbing and moaning, and the book lay before him. He would close it, and he would not look at it again. If he did not read, perhaps he would not be

compelled to do the things it made him want to do. The senseless, foolish things so much worse than bathing in the stream or sending away the wives and children.

Yes, that was it. He would close the book.

His hand was slick with blood and sweat as he attempted to grasp the book's edge. No sign of wear marred the covers; none ever would. He was certain of that, if of nothing else.

But what, he wondered, lay beyond? What came next?

Again Brandon wrestled with curiosity, and once again curiosity won. Brandon turned the page.

Jilly changed gradually. Since giving birth to Little New One she had behaved as Brandon had expected. Every day she nursed the infant beneath the living sun, waiting for Brandon to perform the Great Father role. He went daily into the rich valley, returning with her wants. One day it was fish. Another blueberries. Today crayfish, which was indeed strange, because never, never even during pregnancy, had she cared to eat the hard-shelled creatures with their outsize pincers and alarming eyes. He had pursued them all morning amid the stones, and now he returned, laden with them. He peered inside. Jilly! With the infant on her back, fingers twined fast in her stringy hair, Jilly was leaning over the book!

Brandon's mouth worked, but he found no words. He had told her, he remembered, to learn to read. What an idiotic thing to say! A woman had no business with magic, other than the art of birth. What had he been thinking of? Was it only to make her defy him that he had suggested she read?

Or . . . had the book? Was the book suggesting that he was to admit strangers to his valley, and die, without even Jilly to comfort him? Or perhaps it had been the book that had persuaded him to tell Jilly to read . . . where did the book's power leave off and his own thoughts begin? When had the two become indistinguishable?

"You are angry," she said. She was trembling.

"Read!" he commanded angrily, and he stamped out. He had more important matters, though he was uncertain what they were.

In the valley, surrounded again by greenery, and the

blues and scarlets of the berries, the flickering black and gold and brown of birds, surrounded by the strident hum of insects and the muted roar of the brook, Brandon vented his new frustration. He ripped up bushes and hurled them from him with ridiculous force. He discovered a harmless yellowish snake and jumped up and down upon it, breaking and tearing its twisting body until it was a red jelly upon the grass. He pounded his fists on the boles of trees until his hands bled. He jerked his limbs in an arthritic travesty of a hate dance. He brought down oaths of fire and thunder and hailstone and flood upon oblivious nature. Blowing like a winded animal, foaming in his beard, he snarled down at the darting fish in the little stream.

Then he grunted.

The new thing began with a very small pain somewhere in his chest, like the first ray of the morning sun. And like the sun, it rose and grew and widened until he saw the landscape dim and swirl and he fought his breathlessness with sobs. He fell.

He was dying.

Dying! Dying, after having given his days and his eyesight to an illusion, and it hurt him, more than the dying, to know that what he had given had not been given but *spent,* spent in the way that his seed had sometimes been spent as he slept.

"Brandon?" The softer voice was not Jilly's.

"Brandon?" Not Jilly's, but a voice he recognized: Jalene's. She had been his wife once and he had let her leave him rather than kill her. He twisted, strove desperately to look up at her.

They swam in the mist. There were two of them: Jalene and a strange man with a strong, cruel face.

He tried to think. His mind wanted rest, but it came, filtering, creeping: she had returned, disobedient woman, and she had brought with her a stranger. An enemy, and a man should challenge his enemies. But there was so little time—and no strength.

"You are dying, old man," the stranger said. His voice held malicious joy. "Soon you will lie breathless and stiff. I will take your wives and your valley, and when you're

'aten, I will make a medicine of your bones. Does that anger you, old man?" He was grinning.

Brandon flickered his eyelids, an effort. The light did not seem right, but it was there, it and the sun and the faces above him. The face of the stranger—big, corded neck with some whiskers and some patches of skin discolored and scarred from having been scraped with flint; bristly cheek, flattened nose, smallish eyes set deep in his powerful skull. A brute. A brute such as Brandon had been. The thought filled him with horror and longing; the book had changed him so much!

"You want something, old man? Cold water? Shade? Roots? Medicine? You want me to break your head?"

The club did not waver. He watched it descend slowly, felt it touch his skull, watched it ascend. The man made a show of bunching his muscles, settling his feet, tightening his hands on his log of a weapon. He was taking his time, delighting in the torment. As Brandon had.

"You are not afraid? You not want say love words to wives? Maybe see something in cave?" The brute face smiled: immense white teeth.

Brandon struggled to lift his head. His jaw muscles worked, seeming somehow detached from him. It was a strange thing he said, even to his own ears. He fought to phrase it:

"I must ask you not—"

"*Not*!" The giant's nostrils flared. Brandon knew how he himself would have reacted.

"You must not take other wife. You must kill her, Jilly, and Little New One. Bring them here. Their spirits must accompany me."

The brute smiled. "Your wives all be mine, old man. All *are* mine. Baby will live, too. You will not want to be bothered with baby, old man; you have no milk." He chuckled. So, obediently, did Jalene. "What else you want?"

Brandon had set the pattern. What he said he wanted would be doubled back on itself. What he asked would be denied. He would have what he wished because he would ask the opposite.

"I want—you must not look at book in cave. *My* book,

not yours. Never go and look at it. It—tears things in you. Makes you too wise. Makes you change, like me. Never look at it!"

The strong man hesitated, frowning, but only for a moment. He smiled confidently.

"I will look. Every day. I am strong. I can bear to look at it!" His muscles bunched. He glanced at the woman to be certain she had heard his boast and would remember.

"Wait!" Brandon croaked. "One thing more. One thing you must not do—this above all else. You must not—"

"Tell me, old man. I have no fear of your shadow-spirit. Tell me what I must *not* do." Grinning, white teeth flashing, knuckles whitening about the club.

As from a great distance Brandon forced out the words that expressed the strangest wish. The most important wish of all.

"You must not eat of my brain."

CAROL CARR

INSIDE

The house was a jigsaw puzzle of many dreams. It could not exist in reality and, dimly, the girl knew this. But she wandered its changing halls and corridors each day with a mild, floating interest. In the six months she had lived here the house had grown rapidly, spinning out attics, basements, and strangely geometric alcoves with translucent white curtains that never moved. Since she believed she had been reborn in this house, she never questioned her presence in it.

Her bedroom came first. When she woke to find herself in it she was not frightened, and she was only vaguely apprehensive when she discovered that the door opened to blackness. She was not curious and she was not hungry. She spent most of the first day in her four-poster bed looking at the heavy, flowered material that framed the bay window. Outside the window was a yellow-gray mist. She was not disturbed; the mist was a comfort. Although she experienced no joy, she knew that she loved this room and the small bathroom that was an extension of it.

On the second day she opened the carved doors of the

mahogany wardrobe and removed a quilted dressing gown. It was a little large and the sleeves partially covered her hands. Her fingers, long and pale, reached out uncertainly from the edge of the material. She didn't want to open the bedroom door again but felt that she should; if there were something outside to discover, it too would belong to her.

She turned the doorknob and stepped out into a narrow hall paneled, like the wardrobe in her room, in carved mahogany. There were no pictures and no carpet. The polished wood of the floor felt cool against her bare feet. When she had walked the full distance to the end and touched a wall, she turned and walked to the other end. The hall was very long and there were no new rooms leading from it.

When she got back to her bedroom she noticed a large desk in the corner near the window. She didn't remember a desk but she accepted it as she accepted the rest. She looked out and saw that the mist was still there. She felt protected.

Later that afternoon she began to be hungry. She opened various drawers of the desk and found them empty except for a dusty tin of chocolates. She ate slowly and filled a glass with water from the bathroom sink and drank it all at once. Her mouth tasted bad; she wished she had a toothbrush.

On the second day she had wandered as far as the house allowed her to. Then she slept, woke in a drowsy, numb state, and slept again.

On the third day she found stairs, three flights. They led her down to a kitchen, breakfast area and pantry. Unlike her room, the kitchen was tiled and modern. She ate a Swiss cheese sandwich and drank a glass of milk. The trip back to her room tired her and she fell asleep at once.

The house continued to grow. Bedrooms appeared, some like her own, some modern, some a confusion of periods and styles. A toothbrush and a small tube of toothpaste appeared in her medicine cabinet. In each of the bedrooms she found new clothes and wore them in the order of their discovery.

She began to awaken in the morning with a feeling of

anticipation. Would she find a chandeliered dining room or perhaps an enclosed porch whose windows looked out on the mist?

At the end of a month the house contained eighteen bedrooms, three parlors, a library, dining room, ballroom, music room, sewing room, a basement and two attics.

Then the people came. One night she awoke to their laughter somewhere beyond her window. She was furious at the invasion but comforted herself with the thought that they were outside. She would bolt the downstairs door, and even if the mist disappeared she would not look. But she couldn't help hearing them talk and laugh. She strained to catch the words and hated herself for trying. This was *her* house. She stuffed cotton into her ears and felt shut out rather than shut in, which angered her even more.

The house stopped growing. The mist cleared and the sun came out. She looked through her window and saw a lake made up of many narrow branches, its surfaces covered with a phosphorescent sparkle like a skin of dirty green sequins. She saw no one—the intruders came late at night, dozens of them, judging from the sound they made.

She lost weight. She looked in the mirror and found her hair dull, her cheeks drawn. She began to wander the house at odd hours. Her dreams were haunted by the voices outside, the splash of water, and, worst of all, the endless laughter. What would these strangers do if she suddenly appeared at the doorway in her quilted robe and demanded that they leave? If she said nothing but hammered a "No Trespass" sign to the oak tree? What if they just stood there, staring at her, laughing?

She continued to wander. There were no new rooms, but she discovered hidden alcoves and passageways that connected bedroom to bedroom, library to kitchen. She used these passageways over and over again, avoiding the main halls.

Now when she woke, it was with a feeling of dread. Had any of them got in during the night, in spite of her precautions? She found carpenters' tools in a closet and nailed the windows shut. It took weeks to finish the job, and then she realized she had forgotten the windows in the

basement. That part of the house frightened her and she put off going down. But when the voices at night began to sound more and more distinct, when she imagined that they were voices she recognized, she knew that she had no choice.

The basement was dark and damp. She could find no objects to account for the shadows on the walls. There was not enough light to work by, and when she finished, she knew she had done badly. If they really wanted to come in, these crooked nails would not stop them.

The next morning she found that the house had a new wing of three bedrooms. They were smaller than those in the rest of the house and more cheaply furnished.

She never knew exactly when the servants moved in. She saw the first one, the cook, when she walked into the kitchen one morning. The woman, middle-aged and heavy, wearing a black uniform with white apron, was taking eggs from the refrigerator.

"How would you like them, madam?"

Before she could reply, the doorbell rang. A butler appeared.

"No, don't answer it!" He continued to walk. "Please —"

"I beg your pardon, madam. I am partially deaf. Would you repeat your statement?"

She screamed: "*Do not answer the door.*"

"Scrambled, fried, poached?" said the cook.

"It may be the postman," said the butler.

"Would madam like to see today's menu? Does madam plan to have guests this evening?" The housekeeper was dark and wiry. She hardly moved her lips but her words were clear.

"Some nice cinnamon toast, I think," the cook said, and she placed two slices of bread in the toaster.

"If you're having twelve to dinner, madam, I would suggest the lace cloth," said the housekeeper.

The doorbell was still ringing. It wouldn't stop. She ran to the stairs, toward the safety of her room.

"Madam?" said the cook, the housekeeper, the butler.

That night they came at sunset. She climbed into bed and drew the covers up around her, but still she could

hear their laughter, rising and falling. The water made splashing sounds. She pulled the covers over her head and burrowed beneath them.

A new sound reached her and she threw off the covers, straining to hear. They were downstairs, in the dining room. She could make out the clink of silverware against dishes, the kind of laughter and talking that came up at her from the water. The house was alive with a chattering and clattering she could not endure. She would confront them, explain that this was her house; they would have to leave. Then the servants.

She went down the stairs slowly, rehearsing the exact words she would use. When she reached the ballroom floor she stopped for a second, then crossed it to the open doors of the dining room. She flattened herself against the wall and looked inside.

There were twelve of them, as the housekeeper had suggested—and she knew every one.

Her husband, bald, bold, and precise. "I told her, 'Go ahead and jump; you're not scaring me.' And she jumped. The only brave thing she ever did."

Her mother, dry as a twig, with dead eyes: "I told her it was a sin—but she never listened to me, never."

A friend: "She didn't seem to feel anything. When other people laughed she always looked serious, as if she was mulling it over to find the joke."

"She used to laugh when she was very small. Then she stopped."

"She was a bore."

"She was a sparrow."

"She was a failure. Everyone knew. When she found out for herself, she jumped."

"Was it from a bridge? I was always curious about that."

"Yes. They found her floating on the surface, staring into the sun like some would-be Ophelia." Her husband smiled and wiped his lips with a napkin. "I don't think I'll recommend this place. I've got a stomachache."

The others agreed. They all had stomachaches.

The guests returned, night after night, but each night it was a different group. Always she knew them and always

she watched as they ate. When the last party left, joking about the food being poisoned, she was alone. She didn't have to dismiss the servants; they were gone the next day. The yellow-gray mist surrounded her windows again, and for the first time she could remember, she laughed.

PIP WINN

RIGHT OFF THE MAP

It was Mayson, my bunkmate at the Ministry, who insisted on the guns. I must make that clear. But I anticipate.

I was dozing on my bunk when he came in, hot, flushed and untidy, and carrying a long, thin cylinder. I recognized the material as paper.

"A close shave," he remarked. "I thought I wasn't going to make it." They had been tightening up the travel regulations, and a confiscated walking permit was a serious matter.

"What is it this time?" I stretched and climbed down to his bunk.

"An old map."

I looked pointedly at the regulation plastic map of the World Union which hogged most of the wall space. Not that I ever complained. We were better off than most of the couples with apartment rooms Outside; the tap and the heating worked, and we were spared the trouble of applying for Workers' Travel Disks.

"This is different. It's an antique," said Mayson, unrolling it. "Mid-twentieth century."

With the single men's shopping ration recently reduced to one hour weekly, most of us had time only to fight our way to the queue outside the nearest store, if we bothered at all. But Mayson had a theory about "first things first" and usually returned with something useless, offbeat and space-wasting.

I had to admit that the tattered old map was esthetically pleasing. It showed, in various colors, the political divisions which existed in the twentieth century, with mountain ranges in brown and the landmasses offset by pale-blue sea.

"Well, keep it rolled up, or stick it on the ceiling," I said acidly. "You've got half my storage space already." But I couldn't resist a few comparisons with the modern map. The Department of London, then called "England," was still quite sparsely populated in the west and north. The Department of Khartoum was colored yellow and marked "Sahara Desert," showing that in those days there was still some land actually left barren.

"There's something I want to check." Mayson's finger moved from the old to the new and back again. "Yes, by God! I thought so. Tell me what you see here." He pointed to a place which is now part of the border between the departments of Karachi and Delhi.

I looked. "Two lines of hills, parallel, but converging at both ends. An offshoot of the Himalayas, apparently."

"Good. And the space between?"

"A long, narrow valley, green with black spots." I consulted the index at the foot of the map. "Forest land."

"Right. Now find the place on the standard map."

"It isn't— Yes. Here. But there's only one line of hills. Well, I suppose, with their primitive instruments—"

"No!" I had never seen Mayson so excited. "Cartography was dead accurate by the nineteenth century. Don't you see what this means?"

"You're the historian. I'm only a biologist."

"I'm a sociologist. But never mind that. Suppose it's the modern map that's wrong. There may be lebensraum there—the first to be found in over a century. We're going

to see the Boss. If we handle him right, we'll get an Orange Disk for this."

For an Orange Disk, anything was worth trying. I followed Mayson along the crowded corridor.

Phillips was a harassed man. His title, Chief Surveyor, was a concession to tradition, and he was really a glorified house matron, pessimistically grappling with the problems of housing five thousand people in a fifty-year-old building designed for two thousand. He was placating the telephone as we entered. "Sorry, Stevens, not a square inch at the moment. Yes, of course, at once, if anything turns up."

He compared the map carefully with the one on his wall.

"Too good to be true," he said. "But I suppose it *is* just possible that Karachi and Delhi both thought they had stopped developing on opposite sides of the same range of hills. The place is well off the air routes, and the valley, if it's there, is narrow and completely enclosed. Would you two like to go and find out?"

"Us?" If I hadn't known his thoughts, I'd have sworn Mayson was genuinely surprised.

"Why not? I could do with your bunks for a while. Computers are expecting two girls from the Department of Paris, and we're a bit stuck. Send Stores a list of the things you'll need, and I'll recommend you for Orange Disks." I caught Mayson's triumphant glance. "But you won't get any transport off the regular routes, so travel light."

He waved us away and picked up the phone. "Computers? About those two girls, Stevens—"

A week later, hung over and sore from our injections, we plunged into the inferno of the morning shopping ration. The long-delayed One-Way (Streets) Bill was expected to be passed at the next reading. And not before time.

The shoppers who, struggling and cursing, filled the wide streets were nearly all women, wearing Yellow Disks marked "Housewife. Wed. Shift 1."

Mayson had done some homework, and we were in

period costume: trousers, shirts, socks and hooded jackets, all of natural cotton, and leather shoes. The trousers would protect our legs against thorns, insects or snakes, he said, and the natural materials would be better than synthetics in a hot, humid atmosphere. On our backs were knapsacks containing water, food and other necessities—these were anybody's guess—and the guns hung from our shoulders by straps. On our chests were the Orange Disks, bearing our photographs and the legend "Urgent Priority at All Times." They were valid for a year and were literally priceless.

Thanks to the Disks, we made good speed. They took us through, instead of around, the Parks, and to the front of every queue at both Airstrips, and enabled us to stand by the windows for the whole of the two-hour flight. We saved at least a week by simply ignoring the customs queue, and nobody dared challenge us.

At the other end the driver of an orange garbage-wagon spotted our Disks and picked us up. He used his siren to good advantage and was able to speed up during the comparative lulls between the Workers' and Shoppers' travel shifts. He dropped us within sight of the hills, having saved us many days of battle.

Less than a month after leaving the Ministry we flourished our Disks at the gate in the wall behind the last housing block. The guard saluted and let us through.

At last we sat resting on the cold hilltop, exhausted from the climb and uneasily aware of the unfamiliar space and quietness. Below us lay the valley, its treetops shimmering in the sunshine. I realized that we need no longer stay so close together, and self-consciously moved away, suddenly irritated by Mayson, who was already busy calculating the area of the valley.

I think it was here that I lost the camera. I remember photographing the contrasting views before and behind, and the next day it was missing. The loss seemed trivial at the time. We had the packets of old-fashioned paper notebooks and pencils which Stores had dug out of the Ministry basement (the fewer gadgets, the fewer technical hitches), and these would be adequate for collecting the

notes and diagrams which would be of more interest to Phillips than the scenery, when translated into potential bunk space.

We followed a spring which cascaded down to a small lake, emerging as a stream that, ignorant of its destiny when it should pass beneath the Wall of Civilization into an underground reservoir, meandered peacefully along the valley, overhung by trees. We should not be able to wander far from its banks at first, because the floor of the forest was covered by dense undergrowth, and we had brought no hatchets. In time, the bulldozers would make short work of this problem.

When we came to a break in the trees we cleared a small area, using knives and branches, and camped for the night. After supper, Mayson worked by torchlight for an hour or so and then, with a muttered "Good night," turned in.

