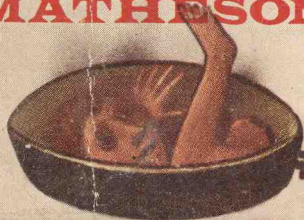




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# THIRD FROM THE SUN

BY RICHARD  
MATHESON



# 13

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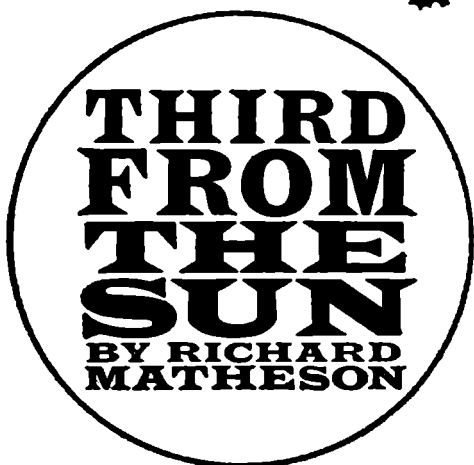
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**NEW YORK**

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**TO**

***Professor William Peden***

**of**

**The University of Missouri**

**with my thanks for  
help and encouragement  
on the first steps**

# CONTENTS

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BORN OF MAN AND WOMAN	I
THIRD FROM THE SUN	5
LOVER WHEN YOU'RE NEAR ME	14
SRL AD	39
MAD HOUSE	50
F---	84
DEAR DIARY	103
TO FIT THE CRIME	107
DRESS OF WHITE SILK	115
DISAPPEARING ACT	120
THE WEDDING	137
SHIPSHAPE HOME	146
THE TRAVELLER	167

**THIRD  
FROM  
THE  
SUN**



## BORN OF MAN AND WOMAN

X— THIS day when it had light mother called me retch. You retch she said. I saw in her eyes the anger. I wonder what it is a retch.

This day it had water falling from upstairs. It fell all around. I saw that. The ground of the back I watched from the little window. The ground it sucked up the water like thirsty lips. It drank too much and it got sick and runny brown. I didnt like it.

Mother is a pretty I know. In my bed place with cold walls around I have a paper things that was behind the furnace. It says on it SCREENSTARS. I see in the pictures faces like of mother and father. Father says they are pretty. Once he said it.

And also mother he said. Mother so pretty and me decent enough. Look at you he said and didnt have the nice face. I touched his arm and said it is alright father. He shook and pulled away where I couldnt reach.

Today mother let me off the chain a little so I could look out the little window. Thats how I saw the water falling from upstairs.

XX— This day it had goldness in the upstairs. As I know when I looked at it my eyes hurt. After I look at it the cellar is red.

I think this was church. They leave the upstairs. The big machine swallows them and rolls out past and is gone. In the back part is the little mother. She is much small than me. I am I can see out the little window all I like.

In this day when it got dark I had eat my food and some bugs. I hear laughs upstairs. I like to know why there are laughs for. I took the chain from the wall and wrapped it around me. I walked squish to the stairs. They creak when I walk on them. My legs slip on them because I dont walk on stairs. My feet stick to the wood.

I went up and opened a door. It was a white place. White as white jewels that come from upstairs sometime. I went in and stood quiet. I hear the laughing some more. I walk to the sound and look through to the people. More people than I thought was. I thought I should laugh with them.

Mother came out and pushed the door in. It hit me and hurt. I fell back on the smooth floor and the chain made noise. I cried. She made a hissing noise into her and put her hand on her mouth. Her eyes got big.

She looked at me. I heard father call. What fell he called. She said a iron board. Come help pick it up she said. He came and said now is *that* so heavy you need. He saw me and grew big. The anger came in his eyes. He hit me. I spilled some of the drip on the floor from one arm. It was not nice. It made ugly green on the floor.

Father told me to go to the cellar. I had to go. The light it hurt some now in my eyes. It is not so like that in the cellar.

Father tied my legs and arms up. He put me on my bed. Upstairs I heard laughing while I was quiet there looking on a black spider that was swinging down to me. I thought what father said. Ohgod he said. And only eight.

XXX— This day father hit in the chain again before it had light. I have to try pull it out again. He said I was bad to come upstairs. He said never do that again or he would beat me hard. That hurts.

I hurt. I slept the day and rested my head against the cold wall. I thought of the white place upstairs.

XXXX— I got the chain from the wall out. Mother was upstairs. I heard little laughs very high. I looked out the

window. I saw all little people like the little mother and little fathers too. They are pretty.

They were making nice noise and jumping around the ground. Their legs was moving hard. They are like mother and father. Mother says all right people look like they do.

One of the little fathers saw me. He pointed at the window. I let go and slid down the wall in the dark. I curled up as they would not see. I heard their talks by the window and foots running. Upstairs there was a door hitting. I heard the little mother call upstairs. I heard heavy steps and I rushed in my bed place. I hit the chain in the wall and lay down on my front.

I heard mother come down. Have you been at the window she said. I heard the anger. *Stay* away from the window. You have pulled the chain out again.

She took the stick and hit me with it. I didnt cry. I cant do that. But the drip ran all over the bed. She saw it and twisted away and made a noise. Oh mygodmygod she said why have you *done* this to me? I heard the stick go bounce on the stone floor. She ran upstairs. I slept the day.

XXXXXX— This day it had water again. When mother was upstairs I heard the little one come slow down the steps. I hidded myself in the coal bin for mother would have anger if the little mother saw me.

She had a little live thing with her. It walked on the arms and had pointy ears. She said things to it.

It was all right except the live thing smelled me. It ran up the coal and looked down at me. The hairs stood up. In the throat it made an angry noise. I hissed but it jumped on me.

I didnt want to hurt it. I got fear because it bit me harder than the rat does. I hurt and the little mother screamed. I grabbed the live thing tight. It made sounds I never heard. I pushed it all together. It was all lumpy and red on the black coal.

I hid there when mother called. I was afraid of the stick. She left. I crept over the coal with the thing. I hid it under my pillow and rested on it. I put the chain in the wall again.

X— This is another times. Father chained me tight. I hurt because he beat me. This time I hit the stick out of his hands and made noise. He went away and his face was white. He ran out of my bed place and locked the door.

I am not so glad. All day it is cold in here. The chain comes slow out of the wall. And I have a bad anger with mother and father. I will show them. I will do what I did that once.

I will screech and laugh loud. I will run on the walls. Last I will hang head down by all my legs and laugh and drip green all over until they are sorry they didn't be nice to me.

If they try to beat me again Ill hurt them. I will.

X—

## THIRD FROM THE SUN

HIS EYES were open five seconds before the alarm was set to go off. There was no effort in waking. It was sudden. Coldly conscious, he reached out his left hand in the dark and pushed in the stop. The alarm glowed a second, then faded.

At his side, his wife put her hand on his arm.

"Did you sleep?" he asked.

"No, did you?"

"A little," he said. "Not much."

She was silent for a few seconds. He heard her throat contract. She shivered. He knew what she was going to say.

"We're still going?" she asked.

He twisted his shoulders on the bed and took a deep breath.

"Yes," he said, and he felt her fingers tighten on his arm.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"About five."

"We'd better get ready."

"Yes, we'd better."

They made no move.

"You're sure we can get on the ship without anyone noticing?" she asked.

"They think it's just another test flight. Nobody will be checking."

She didn't say anything. She moved a little closer to him. He felt how cold her skin was.

"I'm afraid," she said.

He took her hand and held it in a tight grip. "Don't be," he said. "We'll be safe."

"It's the children I'm worried about."

"We'll be safe," he repeated.

She lifted his hand to her lips and kissed it gently.

"All right," she said.

They both sat up in the darkness. He heard her stand. Her night garment rustled to the floor. She didn't pick it up. She stood still, shivering in the cold morning air.

"You're sure we don't need anything else with us?" she asked.

"No, nothing. I have all the supplies we need in the ship. Anyway . . ."

"What?"

"We can't carry anything past the guard," he said. "He has to think you and the kids are just coming to see me off."

She began dressing. He threw off the covering and got up. He went across the cold floor to the closet and dressed.

"I'll get the children up," she said.

He grunted, pulling clothes over his head. At the door she stopped. "Are you sure . . ." she began.

"What?"

"Won't the guard think it's funny that . . . that our neighbors are coming down to see you off, too?"

He sank down on the bed and fumbled for the clasps on his shoes.

"We'll have to take that chance," he said. "We need them with us."

She sighed. "It seems so cold. So calculating."

He straightened up and saw her silhouette in the doorway.

"What else can we do?" he asked intensely. "We can't interbreed our own children."

"No," she said. "It's just . . ."

"Just what?"

"Nothing, darling. I'm sorry."

She closed the door. Her footsteps disappeared down the hall. The door to the children's room opened. He heard their two voices. A cheerless smile raised his lips. You'd think it was a holiday, he thought.

He pulled on his shoes. At least the kids didn't know

what was happening. They thought they were going to take him down to the field. They thought they'd come back and tell all their schoolmates about it. They didn't know they'd never come back.

He finished clasping his shoes and stood up. He shuffled over to the bureau and turned on the light. It was odd, such an undistinguished looking man planning this.

Cold. Calculating. Her words filled his mind again. Well, there was no other way. In a few years, probably less, the whole planet would go up with a blinding flash. This was the only way out. Escaping, starting all over again with a few people on a new planet.

He stared at the reflection.

"There's no other way," he said.

He glanced around the bedroom. Good-bye this part of my life. Turning off the lamp was like turning off a light in his mind. He closed the door gently behind him and slid his fingers off the worn handle.

His son and daughter were going down the ramp. They were talking in mysterious whispers. He shook his head in slight amusement.

His wife waited for him. They went down together, holding hands.

"I'm not afraid, darling," she said. "It'll be all right."

"Sure," he said. "Sure it will."

They all went in to eat. He sat down with his children. His wife poured out juice for them. Then she went to get the food.

"Help your mother, doll," he told his daughter. She got up.

"Pretty soon, haah, pop?" his son said. "Pretty soon, haah?"

"Take it easy," he cautioned. "Remember what I told you. If you say a word of it to anybody I'll have to leave you behind."

A dish shattered on the floor. He darted a glance at his wife. She was staring at him, her lips trembling.

She averted her eyes and bent down. She fumbled at the pieces, picked up a few. Then she dropped them all,

stood up and pushed them against the wall with her shoe.

"As if it mattered," she said nervously. "As if it mattered whether the place is clean or not."

The children were watching her in surprise.

"What is it?" asked the daughter.

"Nothing, darling, nothing," she said. "I'm just nervous. Go back to the table. Drink your juice. We have to eat quickly. The neighbors will be here soon."

"Pop, why are the neighbors coming with us?" asked his son.

"Because," he said vaguely, "they want to. Now forget it. Don't talk about it so much."

The room was quiet. His wife brought their food and set it down. Only her footsteps broke the silence. The children kept glancing at each other, at their father. He kept his eyes on the plate. The food tasted flat and thick in his mouth and he felt his heart thudding against the wall of his chest. Last day. This is the last day.

"You'd better eat," he told his wife.

She sat down to eat. As she lifted the eating utensil the door buzzer sounded. The utensil skidded out of her nerveless fingers and clattered on the floor. He reached out quickly and put his hand on hers.

"All right, darling," he said. "It's all right." He turned to the children. "Go answer the door," he told them.

"Both of us?" his daughter asked.

"Both of you."

"But . . ."

"Do as I say."

They slid off their chairs and left the room, glancing back at their parents.

When the sliding door shut off their view, he turned back to his wife. Her face was pale and tight; she had her lips pressed together.

"Darling, please," he said. "Please. You know I wouldn't take you if I wasn't sure it was safe. You know how many times I've flown the ship before. And I know just where we're going. It's safe. Believe me it's safe."

She pressed his hand against her cheek. She closed her



eyes and large tears ran out under her lids and down her cheeks.

"It's not that so m-much," she said. "It's just . . . leaving, never coming back. We've been here all our lives. It isn't like . . . like moving. We can't come back. Ever."

"Listen, darling," his voice was tense and hurried. "You know as well as I do. In a matter of years, maybe less, there's going to be another war, a terrible one. There won't be a thing left. We have to leave. For our children, for ourselves . . ."

He paused, testing the words in his mind.

"For the future of life itself," he finished weakly. He was sorry he said it. Early in the morning over prosaic food, that kind of talk didn't sound right. Even if it was true.

"Just don't be afraid," he said. "We'll be all right."

She squeezed his hand.

"I know," she said quietly. "I know."

There were footsteps coming toward them. He pulled out a tissue and gave it to her. She hastily dabbed at her face.

The door slid open. The neighbors and their son and daughter came in. The children were excited. They had trouble keeping it down.

"Good morning," the neighbor said.

The neighbor's wife went to his wife and the two of them went over to the window and talked in low voices. The children stood around, fidgeted and looked nervously at each other.

"You've eaten?" he asked his neighbor.

"Yes," his neighbor said. "Don't you think we'd better be going?"

"I suppose so," he said.

They left all the dishes on the table. His wife went upstairs and got garments for the family.

He and his wife stayed on the porch a moment while the rest went out to the ground car.

"Should we lock the door?" he asked.

She smiled helplessly and ran a hand through her hair.

She shrugged. "Does it matter?" she said and turned away.

He locked the door and followed her down the walk. She turned as he came up to her.

"It's a nice house," she murmured.

"Don't think about it," he said.

They turned their backs on their home and got in the ground car.

"Did you lock it?" asked the neighbor.

"Yes."

The neighbor smiled wryly. "So did we," he said. "I tried not to, but then I had to go back."

They moved through the quiet streets. The edges of the sky were beginning to redden. The neighbor's wife and the four children were in back. His wife and the neighbor were in front with him.

"Going to be a nice day," said the neighbor.

"I suppose so," he said.

"Have you told your children?" the neighbor asked softly.

"Of course not."

"I haven't, I haven't," insisted his neighbor, "I was just asking."

"Oh."

They rode in silence a while.

"Do you ever get the feeling that we're . . . running out?" asked the neighbor.

He tightened. "No," he said. His lips pressed together. "No."

"I guess it's better not to talk about it," his neighbor said hastily.

"Much better," he said.

As they drove up to the guardhouse at the gate, he turned to the back.

"Remember," he said. "Not a word from any of you."

The guard was sleepy and didn't care. The guard recognized him right away as the chief test pilot for the new ship. That was enough. The family was coming down to watch him off, he told the guard. That was all right. The guard let them drive to the ship's platform.

The car stopped under the huge columns. They all got out and stared up.

Far above them, its nose pointed toward the sky, the great metal ship was beginning to reflect the early morning glow.

"Let's go," he said. "Quickly."

As they hurried toward the ship's elevator, he stopped for a moment to look back. The guardhouse looked deserted. He looked around at everything and tried to fix it all in his memory.

He bent over and picked up some dirt. He put it in his pocket.

"Good-bye," he whispered.

He ran to the elevator.

The doors shut in front of them. There was no sound in the rising cubicle but the hum of the motor and a few self-conscious coughs from the children. He looked at them. To be taken so young, he thought, without a chance to help.

He closed his eyes. His wife's arm rested on his arm. He looked at her. Their eyes met and she smiled at him.

"It's all right," she whispered.

The elevator shuddered to a stop. The doors slid open and they went out. It was getting lighter. He hurried them along the enclosed platform.

They all climbed through the narrow doorway in the ship's side. He hesitated before following them. He wanted to say something fitting the moment. It burned in him to say something fitting the moment.

He couldn't. He swung in and grunted as he pulled the door shut and turned the wheel tight.

"That's it," he said. "Come on, everybody."

Their footsteps echoed on the metal decks and ladders as they went up to the control room.

The children ran to the ports and looked out. They gasped when they saw how high they were. Their mothers stood behind them, looking down at the ground with frightened eyes.

He went up to them.

"So high," said his daughter.

He patted her head gently. "So high," he repeated.

Then he turned abruptly and went over to the instrument panel. He stood there hesitantly. He heard someone come up behind him.

"Shouldn't we tell the children?" asked his wife. "Shouldn't we let them know it's their last look?"

"Go ahead," he said. "Tell them."

He waited to hear her footsteps. There were none. He turned. She kissed him on the cheek. Then she went to tell the children.

He threw over the switch. Deep in the belly of the ship, a spark ignited the fuel. A concentrated rush of gas flooded from the vents. The bulkheads began to shake.

He heard his daughter crying. He tried not to listen. He extended a trembling hand toward the lever, then glanced back suddenly. They were all staring at him. He put his hand on the lever and threw it over.

The ship quivered a brief second and then they felt it rush along the smooth incline. It flashed up into the air, faster and faster. They all heard the wind rushing past.

He watched the children turn to the ports and look out again.

"Good-bye," they said. "Good-bye."

He sank down wearily at the control panel. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw his neighbor sit down next to him.

"You know just where we're going?" his neighbor asked.

"On that chart there."

His neighbor looked at the chart. His eyebrows raised.

"In another solar system," he said.

"That's right. It has an atmosphere like ours. We'll be safe there."

"The race will be safe," said his neighbor.

He nodded once and looked back at his and his neighbor's family. They were still looking out the ports.

"What?" he asked.

"I said," the neighbor repeated, "which one of these planets is it?"

He leaned over the chart, pointed.

"That small one over there," he said. "Near that moon."

"This one, third from the sun?"

"That's right," he said. "That one. Third from the sun."

XX —

## LOVER WHEN YOU'RE NEAR ME

THE SILVERY welded ship came rushing backwards through the veils of broken cloud, tobogganing down the atmosphere of Station Four. Fires of deceleration jetted red from the reactor ports, roaring their hurricane thrust against the clutch of gravity.

Air thickened; the glittering rocket speck slid easier, settling itself downward like a parachuting missile. Sunlight splashed its metal sides with light and the blue ocean waters billowed wide to swallow it. The ship dipped in a wide arc and backed down toward the reddish-green clad land.

Inside its tiny cabin, the three men lay strapped and waiting for the shock of contact. Their eyes were closed, their hands tight and blood-drained. Muscle blocks struggled against the drag.

The earth swept up and blocked its way; the ship settled hard on its rear braces, trembling. Then, in an instant, it stood motionless and silent, successfully navigated through a thousand billion miles of vacuumed night.

A quarter mile away were the warehouse, the village and the house.

Critical. That was the official record. It was supposed to be secret but David Lindell knew it; all the Wentner men had known it. Station Four The Birds and the Three-Moon Psycho Ward. That was scuttlebutt and to be taken with a fistful of salt. Lindell knew that too.

But it all meant something; the laughter, the ribbing, the silence from upstairs. They put a man on other stations for two years at a clip. Here on Four it was only for six months. That meant something. It adds up they used to

say in the briefing room on Earth. *Wentner's Interstellar Trading Company* doesn't break its heart for nothing. And Lindell believed it.

"But like I always say," he said, "it's no use worrying myself."

He said it to Martin, the ship's co-pilot as the two of them trudged across the wide meadow toward the distant compound carrying Lindell's luggage.

"You have the right idea," said Martin. "Don't worry yourself."

"That's what I always say," said Lindell.

After a while they passed the silent gargantuan warehouse. The sliding doors were half open and, inside, Lindell could see the concrete floor empty and sunlight filtering through the skylight. Martin told him the cargo ship had emptied it out a few weeks before. Lindell grunted and shifted his luggage.

"Where are the workers?" he asked.

Martin gestured his helmeted head toward the workers' village about three hundred yards away. There was no sound from the low-slung white dwellings methodically arranged to form three sides of a rectangle. The windows blinked fiercely in the sunlight.

"Guess they're sacked out," Martin judged. "They sleep a lot when work is done. You'll see them tomorrow when shipments start coming in again."

"Got their families with them?" Lindell asked.

"Nope."

"Thought it was company policy."

"Not here. The Gnees don't have much family life. Too few men and they're all pretty dumb."

"Great," Lindell said. "Dandy." He shrugged. "Well, it's no use worrying myself about it."

While they were on the stairs to the hallway of the house, he asked Martin where Corrigan was.

"He went home with the cargo ship," Martin said. "They do that once in a while. There's nothing here to do anyway after the goods are picked up."

"Oh," said Lindell. "What's this door?" He kicked it open and looked in at the combination livingroom-library.

"All the comforts of," he said.

"More," said Martin, looking over Lindell's shoulder. "Over there you have a movie projector and a tape recorder."

"Swell," Lindell said. "I can talk to myself legal." Then he grimaced. "Let's dump these bags. My arms are falling off."

They shuffled down the hall and Lindell glanced into the small kitchen as they passed. It was porcelain paneled and well kept.

"Can this Gnee woman cook?" he asked.

"From what I hear," said Martin, "you'll be packing it in like a king."

"Glad to hear it. Say, incidentally, you got any idea why they call this joint the Three-Moon Psycho Ward?"

"Who calls it?"

"The boys back on Earth."

"The boys are all wet. You'll like it here."

"But why is it only a six month stint?"

"Here's your bedroom," Martin said.

As they entered, she was making the bed, her back turned to the door. They thumped down the bags and she turned.

Lindell's hands twitched. Oh well, he rallied, I've seen worse in my day.

She wore a heavy robe fastened at the neck and falling to the floor like a truncated cone of cloth. All he could see was her head.

It was a squat, coarsely-grained head, pink and hairless. Like the mottled belly of an expecting bitch, he decided. For ears there were cavities on the sides of her flat, chinless face. Her nose was a stub, single nostriled. Her lips were thick and monkey-like, outlining a small circle of mouth. Hello Beautiful, Lindell decided not to say.

She came across the room quietly and he blinked at her eyes. Then she placed a moist, spongy hand in his.

"Hi," he said.

"She can't hear," Martin said. "Telepathic."



"That's right, I forgot." *Hello*, he thought, and *Hello* came back the answering welcome. *It is good to have you.*

"Thanks," he said. She seemed a decent kid, he thought to himself; weird but homey. A question touched his brain like a timid hand.

"Yeah, sure," he said. *Yes*, he added in his mind.

"What's that?" Martin asked.

"She asked if she should unpack, I think." Lindell slumped down on the bed. "Ahhh," he said. "This I like." He pushed exploring fingers into the mattress.

"Say, how do you know it's a she?" he asked when he and Martin were walking back down the hall while the Gnee woman unpacked.

"The robe. The males don't wear robes."

"That's all?"

Martin grinned. "A few other things of absolutely no interest to you."

They moved into the livingroom and Lindell tried out the easy chair for size. He leaned back and stroked the arms with satisfied fingers.

"Critical or no," he said, "this station has 'em all beat for comfort."

He sat there, momentarily reflecting on her eyes. They were huge eyes, covering a full third of her face; like big glass saucers with dark cup rings for pupils. And they were moist; bowls of liquid. He shrugged and let it go. So what, he thought, it's nothing.

"Hah? What?" he asked, hearing Martin's voice.

"I said—be careful." Martin was holding up a shiny gas pistol. "This is loaded," he warned.

"Who needs it?"

"You won't. Just standard equipment." Martin put it back in the desk drawer and shoved the drawer back in. "And you know where all your books are," he said. "The warehouse office is set up like all the other station offices." Lindell nodded.

Martin glanced at his watch. "Well, I have to be going."

"Let's see," he continued as he and Lindell started for the door. "Anything else to tell you? You know the rule about not harming the people, of course?"

"Who's gonna harm—whoops!"

They'd almost knocked her over as they exited from the room. She jumped back one more bouncy step and stared at them, eyes wide and frightened.

"Take it easy, kiddo," Lindell soothed. "What's up?"

*Eat?* The thought cringed before him like a beggar at the back door of his mind. He pursed his lips and nodded. "You took the words right out of my head."

He looked at her and concentrated. *I'll be back as soon as I walk the co-pilot back to his ship. Make something good.*

She nodded violently and rushed toward the kitchen.

"Where's she off to like a bat?" Martin asked as they turned for the stairs and Lindell told him.

"That's what I call service deluxe," he said, chuckling, as they descended. "This telepathy is okay. At the other stations it was either learn half the language to get a ham sandwich or try and teach 'em English so I wouldn't starve. Either way I really had to sweat for my supper until things got settled."

He looked pleased. "This is hot," he said.

Their heavy boots crushed down the tall crisp blue grass as they approached the upright ship. Martin held out his hand. "Take it easy, Lindell. See you in six."

"Right enough. Give old man Wentner a kick in the pants for me."

"Will do."

He watched the co-pilot dwindle in size ascending the metal ladder to the hatchway. A midget Martin pulled himself into the ship and clanged the metal port shut behind himself. Lindell waved back at the tiny figure at the port and then turned and ran away to escape the blast.

He stood on a hill underneath the heavy scarlet foliage of a tree. Inside the ship's belly he heard a liquid cough, a rush of exploding gasses. He watched the ship hang for a moment on its flaming exhaust and then flash up into the green-blue sky, leaving scorched plant life in its wake. In a moment it was gone.

He walked in lazy strides back toward the house, gazing appreciatively at the profusion of livid plants and flowers

in the meadow around him, bulbous insects hanging over them.

He took off his jacket and let it hang from one hand as he walked. The sun felt good on his lean back.

"Boys," he said to the fragrant air. "You're all wet."

The great blazing sun was almost gone, spraying the sky with the blood of its cyclic dying. Soon the three moons would rise; guaranteed to drive insane a man looking for a shadow to call his own.

Lindell sat at the livingroom window gazing out over the countryside. You couldn't beat it, he thought; for air or climate or all the things that grew in Earth's paling technicolor. Nature had outdone herself in this tucked away corner of the galaxy. He sighed and stretched, wondering about supper.

*Drink?*

He started, chopping a yawn in half, and drew his fingers together so fast that the knuckle bones crackled.

He saw her standing at his side, proffering a tray with a glass on it. He reached for it, feeling his heart placate itself after the initial jolt.

"I'd knock or something," he suggested. The big eyes were elliptical now. They stared at him without comprehension.

"Well, let it go," he said, after a sip of the warm tangy liquid. He smacked his lips and took another sip, a long one.

"Damn good," he said. "Thanks, Lover."

He blinked at himself. That brings a guy up short, he decided. *Lover?* Of all the unlikely names in the universe—He glanced at her with a chuckle bubbling up in his throat.

She hadn't moved. Her face was screwed up into what he assumed was a smile. But her mouth wasn't designed for smiling.

"Hey, when are we eating?" he asked, feeling an edge uncomfortable under the unmoving gaze of her watery eye globes.

She turned and hurried to the door. There she turned. *All ready already*, he got the message.

He grinned, downed the drink, got up and followed her eager shuffle down the dim hallway.

He pushed away the plate with a sigh and leaned back in the chair.

"That's what I call good," he said.

Like a hidden spring, he felt her pleasure well up in his mind. *Lover thanks you*. She certainly picked up the name fast, he thought. She looked at him, eyes wide. Was she trying to smile again, he wondered? To him the expression looked like all her others; the facial poses of an idiot. He thought she was smiling though because of the thoughts that accompanied the expression.

Then he found his eyes watering in empathy and he turned his head, blinking. A trifle nervously, he dumped a teaspoon of sugar in his coffee and stirred. He could feel her eyes on him. A twinge of displeasure marred his thoughts and she turned away abruptly. That's better, he thought, and felt all right again.

"Hey, tell me Lover," he started to say. Well, might as well get used to it, he figured. *You have a husband?* Her returned thoughts were confused.

*A mate?* he reworded.

*Oh, yes.*

*In the workers' village?*

*They have no mates*, she answered and he thought he sensed a note of hauteur in her reply.

He shrugged and took a sip of coffee. "Well," he said to himself, "one satisfied worker would drive the rest of 'em crazy anyway. They'd be biting their nails if they had nails. And on that note, good night."

In bed he sat writing in his much-used diary. Between its beat-up covers were inscribed the sparse comments he had made on half a dozen different planets. This was his seventh selection. *My lucky number*, he paraphrased in blue ink.

Again no sound. *To sleep?* His pen skidded and spit out

three fat blots. He looked up and saw her with the tray again.

"Yeah," he said. *Yeah. Thanks, Lover. But, look, will you just let me know when you . . .*

He stopped, seeing it was hopeless.

"This will make me sleep?" he asked. *Oh, yes, was the reply.*

He took a sip, looking down at the ink-blotted page. Just started it anyway, he thought, no loss of priceless literature. He ripped out the page and crumpled it in one hand.

"This is good stuff," he said, nodding his head toward the glass. He held up the paper. *Throw it away, haah? Throw away?* she asked.

"That's right," he said. "Now clear out. What in 'ell are you doing in a gent's boudoir anyway?"

She scuttled across the floor and he grinned as she closed the door quietly behind herself.

Finishing the drink, he set the glass down on the bedside table and turned off the lamp. He settled back on the soft pillow with a sigh. Some critter, he thought in drowsy satisfaction.

*Good night.*

He opened his heavy-lidded eyes and looked around. There was no one in the room. He sank back.

*Good night.*

He raised up on one elbow, squinting into the darkness.

*Good night.* "Oh," he said. "Good night yourself." The thoughts abated. He fell back again and made his mouth a tooth-edged cave with yawning.

"How 'bout that?" he muttered, thickly, turning on his side. "Absolutely no mirrors. See? Nothin' up my sleeves. Howboutha—"

He had a dream. The dream covered him with sweat.

After breakfast, he left the house with her farewells tugging at his brain and headed across for the warehouse. Already, he saw, the Gnee men were formed in a moving line, carrying bundles on their heads. They marched into the warehouse, deposited their burden on the concrete and had

it checked off by a Gnee foreman who stood in the center of the floor holding a clipboard thick with tissue-thin vouchers.

As Lindell approached, the men all bowed and looked more subservient as they continued on their rounds. He noticed that their heads were flatter than Lover's, a little more darkly tinted with smaller eyes. Their bodies were broad and thick-muscled. They *do* look stupid, he thought.

As he came up to the man who was doing the checking and sent out an unanswered thought, he saw that they weren't telepathic either; or didn't want to be.

"How doody," said the man in a squeaky voice. "I check. You check?"

"That's okay," Lindell said, pushing back the clipboard. "Just bring it into the office when the first batch is all in."

"What, haah?" said the man. Jeez, are you a case, Lindell thought.

"Bring *this*," he said, tapping the clipped sheaf of paper. "Bring to office." He pointed again. "Bring to me—*me*. When goods all in."

The man's splotchy face lit up with a look of vibrant stupidity and he nodded sharply. Lindell patted his shoulder. Good boy, rasped his mind, I bet you're dynamite in a crisis. He headed for the office, gritting his teeth.

Inside, he shut the plastiglass door behind him and looked around the office. It was the same as he remembered from other stations. Except for the cot in one corner. Don't tell me I have to sleep out here nights?—he thought with a groan.

He moved closer. On the flat soil-cased pillow was the imprint of a head. He picked up a light brown hair. And what the hell is this? he wondered.

Under the cot he found a buckleless belt. On the wall by the cot there were violent scratches as though a man in fever had tried to get out of the office the hard way. He stared at them.

"This joint is haunted," he concluded with a vague shake of his head. Then he turned away with a shrug. No use worrying myself, he thought. I got six months to go and nothing's going to get *me* down.

He sat down quickly before the desk and dragged the heavy station log before himself. With a shrug he flipped open the heavy cover and started reading from the beginning.

The first entries were twenty years dry. They were signed *Jefferson Winters*, or, a little later, a hasty *Jeff*. At the end of six months and fifty-two closely packed pages, Lindell found page 53 covered with a floridly penned message—*Station Four, good-bye forever! Jeff* didn't seem to have had any difficulties adjusting to the life there.

Lindell shifted back in the creaking chair and pulled the heavy book on his lap with a sigh of boredom.

It was after the first replacement's second month that the entries started to get ragged. There were blurred words, hurried scrawling, mistakes deleted and re-done. Some of the errors apparently had been corrected much later by still another replacement.

