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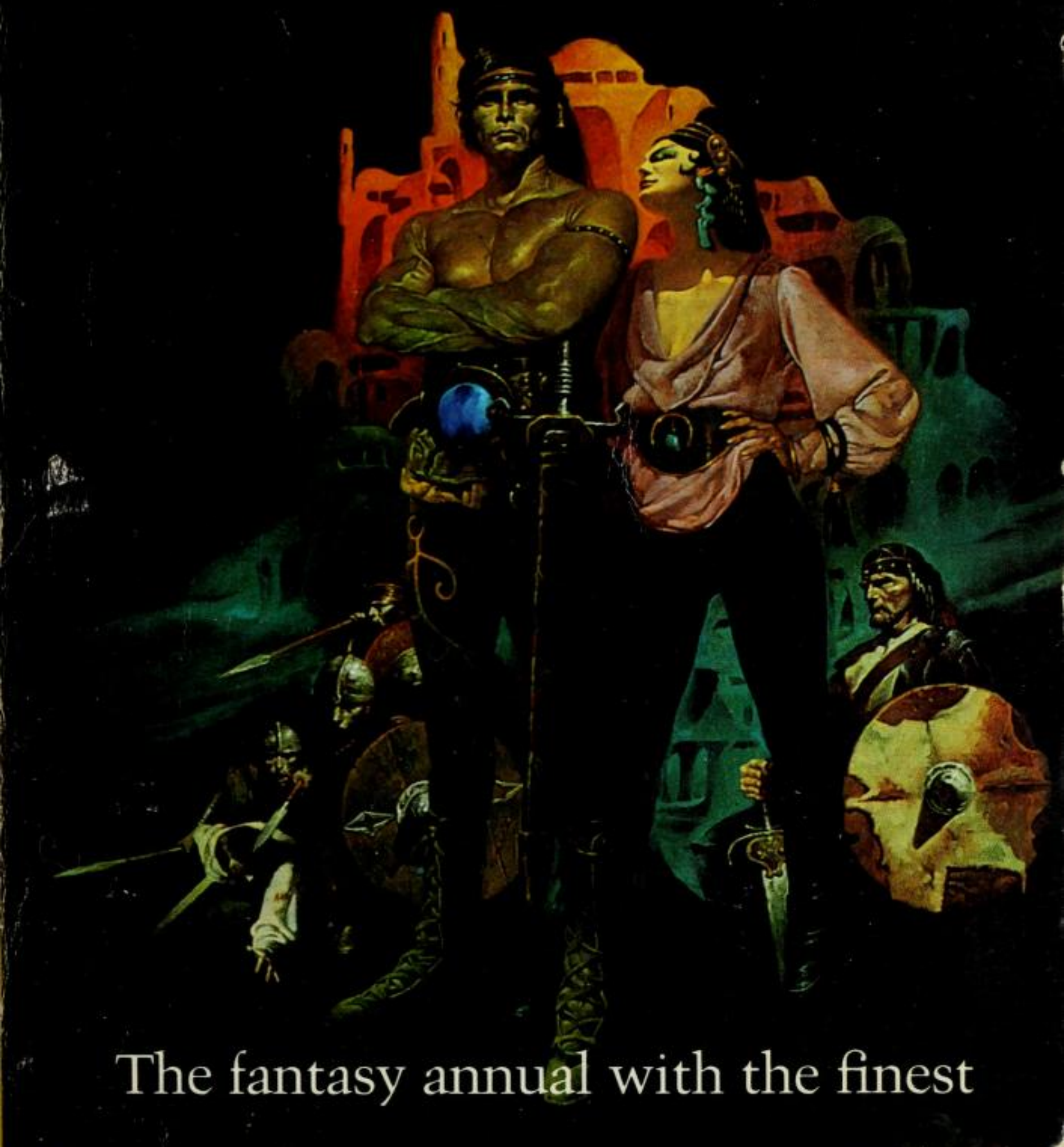
FANTASY

The Year's Best Fantasy Stories: 9

Edited by Arthur W. Saha



The fantasy annual with the finest

Selecting the best of a year's fantasy is a very personal chore which requires a balance between good storytelling and an ability to be carried away by the imaginative content and coloring. Arthur Saha has amply proven to possess this taste for his previous volumes in the unique series have brought forth universal praise. In this latest collection he foretold the Nebula winning novella, and has picked a garland of potential prize-winners in the stories of Michael Shea, Tanith Lee, Suzette Haden Elgin, Parke Goodwin, and, among others, Harlan Ellison.

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Edited by

Arthur W. Saha

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INTRODUCTION

Fantasy is almost certainly the oldest form of storytelling. It has existed since antiquity, when the earliest spinners of tales made up stories in an attempt to explain the unknown and the "darkly seen." It has its roots in folklore and legend, in dreams and in myths. Mankind has always found pleasure in the thrill of the mysterious, the chill of the strange and uncanny, the escape for a time from a humdrum, troublesome and often precarious existence. Fantasy is also undoubtedly the precursor and progenitor of most forms of today's popular fiction: mysteries and thrillers, detective stories, adventure tales, romances, both traditional and modern, and especially science fiction, a form of fantasy which developed when it became clear that much that had heretofore been considered unknowable could be explained by science.

Even though fantasy fiction has produced many offspring, it has retained its own vitality through the years, and is today more popular than it has been in many other periods in the recent past. The function of *The Year's Best Fantasy Stories* is to present the very best short fiction of that type produced during the year.

At first glance it might seem that fantasy fiction is not especially susceptible to the condition of the world at any particular time, but this is not necessarily true. As I was reading stories for this year's annual, it became increasingly apparent to me that many of the stories published during the year had a decidedly optimistic tone. This was true even of those stories that dealt with themes that would normally be considered dark. Many of the tales in this book reflect this trend. What could be grimmer than ghosts, a dreadful curse, malicious demons, sorcerous spells or grimmest of all—death? As the reader will soon discover,

however, many of the stories are presented with a light touch, and in most cases everything works out quite satisfactorily.

I believe that the reason for the appearance of so many upbeat stories is easy to explain. Fantasy writers, just like everyone else, live in the real world and are not immune to the state of that world, and they know that conditions today are depressingly dismal throughout the world. So, many writers, through their fantasies are perhaps telling us that no matter how bad things might be, there is always the possibility and hope that they will get better. Whether or not this is through a conscious effort on the writers' parts only they can answer. Whatever the reasons, the results are what concern us, and, as in previous years, many superb fantasies appeared in 1982.

I'm confident that you, the readers, will find this year's journey into the world of make-believe entertaining and an exciting escape from a world that itself sometimes seems unreal.

ARTHUR W. SAHA
Cooperstown, NY

PARKE GODWIN

INFLUENCING THE HELL OUT OF TIME AND TERESA GOLOWITZ

When a certain urbane gentleman calling himself the Prince offered just deceased Rick Bluestone, a famous Broadway composer, the chance to satisfy an unfulfilled desire, he eagerly accepted. Little did he know that the Prince, a man of culture and a true connoisseur, had an ulterior motive; he wanted to effect a minor alteration in the fabric of time and thereby save from oblivion a remarkable talent.

The first conscious shock after the coronary was staring down at my own body huddled on the floor by the piano. The next was the fiftyish, harmless-looking, total stranger helping himself to my liquor. His cordial smile matched the Brooks Brothers tailoring. An urbane Cecil Kellaway toasting me with my own scotch.

"Cheers, Mr. Bluestone. Hope you don't mind."

I found what passed for a voice. "The hell I don't. Who are you, and—and what's happened to me?"

For all the portly bulk of obvious good living, he moved lightly, settling in a Danish modern chair to sip at his purloined drink. "Glenmorangie single malt—one doesn't find much of it

in the States. One: my friends call me the Prince. Two: you've just had your second and final heart attack."

Right so far: my first was two seasons back, just after finishing the score for *Huey*.

"You've made the big league." The alleged Prince gestured with his drink at my inert form; rich gold links gleamed against snowy cuffs. "No more diets, no more pills, backers' auditions, or critics. You've crossed over."

I goggled at my corpulent residue. "Dead?"

"As Tutankhamen."

At first blush, there didn't seem much change. My penthouse living room, the East River, Roosevelt Island framed in the picture window with late winter sun. My score on the piano with Ernie Hammil's new lyrics. My wife Sarah's overpriced and underdesigned furniture. Even the records I was listening to after lunch: Pete Rugolo and Stan Kenton, discs on the turntable, jackets on the shelf. For difference—me, very dead at the worst time.

"It couldn't wait? We open in two weeks, the second act needs three new songs, and God gives me this for *tsouris?*" I collapsed on the piano bench as my mind did a double take. "Wait a minute. Prince of what?"

His smile was too benign for the answer. "Darkness—or light, it depends on the translation. We do get deplorable press."

I took his point, not very reassured. "I'm not . . . under arrest or something?"

"Of course not." He seemed to regard the question as gauche.

"Will anyone come?"

"Why should they?"

"Well, what do I do? Where do I go?"

The Prince opened his arms to infinite possibilities. "Where would you like to go? Before you answer hastily—" He sipped his scotch, sighing in savory judgment. "Oh, that *is* good. You see, you've cut your spiritual teeth on misconceptions. Good, bad, I'm in heaven, it's pure hell, all of which rather begs the distinction. We're familiarly known as Topside and Below Stairs."

"Below Stairs." I swallowed. "That's hell?"

"Eternity is an attitude. Some say it looks like Queens. You have free choice, Mr. Bluestone, bounded only by imagination and your own will to create—and that, for far too many, is living hell. For you: *carte blanche* to the past, present, or future. Though I did have some small personal motive in dropping by."

"I thought so."

"Nonono. Not a collection but a request. We adore your music Below Stairs. Now that you're eligible, we hoped you'd visit for as long as you like. We've quite an art colony, hordes of theater folk. Wilksey Booth would like to do a musical, and this very night there's a grand party at Petronius' house."

Adventure was not my long suit. "Thanks just the same. I'll stay here."

The Prince pursed his lips and frowned. "You never liked unpleasant scenes. You won't be found until Sarah gets back from Miami, and by then not even the air conditioning will help. There's going to be some abysmal *grand guignol* with the mortuary men, a rubber bag, and your wife weeping buckets into a handkerchief."

Not likely. Sarah bought them at Bergdorf's, Belgian lace. For me she'd use Kleenex—the story of our marriage. We never even had children. Sarah was a real princess. Her only bedtime activities were fighting and headaches. For grief, she'd be spritzing the place with Air-Wick before they got the rubber bagful of me down the elevator. On the other hand, my last will and testament might get a Bergdorf's hanky. The Actors Fund would see a windfall. Sarah wouldn't.

The Prince nudged delicately at the elbow of my thoughts. "Pensive, Mr. Blaustein? It was Blaustein once."

"Not for thirty-five years. Didn't look good on a marquee."

"No fibbing."

"Okay. Four years in an upper-class Washington high school. I used to dream I was a tall blond WASP. On bad days even an Arab."

Memories and reasons dissolved to another dusty but undimmed image. My Holy of Holies. Mary Ellen Cosgrove, super-shiska.

Wheat-blond hair brushed thick and shining in a long pageboy, good legs, tight little boobs succinctly defined by an expensive sweater, sorority pin bobbling provocatively over the left one like Fay Wray hanging from the Empire State Building. I think my eyes really went from following the undulations of her tush. She was my first lust, aridly unrequited, but I played the piano well enough to be invited to all her Lambda Pi parties, Oscar Levant among the Goldwyn Girls with weak, horn-rimmed eyes, pimples, and factory-reject teeth. Not much hope against jocks like Bob Bolling, who was born in a toothpaste ad.

But I could dream; beside me, Portnoy was a eunuch. My lust

burned eternal in the secrecy of my bedroom as, near nightly, I plowed a fistful of ready, willing, and totally unliberated Mary Ellen Cosgrove and panted to my pillow, *Why don't you love me?*

Because you're a nebbish, my pillow said.

The Prince apparently read the thought; his response was tinged with sympathy. "Yes. Mary Ellen."

"It's been forty years. I don't even know if she's still alive."

"More or less."

I was surprised to find how important it was. Past, present, or future, the man said. Why not?

The Prince's brows lifted in elegant question. "A decision?"

"You won't believe this."

"Try me, I'm jaded."

"I want to *shtup* Mary Ellen Cosgrove."

His urbane tolerance palled to disappointment. "That's all?"

"I've missed a lot of things in my life. She was the first, we'll start there."

"My talented friend: *Faust*, for all its endurance, is pure propaganda. I should have thought, at the very least, an introduction to Mozart or Bach—"

"Look, for bar mitzvah I got ten bucks and a pen that leaked on white shirts. Now I'm dead. For door prize you want me to klatch with harpsichord players? Later with the music; I want to ball Mary Ellen Cosgrove."