But I sat with my back to a tree, far into the hot, damp night, idly waving the insects away, and savoring for the first time in my life the peace, and the sounds and scents of the wild: bird calls, the chattering of monkeys, the scuffling of small night creatures, the smell of foliage and moist earth. No doubt there would be snakes—perhaps dangerous. I had once been allotted a Zoo Disk, and an indescribable emotion possessed me as I contrasted this solitude and freedom with the plight of the animals crouching mournfully in their three-tiered cages at home. It occurred to me that the whole world must have been like this before man had destroyed it with the spread of his teeming millions. Suddenly lonely, and frightened by the unquiet forest, I huddled into my blanket and slept.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Mayson's voice shattered the peace of the dawn. He grabbed his water flask (replenished by courtesy of the Orange Disks at the last block before we reached the Wall) and cuddled it as though it were his only child.

I continued to empty mine over a bush and nodded toward the stream. "That's fresher."

"You're nuts. It hasn't been purified."

"It's never been polluted. And in a few days we shan't

need these anymore." I indicated the plastic containers full of synthetic food concentrate. "We'll make some paths, find edible plants. And we can catch animals for meat."

It's funny, but I never thought of using the guns for hunting. My mind was set on the idea that they were for whatever unimaginable emergencies Mayson had envisaged when he insisted on bringing them.

He stowed his food and water into his knapsack, and closed it elaborately. "Oh well, if you want to poison yourself with natural food, stinking with bacteria—"

I grabbed his arm. "Sh! Look! Over there."

I must have been looking at it through the trees for some time without seeing it, so perfect was its camouflage. Elegantly draped over a low branch thirty yards or so from the stream was the most glorious creature I had ever seen: a huge cat, as big as a lion, but colored in black and gold stripes which blended harmoniously with the shafts of morning sunlight slanting into the forest. Its underparts were a vivid white. It lay relaxed, eyes half-closed, a poem of grace, dignity and serenity.

"A tiger! A living tiger!" I breathed. I would have sent the whole civilized world to perdition for the camera.

It is not generally known that there were at one time many species of cat. The only surviving members of this once numerous family were the so-called domestic cat, formerly a popular pet, now a pest, which had successfully defied all attempts at extermination, and the lion, which, being gregarious, lazy and friendly to man, is easily tamed and thrives in captivity. The others, solitary and independent, failed to adapt to close confinement and ceased to breed. Though the leopard was the fiercest, the most beautiful of the wild cats was the tiger, the last of which died in London Zoo early in the twenty-first century.

Nevertheless, a tiger this undoubtedly was—a "living fossil." You may have seen films, or museum exhibits, of tigers, but these could give you no idea of the shining glory and awe-inspiring presence of the living animal.

Mayson had seen it now. His face wore the bleak, let's-

get-it-over-with expression that I had begun to hate. He went over and picked up his gun.

"Put that down," I said. "And for God's sake keep still, or you'll frighten it."

He examined the mechanism of the safety catch. "We'll have to take it back with us. It'll be the scoop of the century."

I planted myself between the gun and the tiger. "Look, Mayson, you can't mean that. You couldn't do it. And anyway, we've no equipment for taking it over the mountain dead or alive."

"Not the carcass. Just the skin. We have knives. Think of the price it will fetch—the sensation!"

I dived for his gun. I was almost crying with rage and horror.

"You're bloody well *not* going to kill it. It may be the last tiger in the world. What would be the use of it dead?"

He caught me in the midriff with the butt of the gun, and I fell heavily, gasping for breath.

"So what?" he said. "Who lost the camera, for that matter? And who do you think would ever believe we'd seen a tiger, without proof?" He began to push his way into the undergrowth, ignoring the thorns that tore his trousers and hands.

As a sociologist, Mayson should have known about the territorial instinct which mankind once shared with the rest of creation. I, as a biologist, certainly did. I had by now noticed that the tiger was a female, and pregnant. I knew that a breeding female was the most dangerous and unpredictable of all wild animals. Alarmed or provoked, that lovely, placid creature could change, in a moment, into a spitting tornado. Also, there was likely to be a male somewhere nearby. Mayson was in deadly danger. I collected my gun and followed him, plucking frantically at his shirt. "Come back, you damned fool! You'll get yourself killed."

The tigress, aroused by our noisy approach, now stood up, glaring at Mayson. Her ears lay flat, her back was arched, and a ferocious snarl distorted her beautiful face. Mayson had never fired a gun. The closeness of the range

was no guarantee that he wouldn't miss. It might even cause him to fire too late. I was equally inexperienced, but obviously I was about to learn fast.

Still oblivious to his danger, Mayson took aim. The tigress crouched, gathering herself for the spring. I had about two seconds. Either that glorious creature and her precious progeny were going to be destroyed for the sake of a bedraggled skin, inexpertly hacked from her warm body, or Mayson, my fellow human, was going to die a very sticky death.

There was no time for sentimentality. No civilized man could dare to take the risk. I raised my gun and fired, a split second before the tigress could leap, like a darting golden flame, at Mayson. There was a snarl, a flurry of limbs, and the sound of the gunshot sent every living thing diving for cover. I stood there, in the sinister, unnatural silence, and saw that I had not missed.

I left Mayson in the clearing we had made, with both the guns, the remainder of the food, and most of the kit. I wanted never to see him again.

I'll wrap this report in a plastic bag and leave it somewhere. But no one will come for it. Phillips is in no hurry to have us on his bunk roll again.

My second notebook is nearly full of drawings—of tiger cubs.

TED THOMAS

THE WEATHER ON THE SUN

> . . . . the name "Weather Bureau" continued to be used, although the organization itself was somewhat changed in form. Thus the Weather Congress consisted of three arms. First was the political arm, the Weather Council. Second was the scientific arm, the Weather Advisors. Third was the operating arm, the Weather Bureau. . . .
>
> —*The Columbia Encyclopedia,* 32 Edition, Columbia University Press

The mass of colors on the great globe shimmered and twisted in silence. The dials on the instruments along the curved walls dimmed and brightened each time the needles moved. The Weather Room presented an indecipherable complex of color to the untrained eye, but to the eyes of the Advisors who lounged there it presented an instantaneous picture of the world's weather, when they bothered to look at it. The day shift was near its end, and the mathemeteorologists were waiting to go home. Now

and then one of them would look at some spot on the great globe to see how the weather pattern reacted—to check on a bit of his own work carried out earlier in the day. But he was not really interested; his mind was on the evening's date, or dinner, or a hockey game. Even Greenberg, head of the Weather Advisors, felt the general lassitude.

Anna Brackney was too bored to sit still. She got up and wandered into the computer room, plopped down again and punched a 2414 computer to check the day's match. It was 90.4 percent. She muttered, "Lousy," and then looked around guiltily. She punched the call-up to see what the match had been last week. Ninety point six. She started to say aloud, "Not bad," but stopped herself in time. James Eden would not approve of her talking to herself. Idly she punched call-up and looked at the results for last month and the month before that. Then she sat bolt upright, and punched for data for the last six months. Very loudly she said, "Well, well, well, well, what do you know about that?" Ignoring the stares of two computer operators, she marched back into the Weather Room, right up to Greenberg.

"Do you realize," she said, "that our fit has been slipping a little each week? We are now operating on a fit of a little better than ninety percent, when as recently as six months ago our fit was better than ninety-three percent? Did you realize that?"

Greenberg sat up and looked alert. "No. Are you sure?"

Anna did not bother to answer. Greenberg leaned aside and spoke into a communicator. "Charlie, get me a summary of the weekly fit for the last six months." He touched a button and said, "Upton, come on out to the Weather Room, will you? We may have a problem."

Greenberg touched several more buttons. In two minutes there was a circle of people around him, and he held a slip of paper in one hand. He said, "Somehow, in the last six months, we've slipped three percentage points in our match. How could that happen?"

The people looked at one another. Upton said, "Everybody thought somebody else was checking the long-term fit. I only compared it with the week before."

There was a chorus of "So did I," and Greenberg slapped his forehead. "How in hell could a thing like that happen?" He was a man who normally did not swear. "We've been drifting away from acceptable performance for six months and nobody even noticed it? What about the complaints? What kind of complaints we been getting?"

The people shrugged, and Upton spoke for them again. "Nothing special. Just the usual gripes. Two weeks ago the Manitoba Council complained the breeze we made to blow away the mosquitoes was too strong, but—"

"Never you mind," said Anna Brackney. "That was my mathematical model on that problem, and the twenty-knot wind they got was just right to eliminate the mosquitoes because the foresters—"

"Knock it off," said Greenberg. "I take it there have been no serious complaints? I'd better check further." He talked into the phone with one of the secretaries, then said to the group, "Well, it seems we've been lucky. Anyhow, we've got to find out what's wrong. And we've got to find it before somebody else notices it, or we'll have the Weather Council on our necks. I wonder if I ought to call President Wilburn."

The people shook their heads, and Upton said, "I don't like to be sneaky or anything like that. But if we've somehow slipped in our procedures and got away with it, let's correct them without stirring up trouble. You know politicians."

Greenberg said, "We'll all have to stay on this until we find it. All of you willing?"

The people gave up their visions of dinner and dates and hockey games and nodded.

"Okay, then. Each of you set up a program designed to make an independent repeat of your models for the last six months. Most of it was routine stuff, so it won't be bad. Call in the computer technicians and utilize all of the university's staff and equipment you need. If you need more, I'll set up a net and we can pull in everything we need from beyond Stockholm. Monitor your steps and when you find an error feed it into the 9680 as a collecting computer. Any other suggestions?"

The people shook their heads.

"All right. Let's get to work and solve this before anybody else even knows there's a problem. Good luck." A red light flashed on the phone at Greenberg's elbow, and the operator's voice said, "Dr. Greenberg, President Wilburn is on the phone. Some kind of emergency."

Greenberg looked startled. He picked up the phone and listened. In a moment he turned up the audio so that the people could hear what Wilburn was saying.

The ox was almost done, and it smelled mighty good to Big John Sommerville. He stood at the edge of the great patio and looked across it through the morning groups of people to where the ox slowly turned on the spit. A cloud of steam rose above it and quickly disappeared in the still, dry air. Beyond the barbecue pit with its automatic basters, auxiliary heaters, powder sprinklers, temperature sensors and color detectors stood one of the cattle barns, and beyond that the roll of the prairie began. It was picture-pretty: a stand of oak and maple on the forward slope, a road winding up, a stream meandering down the dip at the foot of the first hill fed from some hidden subterranean channel that groped its way to the low mountains. Big John Sommerville turned to look at the house.

It rambled and twisted behind him, cloaked in brown-stained shingles and roofed with cedar. It sprawled and sprouted unexpected wings and went on for three hundred feet. There was a story that two years ago there had been eight guests in that house for a week before Big John found out about it. It was a good house, built for comfort, and it had a sense of belonging.

Big John Sommerville hooked his thumbs in his belt and started to stroll over toward the roasting ox. His face was craggy with little sags in the right places, and his body was big with a thin layer of fat over hard muscles, a good Texas face on a good Texas body.

"Hey, John, when do we eat?"

"Half an hour, I reckon." He walked on.

A hand slapped him on the shoulder, jolted him a little off-balance. As he turned he said, "You hungry, too, Brian?"

"Sure am." It was Brian Travers, mayor of Austin, the

third most potent political figure in the area, and he held a large glass of straight bourbon. "I can wait through another pint or so of bourbon, but then I'm going to put me away a hindquarter of that ox. Hope it's as good as the last."

"Ought to be. Why, hello, Henry. Just get here?"

Henry Carpenter shook hands and looked around cautiously. "Everything under control? They all here?"

Travers said, "They're here. Quit worrying, Henry. We'll get it." The three of them had arranged the ox roast for a hundred of the major and minor citizens of the region to win over their support for a proposed monorail shipping line. It never hurt to line up the solid citizenry on your side before you tackled the local, state and national officials. "We'll get them feeling comfortable on John's bourbon and ox, and then we'll tell them what we want to do. They'll go along, all right."

"Got a surprise," said Big John Sommerville. "I got to a few ears and I made out a case for a little water table replenishment around here. In exactly an hour and a half we will have a gentle rainfall on the mountains right behind the house, just over that near ridge. The time and position will be just right for the damnedest rainbow you ever saw in your life—the pot of gold will be right on top of that rise there. I'll announce the rainfall a half hour before it's due, and we'll let these fellows think I got extra-special connections at the Weather Council. When these fellows see what I can do with the Council, they'll split their britches to get behind us on the monoline. Right?"

Travers and Carpenter raised their glasses and took a long pull in honor of Big John Sommerville.

The bourbon was smooth, the ox was tender and tasty, and the announcement came at just the right time. The clouds formed on schedule. And then the rains came. The black heavens opened up and poured out their watery hell all over the spread of Big John Sommerville. Something like twelve inches of rain fell in the first twenty minutes, and the meandering stream turned into a devastating giant that swept away the barn and the stand of trees and the winding road. The water roared down the gentle slope

behind the house and burst through the glass doors that opened out on the concealed porches and little hideaway nooks at the back of the house. The basement quickly filled with water, and the water lifted the floor joists from the plates. The little subterranean waterways built up pressure and quickly saturated the soil to a depth of fifteen feet. A mud slide started that transformed the entire house into a kind of roller coaster. Big John Sommerville felt it start and succeeded in getting everybody out of the house, so there were no casualties. In a final cloudburst, the rainstorm passed away.

One hundred and three men stood on a rocky ledge and looked in awe at all that was left of the house, garages, barns, corral, fences, and trees: a sea of soupy mud with occasional pieces of lumber protruding at crazy angles. The bare bones of the hill showed, and the barbecue pit lay somewhere downslope under fifty feet of mud.

"Big John," said Travers, "when you order yourself a rain, you really order yourself a rain."

It took Big John Sommerville three hours to reach a phone, and by that time his plans were made. First he called the Governor, explained what had happened and what he intended to do. It turned out that the Governor also had some information about a weather order or two that had gone wrong. So the Governor made a few calls himself, ending with a call to Wilburn's office to say that an important constituent named Big John Sommerville would soon be calling to talk to Wilburn about an important problem, and please arrange to have President Wilburn take the call. Big John Sommerville placed a few additional calls to other district councilmen, to three other governors, to several mayors and to half a dozen wealthy industrialists. As it happened, many of these people had some small pieces of information of their own about weather mishaps. When these folk called President Wilburn's office to suggest the President listen to what Big John Sommerville had to say, they also tossed into the conversation a few pointed remarks about weather control and sloppy management.

In two hours' time, the communications network sur-

rounding President Wilburn's office in Sicily was in a snarled mess out of which, nevertheless, two pertinent facts stood out: One, many good citizens were acutely unhappy about the weather control, and, two, Big John Sommerville was acoming.

When Big John Sommerville himself got on the line, President Wilburn was sitting there waiting. The five hours of pent-up anger burst into his office while he sat and marveled. The dirty red face that glared at him, the mud-caked hair, the ripped shirt, the glorious, near incoherence of the teeth-clenched stream of words were all fascinating. Never in his political life had President Wilburn received such a dressing down. Partway through it, Wilburn had to remind himself that the situation was not funny. He was, in fact, in the midst of a totally unexpected crisis.

The screen went blank. Big John Sommerville had had his say.

Wilburn sat quietly and reflected. The world government was not so mighty that one influential and irate citizen could not shake it a little. There should be no false moves now. First, he had to find out what had gone wrong. He called Greenberg at the Advisors.

Greenberg had just turned up the audio.

"Let me make certain there is no misunderstanding," said Wilburn. "Every staff member of the Advisors and all associated personnel are hereby placed on an emergency basis, and you have authority to do whatever is necessary—I repeat, whatever is necessary—to get to the bottom of this and correct it. Money, time, people, equipment, anything you need you get. In twelve hours I want a preliminary report from you, and hopefully you will have the complete answers by that time. If not, your entire organization will stay on the problem until it is solved. Routine work will be suspended except for weather control requests you receive personally from me. Do you have any questions?"

"No, Mr. President," and they hung up.

Anna Brackney said, "Why didn't you tell him we had just discovered the problem ourselves?"

Greenberg gave her a look, then said to the group, "All right, let's go the way we planned. I guess we were dreaming a little to think we were going to solve this before anybody else caught on."

As they turned and walked away, Greenberg heard Anna Brackney say to Hiromaka, "But I don't understand why he didn't tell him we had already found out there was a problem."

Hiromaka said, "Aw, shut up."

At breakfast the next morning Harriet Wilburn said to Jonathan, "I guess this will be a bad one. We'd better make it a good breakfast; lunch may be a little tense." She poked the Diner for his coffee and then began making his onion-flavored eggs basted with pork sauce.

"Why is it," he said, "every time something pops I wind up having the breakfast I used to have when I was a boy? You suppose there's an element of regression there?"

"I certainly hope so. I'd hate to think it was some deep, undefined craving. Do you really think you ought to look at that now?" Wilburn had picked up a morning English-language newspaper.

"Oh, don't worry," he said. "I know I'm going to get the most severe castigation of my career. I'm sort of looking forward to how imaginative the press will be." He began to read.

When his eggs were ready he put down the paper and said, "Yes, they're in full cry. The editors, the seers and columnists say they have been fully aware that things haven't been going right with the Weather Congress for several months, but they were just waiting to see if I would get going and do my job."

Harriet said, "Well, you know, and I know, and your friends know the truth. Eat your eggs, dear."

He ate his eggs. He sipped coffee when he was done, read through another paper, then went out into the soft Sicilian air, stepped on a walk and rode awhile. He got off and walked for a mile as was his custom, but a slight numbness crept into his legs, so he finished the trip on the slidewalk. He entered the Great Hall and went straight to his office through the private door.

Before he closed the door, Tongareva was there. Wilburn said, "Just the man I wanted to see. Come in, Gardner."

On his way to a seat, Tongareva started talking. "I have been reflecting on the events. I think we are caught up in some kind of world hysteria. I think the people have resented the Congress and the Council the way a small boy resents his authoritative father, and now they have found an excuse to let off steam. On top of that, elections are coming. I think we must be very careful."

Wilburn sank into his chair, ignoring the flashing lights on his phones and visuals. "Did you hear about that rained-out picnic in Texas?"

Tongareva nodded, a shade of a smile on his face. "That must have been the granddaddy of all rained-out picnics. The Texan knew just what to do to make an international issue out of it."

"The way he told it to me, it *was* an international issue. He led me to believe that everyone of any international importance was at that picnic, except you and me. Well, let me call Greenberg to see if he's found out what's gone haywire here. Please stay with me, Gardner."

Greenberg took the call in his office, with Upton and Hiromaka. "The information I have for you is incomplete, Mr. President. In fact, I hope it is so incomplete as to be incorrect. But you see, twelve hours is not really enough—"

"What are you trying to say, Dr. Greenberg?"

Greenberg glanced at Upton, took a deep breath and said, "A detailed check of all the procedures, all the mathematical models, all the parameters used here, shows that no error has been made and that our mathematical fit matches the prediction. This would indicate that the error was elsewhere. So we got in touch with Base Lieutenant Commander Markov; Hechmer and Eden are on vacation. We told Markov what we were doing and asked him to check out his results, too. We have his results now, and at least preliminarily, neither he nor we can find any fault with his operations. In short, the Weather Bureau on the Sun accomplished each of its missions within tolerance.

There's no error there either." Greenberg stopped and rubbed his face.

Wilburn asked gently, "What is your conclusion?"