It was that way through the next four hundred or so sleep-inducing pages; a sorry chain of flaws and eventual corrections. Lindell flipped through them wearily, without the slightest interest in their content.

Then he reached entries signed *Bill Corrigan* and, with a blinking yawn, he straightened himself up, propped the book on the desk and paid closer attention.

They were the same as in every case before, excluding the first one; efficient beginnings declining markedly to increased wildness, the penmanship erring more extravagantly with each month until, at last, it became almost illegible. He found a few blatantly miscalculated additions which he corrected in his careful hand.

Corrigan's writing, he noted, broke off in the middle of a word one afternoon. And, for the last month and a half of Corrigan's stay, there were nothing but blank pages. He thumbed through them carelessly, shaking his head slowly. Have to admit it, he thought, I don't get it.

Sitting in the livingroom through twilight, and later at supper, he began to get the sensation that Lover's thoughts were somehow, alive; like microscopic insects crawling in

and out among the fissures of his brain. Sometimes they barely moved; other times they leaped excitedly. Once, when he became a little irritated with her staring, the thoughts were like invisible suppliants pawing clumsily at his mind.

What was worse, he realized later while reading in bed, the sensation occurred even when she wasn't in the same room with him. It was disconcerting enough to feel an endless stream of thoughts flowing into him while she was close; this remote control business was just a little too much for his taste.

*Hey, how about it?* he tried to reason her away good naturedly. But all he got back was the picture of her looking at him wide-eyed and uncomprehending.

"Aah, nuts," he muttered and tossed his book on the bedside table. Maybe that's it, he thought, settling down for the night. This telepathy gimmick, maybe that was what got the other men. Well, not me, he vowed. I just won't worry myself about it. And he turned out the lamp, said good night to the air and went to sleep.

"Sleep," he muttered, unaware, only half conscious. It wasn't sleep; not deep enough by half. A cloudy haze submerged his mind and filled it with the same detailed scene. It telescoped and sank away in a burst. It magnified, welling up and swallowing him and everything.

Lover. Lover. Echo of a shriek in a long black corridor. The robe fluttering close by. He saw her pale features. No, he said, stay away. Far—close—beyond—upon. He cried out. No. No. NO!

He jolted up in the darkness with a choking grunt, eyes full open. He stared groggily around the empty bedroom, his thoughts broiling.

He reached out in the darkness and flicked on the lamp. Hurriedly he stuck a cigarette between his lips and lay slumped against the headboard blowing out clouds of curling smoke. He raised his hand and saw that it shook. He muttered words without sense.

Then his nostrils twitched and his lips drew back in revulsion. What the hell died? he thought. There was a



heavy saccharine odor in the air, getting worse every second. He tossed off the covers.

At the foot of the bed he found them; a thick pile of livid purple flowers arranged there.

He looked at them a moment and then bent over to pick them up and throw them away. He drew back gasping as a thorn punctured his right thumb.

He pressed out fat blood drops and sucked the wound, his brain assailed by the thickening smell.

*It's very nice of you, he sent her the message, but no more flowers.*

She looked at him. She doesn't get it, he knew.

"Do you understand?" he asked.

Floods of affection gurgled over the layers of his brain like syrup. He stirred his coffee restlessly and the transfer eased as though she were determined not to offend him. The kitchen was silent except for the clink of his silver on the breakfast dishes and the slight whispering rustle of her robe.

He gulped down coffee and stood to leave. *I'll eat lunch around . . .*

*I know.* Her thought cut into his, mildly commanding. He grinned a little to himself as he headed down the hall. Her telepathied message had come with an almost mother-like chiding.

Then, crossing the grounds, he recalled the dream again and the departing grin emptied his features of amusement.

All morning he wondered irritably what made the Gnee men so stupid. If they dropped a bundle it was a project to pick it up again. They're like brainless cows, he thought, watching them through the office windows as they plodded through their tasks, eyes dull and unblinking, their thick shoulders sloping inward.

He knew definitely now that they weren't telepathic. He'd tried several times to give them orders with his mind alone and there was no receipt of message. They only reacted to loudly repeated words of two, or preferably less, syllables. And they reacted moronically at that.

In the middle of the morning he looked up from the backlog of paper work that Corrigan had left and realized, with some shock, that her thoughts were reaching him all the way from the house.

And yet they weren't thoughts he could translate into words. They were sensations, amorphously present. He got the feeling that she was checking, sending out exploratory beams now and again to see if all were well with him.

The first few times it did no worse than amuse him. He chuckled softly and went back to his work.

But then the proddings assumed an annoyingly regular time pattern and he began to squirm in his chair. He found himself becoming rigidly erect and anticipating seconds before they came.

By late morning he was repulsing them consciously; tossing his pen on the desk and ordering her angrily to leave him alone when he worked. Her thoughts would break off penitently. And soon come back again, like creeping things that stole upon him, insinuating and beyond insult.

His nerves began to fray a little. He left the office and prowled the warehouse floor, tearing open bundles and checking goods with impatient fingers. The thoughts followed him around faithfully. "How doody," said the Gnee foreman every time Lindell passed, making him angrier yet.

Once he straightened up suddenly over a bundle and said loudly, "*Go away!*"

The foreman jumped a foot in the air, his pencil and clipboard went flying and he hid behind a pillar and looked fearfully at Lindell. Lindell pretended not to notice.

Later, back in the office, he sat thinking, the open log book before him.

No wonder the Gnee men didn't telepathize, he thought. They knew what was good for them.

Then he looked out the window at the plodding line of workers.

What if they weren't just *avoiding* telepathy? What if they were incapable of it; had once held the ability and, because of it, had been broken to their present state of hopeless stolidity.

He thought of what Martin had said about the women outnumbering the men. And a phrase entered his mind—*matriarchy by mind*. The phrase offended him but he was suddenly afraid it might be true. It would explain why the other men had cracked. For, if the women were in control, it might well be that, in their inherent lust for dominance, they made no distinction between their own men and the men from Earth. A man is a man is a man. He twisted angrily at the idea of possibly being considered on a level with the dolts who lived in the village.

He stood up abruptly. I'm not hungry, he thought, not at all. But I'm going back to the house and order her to make me lunch and let her know I'm not hungry either. I'll make her used to being dominated herself and then she'll get no chance to pick at me. No bug-eyed Gnee woman, by God, is going to get *me* down.

Then he blinked and turned away quickly when he realized that he was staring at the wild pattern of scratches on / the far office wall. And the belt without a buckle that still curled limply underneath the cot.

The dream again. It tore at his brain tissues with claws of razor. Sweat covering him. He tossed on the bed with a groan and was suddenly awake, staring into the darkness.

He thought he saw something at the foot of the bed. He closed his eyes and shook his head and looked again. The room was empty. He felt mind-drenching thoughts recede like some alien tide.

His fists contracted angrily. She's been at me while I slept, he thought, goddam her hide, she's been at me.

He pushed aside the covers and crawled to the foot of the bed nervously.

He couldn't see them. But the cloying fumes undulated up from the floor like erected serpents slithering into his nostrils. Gaggling, he slumped down on the mattress, his stomach wrenched. Why? his brain mumbled over and over.

My God, *why?*

Angrily, he threw the flowers away in her sight and the thoughts pleaded and showered over him like raindrops.

"I said *no*, didn't I?" he yelled at her.

Then he sat down at the table and controlled himself as well as he could. I've a long way to go, he told his will, ease off, ease off.

Now he was sure he knew why it was only six months. That would be more than enough. But I won't crack. He commanded himself. It's a cinch she isn't going to crack so conserve yourself. *She's too stupid to crack*, he thought deliberately, hoping she'd pick it up.

She apparently did for her shoulders slumped dejectedly all of a sudden. And during breakfast, she circled him like a timorous wraith, keeping her face averted and her thoughts aloof. He found himself almost sorry for her then. It probably wasn't her fault, he thought, it was just an inborn trait among Gnee women to dominate men.

Then he realized that her thoughts were at him again, tender and gratefully maudlin. He tried to neutralize himself and ignore them as they sought to break through his apathy like honeyed picks.

All day he worked hard and made payments in spices and grain to the Gnee foreman to be forwarded to the workers. He wondered if the payments would go eventually to the women. Wherever they were.

"I'm taping my voice," he dictated later that night. "I want to hear myself talking so I can forget her. There's no one else to talk to so I'll have to talk to myself. A sad case. Well, here goes.

"Here I am on Station Four, folks, having a wonderful time and wish you were here instead of me. Oh, it's not *that* bad, don't get me wrong. But I guess I know what knocked out Corrigan and the poor bastards before him. It was Lover and her cannibal mind eating them up. But I'll tell you this; it's not going to eat *me* up. That much you can put bets on. Lover isn't going to . . .

"No, I didn't call you! Come on, get out of my life, will ya? Go to a movie or something. Yeah, yeah, I know. Well, go to bed then. Just leave me alone." *Alone*.

"There. That's for her. She'll have to go some to get me clawing at the walls."

But he carefully locked the door to his room when he

went to bed. And he groaned in his sleep because of the same nightmare and his limbs thrashed and all peace and rest were crowded out.

He twisted into wakefulness in mid-morning and stumbled up to check the door. He fumbled at the lock with heavy fingers. Finally his thickened brain divined the fact that the door was still locked and he went back to bed in a weaving line and fell on it into a stupored sleep.

When he woke up in the morning there were flowers at the foot of his bed, luxuriantly purple and foul-smelling and the door was locked.

He couldn't ask her about it because he left the kitchen in revulsion when she called him *dear*.

*No more flowers! I'll promise!* cried her pursuing thoughts. He locked himself in the livingroom and sat at the desk, feeling sick. Get hold of yourself!—he ordered his system, clasping his hands tightly and holding his teeth firmly clenched.

*Eat?*

She was outside the door; he knew it. He closed his eyes. *Go away leave me alone,* he told her.

*I'm sorry dear,* she said.

"Stop calling me dear!" he shouted, slamming his fist on desk surface. As he twisted in the chair, his belt buckle caught on the drawer handle and it jerked out. He found himself staring down at the shiny gas pistol. Almost unconsciously he reached down and touched its slick barrel.

He shoved in the drawer with a convulsive movement. None of that! he swore.

He looked around suddenly, feeling alone and free. He got up and hurried to the window. Down below, he saw her hurrying across the grounds with a basket on her arm. She's going for vegetables, he thought. But what made her leave so suddenly?

Of course. The pistol. She must have gotten his thoughts of violent intent.

He sighed and calmed down a little, feeling as if his brain had been drained of thick, noxious fluids.

I've still got cards in my hand, he soothed himself.

While she was out he decided to look in her room and see if he could find the shifting panel that enabled her to enter his room with the flowers. He hurried down the hall and pushed open the door to her barely furnished little chamber.

His brain was immediately attacked by the odor of a reeking pile of the purple flowers in one corner. He held a hand over his mouth and nose as he looked down in distaste at the living and dead blossoms.

What did they represent?—he wondered. An offering of thoughtfulness? His throat contracted. Or was it more than thoughtfulness? He grimaced at the thought and remembered that first evening when he'd dubbed her Lover. What had possessed him to choose that name from the infinity of possible names? He hoped he didn't know.

On the couch he found a small pile of odds and ends. There was a button, a pair of broken shoe laces, the piece of crumpled paper he had told her to throw away. And a belt buckle with the initials W. C. stamped on it.

There were no secret panels.

He sat in the kitchen staring into an untouched cup of coffee. No way she could get in his room. W. C.—William Corrigan. He had to fight it, keep fighting it.

Time passed. And suddenly, he realized that she was back in the house again. There was no sound; it was like the return of a ghost. But he knew it. A cloud of feeling preceded her, came plunging through the rooms like an excited puppy, searching. Thoughts swirled. *You are well? You are not angry? Lover is back*—all hastily and eagerly clutching at him.

She swept into the room so quickly that his hands twitched and he upset the cup. The hot liquid splashed over his shirt and trousers as he jumped back, knocking over the chair.

He put down the basket and got a towel as she patted the stains dry. She'd never been so close to him. She'd never actually touched him before except for that first handshake.

There was an aroma about her. It made his chest heave painfully. And all the time, her thoughts caressed his mind as her hands seemed to be caressing his body.

*There. There . . . I am here with you.*

*David dear.*

Almost in horror, he stared at her spongy pink skin, her huge eyes, her tiny wound of a mouth.

And, in the office that morning, he made three straight mistakes in the log book and tore out a whole page and hurled it across the room with a choking cry of rage.

Avoid her. No point in remonstrations. He tried to raze his mental ground so that her thoughts could not find domicile there. If he relaxed his mind enough, her thoughts flowed through and out. Perhaps taking part of his will as they left but he'd have to risk that.

And if he worked hard and crowded his head with stodgy banks of figures, it kept her at a distance and his hands did not tremble so badly.

Maybe I should sleep in the office, he thought. Then he found Corrigan's note.

It was on a white slip of paper stuck away in the log book, hidden white on white. He only found it because he was going through the pages one at a time, reciting the dates in a loud voice to keep his mind filled.

*God help me, read the note, black and jagged-lettered, Lover comes through the walls!*

Lindell stared. *I saw it myself, attested the words, I'm going out of my mind. Always that damn animal mind tugging and tearing at me. And now I can't even shut away her body. I slept out here but she came anyway. And I . . .*

Lindell read it again and it was a wind fanning the fires of terror. *Through the walls.* The words agonized him. Was it possible?

And it was Corrigan then who had named her Lover. From the very start, the relationship had been on her terms. Lindell had had nothing to say about it.

"Lover," he muttered and her thoughts enveloped him

suddenly like a carrion's wings swooping down from the sky. He flung up his arms and cried out—"Leave me alone!"

And, as her phantom mind slipped off, he had the sense that it was with less timidity, with the patience such as a man knowing his own great strength can afford to display.

He sank back on the chair, exhausted, suddenly, depleted with fighting it. He crumpled the note in his right hand, thinking of the scratches on the wall behind him.

And he saw in his mind: Corrigan tossing on the cot, burning with fever, rearing up with a shriek of horror to see her standing before him. But then. *Then?* The scene was dark.

He rubbed a shaking hand over his face. Don't crack, he said to himself. But it was more a frightened entreaty than a command. Wasting fogs of premonition flooded over him in chilling waves. *She comes through the walls.*

That night again, he poured the potion she made down his bathroom sink. He locked the door and, in the lightless room, he squatted in one corner, peering and waiting, lungs bellowing in spasmodic bursts.

The thermostat lowered the heat. The floorboards got icy and his teeth started chattering. I'm not going to bed, he vowed angrily. He didn't know why it was that suddenly the bed frightened him. I don't know, he forced the words through his brain because he felt vaguely that he *did* know and he didn't want to admit it, even for a second.

But after hours of futile waiting, he had to straighten up with a snapping of joints and stumble back to bed. There, he crawled under the blankets and lay trembling, trying to stay awake. She'll come while I'm asleep, he thought, I mustn't sleep.

When he woke up in the morning there were the flowers on the floor for him. And that was another day before a mass of days that sank crushed into the lump of months.

You can get used to horror, he thought. When it has lost immediacy and is no longer pungent and has become



a steady diet. When it has degraded to a chain of mind-numbing events. When shocks are like scalpels picking and jabbing at delicate ganglia until they have lost all feeling.

Yet, though it was no longer terror, it was worse. For his nerves were raw and bleeding a hemophilia of rage. He fought his battles to the dregs of seconds, gaunt willed, shouting her off, firing lances of hate from his jaded mind; tortured by her surrenders that were her victories. She always came back. Like an enraging cat, rubbing endless sycophantic sides against him, filling him with thoughts of—yes, *admit it!*—he screamed to himself through midnight struggles . . .

Thoughts of *love*.

And there was the undercurrent, the promise of new shock that would topple his already shaking edifice. It needed only that—an added push, another stab of the blade, one more drop of the shattering hammer.

The shapeless threat hung over him. He waited for it, poised for it a hundred times an hour, especially at night. Wait. Waiting. And, sometimes, when he thought he knew what he was waiting for, the shock of admission made him shudder and made him want to claw at walls and break things and run until the blackness swallowed him.

If he could only forget her, he thought. Yes, if you could forget her for a while, just a little while, it would be all right.

He mumbled that to himself as he set up the movie projector in the livingroom.

She begged from the kitchen—*Can I see?*

"No!"

Now all his replies, worded or thought, were like the snapping retorts of a jangled old man. If only the six months would end. That was the problem. The months weren't moving fast enough. And time was like her—not to be reasoned with or intimidated.

There were many reels on the wall shelf. But his hand

reached out without hesitation and picked out one. He didn't notice it; his mind was calloused to suggestion.

He adjusted the reel on the spindle and turned out the lights. He sat down with a tired groan as the flickering milky cone of light shot out from the lens, throwing pictures on the screen.

A lean, dark-bearded man was posing, arms crossed, white teeth showing in an artificial smile. He came closer to the camera. The sun flashed, blurring the film a second. Black screen. Title: *Picture of me.*

The man, high cheek-boned, bright-eyed, stood laughing soundlessly out from the screen. He pointed to the side and the camera swung around. Lindell sat up sharply.

It was the station.

Apparently it was autumn. For, as the camera swung past the house, the village, jerking a moment as though changing hands, he saw the trees surrounded by heaps of dead leaves. He sat there shivering, waiting for something, he didn't know what.

The screen blacked. Another title roughly etched in white. *Jeff In the Office.*

The man peered at the camera, an idiotic smile on his face, white skin accentuated by the immaculate black outline of his beard.

Fadeout—in. The man doing a jig around the empty warehouse floor, hands poised delicately in the air, his dark hair bouncing wildly on his skull.

Another title flashing on the screen. Lindell stiffened in his seat, his breath cut off abruptly.

Title: *Lover.*

There was her face horribly repellent in black and white. She was standing by his bedroom window, her face a mask of delight. He could tell now it was delight. Once he would have said she looked like a maniac, her mouth twisted like a living scar, her grotesque eyes staring.

She spun and her robe swirled out. He saw her puffy ankles and his stomach grew rock taut.

She approached the camera; he saw filmy eyelids slide

down over her eyes. His hands began to tremble violently. It was his dream. It make him sick. It was his dream to the detail. Then it had never been a dream—not from his own mind.

A sob tore at his throat. She was undoing the robe. *Here it is!* he screamed in his panicstricken mind. He whimpered and reached out shakily to turn off the projector.

*No.*

It was a cold command in the darkness. *Watch me*, she ordered. He sat bound in a vise of terror, staring in sick fascination as the robe slid from her neck, pulled down over her round shoulders. She twisted sensuously. The robe sank into a heavy, swirling heap on the floor.

He screamed.

He flung out an arm and it swept into the burning projector. It crashed down on the floor. The room was night. He struggled up and lurched across the room. *Nice? Nice?* The word dug at him mercilessly as he fumbled for the door. He found it, rushed into the hall. Her door opened and she stood in the half light, the robe hanging from one smooth shoulder.

He jolted to a halt. "Get out of here!" he yelled.

*No.*

He made a convulsive move for her, hands out like rigid claws. The sight of her pink, dewy flesh spun him away. *Yes?* her mind suggested. It seemed as if he heard it spoken in a slyly rising voice . . .

"Listen!" he cried, reaching out for the door to his room. "Listen, you have to go, do you understand? Go to your mate!"

He twisted back in utter horror.

*I am with him now*—her message had said.

The thought paralyzed him. He stared, open-mouthed, heart pounding in slow, gigantic beats as the robe slipped over her shoulders and started down her arms.

He whirled with a cry and slammed the door behind him. His fingers shook on the lock. Her thoughts were a

wailing in his mind. He whimpered in fright and sickness and knew it was no good because he couldn't lock her out.

There were monkeys chattering in his brain. They lay on their backs in a circle and kicked at the inside of his skull. They grabbed juicy blobs of grey in their dirty paws and they squeezed.

He rolled on his side with a groan. I'll go crazy, he thought. Like Corrigan, like all of them but the first one; that slimy one who started it all; who added a new and hideous warp to the corrugation of her dominating Gnee mind; who had named her Lover because he meant it.

Suddenly he sat up with a gasp of terror, staring at the foot of the bed. *She comes through the walls!*—howled his brain. Nothing there, his eyes saw. His fingers clutched at the sheets. He felt sweat dripping off his brow and rolling down the embankment of his nose.

He lay down. Up again! He whimpered like a frightened child. A cloud of blackness was falling over him. Her. Her. He groaned. "No." In the blackness. No use.

He whined. Sleep. Sleep. The word throbbed, swelled and depressed in his brain. This is the time. He knew it, knew it, knew. . . .

The blade falling, sanity decapitated and twitching bloody in the basket.

*No!* He tried to push himself up but he couldn't. Sleep. A black tide of night hovering, tracking.

*Sleep.*

He fell back on the pillow, pushed up weakly on one elbow.

"No." His lungs were crusted. "No."

He struggled. It was too much. He screamed a thick, bubbling scream. She threw his will aside, snapped and futile. She was using all her strength now and he was enervated, beaten. He thudded back on the pillow, glassy-eyed and limp. He moaned weakly and his eyes shut—opened—shut—opened—shut. . . .

The dream again. Insane. Not a dream.

When he woke up there were no flowers. The court-

ship was ended. He gaped blankly and unbelievably at the imprint of a body beside him on the bed.

It was still warm and moist.

He laughed out loud. He wrote curse words in his diary. He wrote them in tall black letters, holding the pencil like a knife. He wrote them in the log book too. He tore up vouchers if they weren't the right color. His entries were crooked lines of figures like wavy-numbered tendrils. Sometimes he didn't care about that. Mostly he didn't notice.

He prowled the filled warehouse behind locked doors, red-eyed and muttering. He clambered up on the bundles and stared out through the skylight at the empty sky. He was lighter by fifteen pounds, unwashed. His face was black with wiry growth. He was going to have an immaculate beard. She wanted it. She didn't want him to wash or shave or be healthy. She called him Jeff.

You can't fight that, he told himself. You can't win because you lose. If you advance you are retreating because, when you are too tired to fight, she comes back and takes your city and your soul.

That's why he whispered to the warehouse so no one would hear, "There is a thing to do."

That's why, late at night, he sneaked to the livingroom and put the gas pistol in his pocket. Never harm the Gnees. Well, that was wrong. It was kill or be killed. That's why I'm taking the pistol to bed with me. That's why I'm stroking it as I stare up at the ceiling. Yes, this is it. This is my rock to rest on through the daynights.

And he turned over plans as an animal snuffles over flat stones to find bugs for supper.

Days. Days. Days. He whispered, "Kill her."

He nodded and smiled to himself and patted the cool metal. You're my friend, he said, you're my only friend. She has to die, we all know that.

He made lots of plans and they were all the same one. He killed her a million times in his mind—in secret chambers of his mind that he had discovered and opened; where

he could crouch clever and undisturbed while he made his plans.

Animals. He walked and looked at the workers' village. Animals. I'm not going to end up like you. I'm not going to I'm not going to I'm not going to I'm. . . .

He lurched up from this office desk, eyes wide, slaver running over his lips. He held the pistol tight in his palsied hand.

He flung open the office door and staggered over the concrete, through the lanes between roof-high stacks. His mouth was a line. He held the pistol pointing.

He flung up the catch and dragged back one heavy door. He plunged into the pouring sunlight and broke into a run. Wisps of terror licked out from the house. He reveled in them. He ran faster. He fell down because his legs were weak. The pistol went flying. He crawled to it and brushed off the dust. Now we'll see, he promised the monkeys in his head, *now*.

He stood up dizzily. He started to hobble for the house.

He heard a rushing in the air, a flicker of light dashed over his cheeks and eyes. He looked up and blinked and saw the cargo ship.

Six months.

He dropped the pistol and slumped down beside it and plucked at blue grass stupidly. He stared at the ship dumbly as it came down and stopped and the hatches opened and men climbed out.

"Why," he said, "that's cutting it too thin for me."

And his voice was quite normal except that he broke into giggling and sobbing and had a fist fight with the air.

"You'll be all right," they told him on the way back to Earth. And they shot more sedative to his shrieking nerves to make him forget.

But he never did.

## SRL AD

*LONESOME, VENUS GAL*, pretty—  
yes, nice in socializing; tender and gay  
altogether. Be pleased to write, earthman  
of like fixtures. *Loolie—Greener Abode*  
—*Venus*

July 5, 1951

DEAR Loolie:

I don't know what I'm getting myself in for, but I'm too tired to care. Ever spend a night on astro-physical calculus? Well, I just did and I'm groggy.

So I'm taking your ad straight. What the heck, it doesn't matter. Sat down for a relaxing half hour before sacking out and I feel like shooting off my big fat typewriter so here I am with a cup of java.

I don't care if you live on Venus or Pluto or in a little grass shack in Kehalick Kahooey Hawaii. I just hope you're not selling something.

You know, it *would* be interesting to know if there really was anyone on Venus, or Mars or any other of those damn rolling spitballs that circle old Sol for a good punch.

Okay. I'll assume you know nothing about Earth. So you don't know a ting. Dat's slang. Don't you jes' love Earth, LONESOME VENUS GAL?

What's the game old gal? What's the double talk? Socializing? I'll have you investigated, s'blood.

Pretty—yes. What's that?

As for me: pretty—no.

But I'm gay altogether too. I wake up late at night and just gay altogether all over the place. 'Specially if Willy and I (my room-mate) have imbibed a few tankards of that

mizzible brew they say is squeezed from the waving grain.

You have beer on Venus?

Venus. Venus. One Touch Of. That's a musical show down here. Venus was goddess of Love, I believe. Do you look like Mary Martin? Guess not. If you happen to look like Ava Gardner—hold that rocket ship Sam, I'm packin' mah duds now.

Who am I? This repulsive young lad who communicates in semi-facetious vein? Who regales yo poor blinkers wif giddy persiflage?

Name's Todd Baker. Taking the Astronomy Unit here at Fort College in Fort, Indiana. College endowed by a rich old bugger who went off his nut over the Fortean prose.

You know it just struck me that if you were really on Venus (which I keep forgetting because I think that's a load of—*ah* ha ha!)

Anyway if you really were on the misty ghost world out thar yonder you wouldn't be able to make head nor tail of my confused rambling.

So—for regimentation—for mental exercise—I'll pretend you *are* up there: mean distance from the sun 67.2 million miles, eccentricity .0068, inclination to elliptic  $3^{\circ} 23' 38''$ .

Pardon. Carried away by the figures which leap about my mind like potted sitatungas. That's the way you get after a while. Integration. Differential. Function of a function. Stay away gal! Better to be lonesome on Venus.

I am of the males. I am sane, foregoing epistolary matter to the contrary. I have been here at Fort College these three grotesque years preparing myself for a life of fabulous obscurity studying those pin-points in yon blackness that someone had the audacity to put there.

Could I not be a plumber? Cry in the night. Not me. I must stick a thermometer in the gullet of stars and diagnose—hmmm, the patient is getting old. He has only 95 billion years to live.

Okay. No distracting and altogether ungay and unsuccessful metaphors and snappy patter.

This is Earth. It has a diameter of 7900 miles. Do not ask why. This is a secret.



I am an Earth man of like fixtures. I am 26. This means that I have been undergoing a process of physical and mental growth (well, physical anyway) for  $26 \times 365$  days. It takes the Earth 365 days to get around the sun, a day being one revolution of said solar handball around its own axis.

On Earth, on this continent, the piece of earth in this hemisphere that Davey Jones has not seen fit to stash away in his everloving locker, there is a country called the United States of America. In it is Indiana. In Indiana is Fort. In Fort is Fort College. In college is me. In me is idiocy for writing to any gal who says she's from Venus.

Tell you what I'm gonna do.

You tell me about Venus. We'uns down hyar can't see it, you know. Somebody up there is smoking a damnably large cigar.

So, you give me some figures on Venus. Might even send me a few samples of rocks, plants, dirt and so on. How about it? Trapped you, ay?

Anyway, even though you're just a joker from Mother Earth and way back, drop me a line when next you feel the pressure on your brain.

And now to sack. Good night's sleep tonight; all of four hours.

I take it back. Willy is snoring.

Greetings from the wheeling green place.

Todd Baker  
1729 "J" Street  
Fort, Indiana

July 7, 1951

Oh Dear Toddbaker,

Was it nice to hear from you. Am endless grateful. How good. I wish to have a newer translate book there isn't here. You see? "Forgive me dear."

I have got your message. Fast it came fast, picked up by

my guardians. So happy am I that you have messaged to Loolie. I got no more than yours. I would not be even happy if there was not an answer at all. I worked in muchness to put the note on me in the place you saw. It was good English what?

There is a lot was not known in your message. Old translate book see you. Cup of joe not there. Not yet ever-loving as so common adjective. Or handball. Or Kehalick Kahooey Hawaii. This is a planet?

I am here. On *CM*. What you call Venus. Nice ting. Slang. Right? "You are dear to me."

Oh, of yes, I am loving Earth. But most its Toddbaker. I did not plan for me to stay there with you after—wait now. I must look for the properness word. After . . . marriage\* No. !

No. I had think you come to my planet. But later is time for that to decide. No worries is there dear?

Socializing. That is wrong now see I. I am soci-able. I can have many childs. Ten at a time at once. You will be proud. And pretty—yes. I am. And you I know will be handsome. I know. We will be so happiness. Oh! "My dear it is good to know."

I am not goddess of Love. But I love you—any how? This seems not a question. But in the translate book is always ? after *how*. Is it?

I am glad you own a room-mate. Of natural he can not stay with us here on *CM*. How ever if Willy, as you say it, wants another Lonesome Venus Gal I can do it. I know many. All as pretty—yes as I am pretty. Yes.

Mary Martian? I did not know that your planet was in messaging action with the 4th from CU. We had not thought it livable. This is good yet. I have told our skymen. They are glad to know this. Davey Jones and Ava Gardner is not known. Who is Sam?

Oh dear you are not repulsive. I am know that you are loveliness. We will be lovely with each other together. How dear. Many babies. Hundred. My\* —! I forget.

Fort, I am not knowing. I picked a spot with a point and had my guardians to go down to tell of my lonesome. I am

the first to try. If it works good and it worked good—yes. Then I will tell the rest of mine. I have two hundred and seven sisters. Nice. All pretty. You will like them when they see you.

Figures you said are all not right. But all right for that. I am giving an extra page of notes. See how they show. Formulas, laws and truths of matter here. In a box I will sending some samples of rock and on so.

I am L-. This means I think 8.5 in your numbers. I am very young. I hope it does not mind you to marriage with such a . . . a child. I can bear already babies. Two hundred at least, of course.

And now I will have to send this message from your Loolie. I will now come soon to get you. You will of real like it more on *CMA* than on your icy colded Earth with so lacking warm and air enough. Here is so fulsome warmth all in the U' U'—year in your talk. 224.7 days. Almost.

Now. Dear Todd baker. Here is fare well for a noace. Soon come I. How happy will we be? Yes! "My dear it is love I send. A kiss."

LOOLIE

1729 "J" Street  
Fort, Indiana  
July 10, 1951

Personals Department  
The Saturday Review  
25 West 45th Street  
New York 19, New York

Dear Sir:

I wish to make an inquiry regarding an ad published in your July 3rd issue from a "LONESOME VENUS GAL."

I wrote to this person who claimed to be a resident of the planet Venus. I naturally assumed the claim to be facetious.

Two days after sending my letter I received an answer.

The fact that this letter was written in gibberish does not, in itself, prove anything.

However, with the letter came a sheet of mathematical statistics and a box of mineral and plant samples which this so-called "VENUS GAL" said were from her planet.

A professor at my college—Fort—is now examining the samples and testing the statistics. He has not made any statement.

But I am virtually certain that the samples are of a variety unknown to Earth. They *are*, actually, from another planet. I am almost positive of that.

I would like to know how this person or whatever she is, managed to communicate with you and get such an ad in your magazine.

According to your own written standards, it would seem that this advertisement, by its very nature was far from a communication "of a decorous nature."