The Prince regarded me with cosmic weariness, steepling manicured fingernails under his chin. "I wonder. If memory serves, you last saw this Nordic nymphet in graduation week, 1945."

The growing eagerness made me tremble. "What happened to her?"

"You really want to know?"

"Maybe she's not a big deal after forty years, bubby. But she was the first. That's entitled."

"Let me think." The Prince leaned back, concentrating. "Cosgrove . . . From high school she wafted to a correct junior college, married a correct young man with a correctly promising future. Bob Bolling."

"I knew it! That horny bastard just wanted to score. Not just her, anybody."

"A fact Mr. Bolling belatedly appreciates; at eighteen he considered himself in love when he only needed to go to the

bathroom. He spends less time on his libido now than his gall bladder. Nevertheless, for his better days there is a pliant secretary who understands on cue. Mary Ellen has been relatively faithful.''

''Relatively?''

The Prince's hands arced in graceful deprecation. ''The usual. First affair at forty when her children were grown and no one seemed to need her anymore. An aftermath of delicious guilt followed by anticlimax when no one found out, and one expensive face lift. The last liaison, predictably, just after her younger daughter's wedding. Relatively, I say. She doesn't care that much now. Ennui is always safer than principles; it locks from the inside. Currently into est, vodka, vague malaise about the passage of time and what she imperfectly recalls as her 'golden, best years.' There are millions like her, Mr. Bluestone, perhaps billions. She never found much in herself beyond what men expected of her. For such people youth ought to be bright. It's their end.''

His voice, cultivated with overtones of Harvard and Westminster, carried all the ineffable sadness of being alive, growing up, growing older. But I knew what I wanted.

''Not Mary Ellen now, but *then*. A night in October, 1944, the start of our senior year. There was a party at her house.''

The Prince's eyes flickered with new interest. ''Oh, yes. A fateful evening.''

''I kissed her. The first and only time.''

Memories like that stay with you. Somehow she was in my arms, fabulous boobs and all, Fay Wray enfolded by Kong Blaustein, and all futures were possible. But I retreated into embarrassment; in the middle of paradise, I thought of my bad teeth and wondered if she noticed. ''I blew it.''

''By an odd coincidence, the merest chance,'' the Prince said, ''Teresa Golowitz was there that night.''

''Who?''

''You don't remember her? Nobody does. Sad child, always faded into the wallpaper. Won't you say hello for me?''

Golowitz . . . No, not a clue for memory. Old acquaintance was definitely forgot. She would have paled under the beacon of Mary Ellen, in any case. ''Will I be able to make it with her, change the way things happened?''

''I certainly hope so,'' the Prince purred, rising and making for the whiskey again. ''If not change, a definite influence.''

"Then I'm going to influence the hell out of her."

"I'm counting on it, Mr. Bluestone." For an instant I sensed more in his eyes than weary omniscience. "Remember, you'll be sixteen years old with fifty-odd years of experience. That's not a blessing. Perhaps you can make it one."

Already in a fever to depart, I stopped, agonized by a detail. "I don't remember the exact date."

The Prince flourished like a banner headline. "October 3, 1944! Paris liberated! Allied armies roll across France! Binky Blaustein encircles *la belle* Cosgrove! Why not take the bus for old time's sake?"

"It'll be packed."

"Weren't they all then?" He raised the refilled glass to me. "Good hunting, Binky. And say hello to Teresa."

Again with Golowitz, when my soaring purpose strained at the bit. "Who the hell is—?"

But the Prince, the room, and the year were gone.

Sixteen feels so different from fifty-five. An unsettling mix of fear and intoxication. A well of nervous energy, health, and fluttering insecurity based on the hard certainty that you're the homeliest, most unworthy and unwanted, least redeemable *schlemiel* in the universe. God may love you but girls don't, and life is measured to that painful priority.

Even after forty years I knew the route in my sleep. From my father's jewelry store down Fourteenth Street to Eleventh and E. Catch the Walker Chapel bus through Georgetown over Key Bridge into Virginia, up Lee Highway to Cherrydale and Mary Ellen's house on Military Road.

The bus pulled out at seven-ten; I'd be there at seven forty-five. Just a little more than half an hour! Dropping my real-silver Columbia dime into the paybox, I quivered despite the double exposure of age/youth, glowing with the joyful pain that always churned my blood whenever I was going to see her. It was beginning, would be as it was *then* before time turned into nostalgia and faded both of us into what passed for maturity.

The ancient bus was wartime-jammed with tired government workers and young soldiers in olive drab with shoulder patches no one remembers now: ASTP, Washington Command, the Wolverine Division, 7th Expeditionary Force. Baby-faced sailors with fruit salad on their winter blues, patient and stoic Negroes in the still-Jim-Crowed back seats. Two working housewives from the Government Printing Office in upswept hairdos and

square-shouldered jackets, bitching about their supervisors and the outlandish price of beef: you wouldn't need ration stamps soon, but *sixty* cents a pound, who could pay that? Bad enough you couldn't get cigarettes now even if you ran a drug store.

The bus lumbered up the spottily repaired blacktop of Lee Highway toward Cherrydale. Grimy windows and the outside dark made a passable mirror to show me Richard Blaustein—Binky—in his rumpled reversible box-coat from Woodward & Lothrop. Bushy brown hair neither efficiently combed nor recently cut, unformed mouth and chin still blurred with baby fat. Not Caliban, not even homely; merely embryonic. I winked at him from forty years of forgiveness. *Hey, kid, I fixed the teeth.*

Next to me in the crowded aisle, two sailors compared the sultry charms of Veronica Lake with an upstart pinup newcomer named Bacall. I felt dizzy, godlike. It's October, 1944. Veronica Lake is box office in four starring Paramount vehicles, besides spawning the peekaboo hairstyle that gave eyestrain to a million American girls. *To Have and Have Not* isn't released yet. I might be smoking my hoarded Pinehursts with three fingers along the butt like Bogart, but Lauren Bacall is just a lanky new whosis named Betty Perske.

I looked closer at my mirror-Binky. The liquid brown eyes behind the glasses were not completely naive even then, wary-humorous with an ancient wisdom not yet renamed Murphy's Law. What can go wrong will, but—a little patience, a little hope. In four years we'll raise our own flag over Jerusalem; for the blacks in the rear of the bus, it'll be longer. Veronica Lake was a waitress before she died. Bacall opened her second Broadway show in 1981. They were both nice girls, but Perske and me, we lasted. Don't ask: there are survivors and others.

Cherrydale. I pulled the buzzer cord and wormed through the press toward the rear door as the bus slowed. It rattled open with a wheeze of fatigued hydraulics, then I was out of the smell of sweat, stale perfume, wool, and monoxide, standing on the corner of Military Road under clear October stars.

"Oh, it's you. Come in."

Mary Ellen stood in the open door, one slender hand on the knob, backed by music and chatter. My Grail, the Ark of my libido's own Covenant—and yet different, a subtle gap between my memory and the fact of her.

"Melly?"

"Well, don't stare at me. Come in, hang up your coat. Bo-*ub!*" And she was off paging Bob Bolling. I hung my coat in the familiar closet and stepped into the large living room. Smaller than I remembered it. Gracious, comfortable chairs and sofa, French doors at the rear leading to the yard, Mason & Hamlin grand piano in the far corner. Boys in trousers that seemed baggy and ill-cut to me, girls in pleated skirts and bobby sox. And faces I recalled with a pang: Bill Tait, Frankie Maguerra. And willowy Laura Schuppe, always inches taller than her escorts.

"It's old Blaustein!"

And of course, Bob Bolling with his unwrinkled Arrow collar and hair that stayed combed. He steered around two girls catting to a record of Tommy Dorsey's "Boogie Woogie," stroking one on the hips—"Shake it but don't break it"—to tower over me with an intimidating sunburst of thirty-two straight teeth.

"Big night, Blaustein," he confided. "Melly's folks are away and I brought some grade-A hooch. Bourbon, Blaustein." He always pronounced it *steen* despite my repeated corrections. He patted me on the cowlick. "If you got a note from your mother, I might put some in your Coke. Heh-heh. Come in the kitchen." He disappeared through the hall arch.

"Skip the bourbon." The unsolicited advice came from an owlish, bespectacled boy curled in a chair with a thick book. "It's a gift from Mrs. Bolling's third cousin, a distant relative in the process of retreating even further. Try the scotch."

I edged over to him. A great disguise, but there was no hiding those velvet overtones. "Prince?"

"Even he." He turned a page and giggled. "I love *Paradise Lost*. Milton gave me such marvelous lines. The scotch is under the sink."

The record ended; couples shuffled about, awkward, faced with the need for conversation until the music started again. Bill Tait bummed one of my Pinehursts, and I took the first puff. They tasted awful, but you couldn't find real butts anywhere. I segued to the kitchen in time to hear Mary Ellen, coy, sibilant, and not really angry:

"Bob, now *quit* that! Honest, you're all hands tonight. Grab, grab."

When they saw me, I felt only a phantom of jealousy. " 'Scuse me. Thought I'd get a drink or something."

"Sure, Binky." Mary Ellen switched her pert tush to the icebox. "Coke or Pepsi? Bink, what are you staring at? Coke or Pepsi?"

"Scotch, please."

She made a face at me, strained patience. "You don't drink. Stop putting on."

Bob whinnied. "Little man had a ha-a-rd day?"

"You wouldn't believe—the death of me."

"Mama and Daddy don't even drink scotch."

"Under the sink."

"See smarty?" Mary Ellen yanked open the cabinet door. *Voila:* Glenmorangie, the bottle collared with a small handwritten tag: *Against mixed blessings.*

"I never saw that." She shrugged. "Anyway, aspirin and Coke are your speed."

The bottle looked like an oasis. "Ice?"

"Sure, it's your funeral. Just don't get sick on the furniture."

I dropped three ice cubes in a jigger with a decent lack of haste, christened them with three fat fingers of whiskey, and inhaled half of it in a gulp. "Jesus, that's good!"

"Don't curse, Binky. And stop showing off."

I winced in spite of myself at the sound of that thin, plaintive voice. Once it must have been aphrodisiac, especially when she sang. Now it merely grated.

"It's good to see you again, Melly."

"You drip, you saw me in school today." She peered closer at me. "But—gee, I don't know—you look different."

"So do you." It came out flat and not too gracious.

"Well, you don't have to be so sad about it. Bob, let's go dance."

That evidently concluded her obligations as a hostess. Abandoned, I leaned against the sink and watched that little ass, the centerfold of a thousand steamy fantasies, bounce out of the kitchen with Bolling in tow. Thank God for the drink; the rest of me was deflating fast. Memory was definitely suspect. I remembered her prettier, even beautiful, and much more mature. She was as unformed as myself. The eyes, to which I once wrote saccharine verse, were merely blue with a patina of intolerance over ignorance. The figure was child-cute, but after thirty-five years of grown women and a regiment of Broadway dancers, it retreated now as the half-realized first draft of an ordinary, mesomorphic female body. So far from a resurgence of passion, I felt more pity and understanding than anything else, like suffer-

ing the gauche sophistication of a daughter struggling to be grown-up. The idea of sleeping with Melly was more than absurd, even faintly incestuous. My overblown lust went flat as a bride's biscuit, and from the shadows of Shubert Alley I heard the mournful laughter of Rick Bluestone, who would never call a spade a heart. Mary Ellen Cosgrove at sixteen was interesting as a clam. But then, so was I.

More kids arrived, conversation got louder, high and giddy on youth alone. Melly and Bob danced with glum precision. Suffering from total recall, Frankie Maguerra regaled anyone in earshot with Hope-Crosby jokes from *The Road to Morocco*. My bookish buddy had vanished, but Laura Schuppe over at the piano gave me an X-rated wink and a little beckoning toss of her head. I joined her on the bench.

"Find the scotch?"

"Huh? Yeah. Where's the little guy who was sitting over there?"

"Nelson Baxley, class of '46. Korea, Bronze Star and Purple Heart. Later: television production, five children, one Emmy, one duodenal ulcer."

I might have known. Laura would never even look at me, let alone wink. "Prince?"

"Nelson left, so I borrowed Laura."

"It doesn't bother her, having you in residence?"

"No, it's all rather split-screen. On her side she's drooling over that varsity jock in the maroon sweater. Nice girl, somewhat confused, poor self-image. Top model for *Vogue* and *Harper's*, 1949-55. One therapist, two nervous breakdowns, serial affairs with lovers of mixed gender. Cocaine, anorexia, born-again Christianity. Married a fundamentalist; currently works for the Moral Majority. Depressing. And Mary Ellen?"