Greenberg said, "Well, since the data were used and applied as correctly as we know how, and since the theory checks out as well as ever—"

He fell silent. After a moment Wilburn said, "Well?"

Greenberg looked straight at him and said, "The trouble might be in the Sun itself. The Sun is changing, and our theories are no longer as valid as they used to be."

Wilburn's breath caught, and he felt his body grow cold. He understood what Greenberg had said, but he did not immediately allow the full thought to enter his mind. He held it in front of him where it could not really frighten him, where it hung like a rotted piece of meat that would have to be eaten eventually, but not now. No one spoke or moved in either office. Greenberg and Tongareva did not want to force the swallowing, and so they waited. Finally, Wilburn took it in.

He sat back and groaned, and then stood up and paced out of range of the viewer. Greenberg sat and waited. Then he heard Wilburn's voice asking, "If what you say is true, our whole system of weather control is faulty. Is that right?"

"Yes, if it proves out," said Greenberg.

"Our entire culture, our entire civilization, the world over, is built on weather control. It is the primary fact of life for every living being. If our ability to control weather is destroyed, our world will be destroyed. We go back to sectionalism, predatory individualism. The one factor that ties all men everywhere together would disappear. The only thing left—chaos."

No one answered him, and for another full minute they were all silent.

Wilburn came back and sat down at his desk. He said to Greenberg, "I have to think. How much time will you need to verify your findings so far?"

"Another twelve hours. The European computer net is on it now, and we are in the process of bringing in the United States net and the Asian net simultaneously. Both of them will be on line in an hour. I might say this is the

most intensive effort the Advisors have ever made, and it is causing talk already. There will be no secrets about our findings when we finally get them."

"I understand. I have twelve hours to think of something, and I am going to assume you will confirm what you've already found; that's the worst result I can think of, so I'll get ready to face it." The snap was coming back to Wilburn's voice. "If anything comes up along the way that makes you change your mind, let me know immediately. And thanks for the effort, Dr. Greenberg."

Wilburn looked around his office. The men gathered there did not look happy, and several of them, his political enemies, were frowning. Yet Wilburn needed them all. This was the group that served as a kind of unofficial executive for the entire Council. But it was a difficult group to work with, primarily because they represented such diverse interests.

Councilman Maitland said, "I am afraid, President Wilburn, that you have brought the Council to its lowest point of public esteem that I can remember."

Barstow reared up. "Now just a minute here. How do you—"

Wilburn waved a hand. "It's all right, Arthur. We all agree we have an enormous problem. I called this meeting to ask this group to think about what we do now."

Barstow sat back and nodded. The others were quiet, and then Tongareva said, "You give the impression that you have a plan to solve our present crisis, Jonathan. Are you ready to discuss it?"

"Yes. Although it isn't much of a plan, really." He leaned forward. "We have been this route before. We are confronted with a scientific crisis. The Sun is changing. Our weather control is no longer as accurate, and we may have other dangers we don't even know about yet. The Advisors tell me that these unexpected changes in the Sun might be serious, far more so than our failure to control weather accurately. We don't know what's happening. So here we go again, but this time I'm afraid we will have to mount the largest and most expensive research program the world has ever seen. It is already possible to tell that

the answers won't be easy to get. The Weather Bureau has not seen any changes at all, so the Advisors think things must be happening deep inside the Sun. We've never been able to go deep, so the first scientific order of business will be to solve that one."

"Costs, Jonathan?" It was Du Bois, always a worrier about other people's money.

"Enormous, Georges. This is why we will have to be so careful. The tax burden will be the largest we've ever asked our people to bear. But unless someone can think of another program, I think we'll have to sell it."

Barstow said, "Do you mind if I talk to Greenberg? I want to be able to assure my constituents that I've looked into this personally."

"I hope everyone here will do that, and more. Please talk to any person you want, scientific or not, on any possible solutions he may have. Let's adjourn now and meet here in twenty-four hours to thrash it out."

Tongareva stayed, as Wilburn knew he would. He said, "Who's going to head up the program?"

Wilburn looked at him and smiled. "Need you ask? Aren't Dr. Jefferson Potter and Senior Boatmaster James Eden the ones to do the job?"

Greenberg seemed upset. "Look, with all due respect to you two, I don't think you see the ramifications of the problem. First"—he counted on his fingers—"the trouble appears to lie deep within the Sun. Second, we don't have a vehicle that can penetrate deeper than about two miles; in fact, Jim"—he looked at Eden—"no one has ever equaled that depth you reached some years ago on that Anderson problem. Third, we can't even take measurements at those depths. Fourth, our theories of occurrences at those depths have never been proved out." He dropped his hands. "We are probably in a worse position than we were when we first approached the problem of Sun control as a means of weather control."

Potter and Eden stared reflectively at Greenberg. Then Potter said, "You know, he's just given us an overall breakdown." Greenberg wondered what he was talking about, then realized that Potter was talking to Eden.

Eden said, still looking at Greenberg, "Yes, and he's the man in the best position to make the judgment so far. Four main groups along those lines, with good cross liaison. He's come up with a great way to start out, at least."

Potter said, "Four scientific administrators, each with a cabinet of a dozen or so people with assigned responsibilities. Each of the four groups places its own R & D and hires its own people."

Eden said, "Each cabinet has a member responsible for cross liaison with the other groups. In fact, each cabinet member has sole responsibility for an assigned area. He'll have his own staff to help administer his group."

It was Potter's turn again. "Any overlapping can be minimized by frequent meetings of the big four. Ought to work. Now let's see. All the problems come together on the Sun, so I guess that's where you ought to be. I'll stay here to keep things on the track. We can get together every month or so if necessary. How's that sound to you, Bob?"

Greenberg had caught the drift of the discussion and had been following it, fascinated. He nodded. "Sounds fine to me. Where do the Advisors come into this?"

"Seems to me you should be standing by for any extraordinary computing problems, of which there will be plenty. Don't forget you will also have the day-to-day work going on as usual. You had better increase your staff here, don't you think?"

Greenberg nodded. "Yes, but I can see some problems in getting enough scientific personnel to do all the work on the overall project. We'll wind up with one of our groups bidding against another."

"Bound to happen. We'll try to keep it to a minimum."

Potter said, "All right. I'll get on the horn and we'll start the ball rolling. Wilburn ought to be explaining things to everybody right about now."

Only two of the two hundred councilmen were absent, and Wilburn knew those two were in the hospital. Furthermore, the councilmen sat on the edge of their seats, listening intently to the voices booming over their desk speakers. Wilburn looked down impassively from his desk,

but he was deeply shaken. The debate had gone on for three hours with no interruptions for any reason, and the opposition to the proposed research program was surprisingly strong. What was worse, the mood of the Council was emotional to a degree Wilburn had never seen before. Even Councilman Reardon of 35-50 E 30-45 N, normally a cool speaker, ended his five minutes with his voice broken and quavering. Wilburn frantically tried to think of a way to break the spell, to interject somehow a rational appeal. But he could not prevent the councilmen from obtaining their five minutes to speak. Many of them were so carried away with what they were saying that they did not see the thirty-second warning light on their desks, and they were cut off in mid-sentence by the sergeant at arms when their five minutes were up, left sobbing at a dead microphone.

Wilburn quietly turned to his desk, checked his directory, and dialed the desk of the next speaker, Francisco Espaiyat, 60-75 W 15-30 N. "Frank," he said, "you getting ready to speak?"

"I certainly am, Wilburn. I've come up with some reasons that haven't been mentioned yet, so I hope to do some good here. You got any particular suggestions?"

Wilburn hesitated. "Yes, I have, Frank, but I don't know whether to ask you to do it or not. See what you think. When you come on, simply state that you are in favor of the program, and then leave the rest of your time empty. Give us four minutes and fifty-five seconds of golden silence for a little somber reflection along with a quick trip to the bathroom. I don't like to ask you to give up your speaking time, but nobody yet has got through to these hotheads. What do you think?"

Espaiyat thought about it and then said slowly, "I don't know if it will work, Jonathan, but I'm willing to give it a try."

Three minutes later, when the sergeant at arms announced the speech of Councilman Espaiyat, the Council was startled to hear, "I speak in favor of the program, but I hereby devote the balance of my time to rest and relief from this interminable speechmaking." Espaiyat got up

and started down the aisle. Immediately Wilburn got up and went out the door nearest him. After a moment's looking around the chamber in puzzlement, every other councilman suddenly got up and headed for a door, and as they pressed out to the corridors, some of them began to laugh. A low chant of "Yay, Espaiyat" started up from a few members and quickly spread over the entire chamber and up to the galleries, which were also emptying.

When they poured back to their desks a few minutes later, the spell was broken. Men and women chatted and called to one another. The next speaker, Madame Iwanowski, 45-60 E 45-60 N, spoke against the program, but she tried to marshal some facts. She yielded after two minutes twenty-eight seconds. The crisis had passed. Other speakers disgorged their thoughts, but the tenor of the speeches was only mildly argumentative, for the sake of the constituency back home. In half an hour the question was called and the vote taken. The tabulation flashed on the great board. A small cheer broke out from the floor and gallery. The vote was 133 for, 65 against. Wilburn sat impassively, staring out over the floor, ignoring the numbness that had come back in his legs. They had the required two-thirds vote, but it was much, much too close. On a project of this size he needed all the support in the Council he could get, but about one-third of the group was against him. He sighed. This would not do. There were hard times ahead. If this program didn't work out, he saw clearly who the scapegoat would be. For the first time a President of the Weather Congress would not so much step down as be thrown out. Well, that was politics. Harriet would be waiting for him when it was over, and they could always take up a pleasurable retirement. Key West, now, there was a place he had always loved, and perhaps the same had come to— He caught himself and straightened his shoulders. No time for retirement thoughts yet. There was work to be done. He headed for his office to call Greenberg.

"The trouble is," Senior Boatmaster James Eden said matter-of-factly, "the film of carbon vapor begins to col-

lapse at these pressures. The rate of carbon consumption goes up, the sessile effect dissipates, and the boat itself is consumed."

"Very interesting," said Dr. John Plant. "Now don't you think we ought to get the hell out of here before you demonstrate the point?"

Eden nodded and said into the intercom, "Up. Forty degrees. Now." He fingered the keys and took the boat up to within five hundred yards of the surface before he leveled off. He said to Plant, "Don't wash it out, though. Those limitations I just mentioned will allow these boats to be consumed, but there may be a way around them."

"I don't know what they could be. Those limitations seem pretty fundamental to me. I think we need a whole new approach to get down to the center. We'll never do it with this kind of equipment."

Eden shook his head and said, "I never thought I'd be sitting in a sessile boat on the Sun and hear someone say it was obsolete. Look here. The carbon toruses that surround the boat act as a mirror. They absorb all the radiation from infrared down to the hard stuff to a depth of a fraction of a millimeter and then reflect it with an efficiency of ninety-nine point nine nine nine nine eight. That's the turnaround effect we've been telling you about. Carbon vaporization protects against the balance of the radiation, and the power difference is supplied by our internal reactors. So look. If we can increase the efficiency of the turnaround effect by a factor of a few thousand, we could cope with the increased temperatures and radiative effects at great depths. What's wrong with that?"

"Well, just how do you—"

"We can still balance out the gravitational force by channeling additional power to the bottom toruses, to take advantage of the radiative pressure on the bottom of the boat. Right?"

"Well, just how do you—?"

"That's your problem. I've told you how to do it. You're the scientist. I'm just a boat captain. Now, stand by while we get this thing back to base. I'm going Earthside today."

Plant sighed and settled back in his harness while Eden picked up the beacon and followed it back to base, through the lock and into the bay. While they were stripping off their lead suits, Plant said, "Maybe a carbon alloy."

"What?" said Eden.

"Maybe a carbon alloy would improve the efficiency of the turnaround effect."

"Sounds promising to me. Give it a whirl. Nice going."

Plant looked at him wryly. "Thanks. Glad you like my ideas." Eden was too busy to pay any attention to the slight emphasis on the word "my," so Plant smiled at Eden's back, shrugged and hung up his suit.

They found Base Commander Hechmer in the day room with some of the staff watching a teevee transmit Earthside. Wilburn was addressing the Weather Council, bringing the members up to date on the Sun program. He told them results were coming in. The Sun's core was behaving anomalously. Neutrino formation at the core had accelerated and apparently was going to accelerate even more. The Sun appeared to be moving out of the main sequence a billion years ahead of schedule. Hechmer said, to no one in particular, "Gives you a nice comfortable feeling, doesn't it?"

On the screen Wilburn said, "To finish my report to you, we should know in a few weeks exactly what is wrong with the Sun, and we should then be in a position to know what to do about it. In short, ladies and gentlemen of the Weather Council, this most massive of research efforts has borne fruit. It is isolating the problem, and it will arrive at a solution. Thank you." The applause was long and genuine, and Wilburn made a slight bow and quickly put his hand on the podium.

The Advisors had the jitters, so Greenberg called together his mathemeteorologists and said, "Now look. Just because we have the heavy artillery in the scientific world showing up here in a few minutes is no reason to get all upset. It's just a high-level meeting, and they're holding it here. After all, we've made an important contribution to

the total research effort on this program."

"Yes, but why here? They going to change the Advisors?"

"I hear they're going to fire us."

"Yeah, clean shop and start again with a new group."

Greenberg said, "Oh, cut it out. They probably want our advice on the next steps in the program. You'll have to admit, we have a problem there. We may have accomplished everything we can in the program."

People began to drift in, and soon the room was full. Potter took over as chairman. "What we've got to do is see where we go from here. We've accomplished almost all the major objectives of the program. What's left?"

Kowalski said, "We've fallen down on boat design. We haven't been able to come up with a boat that will get us down to the center of the Sun and back up again. We don't know where to turn next. We've explored every alley we can think of, and we have some thirty thousand people working on the project, including some real bright ones, problem solvers. All we've done is improve the efficiency of the boats by a factor of a thousand. We don't know where to turn next."

Potter said, "You can get a boat down, but you can't get it back. That right?"

"Yes, and don't anybody here tell us about remote control or automation. Center-of-Sun conditions are such that we can't communicate twenty feet away. As to automation, we can't get into the boat a computer of the size we need to make a few critical decisions. The presence of the boat is going to change center-of-Sun conditions, so someone is going to have to make a quick evaluation. Well, let Frank Valko tell you what's there."

Dr. Frank Valko, senior scientist in charge of evaluation of the Sun's deep interior, smiled and rubbed his chin in embarrassment. "I wish I could tell you precisely what's there. Then perhaps we could automate. But here's what we have. Our Bomnak group came up with a neutrino detector of reasonable size, one we could get in a spaceship. This is a device we've been trying for a hundred years. If the program produced nothing else, the neutrino detector alone has been worth it. Well, we put it

in a ship and orbited it around the Sun and did some scanning. This detector is adjustable—most remarkable. We ran the scale from the fastest neutrinos with the weakest interaction to the slowest with some slight interaction, and we were able to peel the core of the Sun like an onion. Each interior layer is a bit hotter than the one outside it. And when we got to the core—I mean the real core now—we found the trouble. We found the very center at a temperature of over half a billion degrees Kelvin. The neutrino energy was greater than the light energy. The electron-positron pairs do not annihilate back to high-energy photons completely. We get significant neutrino-antineutrino formation. There are also some neutrino-photon reactions. But the point is that with such neutrino formation, energy can escape from the core, right through the walls of the Sun. And there you are." He looked around at the others brightly.

The rest of them looked at him blankly, and Eden said it. "Where?"

"Why, the Sun is in the earliest stages of decay, unpredictably early. All we have to do is dampen the core, and we get our old Sun back."

Potter said sarcastically, "How do we do that? Throw some water on it?"

"Well, water might not be the best substance. We're working out the theory to improve on water. I think we'll come up with something."

Eden said, "From a practical point of view, wouldn't it take quite a bit of water?"

"Of course not. Oh, I forgot to tell you. The hot core —the troublemaking part—is only about one hundred feet in diameter right now. But it's spreading. We ought to do something within the next six months."

Potter sat back and rubbed his face. "All right. We know what the trouble is. We know where the trouble is. And we will soon know what to do about it. Fair enough?" He looked around the room. Most of those present nodded. Anna Brackney and two other mathemeteorologists shrugged. Potter glared at them for a moment and continued. "We can even get down there to quench it. But we can't get back. Is that what's left of our

problem?" No one said anything, and there were no shrugs this time. Potter waited a moment, then continued. "Well, if that's really all that's left, then we may be all done. I'm certain we can find a volunteer to take the sessile boat down to the core. The question is, should we allow the volunteer to do it? Do we continue to try to find a way to get him back up?"

Eden started to speak, but before he could form the words Anna Brackney cut in. "Now, just you don't say anything here at all. There's going to be a lot more thought put in on this problem before we go setting up a hero situation." She turned to Kowalski and said, "You have six months. Isn't there a chance you can come up with a suitable boat design in that time?"

Kowalski said, "A chance, yes. But it isn't very likely. We've reached the point where we know we need a major breakthrough. It could happen tomorrow—we're trying. Or it might not happen in the next ten years of intensive work. We've defined the problem sufficiently so that we know what's needed to solve it. I am not optimistic."

Potter said, "Any ideas from any others? McCormick, Metzger?"

Metzger said, "I think you've summarized it, Jeff. Let's try for another, say, four months to get a boat design and to check out what we think we know. If we finish up right where we are now, we won't have hurt anything. We can then find someone to take a boat down, and we'll give him a great big farewell party. Isn't that about it?"

More shrugs from the mathemeteorologists, and Anna Brackney glared at Eden. Potter said, "I think I'll go call President Wilburn and tell him our conclusion. Can I use your office, Bob?" Greenberg nodded, and Potter said, "Be back in a minute. Work out the details while I make the call."

He left, and a desultory conversation went on in his absence as the group set up priorities and discussed the beginnings of the phase-out of the giant program. Ten minutes passed. Potter reappeared and stood in the doorway. Eden looked up, leaped to his feet and ran around the table toward him. Potter was pale and his face was

drawn. He leaned against the door jamb and said, "President Wilburn is dying."

"I'm going with you, Jonathan," said Harriet Wilburn. She sat across from Wilburn, dry-eyed, in their breakfast corner.

He smiled at her, and the cosmetics on his face wrinkled, giving his face an odd, ragged appearance. He reached across and patted her hand. "You have to stay behind to protect my good name. There's a bitterness in some people. As long as my wife is alive, they won't go too far."

"I don't care about them." The tears were in her eyes now, and she looked down at the table to hide them. She wiped her cheeks in annoyance and said in a steady voice, "When do you leave?"

"In three days. The doctors want to make one more attempt to find out what's causing the central myelitis; there's got to be *some* reason for spinal cord deterioration. They hope they can come up with a cure someday, but first they have to find out what causes it."

Harriet Wilburn burst out, "I don't care about all this knowledge, all this good, all this benefit-of-man nonsense. I want you." She put her head down on the table and frankly sobbed. Wilburn reached over and patted the back of her head.

"I don't really believe all this, Boatmaster," said Technician O'Rourke. "When the first manlike creature put out the first fire something like a half million years ago, he almost certainly used water. Now here we are, quenching the core of a sun heading toward a nova, and what do we use? Water. I don't believe it."