This "VENUS GAL" Loolie speaks of *marrying* me—coming down here and getting me.

Please rush a reply. This matter is highly urgent.

Thanking you, I am

Very truly yours  
Todd Baker

July 11, 1951

Dear Mr. Baker:

Your letter of the 10th at hand. We must confess ignorance of its meaning. In our July 3rd issue there was no such ad as you described placed in our Classified Section.

We are of the opinion that you have been the unfortunate butt of some practical joke.

However, we are in communication with one of our territorial representatives in Fort and he is investigating the matter.

If we can be of further service, please feel free to call on us.

Sincerely yours  
J. Linton Freedhoffer  
For the Editor

Mr. Todd Baker  
1729 "J" Street  
Fort, Indiana

Professor Reed:

Dropped in to see you but you weren't in your office.  
Any news?

I'm getting awfully worried. If you find that those samples are as legitimate as I think they are, I'm sunk. I get the shudders every time I think about what fantastic powers this Loolie must have. How she got that ad in the SRL I'll never figure out.

I certainly hope it *is* a practical joke.

If it isn't. . . .

Will you let me know as soon as you reach any definite decision?

Todd Baker

Toddy Lad:;?!

Prof. Reed called up. Said he found out that the samples (whatever they are) are strictly legit. Really come from some place other than Earth. Who's he kidding? Oops, sorry Charles.

Anyway, the old boy says for you to come over to his house tonight for a big pow-wow. Playing teacher's pet? For shame.

Off to supper.

Adoringly  
Your room mate  
The Eternal Sophomore  
Willy

P. S. Letter came for you.

July 11, 1951

Oh Dear Todd baker:

Think! How fortunate it is. I have got a special ship. I can come now right away tomorrow. Oh happiness. "Pack your duds, dear." I am coming to bring you back with me. I am so joyfull. Please hurry.

With everything  
LOOLIE

LOOLIE!

No! You can't do this! I'm an Earth-man. Let me stay one! Keep away. I'm not going *anywhere* with you. I'm warning you!

Please?

Stay away!

T. Baker

P. S. I got a shotgun! Look out!

(From the *Fort Daily Tribune*, July 13, 1951)

### FLOATING GLOBE SIGHTED OVER COLLEGE CAMPUS

More than thirty students and citizens of Fort claimed to have sighted a floating globe last night.

According to the reports, the globe hovered over the college campus for at least ten minutes. It then headed for the outskirts of the city where it disappeared.

Dear Tell Book:

Well, I'm back. I can't understand it. I've been taken in, I have. It seems so odd.

I went to such trouble to put the insert in that Earth publication. And then this Toddbaker went to all the trouble of writing back. And I thought—here now!—I have a mate at last. He seemed so interested and *so* nice.

But heavens. When I told him that we were to be co-joined he protested as though this were something terrible. What sense in that? I thought he was just being shy as are all the depleted males up here.

So, on the third phase, I got into the ship (which I had gone to oh! such trouble to get). I was down there in about seven eks.

I stayed there a little less than a half ek, suspended over a green place with tall structures. There with the use of the proto-finder I located the waves of Toddbaker and headed for this "J" street.

I landed behind his personal structure.

I got out and went over to this place. I sensed his presence with my portable proto. The waves were coming freely through a square hole high up on the wall.

I turned on my air belt and floated up there. There I went into this hole. It was a terrible squeeze.

There he was.

Such a shock!

He was holding something long and shiny in his hands and he pointed it at me. But then he dropped it on the floor and said something.

I do not see how these Earth men understand each other. It was so weird a gurgle and it stuck in him. He stared at me and the voice cavity got large. Then it spread wide across and showed his teeth.

Then the seeing organs in his top part rolled back and disappeared. I suppose it was my air cloud that made it happen. He put out his arms at me and took one step. But then he fell down on the floor with a squeaking noise. He said—*mama*.

I went over and examined him.

My my.

He was not of like fixtures at all. It could not possibly be managed. He was so fragile and pale. It is doubtful

that the whole race of them can last. Not with such a form. So little!

So I left him there, poor thing.

And I had been so happy before. Now I'm still lonesome. I want a mate.

And now what? Nothing I guess. Well, maybe one.

July 20, 1951

Dear Mrs. Baker:

I think you'd better come and take Todd home. He's in a sad way.

He's cutting all his classes and he doesn't eat. All he does is sit around the room and stare at things. He hasn't slept more than a few hours all week and when he does fall asleep he keeps talking to himself, calling for "Louie". We don't know any Louie.

I found the enclosed in the basket this afternoon. I don't get it.

But you better get Todd.

In haste,  
Willy Haskell

(Enclosure)

Dear Sir:

We regret to inform you that your personal advertisement is not acceptable for our classified section.

We return it herewith.

(Enclosure)

LOOLIE: I'm sorry. I didn't know you were so big and beautiful. Won't you please come back? I'll be waiting.  
Love, Todd.



LONESOME VENUS GAL, pretty—yes  
nice in socializing, tender and gay alto-  
gether. Be pleased to write Mars man  
of like fixtures. Note: am friends with  
Mary Martian. LOOLIE, GREENER  
ABODE, VENUS

XXXXX —

## MAD HOUSE

HE SITS down at his desk. He picks up a long, yellow pencil and starts to write on a pad. The lead point breaks.

The ends of his lips turn down. The eye pupils grow small in the hard mask of his face. Quietly, mouth pressed into an ugly, lipless gash, he picks up the pencil sharpener.

He grinds off the shavings and tosses the sharpener back in the drawer. Once more he starts to write. As he does so, the point snaps again and the lead rolls across the paper.

Suddenly his face becomes livid. Wild rage clamps the muscles of his body. He yells at the pencil, curses it with a stream of outrage. He glares at it with actual hate. He breaks it in two with a brutal snap and flings it into the wastebasket with a triumphant, "There! See how you like it in *there!*"

He sits tensely on the chair, his eyes wide, his lips trembling. He shakes with a frenzied wrath; it sprays his insides with acid.

The pencil lies in the wastebasket, broken and still. It is wood, lead, metal, rubber; all dead, without appreciation of the burning fury it has caused.

And yet . . .

He is quietly standing by the window, peering out at the street. He is letting the tightness sough away. He does not hear the rustle in the wastebasket which ceases immediately.

Soon his body is normal again. He sits down. He uses a fountain pen.

He sits down before his typewriter.

He inserts a sheet of paper and begins tapping on the keys.

His fingers are large. He hits two keys at once. The two typefaces are jammed together. They stand in the air, hovering impotently over the black ribbon.

He reaches over in disgust and slaps them back. They separate, flap back into their separate berths. He starts typing again.

He hits a wrong key. The start of a curse falls from his lips unfinished. He snatches up the round eraser and rubs the unwanted letter from the sheet of paper.

He drops the eraser and starts to type again. The paper has shifted on the roller. The next sentences are on a level slightly above the original. He clenches a fist, ignores the mistake.

The machine sticks. His shoulders twitch, he slams a fist on the space bar with a loud curse. The carriage jumps, the bell tinkles. He shoves the carriage over and it crashes to a halt.

He types faster. Three keys stick together. He clenches his teeth and whines in helpless fury. He smacks the type arms. They will not come apart. He forces them to separate with bent, shaking fingers. They fall away. He sees that his fingers are smudged with ink. He curses out loud, trying to outrage the very air for revenge on the stupid machine.

Now he hits the keys brutally, fingers falling like the stiff claws of a derrick. Another mistake, he erases savagely. He types still faster. Four keys stick together.

He screams.

He slams his fists on the machine. He clutches at the paper and rips it from the machine in jagged pieces. He welds the fragments in his fist and hurls the crumpled ball across the room. He beats the carriage over and slams the cover down on the machine.

He jumps up and glares down.

"You fool!" he shouts with a bitter, revolted voice. "You stupid, idiotic, asinine fool!"

Scorn drips from his voice. He keeps talking, he drives himself into a craze.

"You're no damn good. You're no damn good at all. I'm going to break you in pieces. I'm going to crack you

into splinters, melt you, *kill* you! You stupid, moronic, lousy goddam machine!"

He quivers as he yells. And he wonders, deep in the self-isolated recesses of his mind whether he is killing himself with anger, whether he is destroying his system with fury.

He turns and stalks away. He is too outraged to notice the cover of the machine slip down and hear the slight whirring of metal such as he might hear if the keys trembled in their slots.

He is shaving. The razor will not cut. Or the razor is too sharp and cuts too much.

Both times a muffled curse billows through his lips. He hurls the razor on the floor and kicks it against the wall.

He is cleaning his teeth. He draws the fine silk floss between his teeth. It shreds off. A fuzzy bit remains in the gap. He tries to press another piece down to get that bit out. He cannot force the white thread down. It snaps in his fingers.

He screams. He screams at the man in the mirror and draws back his hand, throws the floss away violently. It hits the wall. It hangs there and waves in the rush of angry breeze from the man.

He has torn another piece of floss from the container. He is giving the dental floss another chance. He is holding back his fury. If the floss knows what is good for it, it will plunge down between the teeth and draw out the shredded bit immediately.

It does. The man is mollified. The systematic juices leave off bubbling, the fires sink, the coals are scattered.

But the anger is still there, apart. Energy is never lost; a primal law.

He is eating.

His wife places a steak before him. He picks up the knife and fork and slices. The meat is tough, the blade is dull.

A spot of red puffs up in the flesh of his cheeks. His eyes

narrow. He draws the knife through the meat. The blade will not sever the browned flesh.

His eyes widen. Withheld tempest tightens and shakes him. He saws at the meat as though to give it one last opportunity to yield.

The meat will not yield.

He howls. "*God damn it!*" White teeth jam together. The knife is hurled across the room.

The woman appears, mild alarm etching transient scars on her forehead. Her husband is beyond himself. Her husband is shooting poison through his arteries. Her husband is releasing another cloud of animal temper. It is mist that clings. It hangs over the furniture, drips from the walls.

It is alive.

So through the days and nights. His anger falling like frenzied axe blows in his house, everything he owns. Sprays of teeth-grinding hysteria clouding his windows and falling to his floors. Oceans of wild, uncontrolled hate flooding through every room of his house; filling each iota of space with a shifting, throbbing life.

He lay on his back and stared at the sun-mottled ceiling.

The last day, he told himself. The phrase had been creeping in and out of his brain since he'd awakened.

In the bathroom he could hear the water running. He could hear the medicine cabinet being opened and then closed again. He could hear the sound of her slippers shuffling on the tile floor.

Sally, he thought, don't leave me.

"I'll take it easy if you stay," he promised the air in a whisper.

But he knew he couldn't take it easy. That was too hard. It was easier to fly off the handle, easier to scream and rant and attack.

He turned on his side and stared out into the hall at the bathroom door. He could see the line of light under the door. Sally is in there, he thought. Sally, my wife, whom I married many years ago when I was young and full of hope.

He closed his eyes suddenly and clenched his fists. It came on him again. The sickness that prevailed with more violence every time he contracted it. The sickness of despair, of lost ambition. It ruined everything. It cast a vapor of bitterness over all his comings and goings. It jaded appetite, ruined sleep, destroyed affection.

"Perhaps if we'd had children," he muttered and knew before he said it that it wasn't the answer.

Children. How happy they would be watching their wretched father sinking deeper into his pit of introspective fever each day.

All right, tortured his mind, let's have the facts. He gritted his teeth and tried to make his mind a blank. But, like a dull-eyed idiot, his mind repeated the words that he muttered often in his sleep through restless, tossing nights.

I'm 40 years old. I teach English at Fort College. Once I had hoped to be a writer. I thought this would be a fine place to write. I would teach class part of the day and write with the rest of my time. I met Sally at school and married her. I thought everything would be just fine. I thought success was inevitable. Eighteen years ago.

*Eighteen years.*

How, he thought, did you mark the passing of almost two decades? The time seemed a shapeless lump of failing efforts, of nights spent in anguish; of the secret, the answer, the revelation always being withheld from him. Dangled overhead like cheese swinging in a maddening arc over the head of a berserk rat.

And resentment creeping. Days spent watching Sally buy food and clothing and pay rent with his meager salary. Watching her buy new curtains or new chair covers and feeling a stab of pain every time because he was that much farther removed from the point where he could devote his time to writing. Every penny she spent he felt like a blow at his aspirations.

He forced himself to think that way. He forced himself to believe that it was only the time he needed to do good writing.

But once a furious student had yelled at him, "You're just a third rate talent hiding behind a desk!"

He remembered that. Oh, God, how he remembered that moment. Remembered the cold sickness that had convulsed him when those words hit his brain. Recalled the trembling and the shaky unreason of his voice.

He had failed the student for the semester despite good marks. There had been a great to-do about it. The student's father had come to the school. They had all gone before Dr. Ramsay, the head of the English Department.

He remembered that too; the scene could crowd out all other memories. Him, sitting on one side of the conference table, facing the irate father and son. Dr. Ramsay stroking his beard until he thought he'd hurl something at him. Dr. Ramsay had said—well let's see if we can't straighten out this matter.

They had consulted the record book and found the student was right. Dr. Ramsay had looked up at him in great surprise. Well, I can't see what . . . he had said and let his syrupy voice break off and looked probingly at him, waiting for an explanation.

And the explanation had been hopeless, a jumbled and pointless affair. Irresponsible attitude, he had said, flaunting of unpardonable behavior; morally a failure. And Dr. Ramsay, his thick neck getting red, telling him in no uncertain terms that morals were not subject to the grading system at Fort College.

There was more but he'd forgotten it. He'd made an effort to forget it. But he couldn't forget that it would be years before he made a professorship. Ramsay would hold it back. And his salary would go on being insufficient and bills would mount and he would never get his writing done.

He regained the present to find himself clutching the sheets with taut fingers. He found himself glaring in hate at the bathroom door. Go on!—his mind snapped vindictively—Go home to your precious mother. See if I care. Why just a trial separation? Make it permanent. Give me some peace. Maybe I can do some writing then.

*Maybe I can do some writing then.*

The phrase made him sick. It had no meaning anymore. Like a word that is repeated until it becomes gibberish that sentence, for him, had been used to extinction. It sounded

silly; like some bit of cliché from a soap opera. Hero saying in dramatic tones—Now, by God, maybe I can do some writing. Senseless.

For a moment, though, he wondered if it was true. Now that she was leaving could he forget about her and really get some work done? Quit his job? Go somewhere and hole up in a cheap furnished room and write?

You have \$123.89 in the bank, his mind informed him. He pretended it was the only thing that kept him from it. But, far back in his mind, he wondered if he could write anywhere. Often the question threw itself at him when he was least expecting it. You have four hours every morning, the statement would rise like a menacing wraith. You have time to write many thousands of words. Why don't you?

And the answer was always lost in a tangle of because and wells and endless reasons that he clung to like a drowning man at straws.

The bathroom door opened and she came out, dressed in her good red suit.

For no reason at all, it seemed, he suddenly realized that she'd been wearing that same outfit for more than three years and never a new one. The realization angered him even more. He closed his eyes and hoped she wasn't looking at him. I hate her, he thought. I hate her because she has destroyed my life.

He heard the rustle of her skirt as she sat at the dressing table and pulled out a drawer. He kept his eyes shut and listened to the venetian blinds tap lightly against the window frame as morning breeze touched them. He could smell her perfume floating lightly on the air.

And he tried to think of the house empty all the time. He tried to think of coming home from class and not finding Sally there waiting for him. The idea seemed, somehow, impossible. And that angered him. Yes, he thought, she's gotten to me. She's worked on me until I am so dependent of her for really unessential things that I suffer under the delusion that I cannot do without her.

He turned suddenly on the mattress and looked at her.



"So, you're really going," he said in a cold voice.

She turned briefly and looked at him. There was no anger on her face. She looked tired.

"Yes," she said. "I'm going."

Good riddance. The words tried to pass his lips. He cut them off.

"I suppose you have your reasons," he said.

Her shoulders twitched a moment in what he took for a shrug of weary amusement.

"I have no intention of arguing with you," he said. "Your life is your own."

"Thank you," she murmured.

She's waiting for apologies, he thought. Waiting to be told that he didn't hate her as he'd said. That he hadn't struck *her* but all his twisted and shattered hopes; the mocking spectacle of his own lost faith.

"And just how long is this *trial* separation going to last?" he said, his voice acidulous.

She shook her head.

"I don't know, Chris," she said quietly. "It's up to you."

"Up to me," he said. "It's always up to me, isn't it?"

"Oh, please darl—Chris. I don't want to argue anymore. I'm too tired to argue."

"It's easier to just pack and run away."

She turned and looked at him. Her eyes were very dark and unhappy.

"Run away?" she said. "After eighteen years you accuse me of that? Eighteen years of watching you destroy yourself. And me along with you. Oh, don't look surprised. I'm sure you know you've driven me half insane too."

She turned away and he saw her shoulders twitch. She brushed some tears from her eyes.

"It's n-not just because you hit me," she said. "You kept saying that last night when I said I was leaving. Do you think it would matter if . . ." She took a deep breath. "If it meant you were angry with *me*? If it was that I could be hit every day. But you didn't hit me. I'm nothing to you. I'm not wanted."

"Oh, stop being so . . ."

"No," she broke in. "That's why I'm going. Because I

can't bear to watch you hate me more every day for something that . . . that isn't my fault."

"I suppose you . . ."

"Oh, don't say anymore," she said, getting up. She hurried out of the room and he heard her walk into the living-room. He stared at the dressing table.

Don't say anymore?—his mind asked as though she were still there. Well, there's more to say; lots more. You don't seem to realize what I've lost. You don't seem to understand. I had hopes, oh God, what hopes I had. I was going to write prose to make the people sit up and gasp. I was going to tell them things they needed badly to know. I was going to tell them in so entertaining a way that they would never realize that the truth was getting to them. I was going to create immortal works.

Now when I die, I shall only be dead. I am trapped in this depressing village, entombed in a college of science where men gape at dust and do not even know that there are stars above their heads. And what can I do, what can . . . ?

The thoughts broke off. He looked miserably at her perfume bottles, at the powder box that tinkled *Always* when the cover was lifted off.

*I'll remember you. Always.*

*With a heart that's true. Always.*

The words are childish and comical, he thought. But his throat contracted and he felt himself shudder.

"Sally," he said. So quietly that he could hardly hear it himself.

After a while he got up and dressed.

While he was putting on his trousers a rug slid from under him and he had to grab the dresser for support. He glared down, heart pounding in the total fury he had learned to summon in the space of seconds.

"Damn you," he muttered.

He forgot Sally. He forgot everything. He just wanted to get even with the rug. He kicked it violently under the bed.

The anger plunged down and disappeared. He shook his head. I'm sick, he thought. He thought of going in to her and telling her he was sick.

His mouth tightened as he went into the bathroom. I'm not sick, he thought. Not in body anyway. It's my mind that's ill and she only makes it worse.

The bathroom was still damply warm from her use of it. He opened the window a trifle and got a splinter in his finger. He cursed the window in a muffled voice. He looked up. Why so quiet? he asked. So *she* won't hear me?

"Damn you!" he snarled loudly at the window. And he picked at his finger until he had pulled out the sliver of wood.

He jerked at the cabinet door. It stuck. His face reddened. He pulled harder and the door flew open and cracked him on the wrist. He spun about and grabbed his wrist, threw back his head with a whining gasp.

He stood there, eyes clouded with pain, staring at the ceiling. He looked at the crack that ran in a crazy meandering line across the ceiling. Then he closed his eyes.

And began to sense something. Intangible. A sense of menace. He wondered about it. Why it's myself, of course, he answered then. It is the moral decrepitude of my own subconscious. It is bawling out to me, saying: You are to be punished for driving your poor wife away to her mother's arms. You are not a man. You are a—

"Oh, shut up," he said.

He washed his hands and face. He ran an inspecting finger over his chin. He needed a shave. He opened the cabinet door gingerly and took out his straight razor. He held it up and looked at it.

The handle has expanded. He told himself that quickly as the blade appeared to fall out of the handle willfully. It made him shiver to see it flop out like that and glitter in the light from the cabinet light fixture.

He stared in repelled fascination at the bright steel. He touched the blade edge. So sharp, he thought. The slightest touch would sever flesh. What a hideous thing it was.

*"It's my hand."*

He said it involuntarily and shut the razor suddenly. It *was* his hand, it had to be. It couldn't have been the razor moving by itself. That was sick imagination.

But he didn't shave. He put the razor back in the cabinet with a vague sense of forestalling doom.

Don't care if we *are* expected to shave every day, he muttered. I'm not taking a chance on my hand slipping. I'd better get a safety razor anyway. This kind isn't for me, I'm too nervous.

Suddenly, impelled by those words, the picture of him eighteen years before flew into his brain.

He remembered a date he'd had with Sally. He remembered telling her he was so calm it was akin to being dead. Nothing bothers me, he'd said. And it was true, at the time. He remembered too telling her he didn't like coffee, that one cup kept him awake at night. That he didn't smoke, didn't like the taste or smell. I like to stay healthy, he'd said. He remembered the exact words.

"*And now,*" he muttered at his lean and worn reflection.

Now he drank gallons of coffee a day. Until it sloshed like a black pool in his stomach and he couldn't sleep anymore than he could fly. Now he smoked endless strings of finger-yellowing cigarettes until his throat felt raw and clogged, until he couldn't write in pencil because his hand shook so much.

But all that stimulation didn't help his writing any. Paper still remained blank in the typewriter. Words never came, plots died on him. Characters eluded him, mocking him with laughter from behind the veil of their non-creation.

And time passed. It flew by faster and faster, seeming to single him out for highest punishment. He—a man who had begun to value time so neurotically that it overbalanced his life and made him sick to think of its passing.

As he brushed his teeth he tried to recall when this irrational temper had first begun to control him. But there was no way of tracing its course. Somewhere in mists that could not be pierced, it had started. With a word of petulance, an angry contraction of muscles. With a glare of unrecallable animosity.

And from there, like a swelling amoeba, it had gone its own perverted and downward course of evolution, reaching its present nadir in him; a taut embittered man who found his only solace in hating.

He spit out white froth and rinsed his mouth. As he put down the glass, it cracked and a barb of glass drove into his hand.

"Damn!" he yelled.

He spun on his heel and clenched his fist. It sprang open instantly as the sliver sank into his palm. He stood with tears on his cheeks, breathing heavily. He thought of Sally listening to him, hearing once more the audible evidence of his snapping nerves.

Stop it!—he ordered himself. You can never do anything until you rid yourself of this enervating temper.

He closed his eyes. For a moment he wondered why it seemed that everything was happening to him lately. As if some revenging power had taken roost in the house, pouring a savage life into inanimate things. Threatening him. But the thought was just a faceless, passing figure in the crushing horde of thoughts that mobbed past his mind's eye; seen but not appreciated.

He drew the glass sliver from his palm. He put on his dark tie.

Then he went into the dining room, consulting his watch. It was ten thirty already. More than half the morning was gone. More than half the time for sitting and trying to write the prose that would make people sit up and gasp.

It happened that way more often now than he would even admit to himself. Sleeping late, making up errands, doing anything to forestall the terrible moment when he must sit down before his typewriter and try to wrench some harvest from the growing desert of his mind.

It was harder every time. And he grew more angry every time; and hated more. And never noticed until now, when it was too late, that Sally grew desperate and could no longer stand his temper or his hate.

She was sitting at the kitchen table drinking dark coffee.

She too drank more than she once had. Like him, she drank it black, without sugar. It jangled her nerves too. And she smoked now although she'd never smoked until a year before. She got no pleasure from it. She drew the fumes deep down into her lungs and then blew them out quickly. And her hands shook almost as badly as his did.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down across from her. She started to get up.

"What's the matter? Can't you stand the sight of me?"

She sat back and took a deep pull on the cigarette in her hand. Then she tamped it out on the saucer.

He felt sick. He wanted to get out of the house suddenly. It felt alien and strange to him. He had the feeling that she had renounced all claim to it, that she had retreated from it. The touch of her fingers and the loving indulgences she had bestowed on every room; all these things were taken back. They had lost tangibility because she was leaving. She was deserting it and it was not their home anymore. He felt it strongly.

Sinking back against the chair he pushed away his cup and stared at the yellow oilcloth on the table. He felt as if he and Sally were frozen in time; that seconds were drawn out like some fantastic taffy until each one seemed an eternity. The clock ticked slower. And the house was a different house.

"What train are you getting?" he asked, knowing before he spoke that there was only one morning train.

"11:47," she said.

When she said it, he felt as if his stomach were pulled back hard against his backbone. He gasped, so actual was the physical pain. She glanced up at him.

"Burned myself," he said hastily, and she got up and put her cup and saucer in the sink.

Why did I say that?—he thought. Why couldn't I say that I gasped because I was filled with terror at the thought of her leaving me? Why do I always say the things I don't mean to say? I'm not bad. But every time I speak I build higher the walls of hatred and bitterness around me until I cannot escape from them.

With words I have knit my shroud and will bury myself therein.

He looked at her back and a sad smile raised his lips. I can think of words when my wife is leaving me. It is very sad.

Sally had walked out of the kitchen. His mind reverted to its sullen attitude. This is a game we're playing. Follow the leader. You walk in one room, head high, the justified spouse, the injured party. I am supposed to follow, slope shouldered and contrite, pouring out apologetic hecatombs.

Once more conscious of himself, he sat tensely at the table, rage making his body tremble. Consciously he relaxed and pressed his left hand over his eyes. He sat there trying to lose his misery in silence and blackness.

It wouldn't work.

And then his cigarette really burned him and he sat erect. The cigarette hit the floor scattering ashes. He bent over and picked it up. He threw it at the wastecan and missed. To hell with it, he thought. He got up and dumped his cup and saucer in the sink. The saucer broke in half and nicked his right thumb. He let it bleed. He didn't care.

She was in the extra room finishing her packing.

The extra room. The words tortured him now. When had they stopped calling it "the nursery"? When had it began to eat her insides out because she was so full of love and wanted children badly? When had he begun to replace this loss with nothing better than volcanic temper and days and nights of sheathe-scraped nerves?

He stood in the doorway and watched her. He wanted to get out the typewriter and sit down and write reams of words. He wanted to glory in his coming freedom. Think of all the money he could save. Think of how soon he could go away and write all the things he'd always meant to write.

He stood in the doorway, sick.

Is all this possible?—his mind asked, incredulous. Pos-

sible that she was leaving? But she and he were man and wife. They had lived and loved in this house for more than eighteen years. Now she was leaving. Putting articles of clothing in her old black suitcase and leaving. He couldn't reconcile himself to that. He couldn't understand it or ally it with the functions of the day. Where did it fit into the pattern?—the pattern that was Sally right there cleaning and cooking and trying to make their home happy and warm.

He shivered and, turning abruptly, went back into the bedroom.

He slumped on the bed and stared at the delicately whirring electric clock on their bedside table.

Past eleven, he saw. In less than an hour I have to hold class for a group of idiot freshmen. And, on the desk in the livingroom, is a mountain of mid-term examinations with essays that I must suffer through, feeling my stomach turn at their paucity of intelligence, their adolescent phraseology.

And all that tripe, all those miles of hideous prose, had been wound into an eternal skein in his head. And there it sat unraveling into his own writing until he wondered if he could stand the thought of living anymore. I have digested the worst, he thought. Is it any wonder that I exude it piecemeal?

Temper began again, a low banking fire in him, gradually fanned by further thinking. I've done no writing this morning. Like every morning after every other morning as time passes. I do less and less. I write nothing. Or I write worthless material. I could write better when I was twenty than I can now.

I'll *never* write anything good!

He jolted to his feet and his head snapped around as he looked for something to strike at, something to break, something to hate with such hate that it would wither in the blast.

It seemed as though the room clouded. He felt a throbbing. His left leg banged against a corner of the bed.

He gasped in fury. He wept. Tears of hate and re-



pentance and self commiseration. I'm lost, he thought. Lost. There is nothing.

He became very calm, icy calm. Drained of pity, of emotion. He put on his suit coat. He put on his hat and got his briefcase off the dresser.

He stopped before the door to the room where she still fussed with her bag. So she will have something to occupy herself with now, he thought, so she won't have to look at me. He felt his heart thudding like a heavy drum beat.

"Have a nice time at your mother's," he said dispassionately.

She looked up and saw the expression on his face. She turned away and put a hand to her eyes. He felt a sudden need to run to her and beg her forgiveness. Make everything right again.

Then he thought again of papers and years of writing undone. He turned away and walked across the living-room. The small rug slipped a little and it helped to focus the strength of anger he needed. He kicked it aside and it fluttered against the wall in a rumpled heap.

He slammed the door behind him.

His mind gibbered. Now, soap opera like, she has thrown herself on the coverlet and is weeping tears of martyr-tinged sorrow. Now she is digging nails into the pillow and moaning my name and wishing she were dead.

His shoes clicked rapidly on the sidewalk. God help me, he thought. God help all us poor wretches who would create and find that we must lose our hearts for it because we cannot afford to spend our time at it.

It was a beautiful day. His eyes saw that but his mind would not attest to it. The trees were thick with green and the air warm and fresh. Spring breezes flooded down the streets. He felt them brush over him as he walked down the block, crossed Main Street to the bus stop.

He stood there on the corner looking back at the house.

She is in there, his mind persisted in analysis. In there, the house in which we've lived for more than eight years.

She is packing or crying or doing something. And soon she will call the Campus Cab Company. A cab will come driving out. The driver will honk the horn, Sally will put on her light spring coat and take her suitcase out on the porch. She will lock the door behind her for the last time.

*"No—"*

He couldn't keep the word from strangling in his throat. He kept staring at the house. His head ached. He saw everything weaving. I'm sick, he thought.

*"I'm sick!"*

He shouted it. There was no one around to hear. He stood gazing at the house. She is going away forever, said his mind.

Very well then! I'll write, write, write. He let the words soak into his mind and displace all else.

A man had a choice, after all. He devoted his life to his work or to his wife and children and home. It could not be combined; not in this day and age. In this insane world where God was second to income and goodness to wealth.

He glanced aside as the green-striped bus topped the distant hill and approached. He put the briefcase under his arm and reached into his coat pocket for a token. There was a hole in the pocket. Sally had been meaning to sew it. Well, she would never sew it now. What did it matter anyway?

I would rather have my soul intact than the suit of clothes I wear.

Words, words, he thought, as the bus stopped before him. They flood through me now that she is leaving. Is that evidence that it is her presence that clogs the channels of thought?

He dropped the token in the coin box and weaved down the length of the bus. He passed a professor he knew and nodded to him abstractedly. He slumped down on the back seat and stared at the grimy, rubberized floor boards.

This is a great life, his mind ranted. I am so pleased with this, my life and these, my great and noble accomplishments.

He opened the briefcase a moment and looked in at

the thick prospectus he had outlined with the aid of Dr. Ramsey.

First week—1. *Everyman*. Discussion of. Reading of selections from *Classic Readings For College Freshmen*. 2. *Beowulf*. Reading of. Class discussion. Twenty minute quotation quiz.

He shoved the sheaf of papers back into the briefcase. It sickens me, he thought. I hate these things. The classics have become anathema to me. I begin to loathe the very mention of them. Chaucer, the Elizabethan poets, Dryden, Pope, Shakespeare. What higher insult to a man than to grow to hate these names because he must share them by part with unappreciative clods? Because he must strain them thin and make them palatable for the dullards who should better be digging ditches.

He got off the bus down town and started down the long slope of Ninth Street.

Walking, he felt as though he were a ship with its hawser cut, prey to a twisted network of currents. He felt apart from the city, the country, the world. If someone told me I were a ghost, he thought, I would be inclined to believe.

What is she doing now?

He wondered about it as the buildings floated past him. What is she thinking as I stand here and the town of Fort drifts by me like vaporous stage flats? What are her hands holding? What expression has she on her lovely face?