"The booze is better. Thanks."

Laura sighed with a wisdom eons beyond her. "Nostalgia is always myopic. By the way, there's Miss Golowitz: trying to be invisible as usual."

Even as I recognized and remembered the fat, homely girl, my older heart went out to her. Teresa Golowitz—a dark, shapeless smudge among blondish altos in the school choral section. Coarse, frizzy hair, unplucked eyebrows that aspired to meet over her nose, and a faint but discernible mustache line. Thick legs blotched with unshaved hair under laddered nylons, and—insult to injury—a dress that would look better on Aunt Jemima.

Among the relatively svelte Lambda Pi girls, she fit in like pork chops at a seder. I wondered why she'd been invited.

"That's why," the Prince read my thought casually. "Cast your mind back: Mary Ellen always had a few plain girls around to make her look good. And tonight is Teresa's turn in the barrel."

Memory sharpened to cruel clarity. My own family was conservative enough, but Teresa's orthodox parents made mine look like atheists. She came to school in *shmotte* dresses and no makeup. She'd done her face for the party, no doubt on the bus in a bad light. I watched Teresa trying to press herself through the wall, fiddling with her hands, carmined mouth frozen in a stiff smile. I always avoided her in school; she was all the things I wanted to escape. Now I could see how much she might have wanted it, too.

"You're big on futures, Prince. What happened to her?" Two to one she married the kind of guy who wears his yarmulka to the office.

"Don't you remember?"

"Memory I'm learning not to trust."

"She committed suicide."

"No! She didn—" But in the breath of denial I knew it was true, a sensation at school for a day or two. When Frankie Maguerra told me, I said something like "Gee!" and briefly pondered the intangibles of life before getting on with adolescence.

"When?"

"Tonight."

Yes . . . it was just about this month. The Prince stroked soft chords with Laura's long fingers. "Took the bus back to town reflecting on accumulated griefs and loneliness, and the fact that no one at this golden gathering even said hello to her, not even Blaustein. She got off the bus and waited at the curb—as she is now, tearing at her cuticles, multiplying this night by so many others and so many more to come. She didn't like the product. When the next bus came along—behind schedule and traveling too fast—she stepped in front of it."

I shook my head, foggily mournful. "What a sad waste."

"Sad but academic." The Prince stood up. "Excuse me, Laura has to go to the little girls' room. Had the immortal embrace yet?"

"No. Who needs it?"

Dismally true; the whole purpose of my flashback was on the

cutting room floor. I was pondering whether to talk to Teresa or just leave now when Bill Tait roared away from a dirty-joke session to drape himself over the piano. "Bink! Give us 'Boogie Woogie.' "

"No!" someone else demanded. Do " 'Blue Lights.' "

"Hey, Bink's gonna play."

"Yay!"

I swung into "House of Blue Lights" to a chorus of squealed approval. It sounded fantastic, too good, until I realized I was playing with forty-five years of practice behind me and basic ideas still unknown outside of Fifty-second Street: steel rhythm under a velvet touch, block chords out of Monk, Powell, and Kenton that wouldn't be heard for years yet. The crowd began to collect around the piano. Mary Ellen got set to sing, her big thing at parties. Teresa Golowitz edged in next to her, almost apologetically, pudgy fingers dancing on the piano top. Melly took the vocal on the second verse; not a bad voice, but it wouldn't go past the fifth row without a mike.

Fall in there, where the blue light's lit,
Down at the house, the House of Blue Lights.

And then I heard it, rising over Mary Ellen's sweet, whitish soprano like a great big bird, that smoky alto soaring into the obligato release. Yah-duh-dee-duh-DAH-duh-duh-duh-DEE-dah-dah, bouncing twice around the electrified room and sliding back into the lyric like she was born there. The hair rose on my head and arms; everyone stared at Teresa Golowitz who, perhaps for the first time and on the last night of her life, had decided to leave her mark. I rocked into another coda for her alone, begging.

"Take it, girl!"

Teresa did; together we worked things on that basic boogie that weren't invented yet. And what a voice—not pure, not classical, but a natural for jazz. Teresa straightened out of her usual slump, closed her eyes, and let the good riffs roll. Sixteen years old; you could teach her a little about phrasing and breath control, but the instrument was incredible. She played with the notes, slurring over and under the melodic line with a pitch and rhythm you couldn't break with dynamite. All the greats had this for openers: Lutcher, Fitzgerald, Stafford, June Christy, Sassy Vaughan, all of them. Under the excitement, the Prince's voice whispered into my mind: *Of course she's beautiful. It's her requiem.*

It could well be. When we finished the number, I bounced up

and smeared her lipstick with an off-center kiss. "Baby, you're gorgeous. Don't ever think you're not."

"Hey, lookit old Blaustein the wolf!"

Mary Ellen snickered; as a vocalist her nose was a little out of joint—say about a mile. "Oh, it's a *love* match!"

Teresa blushed crimson; I doubt if she was kissed much at home, let alone at parties. She started to retreat, but I grabbed her hand. "Don't go, I need you. You know 'Opus One'?"

She hesitated, then made her decision. She glared with fierce pride at Mary Ellen and stood even straighter. "Hit it, Blaustein."

I zapped into the machine-gun opening with pure joy. "Opus One" is a real catting number. Most of the kids started to dance, the rest jiggling and beating time on the piano top. From Teresa, we hadn't heard anything yet. She vocalized the soprano sax break from the Dorsey orchestration with a scatty-doo riff that wailed like Nellie Lutcher's "Lake Charles." She shouldn't end like this. In four years or less there'd be recording techniques able to put that voice on the moon, and she wants to off herself in an hour or two. The hell with it all, if I could just keep her from that.

We rolled up the wall-shaking finish, both of us out of breath. Teresa parked herself on the bench beside me, guzzling sloppily at her drink. "You are reet, Blaustein. You are definitely a groove."

"Me! Where'd you pick up jazz like that?"

"Who picks up? You feel it. The first time is like remembering."

"Feeling good, Terri?"

"Yeah, kinda." She grinned shyly. "I always wanted to be called that."

"Terri it is. And take advice: tomorrow we start working together."

Her eyes clouded. "Tomorrow . . ."

"Unless you're not around, you know what I mean? Go home, take a *shvitz*. Tomorrow things will look pure gold. And when I call New York about you—"

I talked fast, promising, conning, cajoling, speaking of agents and record producers not even born yet, anything to get her mind off the loser track and that fatal bus. Still talking, I steered her into the kitchen, spiked her a little Pepsi in a lot of bourbon, a new scotch for me. I'd bomb the suicide out of her if I could,

sing it out: one hour when she and everybody in range knew Teresa Golowitz was a person, a talent, and worth the future.

We were literally dragged back to the piano. Play more. Sing, Teresa. Please sing, Teresa. She didn't know how to handle it all, never opened up like this before. I ruffled a big fanfare chord on the piano.

"Ladies and gentlemen—the fourteen karats of Miss Terri Gold!"

"Yay!"

"Huh?" said Teresa. "What's with Gold?"

"Just like Blaustein. I yell 'Golowitz!'—who'd come? Hang on, Terri. We are going to the moon."

I launched into music so far beyond eight-to-the-bar that the kids were mystified. Way-out Monk, Shearing riffs, Charlie Ventura stuff, bop sounds most of the world hadn't heard yet, like "The Man from Minton's" and the clean, hard-rocking Previn-Manne "I Could Have Danced All Night," still twelve years in the future. Terri's eyes were moons of discovery before she dug it. Like she said, a kind of remembering. On "To Be or Not to Bop," she came in with her own obligato, sure and pure.

"Hey, Bink," Frankie Maguerra wondered. "What *is* that?"

Terri didn't need the name. She knew. I dropped the beat and backed her with light chords in implied time. She was pure gold; with a little grooming she could play clubs now, but she had to live for that. For the other kids, it was too far out; they needed a beat. Teresa yearned visibly after Bob Bolling, who left the living room hand in hand with Mary Ellen. I saw her glow fade back to the one-minute-to-*zotz* look she had before singing. Sadly she glanced at the clock.

"Terri, you want to try a ballad?"

"Gee, I don't know. It's late."

"One ballad. Name it. You got a favorite?"

"Do you know 'I Fall in Love Too Easily'?"

"Does Burns know Allen?" I rippled out a four-bar intro. "Fly, baby. The sky is yours."

Terri closed her eyes, lifted her head, and sang. The room grew a little quieter. It's a great old number, an evergreen from an early Sinatra film that you can still hear on FM in New York. All right, critical? Teresa wasn't as sharp on slow ballads, not the best phrasing, a little wobbly on drawn-out vowels, but her feeling for the arc and sense of lyric was sure and solid. The kids were very quiet now; she had them in the palm of her hand.

Then she did something that curled my hair: ended one phrase softly and, on the same breath, swelled into the first word of the next with a gorgeous crescendo I felt down to my socks.

I've auditioned a thousand singers. You can hear their technique and training in the first line. What Golowitz had no one can teach. I heard her plain in that short phrase, locked in with a soul full of *schmerz* and one slender lifeline of music. A homely girl, a fat loser in the svelte Rita Hayworth era; anyone could hurt her and everyone would, but when she sang it would all be on the line, bare and beautiful. A voice you listened to because it was your own. A smoky, black coffee, tapped-out-and-running-on-guts sound you don't hear anymore unless you own some of the old Billie Holiday sides. Or another voice, quite different but as full of life and pain, that will pack the Palace Theater twenty years from tonight with the same self-lacerating magic in every song. A miracle called Garland.

We finished the song. The kids drifted away, liking but not really understanding what they'd heard, ready for the record player and more grab-ass to music. Teresa looked again at the mantel clock.

"I gotta go. It's late."

"See me tomorrow, Terri?"

"I don't know . . ."

"Promise."

"Blaustein, don't ask. There's a lot of problems."

"Work with me. There's people in New York—"

"Don't put on," she said hopelessly. "You don't know from New York."

"Promise me, damn it."

"Why?" It was a wail, a cry for help. Already in it you could hear the gray decision, a door closing in Loserville. What I answered wasn't from sixteen. I wondered if sixteen could dig it.

"I know from New York and a lot of things. Don't blow it, Terri. You got more to give in thirty-two bars than most people find in a lifetime. You want to be loved? So does the world. They'll love you, Terri. They'll beat your goddam door down. But it takes time and paying your dues and maybe a little trust. So see me tomorrow and we start."

Teresa tried to smooth the crushed material of her dress over shapeless hips. "Blaustein—you're such a *noodge*." She said it like a kiss. "G'night."

I tried to follow her, but a rather strong influence glued me to

the piano bench. You've done your best, Mr. B. Now a little trust.

So I sat there guzzling scotch too fast, which was a mistake. Bluestone could guzzle, Binky couldn't. I took a few deep breaths and watched Frankie Maguerra dance with Laura Schuppe through the wrong end of a telescope, then wobbled upstairs to the bathroom, wondering if I'd be sick. Apparently there was enough Bluestone ballast to hold it down. After a few moments glumly pondering the toilet depths, I scrubbed my face with a washcloth and grinned farewell to Binky.

"See you at Sardi's, kid."

Wavering toward the stairs, I heard Mary Ellen's voice from behind a half-closed door: "*Day*-amn, Bob! I said *stop*."

"For God's sake, what's the matter now? On, off. You're a real tease, you know that?"

I pushed in the door and leaned against the jamb. They didn't see me, sitting stiff and apart on the edge of the bed. Melly looked confused and angry.

"You don't have to be so crude about it."

"Oh . . . shit."

"And don't talk to me like that."

Poor Bob: eighteen, all balls, and no finesse. He even rated a twinge of sympathy. "Hey, stud," I said, "why not try a little conversation first?"

Mary Ellen whirled and stiffened. Bob only looked annoyed. "Blaustein, blow. Get out of here."

I felt booze-brave. "Better idea, *schmuck*. Why don't you go get started on your gall bladder."

"Listen, you—"

"Oh, he's right!" Mary Ellen screeched. "Go home. Go home, you're disgusting."

Confused, outgunned, Bob threw her one classic grimace of exasperation. "All *right*. But I won't be back."

"Bet?" I offered as he pushed past me and clumped down the stairs.

"What a jerk." Melly collapsed in a frustrated bundle. "I don't care if he never comes back. I wouldn't see him again if he was the last man on earth."

"Sure you will." *Because for you, he is*. That was less of a future than an epitaph. The whole thing was vaguely sad. I wanted to go.

"God." Her shoulders began to shake. "I'm surrounded with drips."