Eden did not smile. His mind was on a sessile boat, now about thirty thousand miles deep within the Sun and heading deeper. He sat with Technician O'Rourke in front of the main viewer panel of the neutrino detector, monitoring the flux density at the various energy levels. Eden said, "The reaction we are trying to get back to is simply the high-energy reaction of two photons to produce

an electron-positron pair. As it is now, in the core the temperature is so high that the electron-positron pair doesn't go back to two high-energy photons. Instead they are producing a neutrino-antineutrino pair, and these pour right out through the Sun and are lost to space. If we don't stop that energy loss, the core will collapse. Since all we have to do is reduce the temperature by absorbing photons, we have a choice of materials to use. Many substances will do it, but water is the safest to carry down there without decomposing or volatilizing and killing Wilburn. That's why the water."

"Well, thanks. I still say it's a mighty funny situation. Somebody's going to do a lot of philosophizing on it, I'll bet you. How deep is he now?"

"About forty thousand miles."

Wilburn thought, "You never know. You never know until you're there. I thought I'd be reflecting on my life, the few things I did right, the many things I did wrong, wondering what it all meant." He glanced at a depth gauge that read 46,000, and he continued thinking, "About ten percent of the way, ninety percent to go, many hours yet." He felt hungry, but his ability to swallow had deteriorated to the extent that it was no longer possible for him to eat normally. He sighed, and went about the business of hooking up a bottle of a solution of sugar and protein to the needle in his arm. There were other ingredients in the solution, too, so after the solution was all in, he took a long, painless nap. When he awoke, there were only forty thousand miles to go, and Wilburn realized with a shock that he had had his last meal.

He checked out the few gauges he was familiar with; his briefing period had been limited. He remembered once as a boy his father had taken him through a power plant, and the array of dials and gauges had been fantastic. There had been a large room, divided by a series of panels, and every square inch of the panels and walls of the room had been covered with dials and gauges. When the time came to kick in additional units, one of the operators had called him over and said, "Okay, son. Push that button." Wilburn did, and his father said to him, "Don't forget this.

All the sensing instruments and dials in the world don't mean a thing without one human finger."

Wilburn looked at the one gauge he didn't like—the one that recorded outside temperature. It read 678,000°K, and Wilburn looked away quickly. He was not a scientific man, and he was incapable of really believing that any living creature could exist in an environment of six hundred and seventy-eight thousand degrees. He thought of Harriet.

He had found it necessary to take steps to prevent her from using her rather significant influence to stow away on this boat. He chuckled and felt the wave of warmth he always felt when he thought of her. For her sake it would have been better to allow her to come, but there were times when one could not take the easy and most desirable path. A soft chime sounded through the boat.

He was approaching the core. He focused his attention on the two instruments directly in front of him. He could feel the deceleration of the boat as the toruses, top and bottom, became more nearly balanced. The temperature inside the cabin was one hundred and forty-six degrees Fahrenheit, but Wilburn was not uncomfortable. He had the feeling that everything was going very well, and he wished he could tell Harriet. The deceleration continued; several of the gauges on the periphery of his vision went off scale. He was very close to the core. Conditions seemed to be as predicted.

He continued to watch, and a chime softly began a beat that slowly increased in tempo. He did not know it, because there was no instrument to record it, but the temperature outside approached the one billion mark. He watched the neutrino flux direction indicator, knowing that the great quantity of water aboard was no longer in the form of a liquid, vapor or solid, and it crossed his mind to wonder how that could be. And when the neutrino flux direction indicator wavered, and changed direction to show he had just passed through the very center of the core, he placed his finger on the black button. The last thing he remembered were the words, still clear in his ears, "don't mean a thing without one human finger." Then the walls of the boat collapsed and released the water. And the

electron-positron pairs appeared instead of the neutrino-antineutrino pairs. On the neutrino detector in the orbiting ship, Eden saw the tiny, hot core fade and disappear. The technician made an adjustment to bring in the neutrinos with slightly greater interaction, and the normal core showed up again, with its normal neutrino flux. But Eden, though he stared at the screen with eyes wide open, could see nothing but a blur.

GRAHAM CHARNOCK

THE CHINESE BOXES

The room was white. Its walls were like unmarked fields of snow, gleaming in the light of four fluorescent strips set in the ceiling. In the center of the room stood the Box, a huge cube of stainless steel ten feet on a side. It resembled some exquisite, ultimately formal piece of modern sculpture, although Carpenter, whose last visit to an art gallery had been as a freshman many years ago, preferred to think of it as a shiny, oversized sugar lump.

The surfaces of the Box were, with one exception, featureless, and this exception showed the outline of a flush-fitting door. In place of a latch there was a metal plate possibly five inches square and secured with four crosscut, countersunk bolts. Elleston, who relieved Carpenter at the end of his afternoon watch, had told him that the plate concealed something called a time lock.

Carpenter sat on a chair with his back to one of the room's white walls and facing the Box's door. He was a large man and the chair was rather too small to be comfortable. He'd asked Horden, the man who'd hired him, for a new chair. Carpenter thought that Horden, who was

a sedentary, oversized, florid man himself, would be sympathetic to his request, but three weeks had passed so far and the chair had not been replaced.

For four hours in the morning and four hours in the afternoon Carpenter was supposed to watch the Box. There was a red disk inset on the wall beside him and he was supposed to press this if anything untoward occurred. Untoward was Horden's word. Supposedly the red disk was some kind of alarm.

Anne had picked him up in her Volkswagen after his first day at Chemitect.

She was glad he had got the job. He was really very lucky. Had he seen the unemployment count, going up and up? This was really a job he should try to hold onto. How had it gone?

The Volkswagen purred into life. Carpenter was happy to let Anne drive. He didn't like the Volkswagen—its seats were too small for one thing—but it was cheap and it was economical to run and it was all they really needed.

He told her about the job, about how all it was was just sitting there, you see, and watching this . . . Well, he didn't know what it was. It was big and square and shiny. Like a big, square shiny box. Yes, he meant he just sat there, he really did. On a chair. Well, wasn't sitting in a clean room better than grease-monkeying? Yes, that was it, only this big square, shiny box, nothing else. What was in the box? Well, he didn't know. It had a door so . . . so he forgot about the door, just a door, nothing else. Well, it had a door, so he supposed there was something inside. Sure he'd asked. He'd asked Elleston . . . Who Elleston? He didn't know who Elleston. Elleston relieved him at the end of his afternoon watch, Cochran stood in for him for two hours at lunchtime and Levinson—yes he thought he was Jewish—was the one he relieved in the morning. Yes, he'd asked all three, but none of them knew. None of them knew what—if anything—was in the box.

And there was the alarm of course. . . .

Anne turned her head sharply. Blond, slightly greasy hair spun and whipped at him.

For Christ's sake watch the road! What are you doing . . .

Anne turned into a side-street and pulled up.

Well, he was coming to the alarm wasn't he? Jesus, just a red button. Yes, red. Look, you can't stop here. He pushed the button if anything untoward happened. What untoward? He meant unusual. OK, he meant if anything went wrong. He didn't know what was likely to go wrong. Nothing. Nothing would go wrong. They wouldn't make him sit there if it was dangerous would they? He meant it wasn't likely to explode was it? He meant that if it exploded, then they wouldn't need an alarm, would they? Everybody would know about it, you bet. Yes, he realized it wasn't funny.

Anne said she didn't like it. Not at all. But she started up the car. Looking out of the window as the city swallowed the Volkswagen, Carpenter smiled so that she wouldn't see. She was pretty when she worried and wasn't it nice to have somebody worry about you? He'd marry her when things were better. This job was only the beginning. Hadn't he thought that about all the others? Sure but the gas station, the drugstore, all the no-hope jobs that anybody could get, that had a high turnover rate unemployment or no unemployment . . . losing those jobs had at least taught him the importance of keeping this one. Wait until they had enough money put by to go east. Everybody knew the best jobs were in the east. He'd marry her then, in the east.

Later that evening at his apartment she made him promise.

If you don't promise you don't get your reward. You *know* what I mean. Promise you'll find out what's in that box. Promise you'll find out if it's dangerous. I don't want you involved in anything dangerous. Please. You know I get worried about you.

She smiled and looked pretty.

He promised.

The cell was white, or had been once.

Its walls were blank, or had been once.

The prisoner slept on a discolored pallet that stank of decaying weeks and months. He wore a coarse shirt and

trousers that itched upon his skin and caused rashes. Apart from the prisoner and the pallet, and the pail into which he urinated and defecated, there was nothing.

The light, which came from a small barred slit high on one wall of the cell, was dim and constant during the day, nonexistent during the night, which, like the dawn, always came on abruptly. If he jumped he could just reach the window slit with his fingers and, hanging there, could usually just manage to draw himself abreast of it for a few seconds. The slit was only a few inches high and possibly a foot deep in the wall. Through it he could see only blue sky. He never saw a trace of cloud, nor any birds.

The temperature was constant too. Constantly warm. At the window slit he never saw either rain or snow, or any manifestation of the seasons, although he assumed, as with the absence of clouds and birds, that this was merely bad luck. He seldom had the strength to hoist himself to the slit more than twice a day, usually after the meager warmth and sustenance of a meal.

A typical meal was a lukewarm soup with a little meat in it and two ounces of something spongy that might have been bread. It was served to him regularly through a narrow, hinged flap in the door, so regularly that his stomach had become attuned to it. He could tell if it was even thirty seconds late, and it never was. The food was served in a flat metal pan. Sometimes, when the pan was slid through the door, he would be kneeling there, waiting by the slit. He never managed to see the hand that fed him, however. Sometimes he would shout through the slit as his meal was pushed in—requests for small comforts, for a word, for a sight of his captors.

Once he refused to eat the food. He couldn't remember what his crime was or why he should be in prison. He was convinced they had done something to his mind to make him forget. He thought they might be using drugs in his food, slowly poisoning him, so for six days (he counted them with fecal smears on the wall) he starved. And remembered nothing.

After that he searched his scalp through his long matted hair for a surgical scar. He found nothing, but this didn't shake his conviction that somehow they had interfered

with his mind: why had they taken his memory? Had they done it thinking it to be a kindness? Or had they done it in the hope that, not remembering, he would come to accept his guilt? He would never do that. He was sure that things like guilt and innocence transcended memory. They were qualities of mind, and wherever mind was, memory or not, they would be there. And innocence was there in his case, he was sure of it. He did not believe he had committed any crime. He could not believe he should be punished. "Give me a trial," he cried through the dinner slit. "Tell me what I am accused of." But his captors, whoever they were, gave no sign of having heard him.

He began to take food again. When he finished, he would fling the pan into a corner. The following day, when he awoke, the pan was always gone and a new pail (or perhaps it was merely the old one emptied and cleaned) had been placed there for his droppings. He assumed that, when he slept, one of his captors entered the cell to perform these duties. For three nights he tried to stay awake but succumbed eventually to the absolute womb darkness and the comforting warmth. Always the pan was removed, the pail changed.

The next night he succeeded, standing in a corner and scoring his arms against the stone wall to achieve additional discomfort, in staying awake until dawn came. He was certain that nobody had entered the cell, but once again saw that the pan had been removed and the pail changed.

By this time he had become obsessed with the pan and the pail and decided he would make it impossible for either to be removed without his knowledge. He ripped a sleeve from his shirt and, lacing it through the pail's handle, used it to secure the pail around his neck. The stench itself was enough to keep him awake that night. The pan formed an uncomfortable pillow for his head. In the morning both the pail and the pan were untouched. His captors, spying on him, had obviously noted his precautions and had refrained from entering the cell. The prisoner let out a cry of triumph. He had achieved communication of a sort; he had at least done something to influence the actions of his captors. He set the utensils

down in a corner and went back to his pallet exhilarated. That morning, however, when he came to use the pail he found it clean and empty. He looked for the dinner pan but it had disappeared. He thought about this for a long time but was unable to find an explanation of the phenomenon.

Chemitect was a campuslike layout of small island structures surrounding a massive central hive. Anne dropped him at the entrance of the main building. On the raised piazza fronting the entrance, water dribbled over a chunk of shiny basalt in a concrete bowl. Beyond this, over the entrance itself, "Chemitect" was picked out in low relief. The whole hive was faced with a specially treated sandstone, like some Nubian desert fortress.

"What goes on in there anyway?" asked Anne.

Carpenter paused with his hand on the Volkswagen's door. "It's a research foundation," he said. "There are a lot of college kids about, too. I think its function is partly educational."

"But what do they do?"

"I asked Horden that and he said, 'Anything and everything.' He speaks like that. He's actually got a plaque with 'THINK!' on the wall of his office. It's probably a joke though."

"What does it mean, 'Anything and everything'?"

Carpenter shrugged. "It doesn't bother me as long as *they* know what they're doing."

"Do they though," said Anne and Carpenter threw a playful punch at her and closed the Volkswagen's door. Anne watched him until he had entered the building.

Horden's office was windowless, snug in the core of the building, along a mirror-sleek, waxed corridor that made Carpenter feel as though he were walking on ice. He knocked on the door once and went in. Inside it was cool and the air conditioner blew out an artificial scent of pine. Horden was checking typed columns of figures. He looked up from his papers and nodded Carpenter to a seat. Carpenter sat looking at the plaque which said "THINK!" and finally decided he didn't understand it. On the opposite wall there was a print of an "impossible object," a

spiral staircase that ate its own tail and spiraled downward (or upward) forever. It was rather easier to understand.

Horden shuffled his papers together and shifted his weight in his chair.

"Carpenter, isn't it? How does it feel to be one of the team?"

"It's okay. It's a job and jobs are hard enough to get. I'd feel a bit better if I knew what I was doing though."

"I don't understand."

"Watching a shiny steel box isn't exactly taxing work, mentally or physically. I could feel a bit more interested if I knew the point of the exercise. What's in the box? What's it for?"

"I can't tell you that."

"You *can't*?"

"I mean I don't know myself. My job is to hire administrative personnel for this establishment. I'm an administrator myself, not a scientist." Horden leaned back in his chair and fixed his gaze on the "THINK!" plaque. When he spoke his tone was almost nostalgic. "Once I was curious about Chemitect's role in society too. When I first came here. I knew its business was research, the kind of research that only makes the headlines in the technical press, but I thought it would be interesting to know a little more. A general view is always more rewarding than a narrow one, and like everybody else, I thought it would be nice, too, to be able to point to some gadget or scientific achievement and say, I played a small part in that. So I went on a grand tour of the various departments. I asked what the processes involved were and what the end results were supposed to be. Most of the scientific staff were pleased for an opportunity to explain their work, and when they weren't available the students always proved equally willing. They told me everything, explicitly, in the minutest detail. And do you know what?"

"What?"

"I didn't understand a word of it. Not a fact, not a theory, not a concept, not an idea. I never thought I was an exceptionally intelligent man, just normal, but to have kids of nineteen and twenty run mental rings round you is a frightening experience. I could arrange it for you if you

feel you'd fare any better than I did. Do you want a grand tour?"

"No, I'm not looking for godlike knowledge. All I want to know is one very simple thing: what's in that box?"

Horden smiled and sighed. "And I must tell you again that I can't help you." He swiveled in his chair and switched his gaze from the "THINK!" plaque to the impossible object. His eyes seemed to follow the staircase in its eternal descent/ascent. Carpenter left the office.

Levinson was reading a newspaper. He was a small man with black nervous eyes that seemed to be perpetually flinching away from something nobody else could see. They flinched as they wandered across the newspaper columns and they flinched as they looked up to greet Carpenter.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Carpenter said. "I went to see Horden."

Levinson looked at his watch and dropped his newspaper to the floor. "I hadn't noticed," he said. "What did you see Horden about?"

"I wanted to know what we're all supposed to be watching the Box for. Don't *you* ever get curious?"

"I never think about it." Levinson stood up, stretching himself.

"How long have you been here?"

"Three-four months. It's only temporary, though. My uncle's got a delicatessen out east. He's going to die soon and leave it to me. Then I'll pack up and take my family the hell out of here."

"What's wrong with your uncle?"

"Bad heart. He's just going to fold up someday."

"I'm sorry."

"No, he's been like it for years. I'm over that now. He's going to die soon though. Real soon."

He left and Carpenter settled himself awkwardly in the chair. He picked up Levinson's newspaper and began leafing through it. He glossed through articles on how the population growth curve was leveling out at last and on how the unemployment curve continued to skyrocket. There was an article on suicide as well but he didn't bother to read that.

After ten minutes he put the newspaper aside. His back was stiff from the chair and he stood and walked over to the Box. He put a hand on its side. It was pleasantly cool and he thought he detected a slight vibration. He put his ear to the Box but could hear nothing.

The fungus was a green patch about the size of a hand. It appeared one morning on the wall above the prisoner's pallet. The prisoner moved his pallet into the opposite corner of the cell and a cockroach fell from the bedding, scuttling about on the dusty floor of the cell, as trapped as he was. He watched it with interest. He formed barriers in its path, diverting it, making it trek from location to location in the cell. He shook his bedding and succeeded in dislodging a second insect. He picked a cotton thread out of his shirt and tied one end around the thorax of each of the cockroaches. The cockroaches circled about each other, weaving the cotton into complex knots, occasionally indulging in a comic, scrabbling tug-of-war that would leave them quiescent for a while, as if dazed.

The day passed quicker than usual. That night he allowed the insects to return to the safety of the bedding. He slept fitfully. It seemed colder than usual and he dreamt that cockroaches swarmed on his body. He wanted to run, to shake them off, but he was tied down and wore the insect bodies like a suit until it seemed to him that he himself had become an insect.

He awoke at dawn, sweating. When he shook his bedding seven chitinous bodies fell to the floor like dry leaves. He killed them all in a fit of disgust but regretted it almost immediately.

It was distinctly colder in the cell. The drop in temperature prickled his skin and made him shiver. He ate the warm soup greedily when it was served and hoisted himself up to the window slit. There seemed to be a change in the quality of the light outside. It was hazier, grey, the sky itself seemed colder. It was winter's initial foray into a long, timeless autumn.

Days passed and the cell became a beachhead for the cold's attack on his body. Everything he touched seemed dead and inert. Warmth drained quickly from the soup

when it was served, and it was cold and unnourishing before he finished it. Only very rarely now could he muster the strength to pull himself up to the window slit, and when he did, the sight was never encouraging, merely the usual empty expanse of cold sky.

He begged through the dinner slit for extra clothing or a small stove to heat the cell, but there was never any response. The cold affected his feet worst of all. When he awoke in the morning, there was no sensation in them, and the skin always seemed pasty and colorless. He forced himself to walk to restore some feeling in them, dragging them across the icy stone floor until they bled.

Occasionally he heard the sound of rain blustering outside the cell. He would have liked to see it, to feel the water on his skin, but he had to save his strength for the endless automatic hobble from cell wall to cell wall.

Day followed day and he began to hope that during the night his frozen body would finally sink through the surface of sleep to death. He always awoke, however. There was always another day.

The fungus continued to spread. Now its mottled pattern covered one wall and half the ceiling.

Winter came suddenly, early, with a severe uncharacteristic blizzard that left the city snowbound for a day. The heating in his apartment was inadequate and Carpenter began to long for the controlled warmth of Chemitect. Anne called him to say she would come over. She lived on the other side of the city and he told her not to bother, traveling was impossible. But she said she had to see him. It was important.

She arrived two hours later with snow melting into beads of moisture on her hair. Carpenter kissed her. "You're cold," he said, touching her cheek. "You shouldn't have come. What was so important?"

He helped her off with her coat and she opened her handbag and took out a newspaper clipping headed "The Loneliest Man in the World." She gave it to him. "This."