She is alone in the house, our house. What might have been our *home*. Now it is only a shell, a hollow box with sticks of wood and metal for furnishings. Nothing but inanimate dead matter.

No matter what John Morton said.

Him with his gold leaves parting and his test tubes and his God of the microscope. For all his erudite talk and his papers of slide-ruled figures; despite all that—it was simple witchcraft he professed. It was idiocy. The idiocy that prompted that ass Charles Fort to burden the world with his nebulous fancies. The idiocy that made that fool of a

millionaire endow this place and from the arid soil erect these huge stone structures and house within a zoo of wild-eyed scientists always searching for some fashion of elixir while the rest of the clowns blew the world out from under them.

No, there is nothing right with the world, he thought as he plodded under the arch and onto the wide, green campus.

He looked across at the huge Physical Sciences Center, its granite face beaming in the late morning sun.

Now she is calling the cab. He consulted his watch. No. She is in the cab already. Riding through the silent streets. Past the houses and down into the shopping district. Past the red brick buildings spewing out yokels and students. Through the town that was a potpourri of the sophisticated and the rustic.

Now the cab was turning left on Tenth Street. Now it was pulling up the hill, topping it. Gliding down toward the railroad station. Now . . .

"Chris!"

His head snapped around and his body twitched in surprise. He looked toward the wide-doored entrance to the Mental Sciences Building. Dr. Morton was coming out.

We attended school together eighteen years ago, he thought. But I took only a small interest in science. I preferred wasting my time on the culture of the centuries. That's why I'm an associate and he's a doctor and the head of his department.

All this fled like racing winds through his mind as Dr. Morton approached, smiling. He clapped Chris on the shoulder.

"Hello there," he said. "How are things?"

"How are they ever?"

Dr. Morton's smile faded.

"What is it, Chris?" he asked.

I won't tell you about Sally, Chris thought. Not if I die first. You'll never know it from me.

"The usual," he said.

"Still on the outs with Ramsey?"

Chris shrugged. Morton looked over at the large clock on the face of the Mental Sciences Building.

"Say look," he said. "Why are we standing here? Your class isn't for a half hour yet, is it?"

Chris didn't answer. He's going to invite me for coffee, he thought. He's going to regale me with more of his inane theories. He's going to use me as whipping boy for his mental merry-go-round.

"Let's get some coffee," Morton said, taking Chris's arm. They walked along in silence for a few steps.

"How's Sally?" Morton asked then.

"She's fine," he answered in an even voice.

"Good. Oh, incidentally. I'll probably drop by tomorrow or the next day for that book I left there last Thursday night."

"All right."

"What were you saying about Ramsay now?"

"I wasn't."

Morton skipped that. "Been thinking any more about what I told you?" he asked.

"If you're referring to your fairy tale about my house—no. I haven't been giving it any more thought than it deserves—which is none."

They turned the corner of the building and walked toward Ninth Street.

"Chris, that's an indefensible attitude," Morton said. "You have no right to doubt when you don't know."

Chris felt like pulling his arm away, turning and leaving Morton standing there. He was sick of words and words and words. He wanted to be alone. He almost felt as if he could put a pistol to his head now, get it over with. Yes, I could—he thought. If someone handed it to me now, this moment, it would be done in a moment.

They went up the stone steps to the sidewalk and crossed over to the Campus Cafe. Morton opened the door and ushered Chris in. Chris went in back and slid into a wooden booth.

Morton brought two coffees and sat across from him.

"Now listen," he said, stirring in sugar, "I'm your best friend. At least I regard myself as such. And I'm damned if I'll sit by like a mute and watch you kill yourself."

Chris felt his heart jump. He swallowed. He got rid of the thoughts as though they were visible to Morton.

"Forget it," he said. "I don't care what proofs you have. I don't believe any of it."

"What'll it take to convince you, damn it?" Morton said. "Do you have to lose your life first?"

"Look," Chris said pettishly. "I don't believe it. That's *it*. Forget it now, let it go."

"Listen, Chris, I can show you . . ."

"You can show me nothing!" Chris cut in.

Morton was patient. "It's a recognized phenomenon," he said.

Chris looked at him in disgust and shook his head.

"What dreams you white-frosted kiddies have in the sanctified cloister of your laboratories. You can make yourself believe anything after a while. As long as you can make up a measurement for it."

"Will you listen to me, Chris? How many times have you complained to me about splinters, about closet doors flying open, about rugs slipping? How many times?"

"Oh, for God's sake, don't start *that* again. I'll get up and walk out of here. I'm in no mood for your lectures. Save them for those poor idiots who pay tuition to hear them."

Morton looked at him with a shake of his head.

"I wish I could get to you," he said.

"Forget it."

"Forget it?" Morton squirmed. "Can't you see that you're in danger because of your temper?"

"I'm telling you, John . . ."

"Where do you think that temper of yours goes? Do you think it disappears? No. It doesn't. It goes into your rooms and into your furniture and into the air. It goes into Sally. It makes everything sick; including you. It crowds you out. It welds a link between animate and inanimate. *Psychobolie*. Oh, don't look so petulant; like a child who can't

stand to hear the word *spinach*. Sit down, for God's sake. You're an adult; listen like one."

Chris lit a cigarette. He let Morton's voice drift into a non-intelligent hum. He glanced at the wall clock. Quarter to twelve. In two minutes, if the schedule was adhered to, she would be going. The train would move and the town of Fort would pass away from her.

"I've told you any number of times," Morton was saying. "No one knows what matter is made of. Atoms, electrons, pure energy—all words. Who knows where it will end? We guess, we theorize, we make up means of measurement. But we don't know.

"And that's for matter. Think of the human brain and its still unknown capacities. It's an uncharted continent, Chris. It may stay that way for a long time. And all that time the suspected powers will still be affecting us and, maybe, affecting matter; even if we *can't* measure it on a gauge.

"And I say you're poisoning your house. I say your temper has become ingrained in the structure, in every article you touch. All of them influenced by you and your ungovernable rages. And I think too that if it weren't for Sally's presence acting as an abortive factor, well . . . you might actually be attacked by . . ."

Chris heard the last few sentences.

"Oh, stop this gibberish!" he snapped angrily. "You're talking like a juvenile after his first Tom Swift novel."

Morton sighed. He ran his fingers over the cup edge and shook his head sadly.

"Well," he said, "All I can do is hope that nothing breaks down. Its obvious to me that you're not going to listen."

"Congratulations on one statement I can agree with," said Chris. He looked at his watch. "And now if you'll excuse me I'll go and listen to saddle-shoed cretins stumble over passages they haven't the slightest ability to assimilate."

They got up.

"I'll take it," said Morton but Chris slapped a dime

on the counter and walked out. Morton followed, putting his change into his pocket slowly.

In the street he patted Chris on the shoulder.

"Try to take it easy," he said. "Look, why don't you and Sally come out to the house tonight? We could have a few rounds of bridge."

"That's impossible," Chris said.

The students were reading a selection from *King Lear*. Their heads were bent over the books. He stared at them without seeing them.

I've got to resign myself to it, he told himself. I've got to forget her, that's all. She's gone. I'm not going to bewail the fact. I'm not going to hope against hope that she'll return. I don't *want* her back. I'm better off without her. Free and unfettered now.

His thoughts drained off. He felt empty and helpless. He felt as though he could never write another word for the rest of his life. Maybe, he thought, sullenly displeased with the idea, maybe it was only the upset of her leaving that enabled my brain to find words. For, after all, the words I thought of, the ideas that flourished, though briefly, were all to do with her—her going and my wretchedness because of it.

He caught himself short. No!—he cried in silent battle. I will not let it be that way. I'm strong. This feeling is only temporary, I'll very soon have learned to do without her. And then I'll do work. Such work as I have only dreamed of doing. After all haven't I lived eighteen years more? Haven't those years filled me to overflowing with sights and sounds, ideals, impressions, interpretations?

He trembled with excitement.

Someone was waving a hand in his face. He focused his eyes and looked coldly at the girl.

"Well?" he said.

"Could you tell us when you're going to give back our mid-term papers, Professor Neal?" she asked.

He stared at her, his right cheek twitching. He felt



about to hurl every invective at his command into her face. His fists closed.

"You'll get them back when they're marked," he said tensely.

"Yes, but . . ."

"You heard me," he said.

His voice rose at the end of the sentence. The girl sat down. As he lowered his head he noticed that she looked at the boy next to her and shrugged her shoulders, a look of disgust on her face.

"Miss . . ."

He fumbled with his record book and found her name.

"Miss Forbes!"

She looked up, her features drained of color, her red lips standing out sharply against her white skin. Painted alabaster idiot. The words clawed at him.

"You may get out of this room," he ordered sharply. Confusion filled her face.

"Why?" she asked in a thin, plaintive voice.

"Perhaps you didn't hear me," he said, the fury rising.

"I said get out of this room!"

"But . . ."

"*Do you hear me!*" he shouted.

Hurriedly she collected her books, her hands shaking, her face burning with embarrassment. She kept her eyes on the floor and her throat moved convulsively as she edged along the aisle and went out the doorway.

The door closed behind her. He sank back. He felt a terrible sickness in himself. Now, he thought, they will all turn against me in defense of an addle-witted little girl. Dr. Ramsay would have more fuel for his simple little fire.

And they were right.

He couldn't keep his mind from it. They *were* right. He knew it. In that far recess of mind which he could not cow with thoughtless passion, he knew he was a stupid fool. I have no right to teach others. I cannot even teach myself to be a human being. He wanted to cry out the words and weep confessions and throw himself from one of the open windows.

"The whispering will stop!" he demanded fiercely.

The room was quiet. He sat tensely, waiting for any signs of militance. I am your teacher, he told himself, I am to be obeyed, I am . . .

The concept died. He drifted away again. What were students or a girl asking about mid-term papers? What was anything?

He glanced at his watch. In a few minutes the train would pull into Centralia. She would change to the main line express to Indianapolis. Then up to Detroit and her mother. Gone.

Gone. He tried to visualize the word, put it into living terms. But the thought of the house without her was almost beyond his means. Because it wasn't the house without her; it was something else.

He began to think of what John had said.

Was it possible? He was in a mood to accept the incredible. It was incredible that she had left him. Why not extend the impossibilities that were happening to him?

All right then, he thought angrily. The house is alive. I've given it this life with deadly outpourings of wrath. I hope to God that when I get back there and enter the door, the roof collapses. I hope the walls buckle and I'm crushed to pulp by the crushing weight of plaster and wood and brick. That's what I want. Some agency to do away with me. I cannot drive myself to it. If only a gun would commit my suicide for me. Or gas blow its deadly fumes at me for the asking or a razor slice my flesh upon request.

The door opened. He glanced up. Dr. Ramsey stood there, face drawn into a mask of indignation. Behind him in the hall Chris could see the girl, her face streaked with tears.

"A moment, Neal," Ramsay said sharply and stepped back into the hall again.

Chris sat at the desk staring at the door. He felt suddenly very tired, exhausted. He felt as if getting up and moving into the hall was more than he could possibly

manage. He glanced at the class. A few of them were trying to repress smiles.

"For tomorrow you will finish the reading of *King Lear*," he said. Some of them groaned.

Ramsay appeared in the doorway again, his cheeks pink.

"Are you coming, Neal?" he asked loudly.

Chris felt himself tighten with anger as he walked across the room and out into the hall. The girl lowered her eyes. She stood beside Dr. Ramsey's portly frame.

"What's this I hear, Neal?" Ramsey asked.

That's right, Chris thought. Don't ever call me professor. I'll never be one, will I? You'll see to that, you bastard.

"I don't understand," he said, as coolly as possible.

"Miss Forbes here claims you ejected her from class for no reason at all."

"Then Miss Forbes is lying quite stupidly," he said. Let me hold this anger, he thought. Don't let it flood loose. He shook with holding it back.

The girl gasped and took out her handkerchief again. Ramsay turned and patted her shoulder.

"Go in my office, child. Wait for me."

She turned away slowly. Politician!—cried Neal's mind. How easy it is for you to be popular with them. You don't have to deal with their bungling minds.

Miss Forbes turned the corner and Ramsay looked back.

"Your explanation had better be good," he said. "I'm getting a little weary, Neal, of your behavior."

Chris didn't speak. Why am I standing here?—he suddenly wondered. Why, in all the world, am I standing in this dimly lit hall and voluntarily, listening to this pompous boor berate me?

"I'm waiting, Neal."

Chris tightened. "I told you she was lying," he said quietly.

"I choose to believe otherwise," said Dr. Ramsay, his voice trembling.

A shudder ran through Chris. His head moved forward and he spoke slowly, teeth clenched.

"You can believe anything you damn well please."

Ramsay's mouth twitched.

"I think it's time you appeared before the board," he muttered.

"Fine!" said Chris loudly. Ramsay made a move to close the classroom door. Chris gave it a kick and it banged against the wall. A girl gasped.

"What's the matter?" Chris yelled. "Don't you want your students to hear me tell you off? Don't you even want them to suspect that you're a dolt, a windbag, an ass!"

Ramsay raised shaking fists before his chest. His lips trembled violently.

"This will do, Neal!" he cried.

Chris reached out and shoved the heavy man aside, snarling, "Oh, *get out of my way!*"

He started away. The hall fled past him. He heard the bell ring. It sounded as though it rang in another existence. The building throbbed with life; students poured from classrooms.

"Neal!" called Dr. Ramsay.

He kept walking. Oh, God, let me out of here, I'm suffocating, he thought. My hat, my briefcase. Leave them. Get out of here. Dizzily he descended the stairs surrounded by milling students. They swirled about him like an unidentifiable tide. His brain was far from them.

Staring ahead dully he walked along the first floor hall. He turned and went out the door and down the porch steps to the campus sidewalk. He paid no attention to the students who stared at his ruffled blonde hair, his mussed clothes. He kept walking. I've done it, he thought belligerently. I've made the break. I'm *free!*

I'm sick.

All the way down to Main Street and out on the bus he kept renewing his stores of anger. He went over those few moments in the hallway again and again. He sum-

moned up the vision of Ramsay's stolid face, repeated his words. He kept himself taut and furious. I'm glad, he told himself forcibly. Everything is solved. Sally has left me. Good. My job is done. Good. Now I'm free to do as I like. A strained and angry joy pounded through him. He felt alone, a stranger in the world and glad of it.

At his stop he got off the bus and walked determinedly toward the house pretending to ignore the pain he felt at approaching it. It's just an empty house, he thought. Nothing more. Despite all puerile theories, it is nothing but a house.

Then, when he went in, he found her sitting on the couch.

He almost staggered as if someone had struck him. He stood dumbly, staring at her. She had her hands tightly clasped. She was looking at him.

He swallowed.

"Well," he managed to say.

"I . . ." Her throat contracted. "Well . . ."

"Well *what!*" he said quickly and loudly to hide the shaking in his voice.

She stood up. "Chris, please. Won't you . . . ask me to stay?" She looked at him like a little girl, pleading.

The look enraged him. All his day dreams shattered; he saw the growing thing of new ideas ground under foot.

"Ask you to stay!" he yelled at her. "By God, I'll ask you nothing!"

"Chris! Don't!"

She's buckling, cried his mind. She's cracking. Get her now. Get her out of here. Drive her from these walls!

"Chris," she sobbed, "be kind. Please be kind."

"*Kind!*"

He almost choked on the word. He felt a wild heat coursing his body.

"Have *you* been kind? Driving me crazy, into a pit of despair. I can't get out. Do you understand? Never. Never! Do you understand that! I'll never write. I *can't* write! You drained it out of me! You killed it! Understand *that?* Killed it!"

She backed away toward the dining room. He followed her, hands shaking at his sides, feeling that she had driven him to this confession and hating her the more for it.

"Chris," she murmured in fright.

It seemed as if his rage grew cell-like, swelling him with fury until he was nothing of bone and blood but a hating accusation made flesh.

"I don't want you!" he yelled. "You're right, I don't want you! Get out of here!"

Her eyes were wide, her mouth an open wound. Suddenly she ran past him, eyes glistening with tears. She fled through the front doorway.

He went to the window and watched her running down the block, her dark brown hair streaming behind her.

Dizzy suddenly, he sank down on the couch and closed his eyes. He dug his nails into his palms. Oh God, I *am* sick, his mind churned.

He twitched and looked around stupidly. What was it? This feeling that he was sinking into the couch, into the floorboards, dissolving in the air, joining the molecules of the house. He whimpered softly looking around. His head ached; he pressed a palm against his forehead.

"What?" he muttered. "What?"

He stood up. As though there were fumes he tried to smell them. As though it were a sound he tried to hear it. He turned around to see it. As though there were something with depth and length and width; something menacing.

He wavered, fell back on the couch. He stared around. There was nothing; all intangible. It might only be in the mind. The furniture lay as it did before. The sunlight filtered through the windows, piercing the gauzelike curtains, making gold patterns on the inlaid wooden floor. The walls were still creamy, the ceiling was as it was before. Yet there was this darkening, darkening . . .

*What?*

He pushed up and walked dizzily around the room. He

forgot about Sally. He was in the dining room. He touched the table, he stared at the dark oak. He went into the kitchen. He stood by the sink and looked out the window.

Far up the block he saw her walking, stumbling. She must have been waiting for the bus. Now she couldn't wait any longer and she was walking away from the house, away from him.

"I'll go after her," he muttered.

No, he thought. No, I won't go after her like a . . .

He forgot what like. He stared down at the sink. He felt drunk. Everything was fuzzy on the edges.

She's washed the cups. The broken saucer was thrown away. He looked at the nick on his thumb. It was dried. He'd forgotten about it.

He looked around suddenly as if someone had sneaked behind him. He stared at the wall. Something was rising. He felt it. It's not me. But it had to be; it had to be imagination.

*Imagination!*

He slammed a fist on the sink. I'll write. Write, *write*. Sit down and drain it all away in words; this feeling of anguish and terror and loneliness. Write it out of my system.

He cried, "Yes!"

He ran from the kitchen. He refused to accept the instinctive fear in himself. He ignored the menace that seemed to thicken the very air.

A rug slipped. He kicked it aside. He sat down. The air hummed. He tore off the cover on the typewriter. He sat nervously, staring at the keyboard. The moment before attack. It was in the air. But it's *my* attack!—he thought triumphantly, my attack on stupidity and fear.

He rolled a sheet into the typewriter. He tried to collect his throbbing thoughts. Write, the word called in his mind. Write—*now*.

"Now!" he cried.

He felt the desk lurch against his shins.

The flaring pain knifed open his senses. He kicked the

desk in automatic frenzy. More pain. He kicked again. The desk flung back at him. He screamed.

*He'd seen it move.*

He tried to back off, the anger torn from him. The typewriter keys moved under his hands. His eyes swept down. He couldn't tell whether he was moving the keys or whether they moved by themselves. He pulled hysterically, trying to dislodge his fingers but he couldn't. The keys were moving faster than his eye could see. They were a blur of motion. He felt them shredding his skin, peeling his fingers. They were raw. Blood started to ooze out.

He cried out and pulled. He managed to jerk away his fingers and jump back in the chair.

His belt buckle caught, the desk drawer came flying out. It slammed into his stomach. He yelled again. The pain was a black cloud pouring over his head.

He threw down a hand to shove in the drawer. He saw the yellow pencils lying there. They glared. His hand slipped, it banged into the drawer.

One of the pencils jabbed at him.

He always kept the points sharp. It was like the bite of a snake. He snapped back his hand with a gasp of pain. The point was jammed under a nail. It was imbedded in raw, tender flesh. He cried out in fury and pain. He pulled at the pencil with his other hand. The point flew out and jabbed into his palm. He couldn't get rid of the pencil, it kept dragging over his hand. He pulled at it and it tore black, jagged lines on his skin. It tore the skin open.

He heaved the pencil across the room. It bounced on the wall. It seemed to jump as it fell on the eraser. It rolled over and was still.

He lost his balance. The chair fell back with a rush. His head banged sharply against the floorboards. His out-clutched hand grabbed at the window sill. Tiny splinters flashed into his skin like invisible needles. He howled in deathly fear. He kicked his legs. The mid-term papers showered down over him like the beating wings of insane bird flocks.



The chair snapped up again on its springs. The heavy wheels rolled over his raw, bloody hands. He drew them back with a shriek. He reared a leg and kicked the chair over violently. It crashed on the side against the mantelpiece. The wheels spun and chattered like a swarm of furious insects.

He jumped up. He lost his balance and fell again, crashing against the window sill. The curtains fell on him like a python. The rods snapped. They flew down and struck him across the scalp. He felt warm blood trickle across his forehead. He thrashed about on the floor. The curtains seemed to writhe around him like serpents. He screamed again. He tore at them wildly. His eyes were terror-stricken.

He threw them off and lurched up suddenly, staggering around for balance. The pain in his hand assailed him. He looked at them. They were like raw butcher meat, skin hanging down in shreds. He had to bandage them. He turned toward the bathroom.

At his first step the rug slid from under him, the rug he had kicked aside. He felt himself rush through the air. He reached down his hands instinctively to block the fall. The white pain made his body leap. One finger snapped. Splinters shot into his raw fingers, he felt a burning pain in one ankle.

He tried to scramble up but the floor was like ice under him. He was deadly silent. His heart thudded in his chest. He tried to rise again. He fell hissing with pain.

The bookshelf loomed over him. He cried out and flung up an arm. The case came crashing down on him. The top shelf drove into his skull. Black waves dashed over him, a sharp blade of pain drove into his head. Books showered over him. He rolled on his side with a groan. He tried to crawl out from underneath. He shoved the books aside weakly and they fell open. He felt the page edges slicing into his fingers like razor blades.

The pain cleared his head. He sat up and hurled the books aside. He kicked the bookcase back against the wall. The back fell off it and it crashed down.

He rose up, the room spinning before his eyes. He stag-

gered into the wall, tried to hold on. The wall shifted under his hands it seemed. He couldn't hold on. He slipped to his knees, pushed up again.

"Bandage myself," he muttered hoarsely.

The words filled his brain. He staggered up through the quivering dining room, into the bathroom.

He stopped. No! Get out of the house! He knew it was not his will that brought him in there.

He tried to turn but he slipped on the tiles and cracked his elbow against the edge of the bath tub. A shooting pain barbed into his upper arm. The arm went numb. He sprawled on the floor, writhing in pain. The walls clouded; they welled around him like blank shroud.

He sat up, breath tearing at his throat. He pushed himself up with a gasp. His arm shot out, he pulled open the cabinet door. It flew open against his cheek, tearing a jagged rip in the soft flesh.

His head snapped back. The crack in the ceiling looked like a wide idiot smile on a blank, white face. He lowered his head, whimpering in fright. He tried to back away.

His hand reached out. For iodine, for gauze!—his mind cried.

His hand came out with the razor.

It flopped in his hand like a new caught fish. His other hand reached in. For iodine, for gauze!—shrieked his mind.

His hand came out with dental floss. It flooded out of the tube like an endless white worm. It coiled around his throat and shoulders. It choked him.

The long shiny blade slipped from its sheath.

He could not stop his hand. It drew the razor heavily across his chest. It slit open the shirt. It sliced a valley through his flesh. Blood spurted out.

He tried to hurl away the razor. It stuck to his hand. It slashed at him, at his arms and hands and legs and body.

At his throat.

A scream of utter horror flooded from his lips. He ran from the bathroom, staggering wildly into the livingroom.

"Sally!" he screamed, "Sally, Sally, Sally . . ."

The razor touched his throat. The room went black. Pain. Life ebbing away into the night. Silence over all the world.

The next day Dr. Morton came. He called the police. And later the coroner wrote in his report:

*Died of self-inflicted wounds.*

XXXXXX —

F---

GROUND cars shrieked to a halt. Muffled curses assailed windshields. Pedestrians jumped back, eyes widened, mouths spread into incredulous O's.

A great metal sphere had appeared out of thin air right in the middle of the intersection.

"What? What?" bumbled a traffic controller, leaving the fastness of his concrete island.

"Good heavens!" cried a secretary, gaping from her third story window. "What *can* this be?"

"Popped outta nowhere!" ejaculated an old man. "Outta nowhere, I'll be bound."

Gasps. Everyone leaned forward with pounding hearts.

The sphere's circular door was being pushed open.

Out jumped a man. He looked around interestedly. He stared at the people. The people stared at him.

"What's the meaning?" ranted the traffic controller, pulling out his report book. "Looking for trouble, eh?"

The man smiled. People close by heard him say, "My name is Professor Robert Wade. I've come from the year 1954."

"Likely, likely," grumbled the officer. "First of all get this contraption out of here."

"But that's impossible," said the man. "Right now anyway."

The officer stuck out his lower lip.

"Impossible, eh?" he challenged and stepped over to the metal globe. He pushed it. It didn't budge. He kicked it. He howled, "Ow!"

"Please," said the stranger. "It won't do any good."

Angrily, the officer pushed aside the door. He peered into the interior.

He backed away, a gasp of horror torn from paled lips. "What? What?" he cried in fabulous disbelief.

"What's the matter?" asked the professor.

The officer's face was grim and shocked. His teeth chattered. He was unnerved.

"If you'd . . ." began the man.

"Silence, filthy dog!" the officer roared. The professor stepped back in alarm, his face a twist of surprise.

The officer reached into the interior of the sphere and plucked out objects.

Pandemonium.

Women averted their faces with shrieks of revulsion. Strong men gasped and stared in frank paralysis. Little children glanced about furtively. Maidens swooned.

The officer hid the objects beneath his coat quickly. He held the lump of them with one trembling hand. Then he clapped violently on the professor's shoulder.

"Vermin!" he raved. "Pig!"

"Hang him, hang him!" chanted a group of outraged ladies, beating time on the sidewalk with their canes.

"The shame of it," muttered a churchman, flushing a fast vermilion.

The professor was dragged down the street. He tugged and complained. The shouting of the crowd drowned him out. They struck at him with umbrellas, canes, crutches and rolled-up magazines.

"Villain!" they accused, waving vindictive fingers. "Unblushing libertine!"

*"Disgusting!"*

But in alleys, in vein bars, in pool rooms, behind leer-ing faces everywhere, squirmed wild fancies. Word got around. Chuckles, deeply and formidably obscene, quivered through the city streets.

They took the professor to jail.

Two men of the control police were stationed by the metal globe. They kept away all curious passersby. They kept looking inside with glittering eyes.

"Right in *there!*" said one of the officers again and again, licking his lips excitedly. "Wow!"

High Commissioner Castlemould was looking at licentious postcards when the televiewer buzzed.

His scrawny shoulders twitched violently, his false teeth clicked together in shock. Quickly, he scooped up the pile of cards and threw them in his desk drawer.

Casting one more inhaling glance at the illustrations, he slammed the drawer shut, forced a mask of official dignity over his bony face and threw the control switch.

On the telecom screen appeared Captain Ranker of the control police, fat neck edges oozing over his tight collar.

"Commissioner," crooned the captain, his features dripping obeisance. "Sorry to disturb you during your hour of meditation."

"Well, well, what is it?" Castlemould asked sharply, beating an impatient palm on the glossy surface of the desk.

"We have a prisoner," said the captain. "Claims to be a time traveler from 1954."

The captain looked around guiltily.

"What are you looking for?" crackled the Commissioner.

Captain Ranker held up a mollifying hand. Then, reaching under the desk, he picked up the three objects and set them on his blotter where Castlemould could see.

Castlemould's eyes made an effort to pop from their sockets. His Adam's apple took a nose dive.

"Aaaah!" he croaked. "Where did you get those?"

"The prisoner had them with him," said Ranker uneasily.

The old Commissioner drank in the sight of the objects. Neither of the men spoke for gaping. Castlemould felt a sensuous dizziness creep over him. He snorted through pinched nostrils.

"Hold on!" he gasped, in a high cracking voice, "I'll be right down."

He threw off the switch, thought a second, threw it on again. Captain Ranker jerked his hand back from the desk.

"You better not touch those things," warned Castlemould, eyes slitted. "Don't touch 'em. Understand?"

Captain Ranker swallowed his heart.

"Yes, sir," he mumbled, a deep blush splashing up his fleshy neck.

Castlemould sneered, threw off the switch again. Then he jumped up from his desk with a lusty cackle.

"Haah haah!" he cried. "Haah haah!"

He hobbled across the floor, rubbing his lean hands together. He scuffed the thick rug delightedly with his thin black shoes.

"Haah haah! Aha haah haah haah!"

He called for his private car.

Footsteps. The burly guard unlocked the door, slid it open.

"Get up, *you*," he snarled, lips a curleycue of contempt.

Professor Wade got up and, glaring at his jailer, walked past the doorway into the hall.

"Turn right," ordered the guard.

Wade turned right. They started down the hall.

"I should have stayed home," Wade muttered.

"Silence, lewd dog!"

"Oh, *shut up*!" said Wade. "You must all be crazy around here. You find a little . . ."

"Silence!" roared the guard, looking around hurriedly. He shuddered. "Don't even say that word in my clean jail."

Wade threw up imploring eyes.

"This is too much," he announced, "anyway you look at it."

He was ushered into a room which spread out behind the door reading: "*Captain Ranker—Chief of Control Police.*"

The chief got up hastily as Wade came in. On the desk were the three objects discreetly hidden by a white cloth.

A wizened old man in funereal garb looked at Wade, a shrewd deductive look on his face.

Two hands waved simultaneously at a chair.

"Sit down," said the chief.

"Sit down," said the Commissioner.

The chief apologized. The Commissioner sneered.

"Sit down," Castlemould repeated.

"Would you like me to sit down?" Wade asked.

Apoplectic scarlet splattered over Captain Ranker's already mottled features.

"Sit down!" he gargled. "When Commissioner Castle-mould says to sit down, he means to sit down!"

Professor Wade sat down.

Both men circled him like calculating buzzards anticipating the first swoop. The professor looked at Chief Ranker.

"Maybe you'll tell me . . ."

"Silence!" snapped Ranker.

Wade slapped an irate hand on the chair arm. "I will not be silent! I'm sick and tired of this asinine prattle you people are talking. You look in my time chamber and find *these* idiotic things and . . ."

He jerked the cloth from its shielding drape. The two men jumped back and gasped as though Wade had torn the clothes from the backs of their grandmothers.

Wade got up, throwing the cloth on the desk.

"For God's sake, what's the matter!" he growled. "It's food. *Food*. A little food!"

The men wilted under the repeated impact of the word as though they stood in blasts of purgatorial wind.

"*Shut your filthy mouth,*" said the captain in a choked, wheezy voice. "We refuse to listen to your obscenities."

"Obscenities!" cried Professor Wade, his eyes and mouth expanding in disbelief. "Am I hearing right?"

He held up one of the objects.

"This is a box of crackers!" he said incredulously. "Are you telling me that's obscene?"

Captain Ranker closed his eyes, all atremble. The old Commissioner regained his senses and, pursing his greyish lips, watched the professor with cunning little eyes.

Wade threw down the box. The old man blanched. Wade grabbed the other two objects.

"A can of processed meat!" he exclaimed furiously. "A flask of coffee. What in the hell is obscene about meat and coffee?"



Dead silence filled the room when the tirade had ended.

They all stared at one another. Ranker shivered bonelessly, his face suffused with hopeless fluster. The old man's gaze bounced back and forth between Wade's indignant face and the objects that were back on the desk. Cogitations strained his brain centers.

At length Castlemould nodded and coughed meaningfully.

"Captain," he said, "I want to be alone with this scoundrel. I'll get to the bottom of this outrage."

The captain looked at his superior and nodded his grotesque skull. He hurried from the room wordlessly. They heard him stumbling down the hall, breathing steam whistles.

"Now," said the Commissioner, dwindling into the immensity of Ranker's chair. "Just tell me what your name is." His voice cajoled. It was half joking.

He picked up the cloth between sedate thumb and forefinger and dropped it over the offending articles with the decorum of a minister throwing his robe over the naked shoulders of a strip teaser.

Wade sank down in the other chair with a sigh.