I put my arm around the forlorn, half-grown lump of her uncertainty: more experienced than her mother would imagine and a lot less than she thought. Sixteen, the voice of the turtle bellowing in her blood, wanting all the things she couldn't handle yet, and all she had were the cards girls got dealt in 1944. Unless you were a freak genius or something, you got married. You got a man. There wasn't anything else; not for mommy, not for you. Later it might be easy, now it was hell. Only idiots want to be young again. It's a miserable gauntlet to run, but looking back later, Melly would block out the insecurity and pain until only the glow was left to shimmer in soft focus, and her picture would be no more accurate than mine.

"Take it one day at a time, Melly. It's more fun that way."

She wilted against my shoulder. "Binky, are you my really truly close friend?"

"Guess I am." I pulled her gently to her feet. Her lips found my cheek and then my own mouth. A very split-screen moment: enjoyment, regrets, and a fleeting taste of what it would have been to have a daughter. I might have been good at that.

"You're nice, Bink. Just sometimes you're a jerk. You going home?"

"Time to go."

"See you in school."

"S'long, Melly. It was a swell party."

Wrestling into my coat downstairs, I peeked once more into the living room, at the kids I grew up with. A damned fool, happy and sad, high on life more than anything else, I ducked for the front door before they caught me crying. But someone did.

"Hey, Blaustein!"

Teresa Golowitz swayed precariously in the kitchen hallway, flashing a fresh drink and a bleary grin. "Hu-hi!"

"Terri! I thought—"

"Ah, hu-hell," she gulped. "I felt so good from singing, I figured one more for the road. I have just two questions for you."

"You didn't go. You didn't—"

"Don't change the su-subject. First: what c'n I do for hu-hiccups?"

"Hold your breath and take nine sips of water."

"And the big qu-uk-question," said Teresa Golowitz. "What *time* tomorrow?"

"I'll find you." Gloriously smashed, she couldn't see the tears start. "Come on, how about we take the same bus?"

Terri was still grinning and hiccupping when the scene cut.

My penthouse was still there, but with a few major changes. On the floor, Rick Bluestone was beginning to wilt like leftover salad. The record jackets near the turntable were different, but still classics of their kind. Stan Kenton had metamorphosed to *Kenton Digs Gold*. The Pete Rugolo album was titled simply *Pure Gold and Rugolo*. Beside them lay a third: *Gold Sings Bluestone Plays Gold*. On the wall just above the piano was a photograph of that vulnerable, indestructible head lifted, the mouth parted in a lyric. I remembered it with hiccups and much, much younger.

A lot of change, a lot of years. Some great songs.

Across the back of the album we cut together, she'd scrawled in a looping hand: *Blaustein, you're such a noodge—Terri Gold loves you.*

The Prince rose and straightened his Sulka tie. "Whither away, Mr. Bluestone?"

I turned once more to the window. After thirty-five years of looking at Manhattan, the river, and Queens, I wouldn't miss them all that much. As for Sarah, don't ask. With any luck she'd be out of Air-Wick. "Topside, I suppose. Poppa will expect me."

A nuance of mild discomfort shaded the Prince's *savoir faire*. "Not just yet, I'm afraid."

"Why not? You said anywhere."

"Of course—in time. And time is what we have perverted, not to say brutalized. You won't be welcome just now, I regret to say." He didn't sound regretful at all, more like a sweepstakes winner. "You've played merry hob with the Grand Scheme. Terri Gold: three husbands, four children, three grandchildren, six million-seller records, and a career that threatens never to end—all from a girl who was supposed to be a statistic at sixteen. Where Topside is concerned, it's best we maintain a very low profile until—"

"We?" I rounded on him in a chill of realization. "We?"

"You, me, what's the difference?"

"*That's* why you were all the time with Golowitz. You knew! You bastard, you knew all the time!"

He nodded in modest pleasure. "As the lyric goes, it had to be

you. Of all that nebulous crew at the party, you were the first slated to die after Teresa. And the best bet. I field the shots, I don't call them."

The immensity of it collapsed me on the sofa, gaping. "You *gonif*. So you just waited until I packed it in and—"

"Influenced." The Prince capped it with a satisfied smile. "I'm an artist like yourself, a sculptor of possibilities. What could you change with Mary Ellen, who was cast and immutable by the age of ten?"

I stared at him, unbelieving. "Dead one day and already I need a lawyer."

"And you shall have the best," the Prince conciliated. "For services rendered. Darrow loves cases like this."

"I'll bet. No wonder you get lousy reviews Tópside."

"Topside!" he flared in disgust. "Stodgy, pragmatic conservatives. Liszt should die of fever before he's thirty, Schubert before he could write the glorious Ninth? Never! It's not all fun, believe me. Win some, lose some. Lose a Shelley, lose a Byron, a Kapell. Lose a Radiguet before he's twenty-one, a Gershwin at thirty-nine. But a Terri Gold at sixteen? No, the world is threadbare enough. And no one Topside, not even my celestial Brother—the white sheep of an otherwise brilliant family—has ever understood the concept of *creative* history. What in the cosmos does it matter if I make a mess of their records? I create! Like any artist, I need to be recognized. I need to be understood. Most of all," the Prince concluded wearily, "I need another drink."

I didn't understand half of it, but—you know?—I couldn't really stay mad at him. Whatever else, bad press or no, the guy has *chutzpah*. And there are all those years of Terri Gold.

"How long has Terri got?"

"Ages, Mr. Bluestone. Dogs' years. More records, more men, more grandchildren. She'll be roaring drunk when she goes and happy as a bee among flowers. And the last drink will be her best." The Prince polished off his own, neat. "Shall we?"

"Uh . . . where to?"

"As advertised: your choice. But till the heat's off, I'd suggest Petronius' party. There's someone positively seething to meet you, that clever little woman from the Algonquin set. Which reminds me."

The Prince swept up the Glenmorangie in one protective arm, the other through mine. "Dottie said to bring you *and* the scotch. *Allons*, Mr. Bluestone, The night is young!"

TANITH LEE

MIRAGE AND MAGIA

In just a few short years Tanith Lee has taken her place among the premier fantasy writers of our day. Here, in a richly textured tale set in a mythic time and place, she writes about witchcraft, magic and ensorcelment and examines the nature of vengeance and vanity and, ultimately, the greatest of all magics.

During the Ninth Dynasty of the Jat Calendar, Taisia-Tua lived at the town of Qon Oshen, in a mansion of masks and mirrors.

At that time, being far inland, and unlinked by road or bridge to any of the great seaports of the Western Peninsula, Qon Oshen was an obscure and fulminating area. Its riches, born of itself and turned back like radiations upon itself, had made it both exotic and psychologically impenetrable to most of those foreigners who very occasionally entered it. Generally, it was come on by air, almost by accident, by riders of galvanic silver and crimson balloon-ships. Held in a clasp of pointed, platinum-colored hills, in which one break only poured to the shore of an iridium lake, Qon Oshen presented latticed towers, phantasmal soaring bridgeways, a game board of square plazas and circular trafficuli. Sometimes, gauzelike clouds, attracted to the chemical and auric emanations of the town, would hang low over it, foaming the tower tops. In a similar manner, the reputation of

Taisia-Tua hung over the streets, insubstantial, dreamlike, menacing.

She had come from the north, riding in a high white grasshopper carriage, which strode on fragile legs seven feet in the air. The date of her coming varied depending on who recounted it. Seventeen years ago, ten, the year when Saturo, the demon-god, sent fire, and the cinnamon harvest was lost. Her purpose for arrival was equally elusive. She chose for her dwelling a mansion of rose-red tilework, spiraled about with thin stone balustrades on which squatted antimony toads and jade cats, and enclosed by gates of wrought iron, five yards high. Dark green deciduous, and pale-grey fan-shaped pines spread around the mansion, as if to shield it. After sunset, its windows of stained glass turned slotted eyes of purple, magenta, blue, emerald, and gold upon the town. Within the masking trees and behind the masking windows, the Magia—for everyone had known at once she was an enchantress—paced out the dance moves of her strange and insular life.

One thing was always remembered. On the morning or noon or evening or midnight of her arrival, someone had snatched a glimpse inside the grasshopper carriage. This someone (a fool, for who but a fool would risk such a glimpse?) had told how there were no windows but that, opposite the seat of lush plum silk, the wall above the driver's keys was all one polished mirror. The only view Taisia-Tua had apparently had, all the way from the north to Qon Oshen, was that of her own self.

"Is she beautiful, then?"

"Most beautiful."

"Not at all beautiful."

"*Ugly.*"

"*Gorgeous.*"

"One cannot be sure. Whenever she passes through the town she is always partly masked or veiled. Nor has anyone ever seen her in the same gown twice, or the same wig (she is always wigged). Even her slippers and her jewelry are ephemeral."

It was usually agreed this diversity might be due to such powers of illusion as an enchantress would possess. Or simply to enormous wealth and extravagance—each of which qualities the town was prepared to admire. Certainly, in whatever clothing or guise, Taisia-Tua Magia was never mistaken for another.

At Midsummer of her first year, whenever that was, at Qon

Oshen, she perpetrated her first magic. There were scores of witnesses.

A round moon, yellow as wine, hung over the town, and all the towers and bridgeways seemed to reach and stretch to catch its light. The scent of a thousand peach trees, apricot gardens, lily pools and jasmin pergolas filled the darkness. Gently feverish with the drunkenness of summer, men and women stole from the inns and the temples—on such nights, even the demon-god might be worshipped—and wandered abroad everywhere. And into Seventh Plaza Taisia-Tua walked with slow measured steps, a moment or so behind the midnight bell. Her gown was black and sewn with peacocks' eyes. Her hair was deepest blue. Her face was white, rouged the softest, most transparent of vermilions at cheekbones and lips, and like violet smoulder along the eyelids. This face itself was like a mask, but an extra mask of stiff silver hid her forehead, brows, and the hollows under the painted eyes. Her nails were silver, too, and each of them four inches in length, which presumably indicated these also were unreal. Her feet were gloved in silk mounted on golden soles which went *chink-chink-chink* as she moved. She was unaccompanied, save by her supposed reputation. The crowd in the plaza fell back, muttered, and carefully observed. Instinctively, it seemed, they had always guessed this creature boded them no particular good. But her exoticism was so suitable to the mode, they had as yet no wish to censure.

For some while, the Magia walked about, very slowly, gazing this way and that. She took her time, glancing where she would, paying no apparent heed to any who gazed or glanced at her. She was, naturally, protected by her masks, and perhaps by the tiny looking-glass that hung on a chain from her belt, and which, now and then, she raised, gazing also at herself.

At length, she crossed the plaza to the spot where the three-tiered fountain played, turning now indigo, now orchid. Here a young man was standing, with his friends. He was of the Linla family, one of the highest, richest houses in the town, and his name was Iye. Not merely an aristocrat and rich, either, but exceedingly handsome and popular. To this person the enchantress proceeded, and he, caught in mid-sentence and mid-thought, paused, watching her wide-eyed. When she was some few feet from him, Taisia-Tua halted. She spoke, in a still, curious, lifeless little voice.

"*Follow* me."

Iye Linla turned to his friends, laughing, looking for their support, but they did not laugh at all.

"Magia," said Iye, after a moment, staring her out and faltering, for it was hard to stare out a mask and two masked unblinking eyes. "Magia, I do not follow anyone without good reason. Excuse me, but I have business here."

Taisia-Tua made a very slight gesture, which spread her wide sleeves like the wings of some macabre night butterfly. That was all. Then she turned, and her golden soles went *chink-chink-chink* as she walked away.

One of Iye's friends caught his shoulder. "On no account go after her."

"I? Go after that hag—more likely I would go with demoniac Saturo—"

But already he had taken a step in her direction. Shocked, Iye attempted to secure himself to the ground. Presently, finding he could not, he gripped the wrists and clothing of his companions. But an uncanny bodily motivation possessed him. Like one who is drowning, he slipped inexorably from their grasp. There was no longer any conversation. With expressions of dismay and horror, the friends of Iye Linla beheld him walk after the enchantress, at first reluctantly, soon with a steady, unrelenting stride. Like her dog, it seemed, he would pursue her all the way home. They broke abruptly from their stupor, and ran to summon Iye's father, the Linla kindred and guards. But by the time such forces had been marshalled and brought to the mansion of rose-red tile, the gates were shut, nor did any answer the shouts and knocking, the threats and imprecations, while on their pedestals, the ghostly toads and greenish cats grinned at the sinking moon.

Only one old uncle of the Linla house was heard to remark that a night in bed with a mage-lady might do young Iye no harm at all. He was shortly to repent these words, and half a year later the old man ritually stabbed himself before the family altar because of his ill-omened utterance. For the night passed, and the dawn began to surface like a great shoal of luminous fishes in the east. And a second or so after the sunrise bell, a slim carved door opened in the mansion, and then closed again behind the form of Iye Linla. A second more, and a pair of ironwork gates parted in their turn, but Iye Linla advanced no farther than the courtyard. Soon, some of his kindred hastened into the court,

others standing by the gates to keep them wide, and hurried the young man from the witch's yard.