"Where did this come from?"

"I was clearing out some old newspapers and it caught my eye. It's about six months old. Read it."

He read: "Today Richard Crofton Keller enters an eight-foot square cell at the Chemitect Research Foundation to become the loneliest man in the world. Keller, a thirty-four-year-old, unmarried ex-bartender, will spend eighteen months in voluntary solitary confinement in an attempt to discover the effects of prolonged periods of isolation. Dr. Thomas S. Maynard, in charge of the project, explained: 'Keller will be fed, nourished and cared for by completely automatic systems built into the cell and during the term of his confinement he will have no contact whatsoever with the outside world. Experiments of this nature have been carried out in the past, but we believe this will be the first time in which the subject will be isolated in any absolute sense. Keller won't even possess what is popularly termed a "chicken switch." He will have no means to curtail the experiment should he feel it is going badly. We are using body sensors and other devices to record his behavior and condition, but will have no means of monitoring these while the experiment is in progress. This may seem inhumane but we feel the step is psychologically necessary if the experiment is to have any validity at all. Because this is the first time anything like this has been attempted we're naturally reluctant to discuss the possible results of the experiment. It is, however, basically intended to provide information of use in the treatment of a wide range of schizophrenic and other mental disorders stemming from isolation and alienation in society.' "

Anne took the cutting from him when he had finished it. "I don't think you should go back there," she said.

Carpenter found himself shivering and moved nearer the orange glow of the apartment's electric heater. "What do you mean? I've got to go back. Horden *must* have known about this. He lied to me."

"The job's not important," Anne said. "Not a job like that."

Carpenter turned to her. "What do you mean the job's not important? A couple of weeks ago you were glad I'd got it."

"Don't shout at me, hon."

"I'm sorry," Carpenter said. "I'm upset about Horden

lying to me. Why would he do a thing like that? Deliberately keeping me in the dark." He put his arms around her, wrapping her slight figure in his body. "Do you want me to quit the job?"

"It's the thought of that poor man," Anne said. "I don't like the idea of you as some kind of jailer. I didn't think you'd want to be used that way either."

For a moment they stood together wordless and swaying slightly, enjoying the warmth of each other's body. Then Anne broke away almost guiltily. "Think about it, hon," she said.

"I will. I will."

One morning the prisoner awoke and knew it could not go on. There was no purpose in remaining alive, in dragging his body through the torture of extreme cold or in dragging his mind through the torture of exhausted memories. The memories had sustained him at one time, but they were scanty and largely morbid glimpses of a childhood that had never seemed happy and of an adulthood that had so far been a chronicle of failure, of drifting from job to job and worthless relationship to worthless relationship. The more he reran these scenes in his mind the more unreal they seemed, like the less-than-credible plot of a particularly melodramatic movie. The movie faded out into mental blankness sometime before his imprisonment and picked up again sometime after, when existence was his cell and memory was no real memory at all but merely days running out like identical grains of sand. The terminal memory was a suitably bizarre one. He had once run a bar, a dim basement grotto beneath a pawnbroker's in the slum area of the city. He remembered a poet, a young Jesus-haired character (who knows, he might have thought himself the messiah of his age) who used the bar's toilet to fix himself and then came to sit and talk to him while the heroin worked in his blood, an untouched beer before him for appearances. He talked about things the bartender could understand: disillusionment, a lifetime of bad breaks and unkind people. He talked about what it was like to poison yourself with heroin until the kick began to kick you back, until it became a necessity

like air. It was a form of suicide, the poet said, suicide without real decision, an easy suicide for people with weak minds. The bartender asked him if it was really any different from drinking yourself to death or, for that matter, driving a car until statistics singled you out as one of the *x* percent killed every year in motor accidents. The poet merely smiled and said no, he supposed all life for everybody was one prolonged suicide, that you started killing yourself on the day you were born.

The poet had once given the bartender a book of poems. They were by T. S. Eliot and the bartender had put the book aside, saying he didn't read poetry. One morning he'd just opened up the bar when there was a scream of brakes outside. He went up to the road where a small crowd was already beginning to form. A big saloon was wedged diagonally across the road. Its rear fender had scraped paint from three cars parked along the opposite curb. Something was wedged under the rear wheels and the bartender saw it was the young poet. The driver, a plump man in a neat business suit, was leaning on the car's open door. His face was streaked with blood from a cut on his forehead and he was appealing to the bystanders. "The kid must have been crazy . . . He just stepped out in front of me. Did he want to get killed or something? What was I supposed to do? You saw it, didn't you? Didn't you?"

The bartender went back to the bar. He remembered the Eliot poems and found the book. He read one called "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," which ended:

> The lamp said,
> "Four o'clock,
> Here is the number on the door.
> Memory!
> You have the key,
> The little lamp spreads a ring on the stair.
> Mount.
> The bed is open; the tooth-brush hangs on the wall,
> Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life."

The last twist of the knife.

He didn't understand the poem, except that it seemed black and pessimistic, somehow a suitable epitaph for the young poet.

Memory faded. . . .

Perhaps it was a suitable epitaph for him too, the prisoner thought. The cold would kill him eventually, he knew, but he was afraid of the discomfort and suffering and that it would take too long. He dwelt on the fear. Briefly it seemed to warm him, but soon it was just another stale taste in his mouth. He realized that he wasn't afraid, after all, and that he had come to an acceptance of what he had to do. It wasn't fear that led to suicide, he realized, but a lack of fear and a lack of any prospect of ever experiencing fear again.

He took off his shirt and tore it clumsily with numbed fingers into strips. He tied the strips together until he had formed a serviceable rope several feet long. He tied one end tightly about his neck.

He went to stand beneath the small barred window slit. It required an almost superhuman effort to pull himself up to the slit, but he reflected that it would be the last effort ever required of him and jumped, wedging one hand into the slit and grabbing a bar with his cold fingers. The stone lip of the window cut at his wrist, sending shooting pains along his arm, but he hoisted himself up until he came abreast of the slit. Quickly he tied the rope's other end around one of the bars. The strength was slipping rapidly out of his arms as he pulled the knot tight. He took a last look out of the slit. The sky was as cold and grey and hopeless as ever and with his last remaining strength he threw himself backward from the wall.

Carpenter dropped the cutting on Horden's desk. Horden glanced at it briefly and said: "I see."

"Why didn't you tell me, Horden? You must have known what was going on."

"Yes, I knew. But you're making it sound unnecessarily sinister. . . ."

"I've reason. You lied to me."

"I told you a harmless untruth, yes. I didn't see why such things should concern you. I still don't. Really, does

it matter? You were happy enough doing the job when you didn't know about it. Does this really change anything?"

Carpenter went to the door. He felt confused by Horden's questions. "A job's a job," he said, "even if I don't particularly like myself for doing it. I don't like being lied to, that's all."

Horden waited until Carpenter had left the office; then he leaned forward and pushed a button on his intercom.

Carpenter went down to the Box to find Elleston on duty.

"Where's Levinson?" he asked. It disturbed him to find a familiar routine interrupted. "Is he sick?"

"More than sick," Elleston said. "He's dead."

"Dead?" For a second the word genuinely puzzled Carpenter, like a case of *jamais vu.*

"Yeah, the poor little kike. Apparently he collapsed in the street yesterday, in the snow. He should never have gone out, not in that sort of weather, not with a heart condition like his."

"He had a heart condition? I never knew that."

"Yeah, he'd had a bad heart for years. He must have known it would catch up with him sooner or later."

Carpenter felt a profound sorrow for the small, nervous Jew. He wondered if Levinson's uncle really owned a delicatessen out east. Probably not. There had probably never even been an uncle.

"Well, I'm going to grab some rest," Elleston said. "I sure hope they can get somebody to replace him soon."

"They will," Carpenter said. "There's always somebody."

Elleston nodded and left.

Carpenter approached the Box. He wondered what Keller was doing at this moment, what he was thinking. Perhaps he was asleep. He tried to imagine what six months in isolation would do to *him,* but it was unimaginable. Like trying to imagine death, he thought. Surely no man could endure such isolation and remain sane? What sort of man would volunteer for something like that anyway, something that would very likely destroy him? A disappointed man? An idealistic man? He remem-

bered what he had told Elleston: "There's always somebody."

He ran his fingers along the seam of the Box's door. The man *had* volunteered, but there still remained a moral question. The full burden of it lay upon the scientists who had devised the experiment, but Carpenter carried some of it on his own shoulders. Ought Keller to be held to his voluntary decision, a decision almost certainly made without full knowledge of the consequences? Absently, experimentally, Carpenter took a coin from his pocket and tried it in one of the bolts that secured the door's time lock. He twisted and the countersunk bolt turned easily. He gave it several turns. He watched the bolt as it threaded smoothly away from the covering plate and felt suddenly dizzy. *What was he doing?* If he freed Keller, he possibly freed a man with no desire to be free. And he certainly lost a job that paid good, regular wages. Carpenter screwed the bolt back firmly and dropped the coin into his pocket.

He went back to his seat by the wall and noticed for the first time, with some irony, that Horden had at last replaced the chair. The new one was larger and fully upholstered. Carpenter settled himself into it comfortably. He had only been watching the Box for a few minutes when a stranger in a white lab coat arrived, accompanied by a tired-looking, disgruntled Elleston.

"Are you Carpenter?" the stranger asked. "Will you come with me?"

Carpenter looked questioningly at Elleston, who merely shrugged and took Carpenter's place in the chair. Carpenter followed the stranger along quiet corridors to an office practically identical to Horden's. Instead of an impossible object, however, there was a print of Brueghel's "Massacre of the Innocents" on the wall. The stranger sat behind the desk and Carpenter sat opposite.

"Cigarette?" The stranger offered him a box in which cigarettes and cigars lay partitioned and segregated. Carpenter declined and the stranger took a small cigar and lit it from a desk lighter that reminded Carpenter of a miniature version of the Box. It was shiny chromium. The stranger tapped its top and a lid opened automatically.

Automatically a second, smaller box rose from within the first. Its lid, in turn, opened to reveal a third box which rose up, its uppermost surface glowing like a hot plate. The stranger touched it to his cigar, smiling. "Chinese boxes. It's a favorite toy of mine. My name is Maynard. Horden has asked me to speak to you, to explain why we have to fire you."

"I don't understand."

"You've shown yourself to be disturbed by certain aspects of the work," Maynard said. "It would be dangerous to let you remain."

"Dangerous in what way?"

"Dangerous to the experiment and possibly dangerous to you. It would be a pity, for instance, if you got it into your head to try and release Keller."

"Why should I do that?"

"Not everybody has the mentality of a prison warden, Carpenter, which is in effect what you're expected to be. For certain people—I'd say for practically everybody these days—it goes against the grain. That is why Horden had to lie to you. He has standing orders to conceal the nature of the work whenever possible." Maynard looked at Carpenter through a haze of cigar smoke. "You see, we live in a liberal society, a society educated in the politics of freedom and human rights. It's not always possible to find people who will accept the role this particular job calls for." He smiled. "It's true of the job situation as a whole these days. Education is more than assimilating facts. It's acquiring a whole system of behavioral rules and values. At the present period of history people have been educated to expect a better deal than society can manage to give them. Hence unemployment and unrest. There are too many well-qualified people going after too few really worthwhile jobs.

"You look surprised, but I should have thought you'd have realized this yourself, Carpenter. You're no fool. You're smart. Not so many years ago you wouldn't have been chasing dead-end jobs. You'd have held some senior management post. Now, however, there are too many people like you. And everybody can't be in management."

Carpenter nodded. "Perhaps I did realize it all along. But it's not an easy thing to accept."

Maynard took a packet from his desk and gave it to Carpenter. "Here's a month's pay. What's the matter? You don't look too happy."

"It's just one thing that still puzzles me about the Box. You said in that article that Keller was going to be isolated for eighteen months, that he'd be taken care of by various gadgets inside the box and also that he'd have no way of curtailing the experiment himself. When Horden gave me the job, he said it involved watching for anything 'untoward,' but it seems to me you've got the untoward pretty well sewn up. What's the point of hiring people to watch a foolproof system? Is it just making jobs for the unemployed?"

"No. It's an essential safety measure. You see, there *is* one way Keller can curtail the experiment although not directly through an act of his own will. It's a way he didn't even know about. We don't monitor his life functions, but they're linked directly to the time lock. If, for some reason, they become critical or indeed, stop, then the door automatically opens."

Carpenter felt sick. "You mean the only way he could escape would be by committing suicide. Is that likely?"

"By no means likely, but possible. There are so many unknown factors in this experiment and we have to cover every eventuality. Almost certainly he'll fantasize and some of the fantasies may involve symbolic suicide. From that it's only a small step to the real thing."

Carpenter swore at Maynard, dragging up the most considered, unsubtle epithet he could think of. "There's another reason you employ people to watch that Box," he said. "You're the prison wardens, Maynard, you and your kind, but you need someone to take over your role. You hope it will absolve you of responsibility but it won't. And I think you know it won't."

He stood and went to the door. Behind him he heard a voice squawk from Maynard's intercom. It was Horden and he sounded overexcited. There was another voice in the background, possibly Elleston's. Carpenter didn't pause to hear what they were saying. He was afraid he

knew and he hated himself because he knew he could have prevented it. He left the building, walking past the basalt fountain and across the campus to the highway. Above him the sky was grey and cold like the underside of a great steel lid.

GENE WOLFE

A METHOD BIT IN "B"

I suppose it was because I had attended a film just before going on duty. I have the late tick—what we occasionally call the "graveyard" tick—and that makes it possible for me to visit the one cinema our little village boasts before I go on. Since a new film comes not more than fortnightly, I don't indulge myself in this way often.

The fog had been extraordinarily thick. We have a great deal of fog in every month of the year; still, that night was exceptional. I remember stepping in through the doors of the station house and having it roll past me in great billows as though it were being blown from behind me; and that is strange, because now that this terrible business at the manor house is over, or nearly over, that is the first moment I can recall clearly. It's as if all my previous life were nothing more than a preparation for holding the dying girl in my arms out there on the moors, or looking into the man's horror-ravaged face. When I try to recall anything else, service experiences from the four years I spent in the Glousters for example, or something that has happened during the time I've lived here in the village

(Stoke-on-Wold is what we call it), nothing seems to have taken place at all.

You won't find our little village on any map. Too small, I suppose. So when the new guest came to the manor it created a great deal of foolish talk—and ever since I was sworn in as a constable (the proudest day of my life, I might add), I have considered it a part of my duties to listen to that sort of talk. He was a big man, with a face somewhat like a St. Bernard's that has worms, and would come into the public bar of the Royal James some nights just before closing and drink a glass or two of cognac and watch the moon through the big mullion window. It wasn't full then, but what they call gibbous, meaning between the half and the full, and growing with every turn of the clock, like a bad girl without a ring. Talbot was what they said his name was, and he was an American.

That night, the first night I can really remember, as I told you, nothing to speak of occurred until just a trifle after midnight. Then the 'phone rang, and it was Wilkes, the butler at the manor. The poor chap was so taken I could hardly make out what he was saying, but I could tell it was serious and I hopped on my bike and pedaled out there. The fog had lifted from the high ground but it was still as thick as porridge in the low spots and looked silver-white in the moonlight—not yellow like one of your London fogs.

Breakchain House is the manor's right name, though it isn't used much. The legend that goes with that name is ugly enough that most of us in Stoke-on-Wold don't want to be reminded of it. Except when we can afflict it on trippers. (But then you're a kind of tripper yourself, aren't you? Thumbing your way through the pages.) It's a castle, really, to which a Georgian wing—they call it the "new wing"—has been added. No one lives in the old part now; at least, no one the people in the new wing want to talk about.

Wilkes answered the door for me, still white as paste; I had him assemble everyone in the library in the usual way. Besides Lord and Lady Breakchain, there was a very pretty Yank girl named Betty, and Talbot, and a Prof. Smith. This Smith was a striking-looking gent who called himself

"a student of the occult." I noticed that he carried a cane with a heavy silver knob shaped like a wolf's head; that was unusual, of course, since in a place like the manor one usually gives one's stick to the butler—although I had kept my cosh.

I won't bore you with what was said in the library that night about the unearthly howling that had been heard on the moor or the thing Wilkes and the girl had seen lapping water from the fountain in the garden at midnight, since none of that really bears on what's bothering me now. But when I left there and rode back to the village I saw lights at the James, and thinking of that does put me off a bit. You see, the bar was open, just like any roadhouse in the States, and the barmaid and the owner didn't seem to have any fear of losing the license either, not even when I walked in, even though it was hours after closing.

What was more, they'd quite a number of patrons, late as it was, as if everyone had known the place would be open. Just now I was on the point of saying the patrons were ordinary enough village people, but they weren't, really. Every person for miles around that had something odd or comic about him, something that perhaps might make a stranger laugh, was there. And none of the others were.

The girl behind the bar too. A big strapping blonde. You'd expect her to be sour at having to work late like that and miss her beauty sleep; but she was chipper as a wren, pulling the old Major's long mustaches and making jokes with everyone. I didn't say anything about closing, but took a place at the bar and ordered a pint of the dark. When she brought it, I thought for a second or two that I'd come to the bottom of it all, but afterward I was more at sea than ever.

You see, the stuff in the tankard she brought me wasn't beer at all, but a kind of foaming ginger drink or some such slop. When I tasted it first I nearly spit it out on the floor, but then, as I said, for a moment I thought I had the whole game. "Going to have a good 'un on the law," I thought to myself, "when I tries to tag 'em for servin' after closin' hours they'd give me the proper laugh and claim

none of this stuff's alcoholic." But then I looked around, and so help me none of it was! I couldn't hardly believe my eyes, and when the Major left for a bit of a go at the WC, I took up his brandy and sniffed it and tasted it, and it was nothing but tea—nasty, bad, cold tea at that. It was the same with everyone. Those that was supposed to have beer had the same slops they'd served me, and those that was drinking whiskey or what-not had tea. Of course I should have piped up right then and said, " 'Ere now, isn't there a one of you blighters with more sense than to sit up drinkin' this 'ere sweet bilge at two o'clock in the mornin'?" But I didn't. For the first few minutes I didn't because I expected they'd have the laugh on me, and after that it was because I felt it in my bones they'd say I'd gone crackers and call the sergeant to have me locked up.

Talking to one and another I tried to hint around about it, but it was no go. Nobody wanted to talk about anything except Talbot and what was happening out at the manor. Finally I told them what I had heard out there that night, very official about it so they wouldn't think I was just spreading rumors, and, crikey! when I did, every one of them did just what it was he was famous for. The Major coughed and talked in his throat like a sheep so that no one could understand what he was saying, Harry Dorsey the barber swallowed so you could see the Adam's apple bounce in his long neck, the barmaid patted her hair and said something smart and tartish, and so on.

That was the beginning of it, I suppose. That and the cinema and the time I walked by the widow Perry's window and happened to glance in. Of course that wasn't until later, but then the whole month, the month between the first call out to the manor and the second one, seemed just to pass in a dream anyway. I suppose I performed my regular duties, but I don't remember it. All I was really thinking about was coming into the station house with all the fog blowing past me that time, and how the folk in the village never seemed to have anything to do but gossip now. Also—I know this is going to sound queer, but I can't explain it better—how badly all of us spoke. Some, I mean, as though they were cockneys right out of Cheap-

side although they were born and raised here. And others like Canadians or even Yanks. I found I was doing it myself.