"I give up," he said, "I come from the year 1954 in my time chamber. I bring along a little . . . food . . . in case of a slight emergency. Then you all tell me that I'm an obscene dog. I'm afraid I don't understand a bit of it."

Castlemould folded his hands over his sunken chest and nodded slowly.

"Mmm-hmmm. Well, young man, I happen to believe you," he said. "It's possible. I'll admit that. Historians tell of such a period when, ahem . . . physical sustenance was taken orally."

"I'm glad someone believes," Wade said. "But I wish you'd tell me about this food situation."

The Commissioner flinched slightly at the word. Wade looked puzzled again.

"Is it possible," he said, "that the word . . . *food* . . . has become obscene?"

At the repeated sound of the word something seemed to click in Castlemould's brain. He reached over and drew

back the cloth with glittering eyes. He seemed to drink in the sight of the flask, the box, the tin. His tongue flicked over dried lips. Wade stared. A feeling close to disgust rose in him.

The old man ran a shaking hand over the box of crackers as though it were a chorus girl's leg. His lungs grappled with the air.

"Food." He breathed the word in bated salacity.

Then, quickly, he drew the cloth back over the articles, apparently surfeited with the maddening sight. His bright old eyes flicked up into Professor Wade's. He drew in a tenuous breath.

"F— well," he said.

Wade leaned back in his chair, beginning to feel an embarrassed heat sluicing through his body. He shook his head and grimaced at the thought of it all.

"Fantastic," he muttered.

He lowered his head to avoid the old man's gaze. Then, looking up, he saw Castlemould peeking under the cloth again with all the tremor of an adolescent at his first burlesque show.

"Commissioner."

The ratty old man jerked in the chair, his lips drawing back with a startled hiss. He struggled for composition.

"Yes, yes," he said, gulping.

Wade stood up. He pulled off the cloth and stretched it out on the desk. Then he piled the objects in the center of it and drew up the corners. He suspended the bundle at his side.

"I don't wish to corrupt your society," he said. "Suppose I get the facts I want about your era and then leave and take my . . . take *this* with me."

Fear sprang into the lined features. "No!" Castlemould cried.

Wade looked suspicious. The Commissioner bit off his mental tongue.

"I mean," he glowed, "no point in going back so soon. After all . . ." He flourished his skinny arms in an unfamiliar gesture. "You *are* my guest. Come, we'll go to my house and have some . . ."

He cleared his throat violently. He got up and hurried around the desk. He patted Wade's shoulders, his lips wrenched into the smile of a hospitable jackal.

"You can get all the facts you need in my library," he said.

"Wade didn't say anything. The old man looked around guiltily.

"But you . . . uh, better not leave the bundle here," he said. "Better take it with you."

He chuckled confidentially. Wade looked more suspicious. Castlemould stiffened the backs of his words. "Hate to say it," he said, "but you can't trust inferiors. Might cause terrible upset in the department. *That*, I mean."

He glanced with affected carelessness toward the bundle. His narrow throat suffered an honest contraction.

"Never know what might happen," he continued. "Some people are unprincipled, you know."

He said it as though the horrendous thought had just made its unwanted appearance in his pristine mind.

He started for the door to avoid argument. He turned, fingers clawed around the knob. "You wait here," he said, "I'll get your release."

"But . . ."

"Not at all, not at all," said Castlemould, springing out into the hallway.

Professor Wade shook his head. Then he reached into his coat pocket and drew out a bar of chocolate.

"Better keep this well hidden," he said to himself, "or it's the firing squad for me."

As they entered the hallway of his house, Castlemould said, "Here, let me take the package. We'll put it in my desk."

"I don't think so," Wade said, keeping back laughter at the Commissioner's eager face. "It might be too much of a . . . temptation."

"Who, for *me*?" cried Castlemould. "Haah, that's funny." He kept holding onto the professor's bundle, his lips molded into a pouting circle.

"Tell you what," he bargained furiously. "We'll go in my study and I'll guard your bundle while you take notes from my books. How's that, haah? Haah?"

Wade trailed the hobbling old man into the high-ceilinged study. It still didn't make sense to him. Food. He tested the sound of it in his mind. Just a harmless word. But, like anything else, it could have any meaning people assigned to it.

He noted how Castlemould's vein-popping hands carressed the bundle, noted the acquisitive, shifty-eyed look that swallowed up his dour old face. He wondered if he could leave the . . . He smiled to himself at the hesitation in his mind. It was getting him too.

They crossed the wide rug. "Have the best collection in the city," bragged the Commissioner. "Complete." He winked a red-veined eyeball. "Unexpurgated," he promised.

Wade said, "That's nice."

He stood before the shelves and ran his eyes over the titles surveying the parallel rows of books that walled the room.

"Do you have a . . ." he started, turning. The Commissioner had left his side and was seated at the desk. He had unwrapped the bundle and was looking at the can of meat with the leer of a miser counting his gold.

Wade called loudly, "Commissioner!"

The old man jumped wildly and dropped the can on the floor. Abruptly, he slid from sight and emerged from the desk surface a moment later, dripping with abashed chagrin, the can tightly gripped in both hands.

"Yes?" he inquired pleasantly.

Wade turned quickly, his shoulders shuddering with ill-repressed laughter.

"Have you . . . a history text?" His voice was shaky.

"Yes sir!" Castlemould burst out. "Best history text in the city!"

His black shoes squeaked over the floor. From a shelf overladen with dust, he tugged out a thick volume. "Reading it myself just the other day," he said proffering it to

Professor Wade. Wade nodded as he blew off a cloud of dust.

"Here we are," Castlemould said. "Now you just sit right here." He patted the cracked leather back of an armchair. "I'll get you something to write on."

Wade watched him as he hustled back to the desk and jerked out the top drawer. May as well let the old fool have the food, he thought as Castlemould came back with a fat pad of artipaper. At first Wade was going to say he had a pad but then he changed his mind, thinking it would be nice to have a sample of the paper of the future.

"Now you just sit right here and take all the notes you want," said Castlemould, "and don't you worry about your f— don't you worry." He soothed anciently.

"Where are you going?"

"Nowhere! Nowhere!" the Commissioner professed. "Staying right here. I'll guard the . . ." His Adam's apple dipped low as he surveyed the articles again and his voice petered out in depleting passion.

Wade eased down into the chair and opened the book. He glanced up once at the old man.

Castlemould was shaking the flask of coffee and listening to it gurgle. On his seamed face hung the look of a reflective idiot.

*The destruction of Earth's f—— bearing capacities was completed by the overall military use of bacterial sprays, the Professor read. These minute germinal droplets permeated the earth to such a depth as to make plant growth impossible. They also destroyed the major portion of m—— giving animals as well as ocean edibles, for whom no protectional provision was made in the last desperate germ attack of the war.*

*Also rendered unpalatable were the major water supplies of earth. Five years after the war, at the time of this writing, the heavy pollution still remains, undiminished by fresh rains. Moreover . . .*

Wade looked up from the history text, shaking his head grimly.

He looked over at the Commissioner. Castlemould was leaning back in his chair, juggling the box of crackers thoughtfully.

Wade went back to the book and hurriedly finished the selection. He glanced at his watch. He had to get back. He completed the notation and closed the book. Standing, he slid the volume back into its place and walked over to the desk.

"I'll be going now," he said.

Castlemould's lips trembled, drawing back from his china teeth.

"So soon?" he said, close to menace hovering in his words. His eyes searched the room, searching for something.

"Ah!" he said. Gently he put down the box of crackers and stood up.

"How about a vein-ball?" he asked. "Just a short one before you go."

"A what?"

"Vein-ball." Wade felt the Commissioner's hand touch his arm. He was led back to the armchair. "Come along," said Castlemould, weirdly jovial. Wade sat. No harm, he thought. I'll leave the food. That will mollify him.

The old man was wheeling a cumbersome wagon-like table from one corner of the room. On its dialed top rose numerous shiny tendrils, each dangling over the sides and ending in a stubby needle.

"Just our way of . . ." The Commissioner glanced around like a salesman of illicit postcards, ". . . *drinking*," he finished softly.

Wade watched him pick up one of the tendrils, "Here, give me your hand," said the Commissioner.

"Will it hurt?"

"Not at all, not at all," said the old man. "Nothing to be afraid of."

He took hold of Wade's hand and jabbed the needle into

the palm. Wade gasped. The pain passed almost immediately.

"It might . . ." Wade started. Then he felt a soothing flow of muscle-easing liquors flowing into his veins.

"Isn't that good?" asked the Commissioner.

"This is how you drink?"

Castlemould stuck the needle into his own palm.

"Not everyone has such a deluxe set," he said proudly.

"This vein-wagon was presented to me by the governor of the state. For my services, y'know, in bringing the notorious Tom-Gang to justice."

Wade felt pleasantly lethargic. Just a moment more, he thought, then I'll go. "Tom-Gang?" he asked.

Castlemould perched on the edge of another chair.

"Short for, ahem, Tomato Gang. Group of notorious criminals trying to rise . . . tomatoes. Wholesale!"

"Horrors," said Wade.

"It was grave, grave."

"Grave. I think I've had enough."

"Better change this a little," Castlemould said, rising to fiddle with the dials.

"I've had enough," Wade said.

"How's that?" asked Castlemould.

Wade blinked and shook his head to clear away the fog.

"That's enough for me," he said, "I'm dizzy."

"How's this?" Castlemould asked.

Wade felt the warmth rising. His veins seemed to run with fire. His head whirled. "No more!" he said, trying to rise.

"How's this?" Castlemould said, drawing the needle from his own hand.

"That's enough!" Wade cried. He reached down to pull out the needle. His hands felt numb. He slumped back in the chair. "Turn it off," he said feebly.

"How's *this*!" cried Castlemould and Wade grunted as a hose of flames played through his body. The heat twisted and leaped through his system.

He tried to move. He couldn't. He was inert, in a liquored coma when Castlemould finally turned down the

dials. He sagged in the chair, the shiny tenacles still dropping from his palm. His eyes were half closed. They were glossy and doped.

Sound. His thickened brain tried to place it. He blinked his eyes. It was like compressing his brain between hot stones. He opened his eyes. The room was a blurry haze. The shelves ran into each other, watery streams of book backs. He shook his head. He thought he felt his brains jiggling.

The mists began to slip away one by one like the veils of a dancer.

He saw Castlemould at the desk.

*Eating.*

He was bent over the desk, his face a blackish red as though he were performing some rabidly carnal rite. His eyes had glued themselves to the food spread out on the cloth. He was apart. The flask banged against his teeth. He held it in interlocked fingers, his body shivering as the cool fluid drained down his throat. His lips smacked ecstatically.

He sliced another piece of meat and stuck it between two crackers.

His trembling hand held the sandwich up to his wet mouth. He bit into their crisp layers and chewed loudly, his eyes glittering orbs of excitement.

Wade's face twisted in revulsion. He sat staring at the old man. Castlemould was looking at postcards while he ate. He gazed at them, jaws moving busily. His eyes shone. He looked at what he was eating, then looked at the cards again while he chewed.

Wade tried to move his arms. They were logs. He struggled and managed to slip one hand on the other. He drew out the needle, a sigh rasping in his throat. The Commissioner didn't hear. He was lost; absorbed in an orgy of digestion.

Experimentally, Wade shifted his legs. They felt like somebody else's legs. He knew that, if he stood, he'd pitch forward on his face.



He dug nails into his palms. At first there was no feeling. Then it came slowly, at last flaring up in his brain and clearing away more fog.

His eyes never left Castlemould. The old man shivered as he ate, caressing each morsel. Wade thought: he's committing an act of love with a box of crackers.

He fought to gain control. He had to get back.

Castlemould had polished off the cracker box. He was nibbling on the bits of crumb that remained. He picked them up with a moistened finger and popped them into his mouth. He made sure there were no remaining scraps of meat. He tilted up the flask and drained it. Practically empty, it was suspended over his gaping mouth. The remaining drops fell—*drip, drip*—into the white-toothed cavity and rolled over his tongue and into his throat.

He sighed and set down the flask. He looked at his pictures once more, his chest laboring. Then he pushed them aside with a drunken gesture and sank back in the chair. He stared in sleepy dullness at the desk, the empty box, the can and flask. He ran two weary fingers over his mouth.

After a few minutes his head slumped forward. His rattling snores echoed through the room.

The festival was over.

Wade struggled up. He stumbled across the floor. It tried to heave itself up in his face. He ran into the side of Castlemould's desk and held on dizzily. The old man still slept.

Wade edged around the desk, leaning against its surface. The room still spun.

He stood behind the old man's chair, looking down at the shambles of violent dining. He took a deep ragged breath and held onto the chair with eyes closed until the spasm of dizziness had passed. Then he opened his eyes and looked once more at the desk. He noticed the post-cards. An incredulous look crossed his face.

They were pictures of food.

A head of cabbage, a roast turkey. In some of them, partially unclad women held dessicated lettuce leaves, lean tomatoes, dried up oranges; held them out in their hands in profane offering.

"God, I want to go back," he muttered.

He was halfway to the door when he realized that he had no idea where his chamber was. He stood weaving on the threadbare rug, listening to Castlemould's snores ring out.

Then he went back and squatted dizzily by the side of the desk. He kept his eyes on the open-mouthed Commissioner as he slid out the desk drawers.

In the bottom drawer he found what he wanted; a strange gun-like tube. He took hold of it.

"Get up," he said angrily, rapping the old man on the head.

"Aaahh!" cried Castlemould, starting up. His midriff collided with the desk edge. He fell back in the chair, the wind knocked out of him. "Get up," Wade said.

A confused Castlemould stared up. He tried to smile and a crumb fell from his lips.

"Now look here, young man!"

"*Shut up.* You're taking me back to my chamber."

"Now, wait a . . ."

"Now!"

"Don't fool with that thing," Castlemould warned. "It's dangerous."

"I hope it's very dangerous," Wade said. "Now get up and take me to your car."

Castlemould scurried to his feet. "Young man, this is . . ."

"Oh, be quiet, you senile goat. Take me to your car and hope I don't push this button."

"God, don't do that!"

The Commissioner suddenly stopped halfway to the door. He grimaced and bent over as his stomach began to protest against its violation.

"Oh! That food," he muttered wretchedly.

"I hope you have the belly ache of the century," said Wade, prodding him on. "You deserve it."

The old man clutched at his paunch. "*Ohhhh.*" He groaned. "Don't shove."

They went into the hall. Castlemould spun against the closet door. He clawed at the wood. "I'm dying!" he announced.

Wade ordered, "Come on!"

Castlemould, heedless, pulled open the door and plunged into the closet depths. There, in the stuffy blackness, he was very sick.

Wade turned away in disgust.

At last the old man stumbled forth, face white and drawn. He shut the door and leaned back against it. "Oh," he said weakly.

"You deserved that," Wade said. "Richly."

"Don't talk," begged the old man. "I may die yet."

"Let's go," Wade said.

They were in the car. A recovered Commissioner was at the wheel. Wade sat across the wide front seat from him holding the weapon level at Castlemould's chest.

"I apologize for . . ." started the Commissioner.

"Drive."

"Well, I don't like to feel inhospitable."

"Shut up."

The old man's face tightened. "Young man," he said tentatively, "how would you like to make some money?"

Wade knew what was coming. "How?" he asked anyway.

"Very simple."

"Bring you food," Wade finished.

Castlemould's face twitched. "Well," he whined, "what's so bad about that?"

"You have gall to ask me that," Wade said.

"Now look, young man. *Son*."

"Oh, God, *shut up*," Wade said, twisting his shoulders in disgust. "Think of your hall closet and shut up."

"Now son," insisted the Commissioner, "that was only because I'm not used to it. But now I . . ." His face became suddenly clever and evil. "I have a taste for it."

The car turned a corner. Far ahead Wade saw his chamber.

"Then lose your taste," he said, never taking his eyes off the old man.

The Commissioner looked desperate. His scrawny

fingers tightened on the wheel. His left foot drummed resolutely on the floorboards. "You won't change your mind?" he said, threateningly.

"You're lucky I don't shoot you."

Castlemould said no more. He watched the road with slitted calculating eyes.

The car hissed up beside the chamber and stopped. "Tell the officers you want to examine the chamber," Wade told him.

"If I don't?"

"Then whatever comes out of this tube, you'll get right in the stomach."

Castlemould forced a brisk smile to his lips and the officers came up.

"What's the meaning—ohhh *Commissioner!*" the officer said, shifting noticeably from truculence to reverence. "What can we do for you?" He doffed his cap with a face-halving smile.

"Want to look over that . . . thing," said Castlemould. "Want to check something."

"Yes *sir*, *sir*," said the officer.

"I'm putting the tube in my pocket," Wade said quietly.

The Commissioner said nothing as he opened the door. The two of them approached the chamber. Then Castlemould said loudly, "I'll go in first. Might be dangerous."

The officers murmured appreciatively of his courage. Wade's mouth tightened. He contented himself by thinking how hard he was going to boot the old man right out into the street.

The Commissioner's bones crackled energetically as he reached up for the two door rungs. He pulled himself up with a teeth-clenching grunt. Wade gave him a shove and enjoyed the sound of the old Commissioner flying against the steel bulkhead.

He reached up his free hand. But he couldn't get in with just one hand. He had to reach up both. He grabbed the rungs and swung in quickly.

The moment Wade entered Castlemould plunged his hand into Wade's pocket and jerked out the weapon.

"Aaah-haah!" His high pitched voice echoed shrilly inside the small shell.

Wade pressed against the bulkhead. He could see a little in the dimness. "What do you think you're going to do now?" he asked.

The porcelain teeth flashed. "You're taking me back," Castlemould said. "I'm going with you."

"There's only room for one person in here."

"Then it'll be *me*."

"You can't operate it."

"You tell me," Castlemould ordered.

"Or what?"

"Or I'll burn you up."

Wade tensed himself. "And if I tell you?" he asked.

"You stay here till I come back."

"I don't believe you."

"You have to, young man," cackled the Commissioner. "Now tell me how it works."

Wade reached for his pocket. "Watch it!" warned Castlemould.

"Do you want me to get out the instruction sheet or not?"

"Go on. But watch it. Instruction sheet, hah?"

"You wouldn't understand a word of it." Wade reached into his pocket.

"What's that you got?" Castlemould asked. "That's not paper."

"A bar of chocolate," Wade breathed the words. "A thick, sweet, creamy, rich bar of chocolate."

"Gimme it!"

"Here. *Take* it."

The Commissioner lunged. He fell off balance, the weapon pointed at the floor. As he pitched forward, Wade grabbed the old man by the collar and the seat of the pants. He hurled Commissioner Castlemould out through the doorway and the old man went sprawling into the street.

Shouts. The officers were horrified. Wade tossed out the chocolate bar.

"Obscene dog!" he roared, choking with laughter as the bar bounced off Castlemould's ridged skull.

Then he jerked the door shut and turned the wheel until he was sealed. He flipped switches and strapped himself down, chuckling at the thought of the Commissioner trying to explain the bar of chocolate so he could keep it.

Next, the intersection was empty on that spot except for a few wisps of acrid smoke. There was only one sound in the dead stillness.

The contemplative wail of a hungry old man.

The chamber shuddered to a halt. The door opened and Wade jumped out. He was surrounded by men and students who came flooding from the control room.

"Hey!" said his friend. "You made it!"

"Of course," Wade said, feeling the pleasure of understatement.

"This calls for a celebration," said his friend. "I'm taking you out tonight and buying you the biggest steak you ever saw—hey, what's the matter?"

Professor Wade was blushing.

X—

## DEAR DIARY.

JUNE 10, 1954

Dear Diary:

Honest, sometimes I get so sick of this damn furnished room I could absolutely vomit!

The window is so dirty—half the time on Saturday and Sunday mornings I think it's going to rain even if the sun is shining.

And such a view! Underwear yet, dripping on wash lines. Girdles, overalls. If it isn't enough to make a girl wish she was dead. It all stinks.

And that jiboney across the hall. He makes life worse than it is. Where he gets his money for booze, who knows? Probably he robs old ladies. Drunk—sings all the time, makes lunges at me in that hallway that looks like a dungeon hall in an Errol Flynn picture. For two cents—less—I'd send to the mail order factory for a thirty-two caliber pistol. Then I'd shoot the crumb. They'd put me away, no more worries. Aaah, it ain't worth it.

And what jolly joy is tomorrow night. Harry Hartley takes me to the Paramount and for one lousy show and a cheap chow mein feed he wants I should play wife to him all night. Honest, men!

Honest, it's so stinking hot.

Now I have to wash out some stuff for tomorrow. I hate to think about it. Oh, shut up! Those dumb dopes across the way—jabber, jabber! New York Giants, Brooklyn Dodgers—they should all drop dead!

And when I think of that lousy subway ride tomorrow—twice! Those bodies like sardines, the faces popping like roses. Some pleasure!

God, what I wouldn't do to get away from this. I'd even

marry Harry Hartley and if I'd do that, I know things are bad.

Oh, to go to Hollywood and be a star like Ava Gardner or them. Having the men fall all over themselves to kiss your hand. Go away, Clark, you bother me. Yeah, he should bother me. I'd crawl all over him.

Oooh, this lousy, stinking place! A girl hasn't no future here. What can I look forward to? No guy who likes me except that fat dope. Chow Mein Harry I think I'll call him.

Vacation in two weeks. Two weeks of nothing. Go to Coney with Gladys. Sit on the damn beach and look at the garbage float on the water and go crazy watching kids neck themselves blind. Then I get all sun-burned and maybe a fever even. And I go to a million movies. It's some life.

I wish it was a couple of thousand years from now, that's what I wish. Then—no work. I live in a fancy spot and they have rocket ships and you can eat pills for a meal and free love. Would I go for that! The pills, of course. Like fun!

This isn't no time to be living. Wars, people yelling at each other and what can a girl expect out of life?

Oh, I've got to wash my lousy underwear.

June 10, 3954

Dear Factum:

Sometimes—yes!—I become so ill of this cursed plastoid dwelling that I could be inclined toward regurgitation.

What a dismal view!

The spaceport across the highway. All night—*buzz, buzz*—and those red shooting exhausts from the vents. Even taking the pills and rubbing narcotilotion on my eyes and ears doesn't help. It is all quite sufficient to make me ill. It is all very foul.

And that idiot neighbor with his ray machine. It infuriates me to know that he can see through the plastoid. Even when I put up my fibre screen I feel him staring. Where does he get the purchase tickets for his invention materials? His job at the spaceport doesn't pay enough. I dare say he steals exchange tickets from the business office.



For two minimatickets I'd get myself an atomizer gun from the spaceport armory and decompose the damned lecher! Then they'd put me away in the Venus pits and I'd be all set.

No, it isn't worth it. I can't stand heat and I loathe sand storms.

And tomorrow night—oh, foul joy—Hendrick Halley takes me to the Space Theatre and for one wretched performance and a dull meal of fricaseed lunar bat he expects me to undergo the risk of impregnation. Honestly, men.

Oh, it's so dreadfully warm. And my fool electro washer has to be mis-aligned just when I need it. I'll have to fly down to the Spaceomat to wash my clothes and I do so weary of night flying.

Oh, there they go again—those fools across the way. Why don't they turn off their speakers? This damned local board has to know every word we say. There they go again! Martian Eagles, Lunar Red Sox—may they all succumb to a vacuum.

And when I think of that miserable spaceship ride tomorrow—twice! That lumbering monstrosity. Imagine—more than an *hour* to Mars for heaven's sake!

Oh, it's too much. What I wouldn't do to get away from it all. I'd even undergo a societal juncture with Hendrick Halley. Great galaxies, things can't be *that* advanced!

Oh, to go to the theatre capital and be a notable like Gell Fig or someone like her. To have all the men swooning and begging you to fly with them to their country planets. I do loathe this shiny spotless city.

Oh, this vile spot! What future has a young woman here? None. I have no man who appeals—certainly not lunar-bat Halley with his nasty little ship that has rusty seams. I wouldn't even trust that wreck on a hop to Europa.

Vacationing in two weeks. Nothing to do. Dull trip to The Moon Resort. Sitting by that godawful pool and watching the young people pleasure themselves. And then I get that red dust in my nostrils and get a fever. And a million trips to the Space Theatre. Oh, how pitiful.

I wish it were the olden days, many thousands of years ago. Then a person could know what was what. There was

so much to do. Men were men and not bald, toothless idiots they are now.

I could do much as I pleased without the government checking my every step.

This is no time to be alive. What can a young woman like myself expect in these times?

Oh, curses. I must fly down to the Spacomat and get my clothes done.

XXXX

Dear Slab:

Sometimes I get so sick of this damn cave I could . . .

XX—

## TO FIT THE CRIME

"I'VE BEEN murdered!" cried ancient Iverson Lord, "brutally, foully murdered!"

"There, there," said his wife.

"Now, now," said his doctor.

"Garbage," murmured his son.

"As soon expect sympathy from mushrooms!" snarled the decaying poet. "From cabbages!"

"From kings," said his son.

The parchment face flinted momentarily, then sagged into meditative creases. "Aye, they will miss me," he sighed. "The kings of language, the emperors of the tongue." He closed his eyes. "The lords of splendrous symbol, they shall know when I have passed."

The moulding scholar lay propped on a cloudbank of pillows. A peak of silken dressing gown erupted his turkey throat and head. His head was large, an eroded football with lace holes for eyes and a snapping gash of a mouth.

He looked over them all; his wife, his daughter, his son and his doctor. His beady suspicious eyes played about the room. He glared at the walls. "Assassins," he grumbled.

The doctor reached for his wrist.

"Avaunt!" snapped the hunched-over semanticist, clawing out. "Take off your clumsy fingers!"

He threw an ired glance at the physician. "White collar witch doctors," he accused, "who take the Hypocratic Oath and mash it into common vaudeville."

"Iverson, your wrist," said the doctor.

"Who knuckle-tap our chests and sounds our hearts yet have no more conception of our ills than plumbers have of stars or pigs of paradise."

"Your wrist, Iverson," the doctor said.

Iverson Lord was near ninety. His limbs were glasslike and brittle. His blood ran slow. His heartbeat was a large drum. Only his brain hung clear and unaffected, a last soldier defending the fort against senility.

"I refuse to die," he announced as if someone had suggested it. His face darkened. "I will not let bleak nature dim my light nor strip the jewel of being from my fingers!"

"There, there," said his wife.

*"There, there! There, there!"* rasped the poet, false teeth clicking in an outrage. "What betrayal is this! That I, who shape my words and breathe into their forms the breath of might, should be a-fettered to this cliché-ridden imbecile!"

Mrs. Lord submitted her delicate presence to the abuse of her husband. She strained out a peace-making smile which played upon her features of faded rose. She plucked feebly at mouse-grey curls.

"You're upset, Ivie dear," she said.

"Upset!" he cried. "Who would not be upset when set upon by gloating jackals!"

"Father," his daughter implored.

"Jackals, whose brains like sterile lumps beneath their skulls refuse to emanate the vaguest glow of insight into words."

He narrowed his eyes and gave his life-long lecture once again. "Who cannot deal with word cannot deal with thought," he said. "Who cannot deal with thought should be dealt with—mercilessly!" He pounded a strengthless fist on the counterpane.

"Words!" he cried. "Our tools, our glory and our welded chains!"

"You'd better save your strength," his son suggested.

The jade eyes stabbed up, demolishing. Iverson Lord curled thin lips in revulsion.

*"Bug,"* he said.

His son looked down on him. "Compose your affairs, Father," he said. "Accept. You'll find death not half bad."

"I am not dying!" howled the old poet. "You'd murder me, wouldn't you! Thug! I shall not listen further!"

He jerked up the covers and buried his white-crowned head beneath them. Only his scrawny, dry fingers dribbled over the sheet edge.

"Ivie, dear," entreated his wife. "You'll smother yourself."

"Better smothered than betrayed!" came the muffled rejoinder.

The doctor drew back the blankets.

"Murdered!" croaked Iverson Lord at all of them, "brutally, foully murdered!"

"Ivie, dear, no one has murdered you," said his wife. "We've tried to be good to you."

"Good!" He grew apoplectic. "Mute good. Groveling good. *Insignificant* good. Ah! That I should have created the barren flesh about this bed of pain."

"Father, don't," begged his daughter.

Iverson Lord looked upon her. A look of stage indulgence flickered on his face.

"So Eunice, my bespectacled owl," he said, "I suppose you are as eager as the rest to view your sire in the act of perishing."

"Father, don't talk that way," said myopic Eunice.

"What way, Eunice, my tooth-ridden gobbler—my erupted Venus? In illiterate English? Yes, perhaps that does put rather a strain on your embalmed faculties."

Eunice blinked. She accepted.

"What will you do, child," inquired Iverson Lord, "when I am taken from you? Who will speak to you? Indeed, who will even look?" The old eyes glittered a *coup de grace*. "Let there be no equivocation, my dear," he said gently. "You are ugly in the extreme."

"Ivie, dear," pleaded Mrs. Lord.

"Leave her alone!" said Alfred Lord. "Must you destroy everything before you leave?"

Iverson Lord raised a hackle.

"You," he intoned, darting a fanged glance. "Mental vandal. Desecrator of the mind. Defacing your birthright in the name of business. Pouring your honored blood into the sewers of commerciality."

His stale breath fluttered harshly. "Groveler before check books," he sneered. "Scraper before bank accounts."

His voice strained into grating falsetto. "No, madame. *Assuredly*, madame. I kiss with reverent lips your fat, unwholesome mind, *Madame!*"

Alfred Lord smiled now, content to let the barrages of his father fall upon himself.

"Let me remind you," he said, "of the importance of the profit system."

"Profit system!" exploded his sire. "Jungle system!"

"Supply and demand," said Alfred Lord.

"Alfred, don't," Eunice cautioned.

Too late to prevent venous eyeballs from threatening to discharge from their sockets. "Judas of the brain!" screamed the poet. "Boy scout of intellect!"

"I pain to mention it," Alfred Lord still dropped coals, "but even a businessman may, tentatively, accept Christianity."

"Christianity!" snapped the jaded near-corpse, losing aim in his fury. "Outmoded bag of long-suffering beans! Better the lions had eaten all of them and saved the world from a bad bargain!"

"That will do, Iverson," said the doctor. "Calm yourself."

"You're upset, Ivie," said his wife. "Alfred, you mustn't upset your father."

Iverson Lord's dulling eyes flicked up final lashes of scorn at his fifty-year whipping post.

"My wife's capacity for intelligible discourse," he said, "is about that of primordial gelatine."

He patted her bowed head with a smile. "My dear," he said, "you are nothing. You are absolutely nothing."

Mrs. Lord pressed white fingers to her cheek. "You're upset, Ivie," her frail voice spoke. "You don't mean it."

The old man sagged back, dejected.

"This is my penitence," he said, "to live with this woman who knows so little of words she cannot tell insult from praise."

The doctor beckoned to the poet's family. They moved from the bed toward the fireplace.

"That's right," moaned the rotting scholar, "desert me. Leave me to the rats."

"No rats," said the doctor.

As the three Lords moved across the thick rug they heard the old man's voice.

"You've been my doctor twenty years," it said. "Your brain is varicosed." "I am to perish," it bemoaned, "sans pity, sans hope, sans all." "Words," it mused. "Build me a sepulchre of words and I shall rise again."

And domineered: "This is my legacy! To all semantic drudges—irreverence, intolerance and the generation of unbridled dismay!"

The three survivors stood before the crackling flames.

"He's disappointed," said the son. "He expected to live forever."

"He *will* live forever," Eunice emoted. "He is a great man."

"He's a little man," said Alfred Lord, "who is trying to get even with nature for reducing his excellence to usual dust."

"Alfred," said his mother. "Your father is old. And . . . he's afraid."

"Afraid, perhaps. Great? No. Every spoken cruelty, every deception and selfishness has reduced his greatness. Right now he's just an old, dying crank."