On the street, they slapped his cheeks and hands, forced wine between his lips, implored him, cursed him. To no avail. His open eyes were opaque, seldom blinking, indicating blindness. They led him home, where the most eminent physicians and psychologists were called, but none of these made an iota of progress with him. Eventually, Iye's official courtesan stole in to visit him, prepared to try such remedies as her sensual arts had taught her. She had been in the chamber scarcely two minutes when her single piercing shriek brought half the household into the apartment, demanding what new thing was amiss.

Iye's courtesan stood in a rain of her own burnished hair, and of her own weeping, and she said, "His eyes—his eyes— Oh, I looked into his eyes—Saturo has eaten his soul."

"The woman is mad," was the common consensus, but one of the physicians, ignoring this, went to Iye, and himself peered between the young man's lids. This physician then spoke in a hushed and awful manner that brought quiet and terror on the whole room.

"The courtesan is clever. Some strange spell has been worked here, and any may see it that will look. It is usual, when glancing into the eyes of another, to see pictured there, since these lenses are reflective, a minute image of oneself. But in the eyes of Iye Linla I perceive only this: The minute image of Iye Linla himself, and, what is more, I perceive him from the back."

Fear was, in this event, mightier than speculation.

By noon, most of Qon Oshen knew of Iye's peculiar fate, and brooded on it. A re-emergence of the enchantress was expected with misgiving. However, Taisia-Tua did not walk in the town again for several weeks. In her stead, there began to be seen about, in the high skies of twilight or early morning, a mysterious silvery kite, across whose elongated tail were inscribed these words:

IS THERE A GREATER MAGICIAN THAN I?

In Qon Oshen, not one man asked another to whom this kite belonged.

It may be supposed, though such deeds were performed in secret, that the Linla family sent to the enchantress's house various embassies, pleas and warnings, not to mention coffers

full of bribes. But the spell, such as it was, was not removed from Iye. He, the hope of his house, remained thereafter like an idiot, who must be tended and fed and laid down to sleep and roused up again, exercised like a beast, and nursed like a baby. Sallow death banners were hung from the Linla gates about the time the kite manifested in the sky. By the autumn's end, another two houses of Qon Oshen were mourning in similar fashion.

At the Chrysanthemum Festival, Taisia-Tua, in a gown like fire, hair like burning coals, wings of cinnabar concealing cheeks and chin, scratched with a turquoise nail-tip the sleeve of a young priest, an acolyte of the Ninth Temple. He was devout and handsome, an intellectual, moreover a son of the aristocratic house of Kli-Sra. Yet he went after the Magia just as Iye Linla had done. And came forth from her mansion after the sunrise bell also just as Iye Linla did, so that in his eyes men beheld the young priest's own image, reversed, and to be seen only from the back.

A month later, (only a month), when the toasted leaves were falling and sailing on the oval ponds and inconsequently rushing along the narrow marble lanes of Qon Oshen, an artist of great fame and genius turned from his scroll, the gilded pen in his hand, and found the Magia behind him, her lower face hidden by a veil of ivory plaques, her clothes embroidered by praying mantises.

"Spare me," the artist said to her, "from whatever fate it is you put on those others you summoned. For the sake of the creative force which is in me, if not from pity because I am a human man."

But—"*Follow* me," she said, and moved away from him. This time the soles on her gloved feet were of wood, and they made a noise like fans snapping shut. The artist crushed the gilded pen in his hand. The nib pierced his palm and his blood fell on the scroll. The pattern it made, such was his talent, was as fair as the considered lines any other might have devised. Yet he had no choice but to obey the witch, and when the morning rose from the lake, he was like the others who had done so.

Sometimes the Magia's kite blew in the skies, sometimes not. Sometimes some swore they had seen it, while others denied it had been visible, but all knew the frightful challenge of its writing:

IS THERE A GREATER MAGICIAN THAN I?

Sometimes a man would vanish from his home, and they would say: "*She* has taken him." This was not always the case. Yet she *did* take. In the pure blue days of winter, when all the town was a miracle of ice, each pinnacle like glass, and to step on the streets seemed likely to break every vista in a myriad pieces, then she would come and go, and men would follow her, and men would return—no longer sensible or living, though alive. And in the spring when the blossoms bubbled over and splashed and cascaded from every wall and walk, then, too, she would work her magic. And in the green, fermenting bottle of summer, in its simmering days and restless nights, and in autumn when the world of the town fell upward through a downfalling of purple and amber leaves—then. Randomly, persistently, seemingly without excuse. Unavoidably, despite war being made against her by the nobility of the place, despite intrigues and jurisdiction, despite the employment of other magicians, whose spells to hers were, as it turned out, like blades of grass standing before the curtain of the cyclone. Despite sorties and attacks of a physical nature. Despite the lunacy of firing a missile from a nearby hill in a reaction of fury and madness of the family Mhey, which had lost to her three of its sons. The rocket exploded by night against the roof of the rose tile mansion with a clap like forty thunders, a rose itself of flame and smoke, to wake most of the town with screams and cries. But running to the spot there were discovered only huge hills of clinker and cooling cinders in the street. The mansion was unscathed, its metals and stones untwisted, its jewelry windows unsmashed, its beasts of antimony and jade leering now downward at those who had come to see.

"Her powers are alarming. Why does she work evil against us?"

"What are her reasons?"

"What is the method of the dreadful spell?"

Qon Oshen prayed for her destruction. They prayed for one to come who would destroy her.

But she preyed upon them like a leopard, and they did not know how, or why.

There was a thief in Qon Oshen who was named Locust. Locust was hideous, and very cunning, and partly insane with the insanity of the wise. He slipped in among a gathering of respected rich men, flung off his official-seeming cloak, and

laughed at their surprise. Although he was a thief, and had stolen from each of them, and each surmised it, Locust fitted within the oblique ethics of the town, for he was a lord of his trade and admired for the artistry of his evil-doing. If he were ever caught at his work, he knew well they had vowed to condemn him to the Eight Agonizing Deaths. But while he eluded justice, sourly they reveled in his theatrical deeds against their neighbors and bore perforce with those nearer home.

"I, Locust, knowing how well you love me, for a certain sum, will perform a useful task for you."

The rich men turned to glance at each other. Their quick minds had already telepathically received the impression of his next words.

"Excellently deduced, your excellencies. I will pierce into the Magia's mansion, and presently come tell you what goes on there."

Some hours after, when the bow of the moon was raising its eyebrow at him, Locust, lord of thieves, penetrated, by means of burglars' skills and certain sorceries he himself was adept in, the mansion of rose-red tiling. Penetrated and watched, played hide and seek with shades and with more than shades, and escaped to report his news. Though from that hour of revelation, he reckoned himself—in indefinable, subtle, sinister ways—altered. And when, years later, he faltered in his profession, was snatched by the law, and—humiliatingly—pardoned, he claimed he had contracted emanations of the witch's house like a virus, and the ailment had gradually eroded his confidence in himself.

"It was a trick of leaping to get over the gate—my secret. Entering then by a window too small to admit even a cat—for I can occasionally condense and twist my bones in a fashion unnormal, possibly uncivilized, I dealt with such uncanny safeguards as seemed extant by invoking my demon patron, Saturo; we are great friends. I then dropped down into a lobby."

It was afterward remarked how curious it was that a thief might breach the defenses of the mansion which a fire missile could not destroy.

But Locust, then full of his cleverness, did not remark it. He went on to speak of the bewildering aspect the mansion had come, internally, to display. A bewilderment due mainly to the labyrinthine and accumulative and mirage-making and virtually hallucinatory effects that resulted from a multitude of mirrors, set everywhere and overlapping like scales. Mirrors, too, of all

shapes, sizes, constructions and substances, from those of sheerest and most reflective glass, to those of polished copper and bronze, to those formed by sheets of water held bizarrely in stasis over underlying sheets of black onyx. A fearful confusion, even madness, might have overcome another, finding himself unguided in the midst of such phenomena. For of course the mirrors did not merely reflect, they reflected into each other. Image rebounded upon image like a hail of crystal bullets fired into infinity. Many times, Locust lost himself, fell to his knees, grew cold, grew heated, grew nauseous, passed near to fainting or screaming, but his own pragmatism saved him. From room to unconscionable room he wended, and with him went thousands of replicas of himself (but, accustomed to his own unbeauty, he did not pay these companions much heed). Here and there an article of science or aesthetics might arrest him, but mostly he was bemused, until hesitating to examine a long-stemmed rose of a singular purple-crimson, he was startled into a yell. Without warning, the flower commenced to spin, and as it spun to peal off glowing droplets, as if it wept fire. A moment more and the door of the mansion, far away through the forest of mirrors, opened with a mysterious sigh. Locust hastily withdrew behind a mirror resembling an enormous eye.

In twenty seconds the Magia came gliding in, lavender-haired and clad in a gown like a wave drawn down from the moon. And behind her stumbled the handsome fourth son of the house of Uqet.

And so Locust the thief came to be the only intimate witness to the spell the Magia wove about her victims.

Firstly she seated herself on a pillow of silk.Then she folded her hands upon her lap, and raised her face, which on that day was masked across eyes and forehead in the plumage of a bird of prey. It seemed she sat and gazed at her visitor as if to attract his attention, gazed with her plumaged eyes, her very porcelain skin, her strawberry mouth, even her long, long nails seemed to gaze at him. She was, Locust explained, an object to rivet the awareness, had it not been for the quantities of mirrors, which plainly distracted the young man, so he did not look at Taisia-Tua the enchantress, but around and around, now into this image of himself, now into that. And soon he began to fumble about the room, peering into his own face in crystal, in platinum, in water, jade and brass. For perhaps two hours this went on, or maybe it was longer, or less long. But the son of Uqet wavered

from looking glass to looking glass, at each snagging upon his own reflection, adhering to it, and his countenance grew stranger and stranger and more wild and—oddly—more fixed, until at last all expression faded from it. And all the while, saying nothing, doing nothing, Taisia-Tua Magia sat at the room's center on the pillow of silk.

Finally the son of Uqet came to stare down into the mirror paving under his feet, and there he ceased to move. Until, after several minutes, he fell abruptly to his knees, and so to his face. And there he lay, breathing mist against his own reflected mouth, and the witch came to her feet and stepped straight out of the chamber. But as she went by him, Locust heard her say aloud: "You are all the same. All the same as he who was before you. Is there no answer?"

This puzzled Locust so much, he left it out of his report.

At the witch's exit, it did occur to the thief to attempt reviving the young man from his trance, but when a few pinches and shakings had failed to cause awakening, Locust abandoned Uqet and used his wits instead to gain departure before the enchantress should locate him.

This story thereafter recited (or most of it), earned much low-voiced meditation from his listeners.

"But did she summon no demon?"

"Did she utter no malady?"

"Did she not employ wand or ring, or other device?"

"No."

Uqet was found in the morning, lying in Taisia-Tua's yard: Locust's proof. Uqet's eyes were now a familiar sightless sight.

Immediately a whole tribe of fresh magicians was sent for. Their powers to hers were like wisps of foam blowing before the tidal wave. Not the strongest nor the shrewdest could destroy the horror of her enchantment, nor break a single mirror in her mansion. Houses of antique lineage removed themselves from the vicinity. Some remained, but refused to allow their heirs ever to walk abroad.

They prayed for her destruction. For one to come who would destroy her.

The kite inquired of heaven and earth:

IS THERE A GREATER MAGICIAN THAN I?

In a confusion of datelessness, the years shriveled and fell like the leaves. . . .

But though the date of her arrival was uncertain, the date of his arrival was exactly remembered.

It was in the year of the Scorpion, on the day of the blooming of the ancient acacia tree in Thirty-Third Plaza, that only put forth flowers once in every twenty-sixth decade. As the sun began to shine over the towers and bridges, he appeared under the glistening branches of this acacia, seated cross-legged on the ground. The fretwork of light and shadow, and the mothlike blooms of the tree, made it hard to be sure of what he was, or even if he was substantially there. He was indeed discernible first by an unearthly metallic music that sewed a way out through the foliage and ran down the plaza like streams of water, till a crowd began to gather to discover the source.

The music came from a pipe of bone which was linked, as if by an umbilical cord of silver tubing, to a small tablet of lacquer keys. Having observed the reason for the pipe's curious tone, the crowd moved its attention to the piper. Nor was his tone at all usual. The colors of his garments were of blood and sky, the shades, conceivably, of pain and hope. Around his bowed face and over his pale hands as he played hung a cloud of hair dark red as mahogany, but to which the sun rendered its own edging of blood and sky-blue rainbows.