What I'm getting at is that the film set me thinking about how those method actor chaps are supposed to take a part—create a role is what they call it—and really make themselves believe they're the person. As I understand it, if one of the method chaps is supposed to be a sea captain, for example, he'll bloody well force his mind to believe he fairly *is* that captain.

Now when he's the captain, if you take my meaning, how does he feel about it, eh?

Does he like thinking that when the film's over he's going to be that twirpy little method chap again, not knowing the tiller from the main brace? Or does he even know it?

You see, it seems to me that almost the only thing I'm good for in the village here is going out to the manor as I did tonight to sort of wrap things up officially when all the dust has settled, like tonight when this Prof. Smith winged poor old Talbot with one of his silver—and a rum idea that is if you ask me—bullets and I made my speech about how the best thing would be for me not to report the goings-on at all for fear there'd be a panic. What bothers me, you see, is not watching all that hair come off Talbot's face and his teeth shrink up to normal ones again —that seems right enough, now that the Professor's explained it all—but that when I looked into the widow Perry's window there wasn't any insides to her house. Just empty ground, if you understand me, and weeds.

Don't *you* ever get the feeling that there are things in the world—hydrogen bombs and Moon probes for example, and civilized people who paint flowers on their faces—which only belong in a "B" film? How do you know that we're both not in one? Now that things at the manor seem to be about wound up, I'm getting this rotten feeling that if I was to climb up onto the hill yonder to look out over the moors, I might see a palm tree.

R. A. LAFFERTY

INTERURBAN QUEEN

"It was the year 1907 when I attained my majority and came into a considerable inheritance," the old man said. "I was a very keen young man, keen enough to know that I didn't know everything. I went to knowledgeable men and asked their advice as to how I might invest this inheritance.

"I talked with bankers and cattlemen and the new oilmen. These were not stodgy men. They had an edge on the future, and they were excited and exciting about the way that money might be made to grow. It was the year of statehood and there was an air of prosperity over the new state. I wished to integrate my patrimony into that new prosperity.

"Finally I narrowed my choice to two investments which then seemed about of equal prospect, though you will now smile to hear them equated. One of them was the stock-selling company of a certain Harvey Goodrich, a rubber company, and with the new automobile coming into wider use, it seemed that rubber might be a thing of the future. The other was a stock-selling transportation com-

pany that proposed to run an interurban railway between the small towns of Kiefer and Mounds. It also proposed (at a future time) to run branches to Glenpool, to Bixby, to Kellyville, to Slick, to Bristow, to Beggs, even to Okmulgee and Sapulpa. At that time it also seemed that these little interurban railways might be things of the future. An interurban already ran between Tulsa and Sand Springs, and one was building between Tulsa and Sapulpa. There were more than one thousand of these small trolley railroads operating in the nation, and thoughtful men believed that they would come to form a complete national network, might become the main system of transportation."

But now the old man Charles Archer was still a young man. He was listening to Joe Elias, a banker in a small but growing town.

"It is a riddle you pose me, young man, and you set me thinking," Elias said. "We have dabbled in both, thinking to have an egg under every hen. I begin to believe that we were wrong to do so. These two prospects are types of two futures, and only one of them will obtain. In this state with its new oil discoveries, it might seem that we should be partial to rubber which has a tie-in with the automobile which has a tie-in with petroleum fuel. This need not be. I believe that the main use of oil will be in powering the new factories, and I believe that rubber is already oversold as to industrial application. And yet there *will be* a new transportation. Between the horse and the main-line railways there is a great gap. I firmly believe that the horse will be eliminated as a main form of transportation. We are making no more loans to buggy or buckboard manufacturers nor to harness makers. I have no faith in the automobile. It destroys something in me. It is the interurbans that will go into the smallest localities, and will so cut into the main-line railroads as to leave no more than a half dozen of the long-distance major lines in America. Young man, I would invest in the interurban with complete confidence."

Charles Archer was listening to Carl Bigheart, a cattleman.

"I ask you, boy, how many head of cattle can you put into an automobile? Or even into what they call a lorry or trook? Then I ask you how many you can put into an honest cattle car which can be coupled onto any interurban on a country run? The interurban will be the salvation of us cattlemen. With the fencing regulations we cannot drive cattle even twenty miles to a railroad; but the little interurbans will go into the deep country, running along every second or third section line.

"And I will tell you another thing, boy: there is no future for the automobile. *We cannot let there be!* Consider the man on horseback, and I have been a man on horseback for most of my life. Well, mostly he is a good man, but there is a change in him as soon as he mounts. Every man on horseback is an arrogant man, however gentle he may be on foot. I know this in myself and in others. He was necessary in his own time, and I believe that time is ending. There was always extreme danger from the man on horseback.

"Believe me, young man, the man in the automobile is one thousand times as dangerous. The kindest man in the world assumes an incredible arrogance when he drives an automobile, and this arrogance will increase still further if the machine is allowed to develop greater power and sophistication. I tell you, it will engender absolute selfishness in mankind if the driving of automobiles becomes common. It will breed violence on a scale never seen before. It will mark the end of the family as we know it, the three or four generations living happily in one home. It will destroy the sense of neighborhood and the true sense of nation. It will create giantized cankers of cities, false opulence of suburbs, ruinized countryside, and unhealthy conglomeration of specialized farming and manufacturing. It will breed rootlessness and immorality. It will make every man a tyrant. I believe the private automobile will be suppressed. *It will have to be!* This is a moral problem, and we are a moral nation and world; we will take moral action against it. And without the automobile, rubber has no real future. Opt for the interurban stock, young man."

Young Charles Archer was listening to Nolan Cushman, an oilman.

"I will not lie to you, young fellow, I love the automobile, the motorcar. I have three, custom-built. I am an emperor when I drive. Hell, I'm an emperor anyhow! I bought a castle last summer that had housed emperors. I'm having it transported, stone by stone, to my place in the Osage. Now, as to the motorcar, I can see how it should develop. It should develop with the roads, they becoming leveled and metaled or concreted, and the cars lower and lower and faster and faster. We would develop them so, if we were some species other than human. It is the logical development, but I hope it will not come, and it will not. That would be to make it common, and the commonality of men cannot be trusted with this power. Besides, I love a high car, and I do not want there to be very many of them. They should only be allowed to men of extreme wealth and flair. How would it be if the workingmen were ever permitted them? It would be murderous if they should come into the hands of ordinary men. How hellish a world would it be if all men should become as arroagnt as myself! No, the automobile will never be anything but a rich man's pride, the rubber will never be anything but a limited adjunct to that special thing. Invest in your interurban. It is the thing of the future, or else I dread that future."

Young Charles Archer knew that this was a crossroads of the world. Whichever turning was taken, it would predicate a certain sort of nation and world and humanity. He thought about it deeply. Then he decided. He went out and invested his entire inheritance in his choice.

"I considered the two investments and I made my choice," said Charles Archer, the old man now in the now present. "I put all I had into it, thirty-five thousand dollars, a considerable sum in those days. You know the results."

"I am one of the results, Great-grandfather," said Angela Archer. "If you had invested differently you would have come to different fortune, you would have married

differently, and I would be different or not at all. I like me here and now. I like everything as it is."

Three of them were out riding early one Saturday morning, the old man Charles Archer, his great-granddaughter Angela, and her fiancé Peter Brady. They were riding through the quasiurbia, the rich countryside. It was not a main road, and yet it had a beauty (partly natural and partly contrived) that was as exciting as it was satisfying.

Water always beside the roadway, that was the secret! There were the carp ponds one after another. There were the hatcheries. There were the dancing rocky streams that in a less enlightened age might have been mere gutter runs or roadway runs. There were the small and rapid trout streams, and boys were catching big trout from them.

There were the deep bush-trees there, sumac, witch hazel, sassafras—incense trees they might almost have been. There were the great trees themselves, pecan and hickory and black walnut, standing like high backdrops; and between were the lesser trees, willow, cottonwood, sycamore. Catheads and sedge grass and reeds stood in the water itself, and tall Sudan grass and bluestem on the shores. And always the clovers there, and the smell of wet sweet clover.

"I chose the wrong one," said old Charles Archer as they rode along through the textured country. "One can now see how grotesque was my choice, but I was young. In two years, the stock-selling company in which I had invested was out of business and my loss was total. So early and easy riches were denied me, but I developed an ironic hobby: keeping track of the stock of the enterprise in which I did *not* invest. The stock I could have bought for thirty-five thousand dollars would now make me worth nine million dollars."

"Ugh, don't talk of such a thing on such a beautiful day," Angela objected.

"They heard another of them last night," Peter Brady commented. "They've been hearing this one, off and on, for a week now, and haven't caught him yet."

"I always wish they wouldn't kill them when they catch them," Angela bemoaned. "It doesn't seem quite right to kill them."

A goose-girl was herding her white honking charges as they gobbled weeds out of fields of morning onions. Flowering kale was shining green-purple, and okra plants were standing. Jersey cows grazed along the roadway, and the patterned plastic (almost as patterned as the grasses) filled the roadway itself.

There were clouds like yellow dust in the air. Bees! Stingless bees they were. But dust itself was not. That there never be dust again!

"They will have to find out and kill the sly klunker makers," said old man Charles Archer. "Stop the poison at its source."

"There's too many of them, and too much money in it," said Peter Brady. "Yes, we kill them. One of them was found and killed Thursday, and three nearly finished klunkers were destroyed. But we can't kill them all. They seem to come out of the ground like snakes."

"I wish we didn't have to kill them," Angela said.

There were brightly colored firkins of milk standing on loading stoas, for this was a milk shed. There were chickens squawking in nine-story-high coops as they waited the pickups, but they never had to wait long. Here were a thousand dozen eggs on a refrigeration porch; there a clutch of piglings, or of red steers.

Tomato plants were staked two meters high. Sweet corn stood, not yet come to tassel. They passed cucumber vines and canteloupe vines, and the potato hills rising up blue-green. Ah, there were grapevines in their tight acres, deep alfalfa meadows, living fences of Osage orange and white-thorn. Carrot tops zephyred like green lace. Cattle were grazing fields of red clover and of peanuts—that most magic of all clovers. Men mowed hay.

"I hear him now!" Peter Brady said suddenly.

"You couldn't. Not in the daytime. Don't even think of such a thing," Angela protested.

Farm ducks were grazing with their heads under water in the roadway ponds and farm ponds. Bower oaks grew high in the roadway parks. Sheep fed in hay grazer that was higher than their heads; they were small white islands in it. There was local wine and choc beer and cider for sale at small booths, along with limestone sculpture and

painted fruitwood carvings. Kids danced on loading stoas to little post-mounted music canisters, and goats licked slate outcroppings in search of some new mineral.

The Saturday riders passed a roadway restaurant with its tables out under the leaves and under a little rock overhang. A one-meter-high waterfall gushed through the middle of the establishment, and a two-meter-long bridge of set shale stone led to the kitchen. Then they broke onto view after never-tiring view of the rich and varied quasiurbia. The roadway forms, the fringe farms, the berry patches! In their seasons: Juneberries, huckleberries, blueberries, dewberries, elderberries, highbush cranberries, red raspberries, boysenberries, loganberries, nine kinds of blackberries, strawberries, greenberries.

Orchards! Can there ever be enough orchards? Plum, peach, sand plum and chokecherry, black cherry, apple and crab apple, pear, blue-fruited pawpaw, persimmon, crooked quince. Melon patches, congregations of beehives, pickle patches, cheese farms, flax farms, close clustered towns (twenty houses in each, twenty persons in a house, twenty of the little settlements along every mile of roadway, country honkey-tonks, as well as high-dog clubs already open and hopping with action in the early morning; roadway chapels with local statuary and with their rich-box-poor-boxes (one dropped money in the top if one had it and the spirit to give it, one tripped it out the bottom if one needed it), and the little refrigeration niches with bread, cheese, beef rolls, and always the broached cask of country wine: that there be no more hunger on the roadways forever!

"I hear it too!" old Charles Archer cried out suddenly. "High-pitched and off to the left. And there's the smell of monoxide and—gah—rubber. Conductor, conductor!"

The conductor heard it, as did others in the car. The conductor stopped the cars to listen. Then he phoned the report and gave the location as well as he might, consulting with the passengers. There was rough country over to the left, rocks and hills, and someone was driving there in broad daylight.

The conductor broke out rifles from the locker, passing them out to Peter Brady and two other young men in the

car, and to three men in each of the other two cars. A competent-seeming man took over the communication, talking to men on a line further to the left, beyond the mad driver, and they had him boxed into a box no more than half a mile square.

"You stay, Angela, and you stay, Grandfather Archer," Peter Brady said. "Here is a little thirty carbine. Use it if he comes in range at all. We hunt him down now." Then Peter Brady followed the conductor and the rifle-bearing men, ten men on a death hunt. And there were now four other groups out on the hunt, converging on their whining, coughing target.

"Why do they have to kill them, Great-grandfather? Why not turn them over to the courts?"

"The courts are too lenient. All they give them is life in prison."

"But surely that should be enough. It will keep them from driving the things, and some of the unfortunate men might even be rehabilitated."

"Angela, they are the greatest prison breakers ever. Only ten days ago, Mad Man Gudge killed three guards, went over the wall at State Prison, evaded all pursuit, robbed the cheesemakers' cooperative of fifteen thousand dollars, got to a sly klunker maker, and was driving one of the things in a wild area within thirty hours of his breakout. It was four days before they found him and killed him. They are insane, Angela, and the mental hospitals are already full of them. Not one of them has ever been rehabilitated."

"Why is it so bad that they should drive? They usually drive only in the very wild places, and for a few hours in the middle of the night."

"Their madness is infectious, Angela. Their arrogance would leave no room for anything else in the world. Our country is now in balance, our communication and travel is minute and near perfect, thanks to the wonderful trolleys and the people of the trolleys. We are all one neighborhood, we are all one family! We live in love and compassion, with few rich and few poor, and arrogance and hatred have all gone out from us. We are the people

with roots, and with trolleys. We are one with our earth."

"Would it hurt that the drivers should have their own limited place to do what they wanted, if they did not bother sane people?"

"Would it hurt if disease and madness and evil were given their own limited place? But they will not stay in their place, Angela. There is the diabolical arrogance in them, the rampant individualism, the hatred of order. There can be nothing more dangerous to society than the man in the automobile. Were they allowed to thrive, there would be poverty and want again, Angela, and wealth and accumulation. And cities."

"But cities are the most wonderful things of all! I love to go to them."

"I do not mean the wonderful Excursion Cities, Angela. There would be cities of another and blacker sort. They were almost upon us once when a limitation was set on them. Uniqueness is lost in them; there would be mere accumulation of rootless people, of arrogant people, of duplicated people, of people who have lost their humanity. Let them never rob us of our involuted countryside, or our quasiurbia. We are not perfect; but what we have, we will not give away for the sake of wild men."

"The smell! I cannot stand it!"

"Monoxide. How would you like to be born in the smell of it, to live every moment of your life in the smell of it, to die in the smell of it?"

"No, no, not that."

The rifleshots were scattered but serious. The howling and coughing of the illicit klunker automobile were nearer. Then it was in sight, bouncing and bounding weirdly out of the rough rock area and into the tomato patches straight toward the trolley interurban.

The klunker automobile was on fire, giving off ghastly stench of burning leather and rubber and noxious monoxide and seared human flesh. The man, standing up at the broken wheel, was a madman, howling, out of his head. He was a young man, but sunken-eyed and unshaven, bloodied on the left side of his head and the left side of his breast, foaming with hatred and arrogance.

"Kill me! Kill me!" he croaked like clattering broken

thunder. "There will be others! We will not leave off driving so long as there is one desolate place left, so long as there is one sly klunker maker left!"

He went rigid. He quivered. He was shot again. But he would die howling.

"Damn you all to trolley haven! A man in an automobile is worth a thousand men on foot! He is worth a million men in a trolley car! You never felt your black heart rise up in you when you took control of one of the monsters! You never felt the lively hate choke you off in rapture as you sneered down the whole world from your bouncing center of the universe! Damn all decent folks! I'd rather go to hell in an automobile than to heaven in a trolley car!"

A spoked wheel broke, sounding like one of the muted volleys of rifle fire coming from behind him. The klunker automobile pitched onto its nose, upended, turned over, and exploded in blasting flames. And still in the middle of the fire could be seen the two hypnotic eyes with their darker flame, could be heard the demented voice:

"The crankshaft will still be good, the differential will still be good, a sly klunker maker can use part of it, part of it will drive again—*ahhhiiii.*"

Some of them sang as they rode away from the site in the trolley cars, and some of them were silent and thoughtful. It had been an unnerving thing.

"It curdles me to remember that I once put my entire fortune into that future," Great-grandfather Charles Archer moaned. "Well, that is better than to have lived in such a future."

A young couple had happily loaded all their belongings onto a baggage trolley and were moving from one of the Excursion Cities to live with kindred in quasiurbia. The population of that Excursion City (with its wonderful theaters and music halls and distinguished restaurants and literary coffeehouses and alcoholic oases and amusement centers) had now reached seven thousand persons, the legal limit for any city. Oh, there were a thousand Excursion Cities and all of them delightful! But a limit must be

kept on size. A limit must be kept on everything.

It was a wonderful Saturday afternoon. Fowlers caught birds with collapsible kite-cornered nets. Kids rode free out to the diamonds to play Trolley League ball. Old gaffers rode out with pigeons in pigeon boxes, to turn them loose and watch them race home. Shore netters took shrimp from the semisaline Little Shrimp Lake. Banjo players serenaded their girls in grassy lanes.

The world was one single bronze gong song with the melodious clang of trolley cars threading the country on their green-iron rails, with the sparky fire following them overhead and their copper gleaming in the sun. By law there must be a trolley line every mile, but they were oftener. By law no one trolley line might run for more than twenty-five miles. This was to give a sense of locality. But transfers between the lines were worked out perfectly. If one wished to cross the nation, one rode on some one hundred and twenty different lines. There were no more long-distance railroads. They also had had their arrogance, and they also had had to go.

Carp in the ponds, pigs in the clover, a unique barn-factory in every hamlet and every hamlet unique, bees in the air, pepper plants in the lanes, and the whole land as sparky as trolley fire and right as rails.

KATE WILHELM

THE ENCOUNTER

The bus slid to an uneasy stop, two hours late. Snow was eight inches deep, and the white sky met the white ground in a strange world where the grubby black bus station floated free. It was a world where up and down had become meaningless, where the snow fell horizontally. Crane, supported by the wind and the snow, could have entered the station by walking up the wall, or across the ceiling. His mind seemed adrift, out of touch with the reality of his body. He stamped, scattering snow, bringing some feeling back to his legs, making himself feel the floor beneath his feet. He tried to feel his cheek, to see if he was feverish, but his hands were too numb, his cheek too numb. The heating system of the bus had failed over an hour ago.

The trouble was that he had not dressed for such weather. An overcoat, but no boots, no fur-lined gloves, no woolen scarf to wind and wind about his throat. He stamped and clapped his hands. Others were doing the same.

There had been only nine or ten people on the bus, and some of them were being greeted by others or were slipping out into the storm, home finally or near enough now.

The bus driver was talking to an old man who had been in the bus station when they arrived, the ticket agent, probably. He was wearing two sweaters, one heavy, hip-length green that looked home-knit; under it, a turtle-neck grey wool with too-long sleeves that hung from beneath the green sleeves. He had on furry boots that came to his knees, with his sagging pants tucked tightly into them. Beyond him, tossed over one of the wooden benches, was a greatcoat, fleece-lined, long enough to hang to his boot tops. Fleecy gloves bulged from one of the pockets.