Then they heard Iverson Lord. "Sweep her away!" howled the sinking poet. "Whip her away with ninetails of eternal life!"

The doctor was trying to capture the flailing wrist. They all moved hastily for the bed.

"Arrest her!" yelled Iverson Lord. "Let her not embrace me as her lover! Avaunt—black, foul-faced strumpet!" He took a sock at her. "Avaunt, I say!"

The old man collapsed back on his pillow. His breath escaped like faltering steam. His lips formed soundless, never-to-be known quatrains. His gaze fused to the ceiling. His hands twitched out a last palsied gesture of defiance. Then he stared at the ceiling until the doctor reached out adjusting fingers.

"It's done," the doctor said.

Mrs. Lord gasped. "No," she said. She could not believe.

Eunice did not weep. "He is with the angels now," she said.

"Let justice be done," said the son of dead Iverson Lord.

It was a grey place.

No flames. No licking smoke. No pallor of doom obscured his sight. Only grey—mediocre grey—unrelieved grey.

Iverson Lord strode through the grey place.

"The absence of retributive heat and leak-eyed wailing souls is pre-eminently encouraging," he said to himself.

Striding on. Through a long grey hall.

"After-life," he mused. "So all is not symbolic applesauce as once I had suspected."

Another hallway angled in. A man came walking out briskly. He joined the scholar. He clapped him smartly on the shoulder.

"Greetings gate!" said the man.

Iverson Lord looked down his mobile, Grecian nose.

"I beg your pardon," he said, distaste wrinkling his words.

"What do you know?" said the man. "How's life treating you? What do you know and what do you say?"

The semanticist drew back askance. The man forged on, arms and legs pumping mightily.

"What's new?" he was saying. "Give me the lowdown. Give me the dirt."

Two side halls. The man buzzed into one grey length. Another man appeared. He walked beside Iverson Lord. The poet looked at him narrowly. The man smiled broadly.

"Nice day, isn't it?" he said.

"What place is this?" asked Iverson Lord.

"Nice weather we've been having," said the man.

"I ask, what place is this?"

"Looks like it might turn out nice," said the man.

"Craven!" snapped Iverson Lord, stopping in his tracks. "Answer me!"



The man said, "Everybody complains about the weather but nobody . . ."

"Silence!"

The semanticist watched the man turn into a side hallway. He shook his head. "Grotesque mummery," he said.

Another man appeared.

"Hi, you!" cried Iverson Lord. He ran. He clutched the man's grey sleeve. "What place is this?"

"You don't say?" said the man.

"You will answer me, sirrah!"

"Is that a fact?" said the man.

The poet sprayed wrath upon the man. His eyes popped. He grabbed at the man's grey lapels. "You shall give intelligence or I shall throttle you!" he cried.

"Honest?" said the man.

Iverson Lord gaped. "What density is this?" he spoke incredulously. "Is this man or vegetable in my hands?"

"Well, knock me down and pick me up," said the man.

Something barren and chilling gripped the poet. He drew back muttering in fear.

Into an enormous room. Grey.

Voices chattered. All alike.

"It's swell here," said a voice. "It isn't black as pitch."

"It isn't cold as ice," said another.

The poet's eyes snapped about in confused fury. He saw blurred forms, seated, standing, reclining. He backed into a grey wall.

"It isn't mean as sin," a voice said.

"It isn't raining cats and dogs," said another.

"Avaunt." The ancient lips framed automatically. "I say . . ."

"Gee whiz, but it's super dandy swell-elegant!" a voice cried happily.

The poet sobbed. He ran. "Surcease," he moaned. "Surcease."

"I'm in the plumbing game," said a man running beside him.

Iverson Lord gasped. He raced on, looking for escape.

"It's a rough game, the plumbing game," said the man.

A side hall. Iverson Lord plunged in frantically.

He ran past another room. He saw people cavorting around a grey maypole.

"By George!" they cried in ecstasy. "Great Guns! Holy Mackerel! Jiminy crickets!"

The scholar clapped gaunt hands over his ears. He hurled himself on, driven.

Now, as he ran, there started in his ears a murmuring. A chorus singing.

"A Stitch In Time Saves Nine. Time And Tide Wait For No Man." They chanted. "Early To Bed, Early To Rise. Too Many Cooks Spoil The Broth."

Iverson Lord cried out. "Gods of moulded symbol! *Pity!*"

The chorus hallelujahed. "Oh Boy!" they sang. "Wow! Gee Whiz! Hot Stuff!" Their voices swelled into a mighty "Land O' Goshen!"

"Aaaaah!" howled the poet. He flung himself against a grey wall and clung there while the voices surrounded like melodic fog.

"Oh, my God," he rasped. "This is complete, this is unmitigated hell!"

"YOU SAID IT!" peaned the chorus of thousands. "AIN'T IT THE TRUTH! OH WELL, YOU CAN'T LIVE FOREVER! THAT'S THE WAY IT GOES! HERE TODAY AND GONE TOMORROW! THAT'S LIFE!"

In four part harmony.

## DRESS OF WHITE SILK

QUIET is here and all in me.

Granma locked me in my room and wont let me out. Because its happened she says. I guess I was bad. Only it was the dress. Mommas dress I mean. She is gone away forever. Granma says your momma is in heaven. I dont know how. Can she go in heaven if shes dead?

Now I hear granma. She is in mommas room. She is putting mommas dress down the box. Why does she always? And locks it too. I wish she didnt. Its a pretty dress and smells sweet so. And warm. I love to touch it against my cheek. But I cant never again. I guess that is why granma is mad at me.

But I amnt sure. All day it was only like everyday. Mary Jane came over to my house. She lives across the street. Everyday she comes to my house and play. Today she was.

I have seven dolls and a firetruck. Today granma said play with your dolls and it. Dont you go inside your mommas room now she said. She always says it. She just means not mess up I think. Because she says it all the time. Dont go in your mommas room. Like that.

But its nice in mommas room. When it rains I go there. Or when granma is doing her nap I do. I dont make noise. I just sit on the bed and touch the white cover. Like when I was only small. The room smells like sweet.

I make believe momma is dressing and I am allowed in. I smell her white silk dress. Her going out for night dress. She called it that I dont remember when.

I hear it moving if I listen hard. I make believe to see her sitting at the dressing table. Like touching on perfume or something I mean. And see her dark eyes. I can remember.

Its so nice if it rains and I see eyes on the window. The rain sounds like a big giant outside. He says shushshush so every one will be quiet. I like to make believe that in mommas room.

What I like almost best is to sit at mommas dressing table. It is like pink and big and smells sweet too. The seat in front has a pillow sewed in it. There are bottles and bottles with bumps and have colored perfume in them. And you can see almost your whole self in the mirror.

When I sit there I make believe to be momma. I say be quiet mother I am going out and you can not stop me. It is something I say I dont know why like I hear it in me. And oh stop your sobbing mother they will not catch me I have my magic dress.

When I pretend I brush my hair long. But I only use my own brush from my room. I didnt never use mommas brush. I dont think granma is mad at me for that because I never use mommas brush. I wouldnt never.

Sometimes I did open the box up. Because I know where granma puts the key. I saw her once when she wouldnt know I saw her. She puts the key on the hook in mommas closet. Behind the door I mean.

I could open the box lots of times. Thats because I like to look at mommas dress. I like best to look at it. It is so pretty and feels soft and like silky. I could touch it for a million years.

I kneel on the rug with roses on it. I hold the dress in my arms and like breathe from it. I touch it against my cheek. I wish I could take it to sleep with me and hold it. I like to. Now I cant. Because granma says. And she says I should burn it up but I loved her so. And she cries about the dress.

I wasnt never bad with it. I put it back neat like it was never touched. Granma never knew. I laughed that she never knew before. But she knows now I did it I guess. And shell punish me. What did it hurt her? Wasnt it my mommas dress?

What I like real best in mommas room is look at the picture of momma. It has a gold thing around it. Frame is what granma says. It is on the wall on top the bureau.

Momma is pretty. Your momma was pretty granma says. Why does she? I see momma there smiling on me and she is pretty. For always.

Her hair is black. Like mine. Her eyes are even pretty like black. Her mouth is red so red. I like the dress and its the white one. It is all down on her shoulders. Her skin is white almost white like the dress. And so are her hands. She is so pretty. I love her even if she is gone away forever I love her so much.

I guess I think thats what made me bad. I mean to Mary Jane.

Mary Jane came from lunch like she does. Granma went to do her nap. She said dont forget now no going to your mommas room. I told her no granma. And I was saying the truth but then Mary Jane and I was playing fire truck. Mary Jane said I bet you havent no mother I bet you made up it all she said.

I got mad at her. I have a momma I know. She made me mad at her to say I made up it all. She said Im a liar. I mean about the bed and the dressing table and the picture and the dress even and every thing.

I said well Ill show you smarty.

I looked into granmas room. She was doing her nap still. I went down and said Mary Jane to come on because granma wont know.

She wasnt so smart after then. She giggled like she does. Even she made a scaredy noise when she hit into the table in the hall upstairs. I said youre a scaredy cat to her. She said back well *my* house isnt so dark like this. Like that was so much.

We went in mommas room. It was more dark than you could see. I said this is my mommas room I suppose I made up it all.

She was by the door and she wasnt smart then either. She didnt say any word. She looked around the room. She jumped when I got her arm. Well come on I said.

I sat on the bed and said this is my mommas bed see how soft it is. She didnt say nothing. Scaredy cat I said. Am not she said like she does.

I said to sit down how can you tell if its soft if you dont sit down. She sat down by me. I said feel how soft it is. Smell how sweet it is.

I closed my eyes but funny it wasnt like always. Because Mary Jane was there. I told her to stop feeling the cover. You said to she said. Well stop it I said.

See I said and I pulled her up. Thats the dressing table. I took her and brought her there. She said let go. It was so quiet and like always. I started to feel bad. Because Mary Jane was there. Because it was in my mommas room and momma wouldnt like Mary Jane there.

But I had to show her the things because. I showed her the mirror. We looked at each other in it. She looked white. Mary Jane is a scaredy cat I said. Am not am not she said anyway nobodys house is so quiet and dark inside. Anyway she said it smells.

I got mad at her. No it doesnt smell I said. Does so she said you said it did. I got madder too. It smells like sugar she said. It smells like sick people in your mommas room.

Dont say my mommas room is like sick people I said to her.

Well you didnt show me no dress and youre lying she said there isnt no dress. I felt all warm inside so I pulled her hair. Ill show you I said youre going to see my mommas dress and youll better not call me a liar.

I made her stand still and I got the key off the hook. I kneeled down. I opened the box with the key.

Mary Jane said pew that smells like garbage.

I put my nails in her and she pulled away and got mad. Dont you pinch me she said and she was all red. Im telling my mother on you she said. And anyway its not a white dress its dirty and ugly she said.

Its not dirty I said. I said it so loud I wonder why granma didnt hear. I pulled out the dress from the box. I held it up to show her how its white. It fell open like the rain whispering and the bottom touched on the rug.

It is too white I said all white and clean and silky.

No she said she was so mad and red it has a hole in it. I got more madder. If my momma was here shed show you I said. You got no momma she said all ugly. I hate her.

*I have.* I said it way loud. I pointed my finger to mom-mas picture. Well who can see in this stupid dark room she said. I pushed her hard and she hit against the bureau. See then I said mean look at the picture. Thats my momma and shes the most beautiful lady in the world.

Shes ugly she has funny hands Mary Jane said. She hasnt I said shes the most beautiful lady in the world!

Not not she said *she has buck teeth.*

I dont remember then. I think the dress moved in my arms. Mary Jane screamed. I dont remember what. It got dark and the curtains were closed I think. I couldnt see anyway. I couldnt hear nothing except buck teeth funny hands buck teeth funny hands even when no one was saying it.

There was something else because I think I heard some one call *dont let her say that!* I couldnt hold to the dress. And I had it on me I cant remember. Because I was grown up strong. But I was a little girl still I think. I mean outside.

I think I was terrible bad then.

Granma took me away from there I guess. I dont know. She was screaming god help us its happened its happened. Over and over. I dont know why. She pulled me all the way here to my room and locked me in. She wont let me out. Well Im not so scared. Who cares if she locks me in a million billion years? She doesn't have to even give me supper. Im not hungry anyway.

Im full.

XXXX —

## DISAPPEARING ACT

*These entries are from a school notebook which was found two weeks ago in a Brooklyn candy store. Next to it on the counter was a half-finished cup of coffee. The owner of the store said no one had been there for three hours prior to the time he first noticed the book.*

**SATURDAY** morning early:

I shouldn't be writing this. What if Mary found it? Then what? The end, that's what, five years out the window.

But I have to put it down. I've been writing too long. There's no peace unless I put things on paper. I have to get them out and simplify my mind. But it's so hard to make things simple and so easy to make them complicated.

Thinking back through the months.

Where did it start? An argument of course. There must have been a thousand of them since we married. And always the same one, that's the horror.

Money.

"It's not a question of confidence in your writing," Mary will say. "It's a question of bills and are we or aren't we going to pay them?"

"Bills for what?" I'll say. "For necessities? No. For things we don't even need."

"Don't need!" And off we go. God, how impossible life is without money. Nothing can overcome it, it's everything when it's anything. How can I write in peace with endless worries of money, money, money? The television set, the refrigerator, the washer—none of them paid for yet. And the bed she wants . . .



But despite all, I—I with wide-eyed idiocy—keep making it even worse.

Why did I have to storm out of the apartment that first time? We'd argued, sure, but we'd argued before. Vanity, that's all. After seven years—*seven!*—of writing I've made only \$316 from it. And I'm still working nights at the lousy part-time job typing. And Mary has to keep working at the same place with me. Lord knows she has a perfect right to doubt. A perfect right to keep insisting I take that full-time job Jim keeps offering me on his magazine.

All up to me. An admission of lack, a right move and everything would be solved. No more night work. Mary could stay home the way she wants to, the way she should. The right move, that's all.

So, I've been making the wrong one. God, it makes me sick.

Me, going out with Mike. Both of us glassy-eyed imbeciles meeting Jean and Sally. For months now pushing aside the obvious knowledge that we were being fools. Losing ourselves in a new experience. Playing the ass to perfection.

And, last night, both of us married men, going with them to their club apartment and . . .

Can't I say it? Am I afraid, too weak? Fool!

Adulterer.

How can things get so mixed up? I love Mary. Very much. And yet, even loving her, I did this thing.

And to make it all even more complicated, I enjoyed it. Jean is sweet and understanding, passionate, a sort of symbol of lost things. It was wonderful. I can't say it wasn't.

But how can wrong be wonderful? How can cruelty be exhilarating? It's all perverse, it's jumbled and confused and enraging.

Saturday afternoon:

She's forgiven me, thank God. I'll never see Jean again. Everything will be all right.

This morning I went and sat on the bed and Mary woke up. She stared up at me, then looked at the clock. She'd been crying.

"Where have you been?" she asked in that thin little girl's voice she gets when she's scared.

"With Mike," I told her. "We drank and talked all night."

She stared a second more. Then she took my hand slowly and pressed it against her cheek.

"I'm sorry," she said and tears came to her eyes.

I had to put my head next to hers so she wouldn't see my face. "Oh, Mary," I said. "I'm sorry too."

I'll never tell her. She means too much to me. I *can't* lose her.

### Saturday night:

We went down to Mandel's Furniture Mart this afternoon and got a new bed.

"We can't afford it, honey," Mary said.

"Never mind," I said. "You know how lumpy the old one is. I want my baby to sleep in style."

She kissed my cheek happily. She bounced on the bed like an excited kid. "Oh, feel how soft!" she said.

Everything is all right. Everything except the new batch of bills in today's mail. Everything except for my latest story which won't get started. Everything except for my novel which has bounced five times. Burney House *has* to take it. They've held it long enough. I'm counting on it. Things are coming to a head with my writing. With everything. More and more I get the feeling that I'm a wound-up spring.

Well, Mary's all right.

### Sunday night:

More trouble. Another argument. I don't even know what it was about. She's sulking. I'm burning. I can't write when I'm upset. She knows that.

I feel like calling Jean. At least *she* was interested in my writing. I feel like saying the hell with everything. Getting drunk, jumping off a bridge, something. No wonder babies are happy. Life is simple for them. Some hunger, some cold, a little fear of darkness. That's all. Why bother growing up? Life gets too complicated.

Mary just called me for supper. I don't feel like eating. I don't even feel like staying in the house. Maybe I'll call up Jean later. Just to say hello.

Monday morning:

Damn, damn, damn!

Not only to hold the book for over three months. That's not bad enough, oh no! They had to spill coffee all over the manuscript and send me a *printed* rejection slip to boot. I could kill them! I wonder if they think they know what they've doing.

Mary saw the slip. "Well, what *now*?" she said disgustedly.

"Now?" I said. I tried not to explode.

"Still think you can write?" she said.

I exploded. "Oh, they're the last judge and jury, aren't they?" I raged. "They're the final word on my writing aren't they?"

"You've been writing seven years," she said. "Nothing's happened."

"And I'll write seven more," I said. "A hundred, a *thousand*!"

"You won't take that job on Jim's magazine?"

"No, I will not."

"You said you would if the book failed."

"I *have* a job," I said, "and you have a job and that's the way it is and that's the way it's going to stay."

"It's not the way *I'm* going to stay!" she snapped.

She may leave me. Who cares! I'm sick of it all anyway. Bills, bills. Writing, writing. Failures, failures, *failures*!

And little old life dribbling on, building up its beautiful, brain-brusting complexities like an idiot with blocks.

"You! Who run the world, who spin the universe. If there's anybody listening to me, make the world simpler! I don't believe in anything but I'd give. . . *anything!* If only . . .

Oh, what's the use? I don't care anymore.

I'm calling Jean tonight.

Monday afternoon:

I just went down to call up Jean about Saturday night. Mary is going to her sister's house that night. She hasn't mentioned me going with her so *I'm* certainly not going to mention it.

I called Jean last night but the switchboard operator at the Club Stanley said she was out. I figured I'd be able to reach her today at her office.

So I went to the corner candy store to look up the number. I probably should have memorized it by now. I've called her enough. But somehow, I never bothered. What the hell, there are always telephone books.

She works for a magazine called *Design Handbook* or *Designer's Handbook* or something like that. Odd, I can't remember that either. Guess I never gave it much thought.

I do remember where the office is though. I called for her there a few months ago and took her to lunch. I think I told Mary I was going to the library that day.

Now, as I recall, the telephone number of Jean's office was in the upper right hand corner of the right page in the directory. I've looked it up dozens of times and that's where it always was.

Today it wasn't.

I found the word *Design* and different business names starting with that word. But they were in the lower left hand corner of the left page, just the opposite. And I couldn't seem to find any name that clicked. Usually as soon as I see the name of the magazine I think: *there it is*. Then I look up the number. Today it wasn't like that.

I looked and looked and thumbed around but I couldn't find anything like *Design Handbook*. Finally I settled for the number of *Design Magazine* but I had the feeling it wasn't the one I was searching for.

I . . . I'll have to finish this later. Mary just called me for lunch, dinner, what have you? The big meal of the day anyway since we both work at night.

Later:

It was a good meal. Mary can certainly cook. If only there weren't those arguments. I wonder if Jean can cook.

At any rate the meal steadied me a little. I needed it. I was a little nervous about that telephone call.

I dialed the number. A woman answered.

"*Design Magazine*," she said.

"I'd like to talk to Miss Lane," I told her.

"Who?"

"Miss Lane."

"One moment," she said. And I knew it was the wrong number. Every other time I'd called the woman who answered had said, "All right" immediately and connected me with Jean.

"What was that name again?" she asked.

"Miss Lane. If you don't know her, I must have the wrong number."

"You might mean Mr. Payne."

"No, no. Before, the secretary who answered always knew right away who I wanted. I have the wrong number. Excuse me."

I hung up. I was pretty irritated. I've looked that number up so many times it isn't funny.

Now, I can't find it.

Of course I didn't let it get me at first. I thought maybe the phone book in the candy store was an old one. So I went down the street to the drugstore. It had the same book.

Well, I'll just have to call her from work tonight. But I

wanted to get her this afternoon so I'd be sure she'd save Saturday night for me.

I just thought of something. That secretary. Her voice. It was the same one who used to answer for *Design Handbook*.

But . . . Oh, I'm dreaming.

Monday night:

I called the club while Mary was out of the office getting us some coffee.

I told the switchboard operator the same way I've told her dozens of times. "I'd like to speak to Miss Lane, please."

"Yessir, one moment," she said.

There was silence a long time. I got impatient. Then the phone clicked again.

"What was that name?" the operator asked.

"Miss Lane, Miss *Lane*," I said. "I've called her any number of times."

"I'll look at the list again," she said.

I waited some more. Then I heard her voice again.

"I'm sorry. No one by that name is listed here."

"But I've called her any number of times there."

"Are you sure you have the right number?"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure. This is the Club Stanley, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Well, that's where I'm calling."

"I don't know what to say," she said. "All I can tell you is that I'm certain there isn't anyone by that name living here."

"But I just called *last night*! You said she wasn't in."

"I'm sorry, I don't remember."

"Are you sure? Absolutely sure?"

"Well, if you want, I'll look at the list again. But no one by that name is on it, I'm positive."

"And no one by that name moved out within the last few days?"

"We haven't had a vacancy for a year. Rooms are hard to get in New York, you know."

"I know," I said, and hung up.

I went back to my desk. Mary was back from the drugstore. She told me my coffee was getting cold. I said I was calling Jim in regard to that job. That was an ill-chosen lie. Now she'll start in on that again.

I drank my coffee and typed a while. But I didn't know what I was doing. I was trying hard to settle my mind.

She has to be somewhere, I thought. I know I didn't dream all those moments together. I know I didn't imagine all the trouble I had keeping it a secret from Mary. And I know that Mike and Sally didn't . . .

Sally! Sally lived at the Club Stanley too.

I told Mary I had a headache and was going out for an aspirin. She said there must be some in the men's room. I told her they were a kind I didn't like. I get involved in the flimsiest lies!

I half ran to the nearby drugstore. Naturally I didn't want to use the phone at work again.

The same operator answered my ring.

"Is Miss Sally Norton there?" I asked.

"One moment please," she said, and I felt a sinking sensation in my stomach. She always knew the regular members right away. And Sally and Jean had been living there for at least *two years*.

"I'm sorry," she said. "No one by that name is listed here."

I groaned. "Oh my God."

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No Jean Lane and no Sally Norton live there?"

"Are you the same party who called a little while ago?"

"Yes."

"Now look. If this is a joke . . ."

"A joke! Last night I called you and you told me Miss Lane was out and would I like to leave a message. I said no. Then I call tonight and you tell me there's nobody there by that name."

"I'm sorry. I don't know what to say. I was on the board last night but I don't recall what you say. If you like I'll connect you with the house manager."

"No, never mind," I said and hung up.

Then I dialed Mike's number. But he wasn't home. His wife Gladys answered, told me Mike had gone bowling.

I was a little nervous or I wouldn't have slipped up.

"With the boys?" I asked her.

She sounded kind of slighted. "Well, I *hope* so," she said. I'm getting scared.

Tuesday night:

I called Mike again tonight. I asked him about Sally.

"Who?"

"Sally."

"Sally who?" he asked.

"You know damn well Sally who, you hypocrite!"

"What is this, a gag?" he asked.

"Maybe it is," I said. "How about cutting it out?"

"Let's start all over," he said. "Who the hell is Sally?"

"You don't know Sally Norton?"

"No. Who is she?"

"You never went on a date with her and Jean Lane and me?"

"Jean Lane! What are you talking about?"

"You don't know Jean Lane either?"

"No, I *don't* and this is getting very unfunny. I don't know what you're trying to pull but cut it out. As two married men we . . ."

"Listen!" I almost shouted into the phone. "Where were you three weeks ago Saturday night?"

He was silent a moment.

"Wasn't that the night you and I bached while Mary and Glad went to see the fashion show at . . ."

"Bached! There was no one with us?"

"Who?"

"No girls? Sally? Jean?"

"Oh, here we go again," he groaned. "Look, pal, what's eating you? Anything I can do?"

I slumped against the wall of the telephone booth.

"No," I said weakly. "No."

"Are you sure you're all right? You sound upset as hell."



I hung up. I *am* upset. I have a feeling as though I were starving and there wasn't a scrap of food in the whole world to feed me.

What's wrong?

Wednesday afternoon:

There was only one way to find out if Sally and Jean had really disappeared.

I had met Jean through a friend I knew at College. Her home is in Chicago and so is my friend Dave's. He was the one who gave me her New York address, the Club Stanley. Naturally I didn't tell Dave I was married.

So I'd look up Jean and I went out with her and Mike went out with her friend Sally. That's the way it was, I *know* it happened.

So today I wrote a letter to Dave. I told him what had happened. I begged him to check up at her home and write quickly and tell me it was a joke or some amazing set of coincidences. Then I got out my address book.

*Dave's name is gone from the book.*

Am I really going crazy? I know perfectly well that the address was in there. I can remember the night, years ago, when I carefully wrote it down because I didn't want to lose contact with him after we graduated from college. I can even remember the ink blot I made when I wrote it because my pen leaked.

The page is blank.

I remember his name, how he looked, how he talked, the things we did, the classes we took together.

I even had a letter of his he sent me one Easter vacation while I was at school. I remember Mike was over at my room. Since we lived in New York there wasn't time to get home because the vacation was only for a few days.

But Dave had gone home to Chicago and, from there, sent us a very funny letter, special delivery. I remember how he sealed it with wax and stamped it with his ring for a gag.

The letter is gone from the drawer where I always kept it.

And I had three pictures of Dave taken on graduation day. Two of them I kept in my picture album. They're still there . . .

But he's not on them.

They're just pictures of the campus with buildings in the background.

I'm afraid to go on looking. I could write the college or call them and ask if Dave ever went there.

But I'm afraid to try.

Thursday afternoon:

Today I went out to Hempstead to see Jim. I went to his office. He was surprised when I walked in. He wanted to know why I'd traveled so far just to see him.

"Don't tell me you've decided to take that job offer," he said.

I asked him, "Jim, did you ever hear me talking about a girl named Jean in New York?"

"Jean? No, I don't think so."

"Come on, Jim. I did mention her to you. Don't you remember the last time you and I and Mike played poker? I told you about her then."

"I don't remember, Bob," he said. "What about her?"

"I can't find her. And I can't find the girl Mike went out with. And Mike denies that he ever knew either of them."

He looked confused so I told him again. Then he said, "What's this? Two old married men gallivanting around with . . ."

"They were just friends," I cut in. "I met them through a fellow I knew at college. Don't get any bright ideas."

"All right, all right, skip it. Where do I fit in?"

"I can't find them. They're gone. I can't even prove they existed."

He shrugged. "So what?" Then he asked me if Mary know about it. I brushed that off.

"Didn't I mention Jean in any of my letters?" I asked him.

"Couldn't say. I never keep letters."

I left soon after that. He was getting too curious. I can see it now. He tells his wife, his wife tells Mary—fireworks.

When I rode to work late this afternoon I had the most awful feeling that I was something temporary. When I sat down it was like resting on air.

I guess I must be cracking. Because I bumped into an old man deliberately to find out if he saw me or felt me. He snarled and called me a clumsy idiot.

I was grateful for that.

Thursday night:

Tonight at work I called up Mike again to see if he remembered Dave from college.

The phone rang, then it clicked off. The operator cut in and asked, "What number are you calling, Sir?"

A chill covered me. I gave her the number. She told me there wasn't any such number.

The phone fell out of my hand and clattered on the floor. Mary stood up at her desk and looked over. The operator was saying, "Hello, hello, hello . . ." I hurriedly put the phone back in the cradle.

"What happened?" Mary asked when I came back to my desk.

"I dropped the phone," I said.

I sat and worked and shivered with cold.

I'm afraid to tell Mary about Mike and his wife Gladys.

I'm afraid she'll say she never heard of them.

Friday:

Today I checked up on *Design Handbook*. Information told me there was no such publication listed. But I went over to the city anyway. Mary was angry about me going. But I had to go.

I went to the building. I looked at the directory in the

lobby. And even though I knew I wouldn't find the magazine listed there, it was still a shock that made me feel sick and hollow.

I was dizzy as I rode up the elevator. I felt as if I were drifting away from everything.

I got off at the third floor at the exact spot where I'd called for Jean that afternoon.

There was a textile company there.

“There never was a magazine here?” I asked the receptionist.

“Not as long as I can remember,” she said. “Of course I've only been here three years.”

I went home. I told Mary I was sick and didn't want to go to work tonight. She said all right she wouldn't go either. I went into the bedroom to be alone. I stood in the place where we're going to put the new bed when it's delivered next week.

Mary came in. She stood in the doorway restively.

“Bob, what's the matter?” she asked. “Don't I have a right to know?”

“Nothing,” I told her.

“Oh, please don't tell me that,” she said. “I know there is.”

I started toward her. Then I turned away.

“I . . . I have to write a letter,” I said.

“Who to?”

I flared up. “That's my business,” I said. Then I told her to Jim.

She turned away. “I wish I could believe you,” she said.

“What does *that* mean?” I asked. She looked at me for a long moment and then turned away again.

“Give *Jim* my best,” she said, and her voice shook. The way she said it made me shudder.

I sat down and wrote the letter to Jim. I decided he might help. Things were too desperate for secrecy. I told him that Mike was gone. I asked him if he remembered Mike.

Funny. My hand hardly shook at all. Maybe that's the way it is when you're almost gone.

Saturday:

Mary had to work on some special typing today. She left early.

After I had breakfast I got the bank book out of the metal box in the bedroom closet. I was going down to the bank to get the money for the bed.

At the bank I filled out a withdrawal slip for \$97. Then I waited in line and finally handed the slip and the book to the teller.

He opened it and looked up with a frown.

"This supposed to be funny?" he asked.

"What do you mean, funny?"

He pushed the book across to me. "Next," he said.

I guess I shouted. "What's the matter with you!"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw one of the men at the front desks jump up and hurry over. A woman behind me said, "Let me at the window, if you please."

The man came fussing up.

"What seems to be the trouble, sir?" he asked me.

"The teller refuses to honor my bank book," I told him.

He asked for the book and I handed it to him. He opened it. Then he looked up in surprise. He spoke quietly.

"This book is blank," he said.

I grabbed it and stared at it, my heart pounding.

It was completely unused.

"Oh, my God," I moaned.

"Perhaps we can check on the number of the book," the man said. "Why don't you step over to my desk?"

But there wasn't any number on the book. I saw that. And I felt tears coming into my eyes.

"No," I said. "No." I walked past him and started toward the doorway.

"One moment, sir," he called after me.

I ran out and ran all the way home.

I waited in the front room for Mary to come home. I'm waiting now. I'm looking at the bank book. At the line where we both signed our names. At the spaces where we had made our deposits. Fifty dollars from her parents on our first anniversary. Two hundred and thirty dollars from

my veteran's insurance dividend. Twenty dollars. Ten dollars.

All blank.

Everything is going. Jean. Sally. Mike. Names fluttering away and the people with them.

Now this. What's next?

Later:

I know.

Mary hasn't come home.

I called up the office. I heard Sam answer and I asked him if Mary was there. He said I must have the wrong number, no Mary works there. I told him who I was. I asked him if I worked there.

"Stop the kidding around," he said. "See you Monday night."

I called up my cousin, my sister, her cousin, her sister, her parents. No answer. Not even ringing. None of the numbers work. Then they're all gone.

Sunday:

I don't know what to do. All day I've been sitting in the livingroom looking out at the street. I've been watching to see if anybody I know comes by the house. But they don't. They're all strangers.

I'm afraid to leave the house. That's all there is left. Our furniture and our clothes.

I mean *my* clothes. Her closet is empty. I looked into it this morning when I woke up and there wasn't a scrap of clothing left. It's like a magic act, everything disappearing, it's like . . .