When the music ceased, the crowd would have thrown him cash, but at that moment he raised his head, and revealed he was masked, that a face of alabaster covered his own, a formless blank of face that conveyed only the most innocent wickedness. Although through the long slits of the eyes, something was just detectable, some flicker of life, like two blue ghosts dwelling behind a wall. Then, before the crowd had scarcely formed a thought, he set the instruments of music aside and came to his feet, (which were bare), rose straight and tall and pliant as smoke rising from a fire. He held up one hand and a scarlet bird soared out of his palm. He opened the other hand and an azure bird soared out of that. The two birds dashed together, merged, fell apart in a shattering of gems, rubies, garnets, sapphires, aquamarines, that dewed the pavement for yards around. With involuntary cries of delight and avarice, men bent to pick them up and found peonies and hyacinths instead had rooted in the tiles.

"Then stars spun through the air, and he juggled them—ten stars or twenty."

"Stars by day—day-stars? They were fires he juggled from hand to hand."

"He seemed clothed in fire. All but the white face, like a bowl of white thoughts."

"Then he walked on his hands and made the children laugh."

"A vast throng of people had congregated when he removed several golden fish from the acacia tree. These spread their fins and flew away."

"He turned three somersaults backwards, one after another with no pause."

"The light changed where he was standing."

"Where did he come from?"

"That is speculation. But to our chagrin, many of us saw where he proceeded."

Into the crowd, like the probing of a narrow spear, the presence of the enchantress had pressed its way. They became aware of her as they would become aware of a sudden lowering of the temperature, and, not even looking to see what they had no need or wish to see, they slid from her like water from a blade. She wore violet sewn with beads the color of green ice. All her face, save only the eyes, was caged in an openwork visor of five thin curving horizontal bars of gold. Her hair today was the tint of tarnished orichalc.

She stod within the vortex the crowd had made for her, she stood and watched the magician-musician. She watched him produce silver rings from the air, fling them together to represent atoms or universes, and cast them into space in order to balance upside down on his head, catching the rings with his toes. Certainly, she had had some inkling of the array of mages who had been called to Qon Oshen against her. If it struck her that this was like some parody of their arts, some game played with the concept of witchcraft, she did not demonstrate. But that she considered him, contemplated him, was very evident. The crowd duly grew grim and silent, hanging on the edges of her almost tangible concentration as if from spikes. Then, with a hundred muffled exclamations, it beheld the Magia turn without a word and go away again, having approached no one, having failed to issue that foreboding commandment: *Follow* me.

But it seemed this once she had had no necessity to say the ritual aloud. For, taking up the pipe and the tablet of keys, leaving seven or eight phantasms to dissolve on the air, five or six realities—gilded apples, paper animals—to flutter into the

hands of waiting children, the masked, red-headed man walked from under the acacia tree, and followed her *without* being requested.

A few cried out to him, warning or plea. Most hugged their silence, and as he passed them, the nerves tingled in their spines. While long after he had disappeared from view, they heard the dim, clear notes of the pipe start up along the delicate arteries of the town, like new blood running there in the body of Qon Oshen. It seemed he woke music for her as he pursued her and what must be his destruction.

Men lingered in Thirty-Third Plaza. At last, one of the Mhey household spoke out in a tone of fearful satisfaction:

"Whatever else, I think on this occasion she has summoned up a devil to go with her."

"It is Saturo," responded a priest in the crowd, "the demon-god of darkness and fire. Her evil genius come to devour her."

In alarm and excitement, the people gazed about them, wondering if the town would perish in such a confrontation.

She never once looked back, and never once, as those persons attested which saw him go by, did he falter, or the long sheaves and rills of notes falter, that issued from the pipe and the tablet of lacquer keys.

Taisia-Tua reached her mansion gates, and they swung shut behind her. Next, a carved door parted and she drew herself inside the house as a hand is drawn into a glove, and the door, too, shut itself firmly. In the space of half a minute the demon, if such he was, Saturo, if so he was called, had reached the iron gates. Whole families and their guards had been unable to breach these gates, just as the rocket had been unable to disunify the architecture. Locust the thief had wriggled in by tricks and incantations, but the law of Balance in magic may have decreed just such a ludicrous loophole should be woven in the fabric of the Magia's safeguards. Or she may have had some need for one at least to spy the sole enchantment she dealt inside her rose-red walls.

He who was supposed to be, and might have been, Saturo, the demon-god of flame and shade, poised then at one of the gates. Even through the blank white mask, any who were near could have heard his soft, unmistakable voice say to the gate:

"Why shut me out, when you wish me to come in?"

And at these words the gate opened itself and he went through it.

And at the carved door he said: "Unless you unlock yourself, how am I to enter?"

The door swung the slender slice of itself inward, and the demon entered the mansion of the witch.

The mirrors hung and burned, and fleered and sheered all about him then, scaled over each other, winking, shifting, promising worlds that were not. Saturo paid no attention to any of them. He walked straight as a panther through the house, and the myriad straight and savage images of him, sky and snow, and the drowning redness of his hair, walked with him—but he never glanced at them.

So he arrived quickly in the room where the rose spun and threw off its fiery tears. And here the enchantress had already seated herself on the pillow of silk. Her face, in its golden cage, was raised to his. Her eyelids were rouged a soft, dull purple, the paint on her skin—a second skin—dazzled. Each of her terrible clawlike nails crossed over another. Her eyes, whose hue and character were obscured, stared. She looked merciless. Or simply devoid of anything, which must, therefore, include mercy.

Saturo the demon advanced to within two feet of her, and seated himself on the patterned floor in front of her. So they stared at each other, like two masked dolls, and neither moved for a very long while.

At length, after this very long while had dripped and melted from the chamber like wax, Taisia-Tua spoke to the demon.

"Can it be you alone are immune to my wonderful magery?"

There was no reply, only the stare of the mask continuing unalleviated, the suspicion of two eyes behind the mask, unblinking. Another season of time went by, and Taisia-Tua said:

"Will you not look about you? See, you are everywhere. Twenty to one hundred replicas of yourself are to be found on every wall, the floor, the ceiling. Why gaze at me, when you might gaze at yourself? Or can it be you are as hideous as that other who broke in here, and like him do not wish to be shown to your own eyes? Remove your mask, let me see to which family of the demons you belong."

"Are you not afraid," said Saturo, "of what kind of face a demon keeps behind a mask?"

"A face of black shadow and formlessness, or of blazing fire.

The prayers of the town to be delivered from me have obviously drawn you here. But I am not afraid."

"Then, Taisia-Tua Magia, you yourself may pluck away the mask."

Having said this, he leaned toward her, so close his dark red hair brushed her suddenly uplifted hands, which she had raised as if to ward him off. And as if she could not help herself then, the edges of her monstrous nails met the white mask's edges, and it fell, like half an eggshell, to the floor. It was no face of dark or flame which appeared. But pale and still, and barely human in its beauty, the face looked back at her and the somber pallor of the eyes, that were indeed like two blue ghosts haunting it. It was a cruel face, and kind, compassionate and pitiless, and the antithesis of all masks. And the moment she saw it, never having seen it before, she recognized it, as she had recognized him under the acacia tree. But she said hastily and coldly, as if it were sensible and a protection to say such things to such a creature: "You are more handsome than all the rest. Look into the mirrors. Look into the mirrors and see yourself."

"I would rather," said Saturo, who maybe was not Saturo, "look at you."

"Fool," said the enchantress, in a voice smaller than the smallest bead on her gown. "If you will not surrender to your vanity, how is my magic to work on you?"

"Your magic has worked. Not the magic of your spells. Your own magic."

"Liar," said the witch. "But I see you are bemused, as no other was, by fashion." At this, she pulled the gold cage from her face, and the orichalc wig from her hair—which flew up fine and electric about her head. "See, I am less than you thought," said Taisia-Tua. "Surely you would rather look at yourself?" And she smeared the paint from her face and wiped it clean and pale as paper. "Surely you would rather look at yourself?" And she threw off her jewels, and the nails, and the outer robe of violet, and sat there in the plain undergown. "Surely you would rather look at yourself?" And uncolored and unmasked she sat there and lowered her eyes, which was now the only way she could hide herself. "Surely, surely," she muttered, "you would rather look at yourself."

"Who," said he, quieter than quietness, and much deeper than depth, "hurt you so in the north that you came to this place to revenge yourself forever? Who wounded you so you must

plunge knives into others, which certainly remained the same knife, plunged again and again into your own heart? Why did the heart break that now enables these mirrors not to break? Who loved himself so much more than you that you believed you also must learn to love only your own image, since no other could love you, or choose to gaze on you rather than on himself? True of most, which you have proven. Not true of all. What silly game have you been playing, with pain turned into sorcery and vanity turned into a spell? And have you never once laughed, young woman, not even at yourself?''

Her head still bowed, the enchantress whispered, ''How do you know these things?''

''Any would know it, that knew you. Perhaps I came in answer to praying, not theirs, but yours. Your prayers of glass and live-dead men.''

Then taking her hand he stood up and made her stand with him.

''Look,'' he said, and now he leaned close enough she could gaze into the two mirrors of his eyes. And there she saw, not another man staring in forever at himself, but, for the first time, her own face gazing back at her—for this is what he saw. And finding this, Taisia-Tua, not the rose, wept, and as everyone of her tears fell from her eyes, there was the sound of mirror-glass breaking somewhere in the house.

While, here and there about Qon Oshen, as the mirrors splintered, inverted images crumbled inside the eyes of young men, and were gone.

Iye Linla yawned and cursed, and called for food. The sons of Mhey came back to themselves and rolled in a riotous heap like inebriated puppies. A priest bellowed, an aristocrat frowned, at discovering themselves propped up like invalids, their relatives bobbing, sobbing, about the bed. Each returned and made vocal his return. In Twenty-First Plaza, an artist rushed from his house, shouting for the parchment with the bloodstain of his genius upon it.

By dusk, when the stars cast their own bright broken glass across the sky, the general opinion was that the witch was dead. And decidedly, none saw that wigged and masked nightmare lady again.

For her own hair was light and fine, and her skin paler yet, and her eyes were grey as the iridium lake. She was much less beautiful, and much more beautiful than all her masks. And in

this disguise, her own self, she went away unknown from Qon Oshen, leaving all behind her, missing none of it, for he had said to her: "*Follow* me."

A month of plots and uneasiness later, men burst in the doors of the vacant mansion, hurling themselves beneath the grinning toads and the frigid cats of greenish jade, as if afraid to be spat on. But inside they found only the webs of spiders and the shards of exploded mirrors. Not a gem remained, or had ever existed, to appease them. No treasure and no hoard of magery. Her power, by which she had pinned them so dreadfully, was plainly merely their own power, those energies of self-love and curiosity and fear turned back, (ever mirror-fashion), on themselves. Like the reflection of a moon, she had waned, and the mirage sunk away, but not until a year was gone did they sigh with nostalgia for her empire of uncertainty and terror forever lost to them. "When the Magia ruled us, and we trembled," they would boastfully say. They even boasted of the mocking kite, until one evening a sightseer, roaming the witch's mansion—now a feature of great interest in Qon Oshen—came on a scrap of silk, and on the silk a line of writing.

Then Qon Oshen was briefly ashamed of Taisia-Tua Magia. For the writing read: LOVE, LOVE, LOVE THE MAGICIAN IS GREATER, FAR GREATER, THAN I.

JOR JENNINGS

"OTHER"

During the spring and summer of 1980 thousands of census-takers spread out over the country to follow up on unreturned and incomplete questionnaires, all to make the Decennial United States Census as accurate as possible. Some of the households visited were undoubtedly unusual, but it is extremely unlikely that any were as odd as the "family" accidentally stumbled on by the housewife census-taker in this tale.

Funny, I don't remember seeing this house before, Rita thought as she parked her car next door in Crestview Arms' fifteen-minute loading zone. In all the years she had walked Ronnie down this street, around the cul-de-sac, and back on the other side, you would think she would have noticed the bungalow behind the vine-covered wall. Perhaps it was more visible now that it was the only house left on the block, the one single-family relic struggling to survive on a street full of big, new, ugly condominiums squatting on their underground parking and staring down through aluminum-framed glass at the seedling pine trees bristling beside their walkways. But, of course, she had always kept her attention fixed on Ronnie, to avoid seeing the curious, pitying, sometimes hostile stares of her unknown neighbors. Besides, if Ronnie fell, his four-hundred-pound bulk was more than she could get on its feet

again, and it was embarrassing to have to ask strangers for help.