"Folks," he said, turning away from the bus driver, "there won't be another bus until sometime in the morning, when they get the roads plowed out some. There's an all-night diner down the road, three-four blocks. Not much else in town's open this time of night."

"Is there a hotel?" A woman, fur coat, shiny patent boots, kid gloves. She had got on at the same station that Crane had; he remembered the whiff of expensive perfume as she had passed him.

"There's the Laughton Inn, ma'am, but it's two miles outsida town and there's no way to get there."

"Oh, for God's sake! You mean this crummy burg doesn't even have a hotel of its own?"

"Four of them, in fact, but they're closed, open again in April. Don't get many people to stay overnight in the wintertimes."

"Okay, okay. Which way's the diner?" She swept a disapproving glance over the bleak station and went to the door, carrying an overnight bag with her.

"Come on, honey. I'm going there, too," the driver said. He pulled on gloves and turned up his collar. He took her arm firmly, transferred the bag to his other hand, then turned to look at the other three or four people in the station. "Anyone else?"

Diner. Glaring lights, jukebox noise without end, the smell of hamburgers and onions, rank coffee and doughnuts saturated with grease. Everyone smoking. Someone would have cards probably, someone a bottle. The woman would sing or cry, or get a fight going. She was a nasty one, he could tell. She'd be bored within an hour. She'd have the guys groping her under the table, in the end

booth. The man half-turned, his back shielding her from view, his hand slipping between her buttons, under the blouse, under the slip, the slippery smooth nylon, the tightness of the bra, unfastening it with his other hand. Her low laugh, busy hands. The hard nipple between his fingers now, his own responsive hardness. She had turned to look at the stranded passengers when the driver spoke, and she caught Crane's glance.

"It's a long wait for a Scranton bus, honey," she said.

"I'd just get soaked going to the diner," Crane said, and turned his back on her. His hand hurt, and he opened his clenched fingers and rubbed his hands together hard.

"I sure as hell don't want to wait all night in this rathole," someone else said. "Do you have lockers? I can't carry all this gear."

"Lock them up in the office for you," the ticket agent said. He pulled out a bunch of keys and opened a door at the end of the room. A heavyset man followed him, carrying three suitcases. They returned; the door squeaked. The agent locked it again.

"Now, you boys will hold me up, won't you? I don't want to fall down in all that snow."

"Doll, if you fall on your pretty little ass, I'll dry you off personally," the driver said.

"Oh, you will, will you?"

Crane tightened his jaw, trying not to hear them. The outside door opened and a blast of frigid air shook the room. A curtain of snow swept across the floor before the door banged again, and the laughing voices were gone.

"You sure you want to wait here?" the ticket agent asked. "Not very warm in here. And I'm going home in a minute, you know."

"I'm not dressed to walk across the street in this weather, much less four blocks," Crane said.

The agent still hesitated, one hand on his coat. He looked around, as if checking on loose valuables. There was a woman on one of the benches. She was sitting with her head lowered, hands in her lap, legs crossed at the ankles. She wore a dark cloth coat, and her shoes were skimpier than Crane's, three crossing strips of leather attached to paper-thin soles. Black cloth gloves hid her

hands. She didn't look up, in the silence that followed, while the two men scrutinized her. It was impossible to guess her age in that pose, with only the dark clothes to go by.

"Ma'am, are you all right?" the agent asked finally.

"Yes, of course. Like the gentleman, I didn't care to wade through the snow. I can wait here."

She raised her head and with a touch of disappointment Crane saw that she was as nondescript as her clothing. When he stopped looking at her, he couldn't remember what she looked like. A woman. Thirty. Thirty-five. Forty. He didn't know. And yet. There was something vaguely familiar about her, as if he should remember her, as if he might have seen her or met her at one time or another. He had a very good memory for faces and names, an invaluable asset for a salesman, and he searched his memory for this woman and came up with nothing.

"Don't you have nothing with you that you could change into?" the agent asked peevishly. "You'd be more comfortable down at the diner."

"I don't have anything but some work with me," she said. Her voice was very patient. "I thought I'd be in the city before the storm came. Late bus, early storm. I'll be fine here."

Again his eyes swept through the dingy room, searching for something to say, not finding anything. He began to pull on his coat, and he seemed to gain forty pounds. "Telephone under the counter, back there," he said finally. "Pay phone's outside under a drift, I reckon."

"Thank you," she said.

The agent continued to dawdle. He pulled on his gloves, checked the rest rooms to make sure the doors were not locked, that the lights worked. He veered at a thermostat, muttering that you couldn't believe what it said anyways. At the door he stopped once more. He looked like a walking heap of outdoor garments, a clothes pile that had swallowed a man. "Mr.— uh—"

"Crane. Randolph Crane. Manhattan."

"—Uh, yes. Mr. Crane, I'll tell the troopers that you two are up here. And the road boys. Plow'll be out soon's it lets up some. They'll keep an eye open for you, if you

need anything. Maybe drop in with some coffee later on."

"Great," Crane said. "That'd be great."

"Okay, then. I wouldn't wander out if I was you. See you in the morning, then. Night."

The icy blast and the inrushing snow made Crane start to shake again. He looked over at the woman who was huddling down, trying to wrap herself up in the skimpy coat.

His shivering eased and he sat down and opened his briefcase and pulled out one of the policies he had taken along to study. This was the first time he had touched it. He hoped the woman would fall asleep and stay asleep until the bus came in the morning. He knew that he wouldn't be able to stretch out on the short benches, not that it would matter anyway. He wasn't the type to relax enough to fall asleep anywhere but in bed.

He stared at the policy, a twenty-year endowment, two years to go to maturity, on the life of William Sanders, age twenty-two. He held it higher, trying to catch the light, but the print was a blur; all he could make out were the headings of the clauses, and these he already knew by heart. He turned the policy over; it was the same on the back, the old familiar print, and the rest a blur. He started to refold the paper to return it to the briefcase. She would think he was crazy, taking it out, looking at it a moment, turning it this way and that, and then putting it back. He pursed his lips and pretended to read.

Sanders, Sanders. What did he want? Four policies, the endowment, a health and accident, a straight life, and a mortgage policy. Covered, protected. Insurance-poor, Sanders had said, throwing the bulky envelope onto Crane's desk. "Consolidate these things somehow. I want cash if I can get it, and out from under the rest."

"But what about your wife, the kids?"

"Ex-wife. If I go, she'll manage. Let her carry insurance on me."

Crane had been as persuasive as he knew how to be, and in the end he had had to promise to assess the policies, to have figures to show cash values, and so on. Disapprovingly, of course.

"You know, dear, you really are getting more stuffy every day," Mary Louise said.

"And if he dies, and his children are left destitute, then will I be so stuffy?"

"I'd rather have the seven hundred dollars myself than see it go to your company year after year."

"That's pretty shortsighted."

"Are you really going to wear that suit to Maggie's party?"

"Changing the subject?"

"Why not? You know what you think, and I know what I think, and they aren't even within hailing distance of each other."

Mary Louise wore a red velvet gown that was slit to her navel, molded just beneath her breasts by a silver chain, and almost completely bare in the back, down to the curve of her buttocks. The silver chain cut into her tanned back slightly. Crane stared at it.

"New?"

"Yes. I picked it up last week. Pretty?"

"Indecent. I didn't know it was a formal thing tonight."

"Not really. Optional anyway. Some of us decided to dress, that's all." She looked at him in the mirror and said, "I really don't care if you want to wear that suit."

Wordlessly he turned and went back to the closet to find his dinner jacket and black trousers. How easy it would be, a flick of a chain latch, and she'd be stripped to her hips. Was she counting on someone's noticing that? Evers maybe? Or Olivetti! Olivetti? What had he said? Something about women who wore red in public. Like passing out a dance card and pencil, the promise implicit in the gesture?

"Slut!" he said, through teeth so tightly pressed together that his jaws ached.

"What? I'm sorry."

He looked up. The woman in the bus station was watching him across the aisle. She still looked quite cold.

"I am sorry," she said softly. "I thought you spoke."

"No." He stuffed the policy back in his case and

fastened it. "Are you warm enough?"

"Not really. The ticket agent wasn't kidding when he said the thermostat lies. According to it, it's seventy-four in here."

Crane got up and looked at the thermostat. The adjustment control was gone. The station was abysmally cold. He walked back and forth for a few moments, then paused at the window. The white world, ebbing and growing, changing, changeless. "If I had a cup or something, I could bring in some snow and chill the thermostat. That might make the heat kick on."

"Maybe in the rest room. . . ." He heard her move across the floor, but he didn't turn to look. There was a pink glow now in the whiteness, like a fire in the distance, all but obscured by the intervening clouds of snow. He watched as it grew brighter, darker, almost red; then it went out. The woman returned and stood at his side.

"No cups, but I folded paper towels to make a funnel thing. Will it do?"

He took the funnel. It was sturdy enough, three thicknesses of brown, unabsobent toweling. "Probably better than a cup," he said. "Best stand behind the door. Every time it opens, that blizzard comes right on in."

She nodded and moved away. When he opened the door the wind hit him hard, almost knocking him back into the room, wrenching the door from his hand. It swung wide open and hit the woman. Distantly he heard her gasp of surprise and pain. He reached out and scooped up the funnel full of snow and then pushed the door closed again. He was covered with snow. Breathless, he leaned against the wall. "Are you all right?" he asked after a few moments.

She was holding her left shoulder. "Yes. It caught me by surprise. No harm done. Did you get enough snow?"

He held up the funnel for her to see and then pushed himself away from the wall. Again he had the impression that there was no right side up in the small station. He held the back of one of the benches and moved along it. "The wind took my breath away," he said.

"Or the intense cold. I think I read that breathing in the cold causes as many heart attacks as overexertion."

"Well, it's cold enough out there. About zero by now, I

guess." He scooped out some of the snow and held it against the thermostat. "The furnace must be behind this wall, or under this area. Feel how warm it is."

She put her hand on the wall and nodded. "Maybe we can fasten the cup of snow up next to the thermostat." She looked around and then went to the bulletin board. She removed several of the notices and schedules there and brought him the thumbtacks. Crane spilled a little snow getting the tacks into the paper towel and then into the wall. In a few minutes there was a rumble as the furnace came on and almost immediately the station began to feel slightly warmer. Presently the woman took off her coat.

"Success," she said, smiling.

"I was beginning to think it had been a mistake after all, not going to the diner."

"So was I."

"I think they are trying to get the snowplows going. I saw a red light a couple of minutes ago. It went out again, but at least someone's trying."

She didn't reply, and after a moment he said, "I'm glad you don't smoke. I gave it up a few months ago, and it would drive me mad to have to smell it through a night like this. Probably I'd go back to them."

"I have some," she said. "I even smoke once in a while. If you decide that you do want them. . . ."

"No. No. I wasn't hinting."

"I just wish the lights were better in here. I could get in a whole night's work. I often work at night."

"So do I, but you'd put your eyes out. What—"

"That's all right. What kind of work do I do? An illustrator for Slocum House Catalogue Company. Not very exciting, I'm afraid."

"Oh, you're an artist."

"No. Illustrator. I wanted to become an artist, but . . . things didn't work out that way."

"I'd call you an artist. Maybe because I'm in awe of anyone who can draw, or paint, or do things like that. You're all artists to me."

She shrugged. "And you're an insurance salesman." He stiffened and she got up, saying, "I saw the policy you were looking over, and the briefcase stuffed full of policies

and company pamphlets and such. I knew an insurance salesman once."

He realized that he had been about to ask where she was going, and he clamped his jaw again and turned so that he wouldn't watch her go into the ladies' room.

He went to the window. The wind was still at gale force, but so silent. With the door closed, the station seemed far removed from the storm, and looking at it was like watching something wholly unreal, manufactured to amuse him perhaps. There were storm windows, and the building was very sturdy and probably very well insulated. Now, with the furnace working, it was snug and secure. He cupped his hands about his eyes, trying to see past the reflections in the window, but there was nothing. Snow, a drift up to the sill now, and the wind driven snow that was like a sheer curtain being waved from above, touching the windows, fluttering back, touching again, hiding everything behind it.

She was taking a long time. He should have gone when she left. Now he had the awkward moment to face, of excusing himself or not, of timing it so that she wouldn't think he was leaving deliberately in order to dodge something that one or the other said or hinted. She had done it so easily and naturally. He envied people like her. Always so sure of themselves.

"Which face are you wearing tonight, Randy?" Mary Louise reached across the table and touched his cheek, then shook her head. "I can't always tell. When you're the successful salesman, you are so assured, so poised, charming, voluble even."

"And the other times? What am I these times?"

"Afraid."

Drawing back from her hand, tight and self-contained again, watchful, he said, "Isn't it lucky that I can keep the two separated then? How successful a salesman would I be if I put on the wrong face when I went to work?"

"I wonder if mixing it up a little might not be good for you. So you wouldn't sell a million dollars' worth of insurance a year, but you'd be a little happier when you're not working."

"Like you?"

"Not like me, God forbid. But at least I haven't given up looking for something. And you have."

"Yeah. You're looking. In a bottle. In someone else's bed. In buying sprees."

"*C'est la vie.* You can always buzz off, you know."

"And add alimony to my other headaches? No thanks."

Smiling at him, sipping an old-fashioned, infinitely wise and infinitely evil. Were wise women always evil? "My poor Randy. My poor darling. You thought I was everything you were not, and instead you find that I am stamped from the same mold. Number XLM 119543872—afraid of life, only not quite afraid of death. Someone let up on the pressure there. Hardly an indentation even. So I can lose myself and you can't. A pity, my darling Randy. If we could lose ourselves together, what might we be able to find? We are so good together, you know. Sex with you is still the best of all. I try harder and harder to make you let go all the way. I read manuals and take personalized lessons, all for your sake, darling. All for you. And it does no good. You are my only challenge, you see."

"Stop it! Are you crazy?"

"Ah. Now I know who you are tonight. There you are. Tight mouth, frowning forehead full of lines, narrowed eyes. You are not so handsome with this face on, you know. Why don't you look at me, Randy?" Her hands across the table again, touching his cheeks, a finger trailing across his lips, a caress or mockery. "You never look at me, you know. You never look at me at all."

He leaned his forehead against the window, and the chill roused him. Where was the woman? He looked at his watch and realized that she had been gone only a few minutes, not the half hour or longer that he had thought. Was the whole night going to be like that? Minutes dragging by like hours? Time distorted until a lifetime could be spent in waiting for one dawn?

He went to the men's room. When he returned, she was sitting in her own place once more, her coat thrown over her shoulders, a sketch pad in her lap.

"Are you cold again?" He felt almost frozen. There was no heat in the men's room.

"Not really. Moving about chilled me. There's a puddle under the funnel, and the snow is gone, but heat is still coming from the radiator."

"I'll have to refill it every half hour or so, I guess."

"The driver said it's supposed to go to ten or fifteen below tonight."

Crane shrugged. "After it gets this low, I don't care how much farther it drops. As long as I don't have to be out in it."

She turned her attention to her pad and began to make strong lines. He couldn't tell what she was drawing, only that she didn't hesitate, but drew surely, confidently. He opened his briefcase and got out his schedule book. It was no use, he couldn't read the small print in the poor lighting of the station. He rummaged for something that he would be able to concentrate on. He was grateful when she spoke again:

"It was so stupid to start out tonight. I could have waited until tomorrow. I'm not bound by a time clock or anything."

"That's just what I was thinking. I was afraid of being snowed in for several days. We were at Sky Mount Ski Lodge, and everyone else was cheering the storm's approach. Do you ski?"

"Some, not very well. The cold takes my breath away, hitting me in the face like that."

He stared at her for a moment, opened his mouth to agree, then closed it again. It was as if she was anticipating what he was going to say.

"Don't be so silly, Randy. All you have to do is wear the muffler around your mouth and nose. And the goggles on your eyes. Nothing is exposed then. You're just too lazy to ski."

"Okay, lazy I know this, I'm bored to death here. I haven't been warm since we left the apartment, and my legs ache. That was a nasty fall I had this morning. I'm sore. I have a headache from the glare of the snow, and I think it's asinine to freeze for two hours in order to slide down a mountain a couple of times. I'm going back to the city."

"But our reservation is through Saturday night. Paid in advance."

"Stay. Be my guest. Have yourself a ball. You and McCone make a good pair, and his wife seems content to sit on the sidelines and watch you. Did you really think that anemic blonde would appeal to me? Did you think we'd be too busy together to notice what you were up to?"

"Tracy? To tell the truth I hadn't given her a thought. I didn't know she didn't ski until this afternoon. I don't know why Mac brought her here. Any more than I know why you came along."

"Come on home with me. Let's pack up and leave before the storm begins. We can stop at that nice old antique inn on the way home, where they always have pheasant pie. Remember?"

"Darling, I came to ski. You will leave the car here, won't you? I'll need it to get the skis back home, and our gear. Isn't there a bus or something?"

"Mary Louise, this morning on the slope, didn't you really see me? You know, when your ski pole got away from you."

"What in the world are you talking about? You were behind me. How could I have seen you? I didn't even know you had started down."

"Okay. Forget it. I'll give you a call when I get to the apartment."

"Yes, do. You can leave a message at the desk if I don't answer."

The woman held up her sketch and narrowed her eyes. She ripped out the page and crumpled it, tossed it into the wastecan.

"I think I'm too tired after all."

"It's getting cold in here again. Your hands are probably too cold." He got up and took the funnel from the wall. "I'll get more snow and see if we can't get the furnace going again."

"You should put something over your face, so the cold air won't be such a shock. Don't you have a muffler?"

He stopped. He had crushed the funnel, he realized, and he tried to smooth it again without letting her see what he

had done. He decided that it would do, and opened the door. A drift had formed, and a foot of snow fell into the station. The wind was colder, sharper, almost deliberately cutting. He was blinded by the wind and the snow that was driven into his face. He filled the funnel and tried to close the door again, but the drift was in the way. He pushed, trying to use the door as a snowplow. More snow was being blown in, and finally he had to use his hands, push the snow out of the way, not outside, but to one side of the door. At last he had it clear enough and he slammed the door, more winded this time than before. His throat felt raw, and he felt a constriction about his chest.

"It's getting worse all the time. I couldn't even see the bus, nothing but a mountain of snow."

"Ground blizzard, I suspect. When it blows like this you can't tell how much of it is new snow and how much is just fallen snow being blown about. The drifts will be tremendous tomorrow." She smiled. "I remember how we loved it when this happened when we were kids. The drifts are exciting, so pure, so high. Sometimes they glaze over and you can play Glass Mountain. I used to be the princess."

Crane was shivering again. He forced his hands to be steady as he pushed the thumbtacks into the funnel to hold it in place next to the thermostat. He had to clear his throat before he could speak. "Did the prince ever reach you?"

"No. Eventually I just slid back down and went home."

"Where? Where did you live?"

"Outside Chicago, near the lake."

He spun around. "Who are you?" He grabbed the back of a bench and clutched it hard. She stared at him. He had screamed at her, and he didn't know why. "I'm sorry," he said. "You keep saying things that I'm thinking. I was thinking of that game, of how I never could make it to the top."

"Near Lake Michigan?"

"On the shores almost."

She nodded.

"I guess all kids play games like that in the snow," he said. "Strange that we should have come from the same

general area. Did your milk freeze on the back steps, stick up out of the bottle, with the cap at an angle?"