I just laughed. I must be . . .

I called the furniture store. It's open Sunday afternoons. They said they had no record of us buying a bed. Would I like to come in and check?

I hung up and looked out the window some more.

I thought of calling up my aunt in Detroit. But I can't

remember the number. And it isn't in my address book any more. The entire book is blank. Except for my name on the cover stamped in gold.

My name. Only my name. What can I say? What can I do? Everything is so simple. There's *nothing* to do.

I've been looking at my photograph album. Almost all the pictures are different. There aren't any people on them.

Mary is gone and all of our friends and our relatives.

It's funny.

In the wedding picture I sit all by myself at a huge table covered with food. My left arm is out and bent as though I were embracing my bride. And all along the table are glasses floating in the air.

Toasting me.

**Monday morning:**

I just got back the letter I sent Jim. It has NO SUCH ADDRESS stamped on the envelope.

I tried to catch the mailman but I couldn't. He was gone before I woke up.

I went down to the grocer before. He knew me. But when I asked him about Mary he said stop kidding, I'd die a bachelor and we both knew it.

I have only one more idea. It's a risk, but I'll have to take it. I'll have to leave the house and go downtown to the Veteran's Administration. I want to see if my records are there. If they are, they'll have something about my schooling and about my marriage and the people who were in my life.

I'm taking this book with me. I don't want to lose it. If I lost it, then I wouldn't have a thing in the world to remind me that I'm not insane.

**Monday night:**

The house is gone.

I'm sitting in the corner candy store.

When I got back from the V.A. I found an empty lot

there. I asked some of the boys playing there if they knew me. They said they didn't. I asked them what happened to the house. They said they'd been playing in that empty lot since they were babies.

The V.A. didn't have any records about me. Not a thing.

That means I'm not even a person now. All I have is all I am, my body and the clothes on it. All the identification papers are gone from my wallet.

My watch is gone too. Just like that. From my wrist.

It had an inscription on the back. I remember it.

*To my own darling with all my love. Mary.*

I'm having a cup of cof

X —



## THE WEDDING

THEN he told her they couldn't be married on Thursday because that was the day the Devil married his own mother.

They were at a cocktail party and she wasn't sure what he'd said because the room was noisy and she was a little high.

"What, darlin'?" she asked, leaning over to hear.

He told her again in his serious straightforward manner. She straightened up and smiled.

"Honest, you're a card," she said, and took a healthy sip from her Manhattan.

Later, while he was driving her home, she started talking about the day they were going to get married.

He said they'd have to change it: any day was all right except Thursday.

"I don't get you, darlin'." She put her head on his unbroad and sloping shoulder.

"Any day is all right except Thursday," he repeated.

She looked up, half the amusement dying hard. "All right hon," she said. "A joke's a joke."

"Who's joking?" he inquired.

She stared at him. "Darlin', are you crazy?"

He said, "No."

"But—you mean you want to change the date because . . . ?" She looked flabbergasted. Then she burst into a giggle and punched him on the arm. "You're a card, Frank," she said. "You had me goin' for a minute."

His small mouth pushed together into an irked bow.

"Dearest, I will not marry you on Thursday."

Her mouth fell open. She blinked. "My God, you're serious."

"Perfectly," he answered.

"Yeah, but . . ." she began. She chewed her lower lip. "You're crazy," she said, "because . . ."

"Look, is it so important?" he asked. "Why can't it be another day?"

"But you didn't say anythin' when we made the date," she argued.

"I didn't realize it was to be a Thursday."

She tried hard to understand. She thought he must have a secret reason. B.O. Bad breath. Something important. "But we made the date already," she offered weakly.

"I'm sorry." He was adamant. "Thursday is *out*."

She looked at him carefully. "Let's get this straight, Frank. You won't marry me on that Thursday?"

"Not on *any* Thursday."

"Well, I'm trying to understand, darlin'. But I'm damned if I can."

He didn't say anything.

Her voice rose. "You're bein' childish!"

She slid away from him on the seat and glared out the window. "I'd like to know what *you* call it then."

She lowered the pitch of her voice to imitate his.

"I won't marry on Thursday because . . . because the Devil married his—grandmother or something."

"His mother," he corrected.

She snapped an irritated glance at him and clenched her fists.

"Make it another day and we'll forget the whole thing," he suggested.

"Oh sure. *Sure*," she said. "Forget the whole thing. Forget that my fiancé is afraid he'll make the Devil mad if he marries me on Thursday. That's easy to forget."

"It's nothing to get excited about, dearest."

She groaned. "Oh! if you aren't the . . . the absolute limit."

She turned and looked at him. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"How about Wednesday?" she asked.

He was silent. Then he cleared his throat with embarrassment.

"I—" he started, and then smiled awkwardly. "I forgot that, dear," he said. "Not Wednesday either."

She felt dizzy. "Why?" she asked.

"If we married on Wednesday, I'd be a cuckold."

She leaned forward to stare at him. "You'd be a *what*?" she asked in a shrill voice.

"A cuckold. You'd be unfaithful."

Her face contorted in shock.

"I—I," she spluttered. "Oh, *God*, take me home! I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man in the world!"

He kept driving carefully. She couldn't stand the silence.

She glared at him accusingly. "And—and I suppose if we got married on a-a *Sunday*, you'd turn into a pump-kin!"

"Sunday would be fine," he said.

"Oh, I'm so glad for you," she snapped. "You don't know how happy you've made me."

She turned away from him.

"Maybe you just don't *want* to marry me," she said.

"Well, if you don't, *say so!* Don't give me all this crap about . . ."

"I want to marry you. You know that. But it has to be the right way. For both our sakes."

She hadn't intended to invite him in. But she was so used to his coming in that she forgot when they arrived at the house.

"You want a drink?" she asked sullenly as they went into the livingroom.

"No, thank you. I'd like to talk this thing over with you, sweetheart," he said, pointing to the couch.

She set down her chubby body stiffly. He took her hand.

"Dearest, please try to understand," he said.

He slid an arm around her and stroked her shoulder.

In another moment she melted. She looked into his face earnestly. "Darlin'," she said, "I want to understand. But how can I?"

He patted her shoulder. "Now listen, I just know certain things. And I believe that to marry on the wrong day would be fatal to our relationship."

"But . . . why?"

He swallowed. "Because of consequences."

She didn't say anything. She slid her arms around him and pressed close. He was too comfortable not to marry just because he wouldn't marry on Thursday. Or Wednesday.

She sighed. "All right, darlin'. We'll change it to Sunday. Will that make you happy?"

"Yes," he said. "That will make me happy."

Then one night he offered her father fifteen dollars to seal the bargain of their marriage.

Mr. O'Shea looked up from his pipe with an inquiring smile.

"Would you say that again?" he asked politely.

Frank held out the money. "I wish to pay this as purchase money for your daughter."

"Purchase money?" asked Mr. O'Shea.

"Yes, purchase."

"Who's sellin' her?" Mr. O'Shea inquired. "I'm givin' her hand in marriage."

"I know that," said Frank. "This is just symbolic."

"Put it in your hope chest," said Mr. O'Shea. He went back to his paper.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you must accept it," Frank insisted. Then she came downstairs.

Mr. O'Shea looked at his daughter.

"Tell your young man to stop kiddin'," he said.

She looked at Frank with a worried glance. "Aw, you're not startin' in again, Frank?"

Frank explained it to both of them. He made it clear that he in no way regarded her as a mere cash purchase; that it was only the principle of the thing he wished to adhere to for both their sakes.

"All you have to do is take the money," he finished, "and everything will be all right."

She looked at her father. Her father looked at her.

"Take it, father," she sighed.

Mr. O'Shea shrugged and took the money.

"Four-nine-two," sang Frank. "Three-five-seven . . . eight-one-six. Fifteen, fifteen and thrice on my breast I spit to guard me safe from fascinating charms."

"Frank!" she cried. "You got your shirt all wet!"

Then he told her that, instead of throwing out her bouquet, she'd have to let all the men make a rush for her garter.

She squinted at him. "Come on, Frank. This is goin' too far."

He looked pained.

"I'm only trying to make things right for us," he said. "I don't want anything to go wrong."

"But—good God, Frank!—haven't you done enough? You got me to change the wedding day. You *bought* me for fifteen dollars and spit all over yourself in front of Daddy. You make me wear this awful itchy hair bracelet. Well, I stood for it all. But I'm gettin' a little tired of it all. Enough's enough."

Frank got sad. He stroked her hand and looked like Joan of Arc going up in flames.

"I'm only trying to do what I think is best," he said. "We are beset by a host of dangers. We must be wary of what we do or all is lost."

She stared at him. "Frank, you *do* want to marry me, don't you? This isn't just a scheme to—?"

He swept her into his arms and kissed her fervently.

"Fulvia," he said, "*Dearest*. I love you and I want to marry you. But we must do what is right."

Later Mr. O'Shea said, "He's a jerk. Kick him out on his ear."

But she was rather chubby and she wasn't very pretty and Frank was the only man who'd ever proposed to her.

So she sighed and gave in. She talked it over with her mother and her father. She said that everything would be all right as soon as they got married. She said, "I'll humor him until then, and then—*whammo!*"

But she managed to talk him out of having the male wedding guests make a rush for her garter.

"You don't want me to get my neck broken, do you?" she asked.

"You're right," he said. "Just throw them your stockings."

"Darlin', let me throw my bouquet. Please?"

He looked pensive.

"All right," he said. "But I don't like it. I don't like it one bit."

He got some salt and put it in the hot oven in her kitchen. After a while he looked in.

"Now our tears are dry and we're all right for a while," he said.

The wedding day arrived.

Frank was up bright and early. He went to the church and made sure all the windows were closed tight to keep the demons out. He told the pastor it was lucky it was February so the doors could be kept closed. He made it quite clear that no one was to be allowed to touch the doors during the ceremony.

The pastor got mad when Frank fired his thirty-eight up the chimney.

"What in heaven's name are you doing!" he asked.

"I am just frightening off evil spirits," said Frank.

"Young man, there are no evil spirits in the First Calvary Episcopal Church!"

Frank apologized. But, while the pastor was out in the lobby explaining the shot to a local policeman, Frank took some dishes out of his overcoat pocket, broke them and put the pieces under pew seats and in corners.

Then he rushed downtown and bought twenty-five pounds of rice in case anyone ran out of it or forgot to bring it.

Hurrying back to his betrothed's house, he rang the bell. Mrs. O'Shea answered. Frank asked, "Where's your daughter?"

"You can't see her now," Mrs. O'Shea said.

"I simply must," Frank demanded. He rushed past Mrs. O'Shea and dashed up the stairs.

He found his bride sitting on the bed in her petticoat polishing the shoes she was going to wear.

She jumped up. "What's the matter with you!" she cried.

"Give me one of your shoes," he gasped. "I almost forgot. It would have been doom if I'd forgotten."

He reached for a shoe. She drew back.

"Get out of here!" she cried, pulling on her bathrobe.

"Give me a shoe!"

She said, "No. What am I supposed to wear? Gooloshes?"

"All right," he said, plunged into her closet and came out with an old shoe.

"I'll take this," he said and ran from the room.

She remembered something and her wail followed him out. "You aren't supposed to see me before we get married!"

"That's just a silly superstition!" he called back as he jumped down the staircase.

In the kitchen he handed the shoe to Mr. O'Shea who was sipping coffee and smoking his pipe.

"Give it to me," said Frank.

Mr. O'Shea said, "I'd like to."

Frank was oblivious. "Hand the shoe to me and say 'I transfer authority,'" he said.

Mr. O'Shea's mouth fell open. He took the shoe and handed it back dumbly.

"I transfer authority," he said.

Then he blinked, "Hey, wait!"

But Frank was gone. He jumped back upstairs.

"No!" she yelled as he ran into her room again. "Get the hell out of here!"

He hit her on the head with the shoe. She howled. He swept her into his arms and kissed her violently.

"My dearest wife," he said and ran out.

She burst into tears. "No, I'm *not* going to marry him!" She threw the polished shoes at the wall. "I don't care if he's the last man in the world. He's awful!"

After a while she picked up the shoes and polished them again.

About then Frank was downtown making sure the caterer had used exactly the right ingredients in the cake. Then he bought Fulvia a paper hat to wear when she ran from the church to the sedan. He went to every second hand store in town and bought all the old shoes he could to use as a defense against malign spirits.

By the time the wedding hour came he was exhausted.

He sat in the church anteroom, panting, running over the list he'd made to make sure nothing had been forgotten.

The organ started to play. And she came down the aisle with her father. Frank stood looking at her, still breathing quite heavily.

Then his eyebrows flew up as he noticed that a latecomer was just entering the front door.

"Oh, no!" he cried, covering his face with his hands. "I'm going to go up in a puff of smoke!"

But he didn't.

When he opened his eyes, his bride was holding his hand tightly.

"You see, Frank," she comforted, "you were full of baloney all the time."

The ceremony was performed. And he was so numbed with surprise and shock and bewilderment that he forgot about shoes and bouquets and hats and rice and everything.

As they rode to the hotel in the hired limousine, she stroked his hand.

"Superstition," she cooed. "It's the bunk."

"But—" Frank offered.

"Shush," she said, pressing shut his protest with a kiss. "Aren't you still alive?"

"Yes," said Frank, "and I can't understand it."

At the door to their hotel room Frank looked at her. She looked at him. The bellboy looked away.

Finally she said, "Carry me across the threshold, darlin'."

He smiled a flimsy smile.

"I'd feel silly about it," he said.

"For me," she insisted. "I'm entitled to *one* superstition."



He smiled then. "Yes," he admitted and bent to pick her up.

They never made it. She was awfully chubby.

"Heart failure," said the doctor.

"*Satan*," breathed Fulvia, remaining in a mottled funk the ensuing ten years.

XX —

## SHIPSHAPE HOME

"THAT janitor gives me the creeps," Ruth said when she came in that afternoon.

I looked up from the typewriter as she put the bags on the table and faced me. I was killing a second draft on a story.

"He gives you the creeps," I said.

"Yes, he does," she said. "That way he has of slinking around. He's like Peter Lorre or somebody."

"Peter Lorre," I said. I was still plotting.

"Babe," she implored. "I'm serious. The man is a creep."

I snapped out of the creative fog with a blink.

"Hon, what can the poor guy do about his face?" I said. "Heredity. Give him a break."

She plopped down in a chair by the table and started to take out groceries, stacking cans on the table.

"Listen," she said.

I could smell it coming. That dead serious tone of hers which she isn't even aware of anymore. But which comes every time she's about to make one of her "revelations" to me.

"Listen," she repeated. Dramatic emphasis.

"Yes, dear," I said. I leaned one elbow on the typewriter cover and gazed at her patiently.

"You get that look off your face," she said. "You always look at me as if I were an idiot child or something."

I smiled. Wanly.

"You'll be sorry," she said. "Some night when that man creeps in with an axe and dismembers us."

"He's just a poor man earning a living," I said. "He mops the halls, he stokes the furnaces, he . . ."

"We have oil heat," she said.

"If we had a furnace, the man would stoke it," I said. "Let us have charity. He labors like ourselves. I write stories. He mops floors. Who can say which is the greater act?"

She look dejected.

"Okay," she said with a surrendering gesture. "Okay, if you don't want to face facts."

"Which are?" I prodded. I decided it was best to let it out of her before it burned a hole in her mind.

Her eyes narrowed. "You listen to me," she said. "That man has some design in being here. He's no janitor. I wouldn't be surprised if . . .

"If this apartment house were just a front for a gambling establishment. A hideout for public enemies one through fifteen. An abortion mill. A counterfeiter's lair. A murderer's rendezvous."

She was already in the kitchen thumping cans and boxes into the cupboard.

"Okay," she said. "*Okay.*" In that patient if-you-get-murdered-then-don't-come-to-me-for-sympathy voice. "Don't say I didn't try. If I'm married to a wall, I can't help it."

I came in and slid my arms around her waist. I kissed her neck.

"Stop that," she said. "You can't disconcert me. The janitor is . . ."

She turned. "You're serious," I said.

Her face darkened. "Honey, I *am*," she said. "The man looks at me in a funny way."

"How?"

"Oh," she searched. "In . . . in . . . *anticipation.*"

I chuckled. "Can't blame the man."

"Be serious now."

"Remember the time you thought the milkman was a knife killer for the Maffia?" I said.

"I don't care."

"You read too many fantasy pulps," I said.

"You'll be sorry."

I kissed her neck again. "Let's eat," I said.

She groaned. "Why do I tell you anything?"

"Because you love me," I said.

She closed her eyes. "I give up," she said quietly, with the patience of a saint under fire.

I kissed her. "Come on, hon, we have enough troubles."

She shrugged. "Oh, all right."

"Good," I said. "When are Phil and Marge coming?"

"Six," she said. "I got pork."

"Roast?"

"Mmmm."

"I'll buy that."

"You already did."

"In that case, back to the typewriter."

While I squeezed out another page I heard her muttering to herself in the kitchen. I didn't catch it all. All that came through was a grimly prophetic, "Murdered in our beds or something."

"No, it's flukey," Ruth analyzed as we all sat having dinner that night.

I grinned at Phil and he grinned back.

"I think so too," Marge agreed. "Whoever heard of charging only sixty-five a month for a five-room apartment furnished? Stove, refrigerator, washer—it's fantastic."

"Girls," I said. "Let's not quibble. Let's take advantage."

"Oh!" Ruth tossed her pretty blonde head. "If a man said—Here's a million dollars for you, old man—you'd probably take it."

"I most definitely would take it," I said. "I would then run like hell."

"You're naive," she said. "You think people are . . . are . . ."

"Steady," I said.

"You think everybody is Santa Claus!"

"It is a little funny," Phil said. "Think about it, Rick."

I thought about it. A five-room apartment, brand new,

furnished in the best manner, dishes . . . I pursed my lips. A guy can get lost in his typewriter. Maybe it was true. I nodded anyway. I could see their point. Of course I wouldn't say so. And spoil Ruth's and my little game of war? Never.

"I think they charge too much," I said.

"Oh . . . Lord!" Ruth was taking it straight, as she usually did. "Too much! Five rooms yet! Furniture, dishes, linens, a . . . a television set! What do you want—a swimming pool!"

"A small one?" I said meekly.

She looked at Marge and Phil.

"Let us discuss this thing quietly," she said. "Let us pretend that the fourth voice we hear is nothing but the wind in the eaves.

"I am the wind in the eaves," I said.

"Listen," Ruth re-spun her forbodings, "what if the place is a fluke? I mean what if they just want people here for a cover-up. That would explain the rent. You remember the rush on the place when they started renting?"

I remembered as well as Phil and Marge. The only reason we'd got our apartment was because we happened to be walking past the place when the janitor first put out the renting sign. We went right in. I remember our amazement, our delight, at the rental. We thought it was Christmas.

We were the first tenants. The next day was like the Alamo under attack. It's a little hard to get an apartment these days.

"I say there's something funny about it," Ruth finished. "And did you ever notice that janitor?"

"He's a creep," I contributed blandly.

"He *is*," Marge laughed. "My God, he's something out of a B picture. Those eyes. He looks like Peter Lorre."

"See!" Ruth was triumphant.

"Kids," I said, raising a hand of weary conciliation, "if there's something foul going on behind our backs, let's allow it to go on. We aren't being asked to contribute or suffer by it. We are living in a nice spot for a nice rent. What are we going to do—look into it and try to spoil it?"

"What if there are designs on us?" Ruth said.

"What designs, hon?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "But I sense something."

"Remember the time you sensed the bathroom was haunted?" I said. "It was a mouse."

She started clearing off the dishes. "Are you married to a blind man too?" she asked Marge.

"Men are all blind," Marge said, accompanying my poor man's seer into the kitchen. "We must face it."

Phil and I lit cigarettes.

"No kidding now," I said, so the girls wouldn't hear, "do you think there's anything wrong?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, Rick," he said. "I will say this—it's pretty strange to rent a furnished place for so little."

"Yeah," I said. Yeah, I thought—awake at last. Strange it is.

I stopped for a chat with our strolling cop the next morning. Johnson walks around the neighborhood. There are gangs in the neighborhood, he told me, traffic is heavy and the kids need watching especially after three in the afternoon.

He's a good Joe, lots of fun. I chat with him everyday when I go out for anything.

"My wife suspects foul doings in our apartment house," I told him.

"This is my suspicion too," Johnson said, dead sober. "It is my unwilling conclusion that, within those walls, six-year-olds are being forced to weave baskets by candle light."

"Under the whip hand of a gaunt old hag," I added.

He nodded sadly. Then he looked around, plotter-like.

"You won't tell anyone, will you?" he said. "I want to crack the case all by myself."

I patted his shoulder. "Johnson," I said. "Your secret is locked behind these iron lips."

"I am grateful," he said.

We laughed.

"How's the missus?" he asked.

"Suspicious," I said. "Curious. Investigating."

"Much the same," he said. "Everything normal."

"Right," I said. "I think I'll stop letting her read those science-fiction magazines."

"What is it she suspects?" he asked.

"Oh," I grinned. "Just suppositions. She thinks the rent is too cheap. Everybody around here pays twenty to fifty dollars more, she says."

"Is that right?" Johnson said.

"Yeah," I said, punching his arm. "Don't *you* tell anybody. I don't want to lose a good deal."

Then I went to the store.

"I knew it," Ruth said. "I *knew* it."

She gazed intently at me over a dishpan of soggy clothes.

"You knew what, hon?" I said, putting down the package of second sheets I'd gone down the street to buy.

"This place is a fluke," she said. She raised her hand. "Don't say a word," she said, "You just listen to me."

I sat down. I waited. "Yes dear," I said.

"I found engines in the basement," she said.

"What kind of engines, dear? Fire engines?"

Her lips tightened. "Come on, now," she said, getting a little burned. "I saw the things."

She meant it.

"I've been down there too, hon," I said. "How come I never saw any engines?"

She looked around. I didn't like the way she did it. She looked as if she really thought someone might be lurking at the window, listening.

"This is *under* the basement," she said.

I looked dubious.

She stood up. "Damn it! You come on and I'll show you."

She held my hand as we went through the hall and into

the elevator. She stood grimly by me as we descended, my hand tight in her grip.

"When did you see them?" I asked, trying to be nice.

"When I was washing in the laundry room down there," she said. "In the hallway, I mean, when I was bringing the clothes back. I was coming to the elevator and I saw a doorway. It was a little bit open."

"Did you go in?" I asked.

She looked at me. "You went in," I said.

"I went down the steps and it was light and . . ."

"And you saw engines."

"I saw engines."

"Big ones?"

The elevator stopped and the doors slid open. We went out.

"I'll show you how big," she said.

It was a blank wall. "It's here," she said.

I looked at her. I tapped the wall. "Honey," I said.

"Don't you dare say it!" she snapped. "Have you ever heard of doors in a wall?"

"Was this door in the wall?"

"The wall probably slides over it," she said starting to tap. It sounded solid to me. "Darn it!" she said, "I can just hear what you're going to say."

"I didn't say it. I just stood there watching her.

"Lose something?"

The janitor's voice was sort of like Lorre's, low and insinuating. Ruth gasped, caught way off guard. I jumped myself.

"My wife thinks there's a—" I started nervously.

"I was showing him the right way to hang a picture," Ruth interrupted hastily. "*That's* the way, babe." She turned toward me. "You put the pail in at an angle, not straight in. Now, do you understand?" She took my hand.

The janitor smiled.

"See you," I said awkwardly. I felt his eyes on us as we walked back to the elevator.

When the doors shut, Ruth turned quickly.

"Good night!" she stormed. "What are you trying to do, get him on us?"



"Honey. What . . . ?" I was flabbergasted.

"Never mind," she said. "There are engines down there. *Huge* engines. I saw them. And he knows about them."

"Baby," I said. "Why don't . . ."

"Look at me," she said quickly.

I looked. Hard.

"Do you think I'm crazy?" she asked. "Come on, now. Never mind the hesitation."

I sighed. "I think you're imaginative," I said. "You read those . . ."

"Uh!" she muttered. She looked disgusted. "You're as bad as . . ."

"You and Galileo," I said.

"I'll show you those things," she said. "We're going down there again tonight when that janitor is asleep. If he's ever asleep."

I got worried then.

"Honey, cut it out," I said. "You'll get me going too."

"Good," she said. "*Good*. I thought it would take a hurricane."

I sat staring at my typewriter all afternoon, nothing coming out.

But concern.

I didn't get it. Was she actually serious? All right, I thought, I'll take it straight. She saw a door that was left open. Accidentally. That was obvious. If there were really huge engines under the apartment house as she said, then the people who built them darn sure wouldn't want anyone to know about them.

East 7th Street. An apartment house. And huge engines underneath it.

True?

*"The janitor has three eyes!"*

She was shaking. Her face was white. She stared at me like a kid who'd read her first horror story.

"Honey," I said. I put my arms around her. She was scared. I felt sort of scared myself. And not that the janitor had an extra eye either.

I didn't say anything at first. What can you say when your wife comes up with something like that?

She shook a long time. Then she spoke, in a quiet voice, a timid voice.

"I know," she said. "You don't believe me."

I swallowed. "Babe," I said helplessly.

"We're going down tonight," she said. "This is something important now. It's serious."

"I don't think we should . . ." I started.

"I'm going down there," she said. She sounded edgy now, a little hysterical. "I tell you there are engines down there. Goddamn it, there are engines!"

She started crying now, shaking badly. I patted her head, rested it against my shoulder. "All right, baby," I said. "All right."

She tried to tell me through her tears. But it didn't work. Later when she'd calmed down, I listened. I didn't want to get her upset. I figured the safest way was just to listen.

"I was walking through the hall downstairs," she said. "I thought maybe there was some afternoon mail. You know once in a while the mailman will . . ."

She stopped. "Never mind that. What matters is what happened when I walked past the janitor."

"What?" I said, afraid of what was coming.

"He smiled," she said. "You know the way he does. Sweet and murderous."

I let it go. I didn't argue the point. I still didn't think the janitor was anything but a harmless guy who has the misfortune to be born with a face that was strictly from Charles Addams.

"So?" I said. "Then what?"

"I walked past him. I felt myself shiver. Because he looked at me as if he knew something about me I didn't even know. I don't care what you say—that's the feeling I got. And then . . ."

She shuddered. I took her hand.

"Then?" I said.

"I felt him looking at me."

I'd felt that too when he found us in the basement. I

knew what she meant. You just knew the guy was looking at you.

"All right," I said. "I'll buy that."

"You won't buy this," she said grimly. She sat stiffly a moment, then said, "When I turned around to look he was walking away from me."

I could feel it on the way. "I don't . . ." I started weakly.

*"His head was turned but he was looking at me."*

I swallowed. I sat there numbly, patting her hand without even knowing I was doing it.

"How, hon?" I heard myself asking.

"There was an eye in the back of his head."

"Hon," I said. I looked at her in—let's face it—fright. A mind on the loose can get awfully confused.

She closed her eyes. She clasped her hands after drawing away the one I was holding. She pressed her lips together. I saw a tear wriggle out from under her left eyelid and roll down her cheek. She was white.

"I saw it," she said quietly. "So help me God, I saw that eye."

I don't know why I went on with it. Self torture, I guess. I really wanted to forget the whole thing, pretend it never even happened.

"Why haven't we seen it before, Ruth?" I asked. "We've seen the back of the man's head before."

"Have we?" she said. "Have we?"

"Sweetheart, *somebody* must have seen it. Do you think there's never been anyone behind him?"

"His hair parted, Rick," she said, "and before I ran away I saw the hair going back over it, so you couldn't see it."

I sat there silently. What to say now?—I thought. What could a guy possibly say to his wife when she talks to him like that? You're nuts? You're loony? Or the old, tired, "You've been working too hard." She hadn't been working too hard.

Then again maybe she *had* been working overtime. With her imagination.

"Are you going down with me tonight?" she asked.

"All right," I said quietly. "All right, sweetheart. Now will you go and lie down?"

"I'm all right."

"Sweetheart, go and lie down," I said firmly. "I'll go with you tonight. But I want you to lie down now."

She got up. She went into the bedroom and I heard the bedsprings squeak as she sat down, then drew up her legs and fell back on the pillow.

I went in a little later to put a comforter over her. She was looking at ceiling. I didn't say anything to her. I don't think she wanted to talk to me.

"What can I do?" I said to Phil.

Ruth was asleep. I'd sneaked across the hall.

"Maybe she saw them?" he said. "Isn't it possible?"

"Yeah, sure," I said. "And you know what else is possible too."

"Look, you want to go down and see the janitor. You want to . . ."

"No," I said. "There's nothing we can do."

"You're going down to the basement with her?"

"If she keeps insisting," I said. "Otherwise, no."

"Look," he said. "When you go, come and get us."

I looked at him curiously. "You mean the thing is getting you too?" I said.

He looked at me in a funny way. I saw his throat move.

"Don't . . . look, don't tell anyone," he said.

He looked around, then turned back.

"Marge told me the same thing," he said. "She said the janitor has three eyes."

I went down after supper for some ice cream. Johnson was walking around.

"They're working you overtime," I said as he started to walk beside me.

"They expect some trouble from the local gangs," he said.

"I never saw any gangs," I said distractedly.

"They're here," he said.

"Mmmm."

"How's your wife?"

"Fine," I lied.

"She still think the apartment house is a front?" he laughed.

I swallowed. "No," I said. "I've broken her of that. I think she was just kidding me all the time."

He nodded and left me at the corner. And for some reason I couldn't keep my hands from shaking all the way home. I kept looking over my shoulder too.

"It's time," Ruth said.

I grunted and rolled on my side. She nudged me. I woke up sort of hazy and looked automatically at the clock. The radium numbers told me it was almost four o'clock.

"You want to go *now*?" I asked, too sleepy to be tactful.

There was a pause. That woke me up.

"I'm going," she said quietly.

I sat up. I looked at her in the half darkness, my heart starting to do a drum beat too heavily. My mouth and throat felt dry.

"All right," I said. "Wait till I get dressed."

She was already dressed. I heard her in the kitchen making some coffee while I put on my clothes. There was no noise. I mean it didn't sound as if her hands were shaking. She spoke lucidly too. But when I stared into the bathroom mirror I saw a worried husband. I washed cold water in my face and combed my hair.

"Thanks," I said as she handed me the cup of coffee. I stood there, nervous before my own wife.

She didn't drink any coffee. "Are you awake?" she asked. I nodded. I noticed the flashlight and the screw driver on the kitchen table. I finished the coffee.

"All right," I said. "Let's get it over with."

I felt her hand on my arm.

"I hope you'll . . ." she started. Then turned her face. "What?"

"Nothing," she said. "We'd better go."

The house was dead quiet as we went into the hall. We were halfway to the elevator when I remembered Phil and Marge. I told her.

"We can't wait," she said. "It'll be light soon."

"Just wait and see if they're up," I said.

She didn't say anything. She stood by the elevator door while I went down the hall and knocked quietly on the door of their apartment. There was no answer. I glanced up the hall.

She was gone.

I felt my heart lurch. Even though I was sure there was no danger in the basement, it scared me. "Ruth," I muttered and headed for the stairs.

"Wait a second!" I heard Phil call loudly from his door.

"I can't!" I called back, charging down.

When I got to the basement I saw the open elevator door and light streaming from the inside. Empty.

I looked around for a light switch but there wasn't any. I started to move along the dark passage as fast as I could.

"Hon!" I whispered urgently. "Ruth, where are you?"

I found her standing before a doorway in the wall. It was open.

"Now stop acting as if I were insane," she said coldly.

I gaped and felt a hand pressing against my cheek. It was my own. She was right. There were stairs. And it was lighted down there. I heard sounds. Sounds of metallic clickings and strange buzzings.

I took her hand. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry."

Her hand tightened in mine. "All right," she said. "Never mind that now. There's something flukey about all this."

I nodded. Then I said, "Yeah," realizing she couldn't see my nod in the darkness.