Rita checked her list again. Yes, there really was a 1928 Crestview Circle, and its residents had not returned their census form. Llano, it said on the mailbox. What kind of name was that? She looked at her watch. Four-thirty. Just time enough to do the interview, pick up Ronnie at the day care center, give Elizabeth her bath, iron Carolyn's clothes, and fix dinner before Burt came home with his clients. With Burt Jr. coming home for the weekend . . . "I can manage," Rita said aloud, as though trying to convince Burt that she could handle a job and still give her family the same loving care she had always provided.

She pushed open the vine-tangled gate and started down the overgrown walk. Blooming fruit trees half strangled by flowering vines, jasmine, honeysuckle, rambling roses, reared up around her, marooning her in an overpoweringly odorous jungle of glowing flowers, bees, and hummingbirds.

The boy who answered the door came up to Rita's shoulder, yet there was a strange air of maturity about him. His coloring was strange, too: skin dark as an Indian's, pale green eyes, a shock of shoulder-length yellow-white hair. A surfer? Yes, that would account for the suntan and bleached hair. The boy didn't look so odd, now that she had identified him as a surfer.

"Hello, I'm from the Census Office, my name is Rita Morgenthau, here's my identification," Rita said, as she had been saying all day. "This *is* 1928 Crestview Circle?" The boy seemed too bewildered to reply, and she asked, "How old are you?"

"I don't know," the boy said. "You mean in years?" He started counting on his fingers.

Phenylketonuria! Rita thought. Poor boy. He would not have become retarded if only the disorder had been diagnosed in time. Maybe his parents would like to join Families with Special Children, a group Rita had started when Ronnie was born. "Uh, never mind," Rita said gently. "Is your mother or father at home?"

"Violet. That's my mother," the boy said positively. "I don't know my father, though." He sounded unconcerned.

"Uh—well, is Violet here, then?" Rita asked, hoping she hadn't blushed.

"No."

"When do you expect her back?"

"Tomorrow. Next year. Maybe midsummer?" He wasn't concerned about that, either.

"Well, who's taking care of you in her absence?"

"Huh?" said the boy with a blank stare.

Hoping that someone was taking care of the boy, that this Violet person hadn't simply abandoned her illegitimate, mentally defective son, Rita tried again. "Look, is there a head of the household, uh, an older person living with you—"

"The Queen," the boy said. "You wish to speak with the Queen?"

"That's right. Let me speak to the Queen." Who or what the Queen was, she could find out from the Queen.

"Follow me, please." Taking a torch off the wall, the boy led the way down a long, dark hall.

It was a very long, very dark hall. How long a hall can you put in a tiny bungalow? This one seemed to go on for miles. Rita had plenty of time to wonder about that, and about the boy's torch, a baton tipped with a smokeless ball of blue fire, and time left over to worry about getting into something her training hadn't covered. Could she find her way back to the front door, while running, in a panic? Finally the boy led her down some stone steps into a room like a white limestone grotto filled with houseplants, shrubs, and small trees, where his family was having a reunion.

Some of the people were a little taller than the boy, some a little shorter, all were dark-skinned and ivory or pinkish haired, and there were a lot of them. They kept moving in and out of the shrubbery, so they were hard to count. The first time Rita tried to count them she got to fifty-two before she realized that she had counted some twice. She started over and this time counted thirty-nine.

The focus of the family was a skinny old woman in a cloudlike shawl who sat by a firepit in an ornate rattan rocking chair, absent-mindedly stroking the pet badger asleep on her lap. Two elderly men sat nearby on stools; a third, and some women, sat at her feet on tortoises. One woman stirred the contents of a translucent alabaster cauldron suspended over the smokeless blue coals in the firepit. Meanwhile, the young folks moved about the garden, stopping to mist the begonias, bromiliads and orchids that grew on the ceiling among the stalactites, eat apricots and pomegranates off the trees, or kneel over flowers with straws in their mouths (were they hand-pollinating the blooms?). Some

worked, together or alone, at projects. Two girls were making a complicated floor-to-ceiling macramé sculpture, while a third spun yarn for them, now and again laying down her spindle and going off to comb more wool from a vicuna browsing on the flowers. Two boys practiced their music lessons, one on the harp, the other on the recorder. They managed to sound pretty together, although they were playing different pieces.

How long has it been since I sat down at my cello? Rita wondered. Not since Burt brought Ronnie home from the hospital. Burt said they couldn't afford the sanitarium anymore, not with Burt Jr. in medical school, and the state hospital kept poor Ronnie so drugged . . . So had the sanitarium, for that matter. That was about all you could do with Ronnie, drug him to prevent the destructive rages that erupted whenever he was denied the food he had to have constantly. Rita couldn't bear to drug him, so she let him eat. "Rita, you're killing him with kindness," the doctor had warned when Rita proved incapable of keeping her idiot first-born son on any kind of diet. *Exactly,* she realized. She was murdering Ronnie. Except, to prove murder, you would first have to prove that Ronnie was a human being. That might be hard to do. A shark has more cerebral cortex . . . That's what Ronnie was, a shark! A four-hundred-pound shark in a perpetual feeding frenzy . . . *Have another chocolate cake, Ronnie!* Vividly she visualized Ronnie stuffing chocolate cake into his mouth with both hands, getting chocolate icing in his beard, up his nose . . . Just as vividly she imagined a Ronnie grown so gross he could no longer get through the door, stumbling, falling on his face, and, unable to stand or even roll over, suffocating in his fat like a beached whale. Seeing him dead like that, she saw how he had terrified her. . . .

What appalling thoughts she was having! This would never do. She glanced at the new digital watch Burt had given her after Ronnie broke the old one (along with his mother's arm). The numbers flickered faintly, as though the battery were weak, but it was a different number each time. She pushed the button to get the date. "8 18, 12 4, 3 28"—oh well. If she was late getting home she could always say her watch wasn't working.

"Hello, I'm from the Census Office, my name is Rita Morgenthau, I'm here to ask you some questions because the office has no record of receiving your form," Rita said with the feeling that she was talking too fast.

Everyone else she called on had protested that they had mailed in their census form ages ago, they couldn't understand why the Census Office hadn't received it, perhaps it had been lost in the mail? No one said that here. Instead, there was a moment of silence while the group around the old woman digested the information, and then the man sitting at her feet said, "Be welcome."

A slip of a girl in a seafoam silk frock retrieved a green python from an emerald cushion in a rattan armchair near the fire, wound it expertly around her tiny waist, nudged Rita into the chair, and filled a mug for her at the cauldron. Rita hadn't meant to accept refreshments, but the conservatory seemed chilly, and the spicy brew was so fragrant and warm, she couldn't resist sipping it. "This is delicious! I must get the recipe," she hinted.

No one offered to give it to her, and Rita, feeling embarrassed, decided it was time to get down to business. "Um—this *is* the residence at 1928 Crestview Circle?" No one said it wasn't, and Rita added, "Just checking. How many people actually live here, Mr.—is it Lano, or Yano?" she asked the man who had welcomed her.

"You may call me whichever you prefer," he replied agreeably. "Do not be surprised, however, if everyone else calls me Oregon Junco."

"It says 'Llano' on your mailbox," Rita said somewhat defensively.

"Does it? I wouldn't know about that."

"Okay, Mr. Junco." A titter ran round the room at that, and Rita guessed she had said something wrong. Well, she couldn't worry about every faux pas. "How many of you people actually live in this house, Mr. Junco?"

He shrugged. "All of us live here, when we are here. When we are somewhere else, we live there. What can I tell you? We come and we go."

"I see. Well, what I really need to know is how many people were living in this house on April 1, 1980."

Nobody said anything. Rita tried again. "Mr. Junco, were you living in this house on April 1, 1980?"

"No, I was in Spain. Wait a minute—1980, you say? Was that the year of the great earthquake?"

"April 1, 1980 was last month," said Rita.

"Oh. In that case, I was living here. Most likely."

Everyone else quickly agreed that they too were living here on April 1, 1980. Most likely.

Rita realized she would have to write down what they told her, whether or not she believed it. "Okay, now I need to get your names—"

"My name is House Finch," said the boy who had been her guide, and he whistled the song of the house finch to prove it.

"I'm Thistledown," said one of the macramé girls, drifting across Rita's field of vision in a flurry of pale skirts; the yarn spinner, "Mourning Dove," nested and cooed, while "Wild Cucumber" proved her identity by climbing the macramé.

"Just a minute, I need your ages, too," Rita said before anyone else could sing or dance.

"Forty-three," House Finch said promptly.

"I mean in years," Rita said, remembering his earlier confusion.

"That's in years. Your years," House Finch amended. "A span of elapsed our-time equivalent to one revolution of the Earth around the Sun."

Mourning Dove was also forty-three, Thistledown a year younger, and Wild Cucumber a mere kid of thirty-eight.

"They can't be," Rita appealed to Oregon Junco.

"I'm one hundred and eighty-three," Oregon Junco said helpfully.

"Oregon Junco, 143," Rita said as she wrote. No one corrected her. "Now, I also need your relationship to the head of the household—"

The old woman looked up from her badger. "They're all my children."

"Then you must be Violet," Rita guessed.

"Of course I'm not Violet. I'm Slime Mold. Violet isn't here," the old woman snapped. She seemed offended.

"But I thought—" Rita began, looking at House Finch.

"They're all my children," Slime Mold repeated. "If you don't put they're all my children, this will take too much time."

"I can manage," Rita said sharply, as though the old woman had criticized her. The way Burt had criticized her, over and over. "If you don't have time—to take my suits to the cleaners, to entertain my clients, to plant the hundred gladioli I just bought—you should never have taken this job." *I took this job before you asked your invalid mother to live with us,* Rita wanted to scream at him, but he wasn't there. Instead, she said to Slime Mold what she had always said to Burt. *I can manage.*

Poor Elizabeth, Rita thought, trying hard to feel sympathetic. How terrible it must be to be bedridden, senile, incontinent, half-paralyzed from strokes, and utterly dependent on the daughter-in-law you've always despised! *Come on, Elizabeth! One more stroke! And this time give it all you've got!*

ELIZABETH MORGENTHAU
1909-1980
Beloved Wife and Mother

it said on the headstone, half-hidden in deep grass. The plastic flowers in the vase at its foot were faded to gray. The picture in Rita's mind was so vivid, she actually seemed to be on that graveyard hillside. She concentrated, trying to add a fourth line, "Nagging Mother-in-Law," to the grave marker, but her mind refused to do that. Finally she gave up and wandered on. . . .

To Carolyn's grave. *Oh, no! Not Carolyn! I don't want Carolyn to die! I just want her to see a psychiatrist*, Rita told her unconscious mind. *And fulfill the promise of her beauty, not get stuck in the wife-and-mother trap like I did.* Instead, Carolyn, a lovely blonde who dressed all in white and scorned synthetics, came home from college determined to be a writer, and spent all day locked in her room, playing rock and roll at full volume on her stereo, emerging only to procure a fresh bottle from her father's wine cellar. "Rita, we have to be patient with her, she's writing the great American novel," said Burt, who didn't have to iron his darling daughter's lily white, one-hundred-percent natural fiber clothes (she went through three sets a day), nor did he have to stay home all the time caring for a paralyzed harpy and a dangerous monster, while the thud thud thud from Carolyn's stereo reverberated through the house until Rita thought she would go out of her mind. *Carolyn plays the stereo so loud to cover up the sound her typewriter isn't making, while she drinks herself insensible*, Rita wished she could tell Burt. *Is that how . . . ?* And Rita saw her beautiful, blonde daughter, dressed as always in immaculate white ducks and white silk shirt, speakerphones over her ears and her head in a fogbank, roller-skating out the driveway right into the path of an oncoming street sweeper. Swish! Scrub! Rub-a-de-dub! And the too-clean novelist was all washed up.

Rita blinked, and the flowery cavern was around her again. The old woman, Slime Mold—was that really her name?—was

looking at her strangely. "I'm sorry, I've got a million things on my mind," Rita said, and, as her habit was, followed her apology with a compliment. "You know, this patio—this conservatory—it's really the most beautiful place I've ever seen. You must have one fantastic green thumb."

"If you like it here, stay as long as you wish," said Slime Mold. "Once you leave, you will not be able to return."

"Oh, I'd love to stay, but I have a jillion things to do," Rita said with a nervous laugh. "Including filling out the rest of this form. Now, look. Fun's fun, but the Census Office really does need to know—"

"No, it doesn't," snapped Slime Mold.

"Not anymore," said Oregon Junco, by way of explanation.

"But it does!" Rita protested. "They need to know what the population is, so they can apportion representatives—"

"Then ask us your questions and we will tell you what to put," said Slime Mold, "but if you argue about every answer you will be here much too long."