"Yes. And those awful cloakrooms at school, where you had to strip off snowsuits and boots, and step in icy water before you could get your indoors shoes on."

"And sloshing through the thaws, wet every damn day. I was wet more than I was dry all through grade school."

"We all were," she said, smiling faintly, looking past him.

He almost laughed in his relief. He went to the radiator and put his hands out over it, his back to her. Similar backgrounds, that's all, he said to himself, framing the words carefully. Nothing strange. Nothing eerie. She was just a plain woman who came from the same state, probably the same county that he came from. They might have gone to the same schools, and he would not have noticed her. She was too common, too nondescript to have noticed at the time. And he had been a quiet boy, not particularly noteworthy himself. No sports besides the required ones. No clubs. A few friends, but even there, below average, because they had lived in an area too far removed from most of the kids who went to his school.

"It's only two. Seems like it ought to be morning already, doesn't it." She was moving about and he turned to see what she was doing. She had gone behind the counter, where the ticket agent had said there was a telephone. "A foam cushion," she said, holding it up. "I feel like one of the Swiss Family Robinson, salvaging what might be useful."

"Too bad there isn't some coffee under there."

"Wish you were in the diner?"

"No. That bitch probably has them all at each other's throats by now, as it is."

"That girl? The one who was so afraid?"

He laughed harshly and sat down. "Girl!"

"No more than twenty, if that much."

He laughed again and shook his head.

"Describe her to me," the woman said. She left the counter and sat down on the bench opposite him, still carrying the foam cushion. It had a black plastic cover, grey foam bulged from a crack. It was disgusting.

Crane said, "The broad was in her late twenties, or possibly thirties—"

"Eighteen to twenty."

"She had a pound of makeup on, nails like a cat."

"Fake nails, chapped hands, calluses. Ten-cent store makeup."

"She had expensive perfume, and a beaver coat. I think beaver."

She laughed gently. "Drugstore spray cologne. Macy's Basment fake fur, about fifty-nine to sixty-five dollars, unless she hit a sale."

"And the kid gloves, and the high patent-leather boots?"

"Vinyl, both of them." She looked at him for an uncomfortable minute, then examined the pillow she had found. "On second thought, I'm not sure that I would want to rest my head on this. It's a little bit disgusting, isn't it?"

"Why did you want me to describe that woman? You have your opinion of what she is; I have mine. There's no way to prove either of our cases without having her before us."

"I don't need to prove anything. I don't care if you think you're right and I'm wrong. I felt very sorry for the girl. I noticed her."

"I noticed her, too."

"What color was her hair, her eyes? How about her mouth, big, small, full? And her nose? Straight, snub, broad?"

He regarded her bitterly for a moment, then shrugged and turned toward the window. He didn't speak.

"You can't describe what she really was like because you didn't see her. You saw the package and made up your mind about the contents. Believe me, she was terrified of the storm, of those men, everything. She needed the security of the driver and people. What about me? Can you describe me?"

He looked, but she was holding the pillow between them and he could see only her hands, long, pale, slender fingers, no rings.

"This is ridiculous," he said after a second. "I have one

of those reputations for names and faces. You know, never forget a name, always know the names of the kids, the wife, occupation, and so on."

"Not this side of you. This side refuses to see anyone at all. I wonder why."

"What face are you wearing tonight, Randy?" Mary Louise touching him. "Do you see me? Why don't you look at me?"

Wind whistling past his ears, not really cold yet, not when he was standing still anyway, with the sun warm on him. But racing down the slope, trees to his right, the precipice to his left, the wind was icy. Mary Louise a red streak ahead of him, and somewhere behind him the navy and white blur that was McCone. Holding his own between them. The curve of the trail ahead, the thrill of the downward plummet, and suddenly the openmouthed face of his wife, silent scream, and in the same instant, the ski pole against his legs, tripping him up, the more exciting plunge downward, face in the snow, blinded, over and over, skis gone now, trying to grasp the snow, trying to stop the tumbling, over and over in the snow.

Had his wife tried to kill him?

"Are you all right, Mr. Crane?"

"Yes, of course. Let me describe the last man I sold insurance to, a week ago. Twenty-four, six feet one inch, a tiny, almost invisible scar over his right eyebrow, crinkle lines about his eyes, because he's an outdoor type, very tanned and muscular. He's a profesional baseball player, incidentally. His left hand has larger knuckles than the right . . ."

The woman was not listening. She had crossed the station and was standing at the window, trying to see out. "Computer talk," she said. "A meaningless rundown of facts. So he bought a policy for one hundred thousand dollars, straight life, and from now on you won't have to deal with him, be concerned with him at all."

"Why did you say one hundred thousand dollars?"

"No reason. I don't know, obviously."

He chewed his lip and watched her. "Any change out there?"

"Worse, if anything. I don't think you'll be able to use

this door at all now. You'd never get it closed. It's half covered with a drift."

"There must be a window or another door that isn't drifted over."

"Storm windows. Maybe there's a back door, but I bet it opens to the office, and the ticket agent locked that."

Crane looked at the windows and found that she was right. The storm windows couldn't be opened from inside. And there wasn't another outside door. The men's room was like a freezer now. He tried to run the water, thinking that possibly cold water would work on the thermostat as well as snow, but nothing came out. The pipes must have frozen. As he started to close the door, he saw a small block-printed sign: "Don't close door all the way, no heat in here, water will freeze up." The toweling wouldn't hold water anyway.

He left the door open a crack and rejoined the woman near the window. "It's got to be this door," he said. "I guess I could open it an inch or two, let that much of the drift fall inside and use it."

"Maybe. But you'll have to be careful."

"Right out of Jack London," he said. "It's seventy-two on the thermometer. How do you feel?"

"Coolish, not bad."

"Okay, we'll wait awhile. Maybe the wind will let up."

He stared at the puddle under the thermostat, and at the other larger one across the room near the door, where the snowdrift had entered the room the last time. The drift had been only a foot high then, and now it was three or four feet. Could he move that much snow without anything to work with, if it came inside?

He shouldn't have started back to town. She had goaded him into it, of course. Had she suspected that he would get stranded somewhere, maybe freeze to death?

"Why don't you come right out and say what you're thinking?" Red pants, red ski jacket, cheeks almost as red.

"I'm not thinking anything. It was an accident."

"You're a liar, Randy! You think I guessed you were there, that I let go hoping to make you fall. Isn't that what you think? Isn't it?"

He shook his head hard. She hadn't said any of that. He

hadn't thought of it then. Only now, here, stranded with this half-mad woman. Half-mad? He looked at her and quickly averted his gaze. Why had that thought come to him? She was odd, certainly, probably very lonely, shy. But half-mad?

Why did she watch him so? As if aware of his thoughts, she turned her back and walked to the ladies' room. He had to go too, but he remembered the frozen pipes in the men's room. Maybe she'd fall asleep eventually and he'd be able to slip into her rest room. If not, then he'd wait until morning. Maybe this night had come about in order to give him time to think about him and Mary Louise, to really think it through all the way and come to a decision.

He had met her when he was stationed in Washington, after the Korean War. He had been a captain, assigned to Army Intelligence. She had worked as a private secretary to Senator Robertson of New York. So he had done all right without her up to then. She had introduced him to the president of the company that he worked for now. Knowing that he wanted to become a writer, she had almost forced him into insurance. Fine. It was the right choice. He had told her so a thousand times. But how he had succeeded was still a puzzle to him. He never had tested well on salesmanship on aptitude tests. Too introverted and shy.

"You make other people feel stupid, frankly," she had said once. "You are so tight and so sure of yourself that you don't allow anyone else to have an opinion at all. It's not empathy, like it is with so many good salesmen. It's a kind of sadistic force that you apply."

"Oh, stop it. You're talking nonsense."

"You treat each client like an extension of the policy that you intend to sell to him. Not like a person, but the human counterpart of the slick paper with the clauses and small print. You show the same respect and liking for them as for the policies. They go together. You believe it and make them believe it. Numbers, that's what they are to you. Policy numbers."

"Why do you hang around if you find me so cold and calculating?"

"Oh, it's a game that I play. I know there's a room

somewhere where you've locked up part of yourself, and I keep searching for it. Someday I'll find it and open it just a crack, and then I'll run. Because if it ever opens, even a little, everything will come tumbling out and you won't be able to stop any of it. How you'll bleed then, bleed and bleed, and cry and moan. I couldn't stand that. And I can't stand for it not to be so."

Crane put his head down in his hands and rubbed his eyes hard. Without affect, that was the term that she used. Modern man without affect. Schizoid personality. But he also had a nearly split personality. The doctor had told him so. In the six sessions that he had gone to he had learned much of the jargon, and then he had broken it off. Split personality. Schizoid tendencies. Without affect. All to keep himself safe. It seemed to him to be real madness to take away any of the safeties he had painstakingly built, and he had quit the sessions.

And now this strange woman that he was locked up with was warning him not to open the door a crack. He rubbed his eyes harder until there was solid pain there. He had to touch her. The ticket agent had seen her, too, though. He had been concerned about leaving her alone with a strange man all night. So transparently worried about her, worried about Crane. Fishing for his name. He could have told the fool anything. He couldn't remember his face at all, only his clothes.

All right, the woman was real, but strange. She had an uncanny way of anticipating what he was thinking, what he was going to say, what he feared. Maybe these were her fears too.

She came back into the waiting room. She was wearing her black coat buttoned to her neck, her hands in the pockets. She didn't mention the cold.

Soon he would have to get more snow, trick the fool thermostat into turning on the furnace. Soon. A maniac must have put it on that wall, the only warm wall in the building. A penny-pinching maniac.

"If you decide to try to get more snow, maybe I should hold the door while you scoop it up," she said, after a long silence. The cold had made her face look pinched, and Crane was shivering under his overcoat.

"Can you hold it?" he asked. "There's a lot of pressure behind that door."

She nodded.

"Okay. I'll take the wastecan and get as much as I can. It'll keep in the men's room. There's no heat in there."

She held the doorknob until he was ready, and when he nodded, she turned it and, bracing the door with her shoulder, let it open several inches. The wind pushed, and the snow spilled through. It was over their heads now, and it came in the entire height of the door. She gave ground and the door was open five or six inches. Crane pulled the snow inside, using both hands, clawing at it. The Augean stable, he thought bitterly, and then joined her behind the door, trying to push it closed again. At least no blast of air had come inside this time. The door was packing the snow, and the inner surface of it was thawing slightly, only to refreeze under the pressure and the cold from the other side. Push, Crane thought at her. Push, you devil. You witch.

Slowly it began to move, scrunching snow. They weren't going to get it closed all the way. They stopped pushing to rest. He was panting hard, and she put her head against the door. After a moment he said, "Do you think you could move one of the benches over here?"

She nodded. He braced himself against the door and was surprised at the increase in the pressure when she left. He heard her wrestling with the bench, but he couldn't turn to see. The snow was gaining again. His feet were slipping on the floor, wet now where some of the snow had melted and was running across the room. He saw the bench from the corner of his eye, and he turned to watch her progress with it. She was pushing it toward him, the back to the wall; the back was too high. It would have to be tilted to go under the doorknob. It was a heavy oak bench. If they could maneuver it in place, it would hold.

For fifteen minutes they worked, grunting, saying nothing, trying to hold the door closed and get the bench under the knob without losing any more ground. Finally it was done. The door was open six inches, white packed snow the entire height of it.

Crane fell onto a bench and stared at the open door, not

able to say anything. The woman seemed equally exhausted. At the top of the door, the snow suddenly fell forward, into the station, sifting at first, then falling in a stream. Icy wind followed the snow into the room, and now that the top of the column of snow had been lost, the wind continued to pour into the station, whistling shrilly.

"Well, we know now that the drift isn't really to the top of the building," the woman said wearily. She was staring at the opening.

"My words, almost exactly," Crane said. She always said what he planned to say. He waited.

"We'll have to close it at the top somehow."

He nodded. "In a minute. In a minute."

The cold increased and he knew that he should get busy and try to close the opening, but he felt too numb to cope with it. The furnace couldn't keep up with the draft of below-zero air. His hands were aching with cold, and his toes hurt with a stabbing intensity. Only his mind felt pleasantly numb and he didn't want to think about the problem of closing up the hole.

"You're not falling asleep, are you?"

"For God's sake!" He jerked straight up on the bench and gave her a mean look, a guilty look. "Just shut up and let me try to think, will you?"

"Sorry." She got up and began to pace briskly, hugging her hands to her body. "I'll look around, see if I can find anything that would fit. I simply can't sit still, I'm so cold."

He stared at the hole. There had to be something that would fit over it, stay in place, keep out the wind. He narrowed his eyes, staring, and he saw the wind-driven snow as a liquid running into the station from above, swirling about, only fractionally heavier than the medium that it met on the inside. One continuum, starting in the farthest blackest vacuum of space, taking on form as it reached the highest atmospheric molecules, becoming denser as it neared Earth, almost solid here, but not yet. Not yet. The hole extended to that unimaginable distance where it all began, and the chill spilled down, down, searching for him, wafting about here, searching for him, wanting only to find him, willing then to stop the ceaseless whirl. Coat

him, claim him. The woman belonged to the coldness that came from the black of space. He remembered her now.

Korea. The woman. The village. Waiting for the signal. Colder than the station even, snow, flintlike ground, striking sparks from nails in boots, sparks without warmth. If they could fire the village, they would get warm, have food, sleep that night. Harrison, wounded, frozen where he fell. Lorenz, frostbitten; Jakobs, snow-blind. Crane, too tired to think, too hungry to think, too cold to think. "Fire the village." The woman, out of nowhere, urging him back, back up the mountain to the bunkers that were half filled with ice, mines laid now between the bunkers and the valley. Ordering the woman into the village at gunpoint. Spark from his muzzle. Blessed fire and warmth. But a touch of ice behind the eyes, ice that didn't let him weep when Lorenz died, or when Jakobs, blinded, wandered out and twitched and jerked and pitched over a cliff under a fusillade of bullets. The snow queen, he thought. She's the snow queen, and she touched my eyes with ice.

"Mr. Crane, please wake up. Please!"

He jumped to his feet reaching for his carbine, and only when his hands closed on air did he remember where he was.

"Mr. Crane, I think I know what we can use to close up the hole. Let me show you."

She pulled at his arm and he followed her. She led him into the ladies' room. At the door he tried to pull back, but she tugged. "Look, stacks of paper towels, all folded together. They would be about the right size, wouldn't they? If we wet them, a block of them, and if we can get them up to the hole, they would freeze in place, and the drift could pile up against them and stop blowing into the station. Wouldn't it work?"

She was separating the opened package into thirds, her hands busy, her eyes downcast, not seeing him at all. Crane, slightly to one side of her, a step behind, stared at the double image in the mirror. He continued to watch the mirror as his hands reached out for her and closed about her throat. There was no struggle. She simply closed her eyes and became very limp, and he let her fall. Then he took the wad of towels and held it under the water for a

few moments and returned to the waiting room with it. He had to clear snow from the approach to the door, and then he had to move the bench that was holding the door, carefully, not letting it become dislodged. He dragged a second bench to the door and climbed on it and pushed the wet wad of towels into the opening. He held it several minutes, until he could feel the freezing paper start to stiffen beneath his fingers. He climbed down.

"That should do it," the woman said.

"But you're dead."

Mary Louise threw the sugar bowl at him, trailing a line of sugar across the room.

He smiled. "Wishful thinking," he/she said.

"You're dead inside. You're shriveled up and dried up and rotting inside. When did you last feel anything? My God! You can't create anything, you are afraid of creating anything, even our child!"

"I don't believe it was our child."

"You don't dare believe it. Or admit that you know it was."

He slapped her. The only time that he ever hit her. And her so pale from the operation, so weak from the loss of blood. The slap meant nothing to him, his hand meeting her cheek, leaving a red print there.

"Murderer!"

"You crazy bitch! You're the one who had the abortion! You wanted it!"

"I didn't. I didn't know what I wanted. I was terrified. You made the arrangements, got the doctor, took me, arranged everything, waited in the other room writing policies. Murderer."

"Murderer," the woman said.

He shook his head. "You'd better go back to the ladies' room and stay there. I don't want to hurt you."

"Murderer."

He took a step toward her. He swung around abruptly and almost ran to the far side of the station, pressing his forehead hard on the window.

"We can't stop it now," the woman said, following him. "You can't close the door again now. I'm here. You finally saw me. Really saw me. I'm real now. I won't be

banished again. I'm stronger than you are. You've killed off bits and pieces of yourself until there's nothing left to fight with. You can't send me away again."

Crane pushed himself away from the glass and made a halfhearted attempt to hit her with his fist. He missed and fell against the bench holding the door. He heard the woman's low laugh. All for nothing. All for nothing. The bench slid out from under his hand, and the drift pushed into the room like an avalanche. He pulled himself free and tried to brush the snow off his clothes.

"We'll both freeze now," he said, not caring any longer.

The woman came to his side and touched his cheek with her fingers; they were strangely warm. "Relax now, Crane. Just relax."

She led him to a bench where he sat down resignedly. "Will you at least tell me who you are?" he said.

"You know. You've always known."

He shook his head. One last attempt, he thought. He had to make that one last effort to get rid of her, the woman whose face was so like his own. "You don't even exist," he said harshly, not opening his eyes. "I imagined you here because I was afraid of being alone all night. I created you. *I created you.*"

He stood up. "You hear that, Mary Louise! Did you hear that? I created something. Something so real that it wants to kill me."

"Look at me, Crane. Look at me. Turn your head and look. Look with me, Crane. Let me show you. Let me show you what I see. . . ."

He was shaking again, chilled through, shaking so hard that his muscles were sore. Slowly, inevitably he turned his head and saw the man half-standing, half-crouching, holding the bench with both hands. The man had grey skin, and his eyes were mad with terror.

"Let go, Crane. Look at him and let go. He doesn't deserve anything from us ever again." Crane watched the man clutch his chest, heard him moaning for Mary Louise to come help him, watched him fall to the floor.

She heard the men working at the drift, and she opened the office door to wait for them. They finally got through

and the ticket agent squirmed through the opening they had made.

"Miss! Miss? Are you all right?"

"Yes. I broke into the office, though."

"My God, I thought . . . When we saw that the door had given under the drift, and you in here . . . alo—" The ticket agent blinked rapidly several times.

"I was perfectly all right. When I saw that the door wasn't going to hold, I broke open the inner office and came in here with my sketch book and pencils. I've had a very productive night, really. But I could use some coffee now."

They took her to the diner in a police car, and while she waited for her breakfast order, she went to the rest room and washed her face and combed her hair. She stared at herself in the mirror appraisingly. "Happy birthday," she said softly then.

"Your birthday?" asked the girl who had chosen to wait the night out in the diner. "You were awfully brave to stay alone in the station. I couldn't have done that. You really an artist?"

"Yes, really. And last night I had a lot of work to get done. A lot of work and not much time."

ORBIT 8

is the latest in this unique series of anthologies of the best new SF. Fourteen stories written especially for this collection by some of the top names in the field.

Harlan Ellison in "One Life, Furnished in Early Poverty" tells a moving story of a man who goes back in time to help his youthful self.

Avram Davidson finds a new and sinister significance in the first robin of Spring.

R. A. Lafferty reveals a monstrous microfilm record of the past.

Kate Wilhelm finds real horror in a story of boy-meets-girl.

And ten other tales by some of the most original minds now writing in this most exciting area of today's fiction are calculated to blow the mind.