"Let's go down," she said.

"I don't think we better," I said.

"We've got to know," she said as if the entire problem had been assigned to us.

"But there must be someone down there," I said.

"We'll just peek," she said.

She pulled me. And I guess I felt too ashamed of myself to pull back. We started down. Then it came to me. If she was right about the doorway in the walls and the engines, she must be right about the janitor and he must really have had . . .

I felt a little detached from reality. East 7th Street, I told myself again. An apartment house on East 7th Street. It's all real.

I couldn't quite convince myself.

We stopped at the bottom. And I just stared. Engines, all right. Fantastic engines. And, as I looked at them it came to me what kind of engines they were. I'd read about science too, the non-fiction kind.

I felt dizzy. You can't adapt quick to something like that. To be plunged from a brick apartment house into this . . . this storehouse of energy. It got me.

I don't know how long we were there. But suddenly I realized we had to get out of there, report this thing.

"Come on," I said. We moved up the steps, my mind working like an engine itself. Spinning out ideas, fast and furious. All of them crazy—all of them acceptable. Even the craziest one.

It was when we were moving down the basement hall we saw the janitor coming at us.

It was dark still, even with a little light coming from the early morning haze. I grabbed Ruth and we ducked behind a stone pillar. We stood holding our breaths, listening to the thud of his approaching shoes.

He passed us. He was holding a flashlight but he didn't play the beam around. He just moved straight for the open door.

Then it happened.

As he came into the patch of light from the open doorway he stopped. His head was turned away. The guy was facing the stairway.

*But he was looking at us.*

It knocked out what little breath I had left. I just stood there and stared at that eye in the back of his head. And,

although there wasn't any face around it, that damned eye had a smile going with it. A nasty, self-certain and frightening smile. He saw us and he was amused and wasn't going to do anything about it.

He went through the doorway and the door thudded shut behind him, the stone wall segment slid down and shut it from view.

We stood there shivering.

"You saw it," she finally said.

"Yes."

"He knows we saw those engines," she said. "Still he didn't do anything."

We were still talking as the elevator ascended.

"Maybe there's nothing really wrong," I said. "Maybe . . ."

I stopped, remembering those engines. I knew what kind they were.

"What shall we do?" she asked. I looked at her. She was scared. I put my arm around her. But I was scared too.

"We'd better get out," I said. "Fast."

"We have nothing packed though," she said.

"We'll pack them," I said. "We'll leave before morning. I don't think they can do . . ."

"They?"

Why did I say that?—I wondered. They. It had to be a group though. The janitor didn't make those engines all by himself.

I think it was the third eye that capped my theory. And when we stopped to see Phil and Marge and they asked us what happened I told them what I thought. I don't think it surprised Ruth much. She undoubtedly thought it herself.

"I think the house is a rocket ship," I said.

They stared at me. Phil grinned; then he stopped when he saw I wasn't kidding.

"What?" Marge said.

"I know it sounds crazy," I said, sounding more like my wife than she did. "But those are rocket engines. I don't know how in the hell they got there but . . ." I shrugged



helplessly at the whole idea. "All I know is that they're rocket engines."

"That doesn't mean it's a . . . a ship?" Phil finished weakly, switching from statement to question in mid-sentence.

"Yes," said Ruth.

And I shuddered. That seemed to settle it. She'd been right too often lately.

"But . . ." Marge shrugged. "What's the point?"

Ruth looked at us. "I know," she said.

"What, baby?" I asked, afraid to be asking.

"That janitor," she said. "He's not a man. We know that. That third eye makes it . . ."

"You mean the guy *has* one?" Phil asked incredulously.

I nodded. "He has one. I saw it."

"Oh my God," he said.

"But he's not a man," Ruth said again. "Humanoid, yes, but not an earthling. He might look like he does actually—except for the eye. But he might be completely different, so different he had to change his form. Give himself that extra eye just to keep track of us when we wouldn't expect it."

Phil ran a shaking hand through his hair.

"This is crazy," he said.

He sank down into a chair. So did the girls. I didn't. I felt uneasy about sticking around. I thought we should grab our hats and run. They didn't seem to feel in immediate danger though. I finally decided it wouldn't hurt to wait until morning. Then I'd tell Johnson or something. Nothing could happen now.

"This is crazy," Phil said again.

"I saw those engines," I said. "They're really there. You can't get away from it."

"Listen," Ruth said. "They're probably extra-terrestrials."

"What are you talking about?" Marge asked irritably. She was good and afraid, I saw.

"Hon," I contributed weakly, "you've been reading an awful lot of science-fiction magazines."

Her lips drew together. "Don't start in again," she said. "You thought I was crazy when I suspected this place. You thought so when I told you I saw those engines. You thought so when I told you the janitor had three eyes. Well, I was right all three times. Now, give me some credit."

I shut up. And she went on.

"What if they're from another planet," she rephrased for Marge's benefit. "Suppose they want some Earth people to experiment on. To *observe*," she amended quickly, I don't know for whose benefit. The idea of being experimented on by three-eyed janitors from another planet had nothing exciting about it.

"What better way," Ruth was saying, "of getting people than to build a rocket ship apartment house, rent it out cheap and get it full of people fast?"

She looked at us without yielding an inch.

"And then," she said, "just wait till some morning early when everybody was asleep and . . . goodbye Earth."

My head was whirling. It was crazy but what could I say? I'd been cleverly dubious three times. I couldn't afford to doubt now. It wasn't worth the risk. And, in my flesh, I sort of felt she was right.

"But the whole house," Phil was saying. "How could they get it . . . in the air?"

"If they're from another planet they're probably centuries ahead of us in space travel."

Phil started to answer. He faltered, then he said, "But it doesn't *look* like a ship."

"The house might be a shell over the ship," I said. "It probably is. Maybe the actual ship includes only the bedrooms. That's all they'd need. That's where everybody would be in the early morning hours if . . ."

"No," Ruth said. "They couldn't knock off the shell without attracting much attention."

We were all silent laboring under a thick cloud of confusion and half-formed fears. Half formed because you can't shape your fears of something when you don't even know what it is.

"Listen," Ruth said.

It made me shudder. It made me want to tell her to shut up with her horrible forebodings. Because they made too much sense.

"Suppose it *is* a building," she said. "Suppose the ship is *outside* of it."

"But . . ." Marge was practically lost. She got angry because she was lost. "There's nothing outside the house, that's obvious!"

"Those people would be way ahead of us in science," Ruth said. "Maybe they've mastered invisibility of matter."

We all squirmed at once, I think. "Babe," I said.

"Is it possible?" Ruth asked strongly.

I sighed. "It's possible. *Just* possible."

We were quiet. Then Ruth said, "Listen."

"No," I cut in, "you listen. I think maybe we're going overboard on this thing. But there *are* engines in the basement and the janitor *does* have three eyes. On the basis of that I think we have reason enough to clear out. Now."

We all agreed on that anyway.

"We'd better tell everybody in the house," Ruth said. "We can't leave them here."

"It'll take too long," Marge argued.

"No, we have to," I said. "You pack, babe. I'll tell them."

I headed for the door and grabbed the knob.

Which didn't turn.

A bolt of panic drove through me. I grabbed at it and yanked hard. I thought for a second, fighting down fear, that it was locked on the inside. I checked.

It was locked on the outside.

"What is it?" Marge said in a shaking voice. You could sense a scream bubbling up in her.

"Locked," I said.

Marge gasped. We all stared at each other.

"It's true," Ruth said, horrified. "Oh, my God, it's all true then."

I made a dash for the window. Then the place started to vibrate as if we were starting to get hit by an earthquake.

Dishes started to rattle and fall off shelves. We heard a chair crash onto its side in the kitchen.

"What is it!" Marge cried again. Phil grabbed for her as she started to whimper. Ruth ran to me and we stood there, frozen, feeling the floor rock under our feet.

"The engines!" Ruth suddenly cried. "They're starting them!"

"They have to warm up!" I made a wild guess. "We can still get out!"

I let go of Ruth and grabbed a chair. For some reason I felt that the windows had been automatically locked too.

I hurled the chair through the glass. The vibrations were getting worse.

"Quick!" I shouted over the noise. "Out the fire escape! Maybe we can make it!"

Impelled by panic and dread, Marge and Phil came running over the shaking floor. I almost shoved them out through the gaping window hole. Marge tore her skirt. Ruth cut her fingers. I went last, dragging a glass dagger through my leg. I didn't even feel it I was so keyed up.

I kept pushing them, hurrying down the fire escape steps. Marge caught a slipper heel in between two gratings and it snapped off. Her slipper came off. She limped, half fell down the orange-painted metal steps, her face white and twisted with fear. Ruth in her loafers clattered down behind Phil. I came last, shepherding them frantically.

We saw other people at their windows. We heard windows crashing above and below. We saw an older couple crawl hurriedly through their window and start down. They held us up.

"Look out, will you!" Marge shouted at them in a fury. They cast a frightened look over their shoulders.

Ruth looked back at me, her face drained of color. "Are you coming?" she asked quickly, her voice shaking.

"I'm here," I said breathlessly. I felt as if I were going to collapse on the steps. Which seemed to go on forever.

At the bottom was a ladder. We saw the old lady drop from it with a sickening thud, crying out in pain as her ankle twisted under her. Her husband dropped down and

helped her up. The building was vibrating harshly now. We saw dust scaling out from between the bricks.

My voice joined the throng, all crying the same word, "*Hurry!*"

I saw Phil drop down. He half caught Marge, who was sobbing in fright. I heard her half-articulate, "Oh, thank God!" as she landed and they started up the alleyway. Phil looked back over his shoulder at us but Marge dragged him on.

"Let me go first!" I snapped quickly. Ruth stepped aside and I swung down the ladder and dropped, feeling a sting in my insteps, a slight pain in my ankles. I looked up, extending my arms for her.

A man behind Ruth was trying to shove her aside so he could jump down.

"Look out!" I yelled like a raging animal, reduced suddenly by fear and concern. If I'd had a gun I'd have shot him.

Ruth let the man drop. He scrambled to his feet, breathing feverishly and ran down the alley. The building was shaking and quivering. The air was filled with the roar of the engines now.

"Ruth!" I yelled.

She dropped and I caught her. We regained our balance and started up the alley. I could hardly breathe. I had a stitch in my side.

As we dashed into the street we saw Johnson moving through the ranks of scattered people trying to herd them together.

"Here now!" he was calling. "Take it easy!"

We ran up to him. "Johnson!" I said. "The ship, it's . . ."

"Ship?" He looked incredulous.

"The house! It's a rocket ship! It's . . ." The ground shook wildly.

Johnson turned away to grab someone running past. My breath caught and Ruth gasped, throwing her hands to her cheeks.

Johnson was still looking at us; with that third eye. The one that had a smile with it.

"No," Ruth said shakily. "No."

And then the sky, which was growing light, grew dark. My head snapped around. Women were screaming their lungs out in terror. I looked in all directions.

Solid walls were blotting out the sky.

"Oh my God," Ruth said. "We can't get out. *It's the whole block.*"

Then the rockets started.

XXX —

## THE TRAVELLER

SILENT snows descended like a white curtain as Professor Paul Jairus hurried under the dim archway and onto the bare campus of Fort College.

His rubber-protected shoes squished aside the thin slush as he walked. He raised the collar of his heavy overcoat almost to the brim of his pulled down fedora. Then he drove his hands back into his coat pockets and clenched them into fists of chilled flesh.

He strode as rapidly as he could without getting the icy slush on his trousers and ankles. Clouds of steam puffed from his lips as he pressed on. He looked up a moment at the high granite face of the Physical Sciences Center far across the wide campus. Then he lowered his almost colorless face to avoid the cutting wind and hurried on around the curving path, his feet carrying him past the line of skeletal trees whose branches stood brittle and black in the freezing air.

The wind seemed to push him back from his destination. It almost seemed to Jairus as if it were battling him. But that was pure imagination, of course. Keen desire to be over the preliminary steps only made them seem harder. He *was* anxious. In spite of endless self-examination and preparation, the thought of what he was soon to witness excited him. Far beyond the power of mind to chill or snow to whiten.

Or mind to caution.

Now he was past the edge of the huge building. It shielded Jairus from the wind and he raised his dark eyes. In his pockets, his hands flexed impatiently and he felt a strong inclination to break into a run. He must watch himself. If he appeared too excitable they might change their

minds about letting him go. They had responsibilities, after all. He took a deep breath and let the cold air into his lungs. Once the initial fascination had gone he'd be his old rational self. It was the uniqueness of the situation that was upsetting his usual balance. But it was ridiculous to be *this* anxious.

He pushed through the revolving door into the building and almost sighed with pleasure as the warm air rushed over him. He took off his hat and shook the drops onto the marble floor. Then he unbuttoned his coat as he turned right and started down the long hallway. His rubbers squeaked as he walked.

To think, the idea probed at his brain, in less than a half hour it will happen. He shook his head at the inexplicable import of it . . . Never mind, he told himself, control yourself, that's all. You'll need self control to resist the pummeling of false sentiment.

Near the end of the hall he stopped in front of a door, half blonde wood, half frosted glass. His eyes moved briefly over the printed words before he pushed in.

*Dr. Phillips. Dr. Randall.* A blank space, recently scratched out. And, underneath, in neat red letters, the word:

*Chrono-Transposition.*

"You understand clearly then," said Dr. Phillips in an urgent voice, "you are to make no attempt to affect your surroundings in anyway."

Jairus nodded.

"We have to emphasize that," Dr. Randall spoke from his chair. "It's the essential point. Any physical imposition on your surroundings might be fatal to yourself. And . . ." He gestured. ". . . to our program."

"I quite understand," Jairus said. "You can depend on my discretion."

Randall nodded once. He held up his hands and drew the fingers together nervously. "I suppose you know about Wade," he said.



"I've heard rumors," Jairus replied. "But nothing specific."

"Professor Wade was lost in the last transposition," Dr. Phillips said soberly. "The chamber returned without him. We must assume he is dead."

"That was early in September," Randall said. "It's taken us over two months to convince the board to let us try again. If we fail this time . . . well, that's the end of it."

"I see," Jairus said.

"I hope you do, professor, I hope you do," Dr. Phillips broke in. "A great deal is at stake."

"Well, let's not depress him anymore," Randall said with a tired smile. "I think you also know you're about to see something a lot of people would willingly give their lives to see."

"I know it," Jarius said. I also know a lot of people are fools, he thought.

"Shall we go then?" Randall asked.

The footsteps of the three men echoed in the hallway as they walked toward the Apparatus Laboratory. Jairus kept his hands in his coat pockets and did not speak except to make brief replies to their questions. Randall was telling him about the time screen.

"We've discarded the chamber as a dangerous vehicle for travel," Randall said. "You will travel in a circular energy screen which will render you invisible to the people you'll see. The screen *can* be broken by you but I think we've made it clear how perilous that can be."

"You will *please* remain within the screen boundaries," Phillips emphasized. "You must understand that."

"Yes," Jairus said. "I understand it."

"As an added measure, though," Randall said, "you will communicate with us through a chest speaker. This will give us information as you see it. And, also, if you feel any uneasiness, any premonition of danger to yourself—why, you have only to tell us and we'll bring you back immediately. At any rate your . . . *visit*, shall we say, will not exceed one hour."

An hour, Jarius thought. More than enough time to dispel the fallacies of the ages.

"With your health, your education, your background," Randall was saying, "you should have no difficulties."

"One thing I've wondered," Jarius said. "What makes you pick out this particular event instead of any other?"

Randall shrugged. "Maybe because it's almost Christmas."

Sentimental rot, Jarius thought.

They pushed through the heavy metal doors in the Apparatus Laboratory and Jarius saw graduate students moving around a metal platform set on conductor bars arranged like ties. The white-frosted students were setting up and adjusting what appeared to be colored spotlights all pointed to one spot on the platform.

Phillips went into the control room and Randall led Jarius to the platform and introduced him to the students. Then he checked the platform and the lights while Jarius stood by, nervous in spite of self-regimentation, heartbeats trembling his lean body.

Watch it now, he told himself, no emotional involvement. There, that's better. This is exciting, yes, but only as a scientific accomplishment, remember. The wonder is in the visiting and not the moment I am to visit. Years of study have made that quite clear. It's nothing.

That's what he kept telling himself as he stood there on the platform, his hands shaking, watching the lab disappear as though it were blotted away. Feeling his heart pound violently and being unable to stop the pounding with rational words. Words that were: it's nothing, *nothing*. It's only an execution, only an execution, only . . .

I'm standing on Golgotha.

It's about nine o'clock in the morning. The skies are clear. There are no clouds, the sun is bright. This place, the so-called place of the skull, is a bare, unvegetated eminence about a half mile from the walls of Jerusalem. The hill is to the northwest of the city on a high, uneven plain

which extends between the walls of the city and the two valleys of Kedron and Hinnom.

It's a very depressing location. Something akin to an unkempt city lot in our own times. From where I stand I can see discarded garbage and even animal excrement. A few dogs are foraging in the garbage. Quite depressing.

The hill is deserted except for two Roman soldiers. They're putting the upright stakes into the ground, hammering them with mallets into the holes they've dug. Looking around I can see a few people straggling up the hill. Apparently they want to get a good spot to watch the execution. You always find those kind of people, I guess.

It's warm here. I can feel the heat through the screen. The smell too. It's most offensive. There are large flies around. They move in and out of the energy screen without seeming to be blocked. I suppose that means people will do the same.

THAT'S CORRECT, PROFESSOR.

Wait. I can see a cloud of dust. A procession is coming this way. About ten to fifteen soldiers, I'd judge. And there are three men. Two quite burly ones in the lead. In the rear is a . . . is *him*. He's . . . oh, the dust is hiding him.

The two soldiers here are finished with their stakes. They're putting on their armor. Now they're buckling on their swords. One of the people asks them how soon it will start. The soldier says soon enough. Now they're . . .

.....

SOMETHING WRONG?

No, no, I'm just watching. I'm sorry. I should be talking. It's a little hard to remember.

Well, *apparently*, the legend about Simon of Cyrene is factual. The last man . . . *him*, dropped to the earth on his knees. Those cross beams . . . they must weigh almost 200 pounds. The man can't get up. Now the soldiers are

beating him. He can't rise. Too weak, I guess. Some other soldiers are forcing a passerby to lift the cross beam from the man's shoulders. The man stands. He follows behind Simon. I'll assume it's Simon of Cyrene. It can't be proved, of course.

Now the procession is quite close. I can see the two thieves. They're large men, hairy armed with long, dirty robes on their bodies. They don't seem to be having any trouble with their burdens. One of them is even laughing, it appears. Yes, he *is*. He just said something to one of the soldiers and the soldier laughed too.

They're almost here. I can . . .

I can see Jesus.

He's bent over but I can see he's quite tall. Over six feet I'd say. But he's quite thin. He's obviously been fasting. His face and hands are almost white from dust. He's stumbling. He just coughed from the dust in his lungs. His robe is dirty too. There are stains on it. Apparently . . . they've been throwing dung at him.

His face is without expression. Very stolid. His eyes look lifeless. He stares ahead of himself as he moves on. His beard is uncombed and tangled, so is his hair. He looks as if he's half dead already. As a matter of fact he looks . . . quite *ordinary*. Yes he . . .

.....

### PROFESSOR JAIRUS?

They're here now. I'm standing about seven yards away from the stakes. I can see the three men quite clearly. I can even see the wounds around the head of Jesus. Again I can only assume. That the wounds were made by a crown of thorns, I mean. One can't be sure. The gouges appear to be still oozing blood. His temples and hair are caked with it. There's even a line of blood running down his left cheek. He looks terrible, quite terrible. I wonder if the man knows what it's like to be crucified.

They're stripping his clothes off.

They're also taking off the clothes of the two . . . thieves, I suppose they are. They might be murderers, one can't say. At any rate, they're all having their clothes taken from them. They're naked now.

He's thin, my *God*, he's thin. What brainless sort of faith prescribes starvation for a man?

Excuse my comments, gentlemen. I'm liable to make them without thinking. I have rather definite opinions on this moment and this man.

Jesus is quite emaciated. Muscular though. Quite well built. A little flesh and he'd look . . . almost excellent. Now I can see his face a little better. It's . . . rather handsome. Yes, under ideal circumstances this man *might* be extremely handsome. One might then understand his magnetic control over people, his seeming . . . *aura* of supernatural prescience.

#### WHAT'S HAPPENING, PROFESSOR?

The soldiers are forcing the three men on their backs. Their arms are being extended along the cross beams. Are they to be lashed or . . .

They *were*—I mean they *are being* . . . Uh! Good God, can you hear the sound of it? Oh my God. Right through their palms! *Sickening* practice. These ancients certainly have their foul ways.

This crucifixion business—a horrible thing. A man can last three or four days if his constitution is strong enough—if he survives the impeded circulation, the headaches, the hunger, the wracking cramps, hemorrhage, sycophancy of the heart. Either hunger or thirst will get them, probably thirst.

I hope to heaven they don't practice *crurifragium*, that brutal beating to death with mallets. History says nothing of it in this case but how can anyone know? Except—the idea occurs—except *me*.

#### WHAT'S HAPPENING?

They're being raised. The soldiers are lifting them with the cross beams. The thieves are jumping up in order to avoid torn palms. They're roaring with anger and pain.

*He* can't get up. They're—oh God!—they're *pulling* him

up by his nailed palms! His face has gone *white*. But he doesn't cry out. His lips are pressed together, they're drained of color. He refuses to cry out. The man's a *fanatic*.

IS THE PLACE CROWDED, PROFESSOR?

No, no, there's no one around. The soldiers are keeping people away. There are a few people but none closer than thirty yards. A few men. And, yes, some women. Three I see together. They could possibly be the three mentioned by Matthew and Mark.

But no one else. I see no man who could be John. No woman who could be the mother of Jesus. And surely I'd recognize Mary of Magdalene. No one but those three women. No one seems to care, that is. The rest, apparently, are here for the . . . the show. Good God how this scene has been garbled and obscured by pious gilding. I can—I can hardly express how *dreary* it all is, how common and ordinary. Not that killing a man this way is ordinary but . . . well, where are the portents, the signs, the miracles?

*Biblical drivel.*

WHAT'S HAPPENING, JAIRUS?

Well, he's been put up. The cross is, of course, not at all as pictured in religious rite. It's really a low wooden structure resembling a letter T. The stem was already in the ground as I've said and the cross beam was put on top of it and nailed and lashed. The feet of the three men are only inches from the ground. That serves the purpose as well as if it were many feet.

And, speaking of feet, the feet of the three men were lashed, not nailed to the stake. And between their legs is a-a spar, a peg. It supports their bodies. I'd rather expected one under their feet too. Apparently I'm wrong on that count.

It is—*bizarre* though, how people in our time can believe a man weighing—oh, it must be at least 170 pounds—could *hang* from a cross merely by nails through palms and feet. They attribute to the human flesh far more durability than it possesses.

Now the soldiers are . . .

WHAT ABOUT THE TITULAR INSCRIPTION, PROFESSOR?

Oh, yes, yes. Well, they *are* in three languages, it appears. There's Greek. There's Hebrew and Latin. Let me see . . . uh . . . *Jesus of . . . Nazareth—yes—Jesus of Nazareth. The . . . King . . . King of the Jews.* That's the complete inscription. Have you got that? *Jesus of Nazareth. The King of the Jews.* Apparently John had some factual information about the crucifixion anyway. Even if he isn't here as he claimed.

Ah, yes. The soldiers are holding a drink up to Jesus. I assume it's the soporific intended to induce stupefaction that the Jerusalem women are reputed to have prepared for all such condemned criminals.

Ah. He refuses it. He turns his head to the side. The soldier is angry. He draws back as if he means to strike Jesus. But he changes his mind.

The other two men are drinking the wine and myrrh the soldiers hold to their lips. They're smacking their lips. One of them says something. I didn't hear all of it. I heard the word *good* though. They're both smacking their lips.

One of them, apparently, is asking for the drink Jesus refused. He doesn't get it. He turns and jeers at Jesus for not drinking it. He speaks so fast I can't catch his words. I think he must be half drunk with terror anyway. Soon he'll be insensible from the drink though. That will be his release. Jesus chooses to have no release.

That's his privilege as self-appointed martyr.

YOU WERE SAYING BEFORE ABOUT THE SOLDIERS, PROFESSOR?

The soldiers? Oh—oh *yes*. They're casting lots for the clothes. I imagine I don't have to tell you that there's no robe I can see that has no seam. They're all three very ordinary robes with very visible seams.

Well, that seems to complete the basic details. The three are up. I'll study Jesus now a little. May I move closer?

IF YOU WISH. BUT BE ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN YOU REMAIN WITHIN THE ENERGY SCREEN.

I'll be careful. I'm moving. I'm about six yards away

now. Five—three—t . . . this will do. I don't think I should . . . I don't think I'd better get any closer.

IS EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT?

Quite—quite all right. I-uh-*am* a little nervous, that's all. After all, this *is* Jesus. I almost feel as if he can—well, that's absurd. How powerful a hold superstition holds on the mind.

Yes, he's quite young. In his thirties, I'd judge. As I said, in good health and groomed, he might be a stunning figure. He might even understandably be taken for some sort of messianic deliverer.

His skin is clear. Dirty, of course, but . . . clear. His mouth is rather wide, full lipped. A strong line. His nose isn't hooked. It looks almost—oh, I don't know—almost Grecian, you might say. He *is* quite handsome. Yes. He's quite a handsome man.

The eyes are . . .

.....

PROFESSOR?

Well, at least our theories are vindicated that later description of the crucifixion is almost primarily based on prophecy. It's obvious that very little in the Bible transcription of the scene is factual. There is no John, no mother of Jesus, no Mary of Magdalene, no others supposed to be here. I've heard no words from Jesus. No one has jeered at him except that thief and that was only because the thief was angry he didn't get the second drink of drugged wine. And there are no signs.

No, I think we can safely say that the later chroniclers, intent on substantiating the old Psalms auguries, put together the account of the crucifixion with Old Testament in lap. These Psalms, the 22nd, 31st, 38th and 69th to the fore, plus Christian imagination—made the crucifixion



something—*quite* different from what it actually was.  
From what it *is* as I stand here.

I . . . *oh*

.....

### WHAT IS IT, PROFESSOR?

He just . . . *spoke*.

He spoke. He said—Eloi. He said *God* in his own language. His face is white and drawn. The lines of *pain* on it . . .

His face—it's so . . . so *gentle*. Even now in this moment of terrible pain, he . . .

Undoubtedly auto-suggested hypnosis, easily effected due to his exhaustion and emotional fervor. I'm sure the poor dev—man must feel some sort of . . . violent ecstasy of pain. Maybe he doesn't even feel pain at all. Perhaps his heightened body functioning, his exacerbated adrenalin flow—prevent feeling. It's perfectly feasible. His eyes are . . . his—his eyes are . . .

### ARE THERE ANY SIGNS OF NATURAL DISORDER, PROFESSOR JAIRUS?

I assume you—refer to the earthquake recorded or the dark skies or the tombs rent open or a half dozen other things spoken about in the Bible and other sources.

No, I'm afraid not.

No dark skies. The sun is still very bright and very hot. The ground is as steady as a rock. The records *err* slightly. Obviously the authors of the records weren't satisfied with this and decided to add religious significance to an otherwise unreligious moment. Hand of God and all that rot.

It makes me furious, really. Isn't the moment enough in itself? Isn't it terrible and violent enough for . . . *oh*, the damnable pedantry of—!

.....

PROFESSOR, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

What?

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT? ARE YOU FEELING ILL?

I'm . . . quite well. Thank you.

WHAT'S HAPPENING?

.....

PROFESSOR?

Those eyes. Those *eyes*. My God, they're so—they're so *hurt*! Like a father who's been beaten by his own children. Yet who still loves his children. Who's been set upon by loved ones and *stripped* and *beaten* and *nailed* and *humiliated*! Is there no—

PROFESSOR.

I'm—I'm—I'm all right. I'm quite—quite all right. It's just that . . . it *is* upsetting. This man has done nothing and—oh, my God, there's a *fly* on his lips! *Get off!*

.....

WHAT'S HAPPENING, PROFESSOR JAIRUS? ARE YOU—

They're giving him a drink. He must be horribly thirsty. The sun is so hot. I'm thirsty myself.

A soldier just dipped a sponge into a pail of *posca*, the soldiers' drink of vinegar and water. Now he's put the sponge on a broken reed which was lying on the ground. He touches the sponge to the mouth of Jesus.

He . . . sucks the sponge. His lips tremble. It must taste horrible—*bitter* and *warm*. God, why don't they give him a real drink—some cool water? Have they no pity for the—

PROFESSOR, YOU'D BETTER GET READY TO

COME BACK NOW. YOU'VE BEEN GONE ALMOST FORTY MINUTES ALREADY. YOU'VE DONE WHAT'S TO BE DONE.

No, don't take me back yet—not just yet. A little while. Just a little while. I'll be all right. I swear I'll be all right. J-just let me—stay here with him. Don't take me, not now. *Please.*

PROFESSOR JAIRUS.

His eyes, his eyes—*his eyes!* Oh my God in heaven, they're looking at me! He *sees* me! I'm sure of it! He *sees* me!

WE'RE BRINGING YOU BACK.

No, not yet. I'm—I must . . . I . . .

DON'T GET OUT OF THE SCREEN.

Out of the screen? Yes, maybe I can—I could . . .

YOU'RE COMING BACK.

No! No, I'll break the screen if you try to bring me back! I'll—I'll go *through* it! I swear I will—don't touch me!

PROFESSOR, STOP IT!

I've got to stop them! I've got to *stop* them! I'm here, I can save him! I *can!* Why can't I take him into the screen with me and take him away?

JAIRUS, USE YOUR HEAD!

Why not, damn it, why *not!* I'm not going to stand here and let them destroy him! He's too good, too gentle. I can save him—I *can!*

JAIRUS, YOU'VE DONE YOUR JOB! NOW LET HIM DO *HIS!*

No!

LOCK THE SCREEN.

What! What are you doing?

WE'LL HAVE TO CHANCE BRINGING HIM BACK IN THE FEW SECONDS THE SCREEN LOCK WILL HOLD.

Let me out! God help me, let me free! Stop it, you don't know what you're doing!

QUICKLY!

No! Stop—*stop!* Don't take me! *Don't!* LOOK OUT!

They dragged him, frenzied and kicking from the platform. They carried him into the office and put him down on a cot and Doctor Randall drove a syringe into his arm.

In a half hour Professor Jairus was quiet enough to swallow a glass of brandy. He sat in a big leather chair, staring straight ahead, his eyes lifeless. His mind had not returned with his body—it was still back on a lonely hill beyond Jerusalem.

There were things he could have told them; word pictures to bolster history. He could have described the clothes worn on Golgotha, the words spoken there, the moment in its bleak and brutal entirety—all this he could have told them. Told them especially that, in bringing him back so quickly, they had caused the phenomena which the Bible recorded as a quaking of earth and a renting of rocks.

None of these things did he tell them.

He told them he wanted to go home.

He put on his coat and hat and overshoes and walked into the grey murk of afternoon. His rubber covered shoes crunched in the hard packed snow, his eyes stared into the curtain of soft-falling snow.

The other things are not important, he was thinking. True or untrue they didn't matter. The water into wine, the lepers cleansed, the sick healed, the walking on water, the return from the grave—none of them mattered. Men who sought for hope in physical miracles only were childish dreamers who could never save the world.

A man had given up his life for the things he believed in. *That was miracle enough for anyone.*

It was Christmas Eve and it was a lovely time to find a faith.

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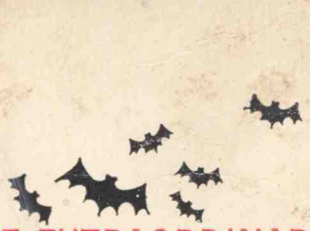
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