"That's for sure. My car will be towed away." Rita looked at her watch. The window was blank. "Look, I'm willing to put down anything you say, if you'll sign the statement at the end that says all of the above information is true to the best of your knowledge."

"You put. I sign," said Slime Mold.

"Head of household. Slime Mold," Rita put.

"Two hundred and four years old," said Slime Mold.

"Gee, I suppose everyone tells you this, but you don't look a day over ninety," said Rita, deciding to go along with the gag.

No one laughed. "You age faster than we do," Oregon Junco explained, not unkindly.

"Thanks. I needed that. Now, let's get the rest of the names—"

Everyone in the room had an Indian-sounding name, and everyone claimed to be much older than he looked. Most remembered being born, but didn't know the date. Rita interrupted tales of "popping out" on lily pads, in Antarctic crevasses, among the vents of submarine volcanoes, with "What race are you?"

"The race that's not to the swift," Oregon Junco said wittily.

"That's not on my list. I'll read it to you. Are you, check one, white, black or Negro, Japanese, Chinese, Filippino, Korean, Vietnamese, American Indian (in which case, which tribe?), Asian Indian, Hawaiian, Guamanian, Samoan, Eskimo, Aleut, or Other?"

"Other," said Slime Mold, as though it were obvious.

"Other. Right. Now, we do have to specify. What race are you, if you're not on my list? Gypsies? You're not gypsies, are you?"

House Finch perched on the arm of her chair and looked down at the form she was filling out. "We're fairies," he said.

"You can't all be!" Rita felt her face turning red. "Anyway, that's not a race," she mumbled.

House Finch agreed. "It's a different species."

"Not by their definition. Not if we interbreed and have fertile young. And Violet did get House Finch by a mortal father," Oregon Junco reminded them all.

There were murmurs of agreement from all around the room.

"So she said!" snapped Slime Mold.

Silence supplanted the murmurs.

Rita was silent, too. She was thinking about her own son, Burt Jr., the chip off Burt's block. Handsome, athletic, straight A student, halfway through medical school, and planning to specialize in orthopedic surgery—because that was where the money was. His brother's decorticate brain, his grandmother's shattered one, his mother's hot flashes, for that matter, none of it interested him. Just money. "Mom, do you know how much an orthopedic surgeon *gets* for testifying in a P.I. case?"

Let's see. To do in a doctor you need a medical problem, one outside his specialty, Rita decided, as she felt another hallucination coming on. She was beginning to enjoy them: what would her family say if they knew she was spending her afternoon visualizing horrible ways for them to die? *I guess I really did need to face up to my hostilities*, she thought, feeling delightfully naughty. *But what did they put in that drink?*

It was Supergerm, the ultimate, antibiotic-resistant microbe, swatting down Americans like DDT does flies, Rita decided. Fleeing the epidemic-ridden city too late, Burt and Burt Jr. cracked up the car, crawled feverishly through a sleetstorm to the leaky shelter of a tumbledown barn, and huddled shivering in mouldy straw, calling her name in their delirium, calling "Rita!" calling "Mother!" until they died. Rita could see them very clearly in her mind's eye. Her student son looked middle-aged; Burt was an old man. Dear Burt. Burt, who brought his invalid mother home for her to care for just when she began training to be a census enumerator; Burt, who brought Ronnie home to stay

right after she landed that long-sought place on the grand jury; Burt, who had called that afternoon to say he was bringing some important clients home with him: "I've told them what a great cook you are, Rita. They're expecting a gourmet dinner." Fat chance. She would pick up some fried chicken on the way home. No, the beef Stroganoff was already thawing in the microwave. *Ronnie goes or I go!* No, Burt would just hint that she couldn't manage, and she could, that was the trouble. She could manage all too well. As long as she was willing to spend every waking moment doing things she didn't want to do, she could manage.

For starters, she would stop ironing Carolyn's clothes. They could stay in the dampening bag until they mildewed. And if Carolyn couldn't keep sober long enough to iron her own clothes, she could wear polyester doubleknits like everyone else. *One thing's sure. When I get home there'll be some changes made!*

"You don't want me to put 'gay' or something, you want me to put 'fairies'?" Rita asked Slime Mold. "If I put that, you'll sign?"

"You put, I sign," said Slime Mold.

"How do you spell it?" Rita was wondering if there was a race called Phaerris that she had never heard of.

"Spell it yourself. I don't know those bird-tracks you call writing."

Then how are you going to sign this? Rita decided not to ask. She wrote, "Phaerris (sp?)" "Now. I assume you're all U.S. citizens. Tell me if you're not. Are any of you married? Hispanic or of Spanish descent? Good. That makes it easy. My next group of questions deals with your living quarters. Suppose I just tell you what I've assumed, and you tell me if I'm wrong. This address *is* 1928 Crestview Circle. There's one housing unit here, you enter from outside, not through a hall, I mean, that hall is part of your home, you do have hot water? that is, if you don't all take showers at once, ha, ha! Uh, how many bedrooms do you have?"

"If you would survive, you must take things that are not yours," said Slime Mold.

"Oh, I don't think that's necessary. How many bedrooms—"

"You will survive, you will live, only if you take things that are not yours," Slime Mold repeated.

"Shall we say two bedrooms? No argument? Good. Now, do you own, or are you in the process of buying, your home, or do you rent?" When no one answered, she added, ' 'Look, I can't guess that, I really do need an answer."

"We live here," Oregon Junco said with a shrug.

"Sometimes," said Thistledown with a giggle.

"We come and we go," said Wild Cucumber in a sing-song, and the other girls chimed in, turning "We live here, sometimes, We come and we go" into a round with an elaborate interweaving of harmony and counterpoint, which was picked up and amplified by the harpist and the recorder player.

They must be squatters. *Did the owner know that a horde of impecunious, mentally defective, homosexual pygmies had moved into his vacant house?* Rita wondered. She wrote, "Family lives here rent free. Not aware of value of house or land."

When Slime Mold signed the census form, and the supplementary pages, with what looked like an Egyptian hieroglyphic, Rita was beyond caring. She just wanted to get out of there. With the relief of someone leaving a lunatic asylum, she went out of the torch-lit hall into the bright spring sunshine, and down the flower-lined walk, to the curb.

Where her car was gone.

It's been towed away! I must have been gone a lot longer than fifteen minutes, was Rita's first thought. The tow trucks had certainly been busy! The only cars left at the curb were two domeshaped three-wheeled vehicles covered with pine needles.

Oh, that's the problem! This isn't Crestview Circle! But where in the neighborhood was this cul-de-sac shaded by huge, old, half-dead pine trees? Through the trees she could see dilapidated old apartment buildings that looked abandoned. Windows were broken, balconies dripped bird droppings, sidewalks were brown pine needles that hadn't been swept in years.Trying to get her bearings, Rita turned around to look at the tiny bungalow she had just visited. It was gone. Even the space it had occupied was gone, reduced to a narrow walkway between two huge, old, abandoned apartment buildings. Over the arched doorway of the nearest one, red tile letters still spelled out, "Crestview Arms."

In a growing panic, Rita clutched her shoulder bag to her chest and ran for the street that had led to her home.

MICHAEL SHEA

THE HORROR ON THE #33

Many of our citizens find themselves in the lowest stratum of our society for a variety of reasons. The Horror on the #33 is about an encounter between two such persons: a wino who has deliberately chosen a "career" and a trashbagger lady who—well, she's something else entirely.

Of those grim events I find it difficult, even at this late date, to write. Strictly speaking, they did not even involve me, but Knavle, my dear friend, from whose voluminous correspondence alone I know of them. But we are close in soul, Knavle and I, and through his accounts, hellishly circumstantial as they were, I can say that I too, in a manner, lived those moments of horror with him.

When that first dread encounter befell him, Knavle had been a wino for almost exactly a year. He was in fact observing the anniversary month (he had already lost his memory for exact dates) of his choosing that bibulous career.

I must confess that all of us who knew him sought to discourage him from following this alcoholic vocation. Even I, his closest confidant, had been so unsupportive as to call his choice of lifestyle a "downward path." He had mildly replied that his was no smooth downhill way; that it was far easier, in fact, to be a short-order cook (for example) or a bank president, than to be a wino; that, moreover, in being an object of compassion, he was

performing a vital moral service for those more fortunate than himself who would otherwise, lacking such flagrant specimens of misery, pity only themselves.

Fortunately over the months Knavle's happiness and dedication persuaded me of the narrowness of my prim response, and by the time I write of, our breach was well healed. In the last letter I had of him before the one detailing his encounter, my friend had written with calm gaiety of his simple rituals of anniversary: apart from drinks cadged from others' bottles, over whose nature he had no control, he was drinking, throughout the month, only Santa Fe White Port—his first "poison" (so he fondly called it) as a fledgling sot.

Ah, the contrast of that letter with the next! The former closed with an airy reference to von Schecklestumpff's remark that religious faith lies more in small observances than grand beliefs, and in the postscript Knavle put the bite on me for five dollars. But even as I was sealing my reply, with a two-dollar money order, his next letter was dropped through my door slot, thick with Knavle's scrupulous detail. About its pages hung—not the festive fragrance of Santa Fe, but the light stink of sweating fear!

Knavle is slight and short—in general, large-bodied winos don't survive well. Knavle was one of those who could fold themselves out of sight to take their doses of oblivion. An important concomitant of this skill is the habit, on waking, of lying perfectly still until one has rediscovered one's surroundings. This Knavle did on the night in question.

He climbed up out of the chasm of two quarts of White Port to find himself folded up, vibrating. He lay on a taut surface of ocher-colored plastic whose texture parodied skin, and which had a scorched smell. He was, he realized, on a bus. That it was late at night, he judged from its being interiorly lit, and from the absence of voices. And by the fetid hum beneath him Knavle knew he was over the bus's motor, at the rear of the great rattling, fluorescent barn of a vehicle. Knavle turned his face up, and looked above.

He could see the contents of the bus without sitting up, because it was a new model, with yard-square windows which, when it was dark outside and light within, formed facing walls of mirrors. Out either side, the bus's interior, in hologram, lay adjoining itself. Thus Knavle saw all just by twisting his head slightly, and the image quality was excellent, even down to the

striates of the red rubber aisle-mat, and the felt-tipped graffiti on the aluminum screen up front concealing the driver.

As plainly mirrored, were the bus's two other passengers, closer to the front. One was a small, elderly Oriental man, sitting motionless, wearing a suit and tie, his skull appearing as soft as the thin ashen hair slicked down across it. And the other, some seats behind him, was an old woman, a trashbagger.

She was, with her three bulging handbags and two doubled grocery sacks of junk, one of the shopping-cart crazies, the trashcan scavengers who wheeled their wealth, mumbling, through just such parks and public squares as Knavle frequented. This one he had never seen. Her hair was a frozen yellowish thornball, like tallow radiating in spikes from her dirty, nut-hard face. Even as Knavle studied her she rose and carried her baggage up the aisle to the little Oriental gentleman's seat, muttering to herself as she went. He turned up to her, inquiringly, his smooth, bulged brow that suggested infant frailty; the frecklings of age around the deep orbits of his eyes gathered into the constellations of a painful smile. The old woman plumped down beside him and began mumbling with more purpose, almost audibly to Knavle where he lay.

My friend watched, expecting the old man's attempt to extricate himself. The little person made none. His mouth widened—a smile now of absorption in what the old she-crazy was saying. Tenderly, absently, he almost touched the careful knot of his tie, and replied something. The white, spike-radiating head rocked, nodding.

Knavle's neck was cramped, and he was just deciding to sit up, when he saw the old woman throw a look round the bus. There was something in the alert competence of the look that chilled him. He felt sure she had not seen him, and that look made him know that she must not. The bus increased speed, plowing down a long slope between sparse lines of street lamps just visible through the interior reflections in the windows. The motor went into a higher, sighing key, and the boom and hustle of the great chassis erased all traces of what the trashbagger was now saying to her seat-mate.

As she spoke she began actually to touch the little man, to groom him here and there—pat his tieknot, smooth the hair like fine dead grass at his temples, stroke his lapels. While she did these things, the man's head drooped forward, he gaped at her, and seemed to want to deny something that she was saying.

Then all at once the old woman shifted in her seat and went straight to work on him. She unknotted his tie, dragged it out of his collar, and wadded it into one of her bags. She reached down, seemed to fumble obscenely for a moment, then sat up, tucking one of his shoes into a different bag. Lastly she rousted the comb from one of his back pockets, and snagged it decoratively in her waxy locks. The old man gazed at her, rapt, with the expression of one who wants to smile politely, but finds what has been said a bit too difficult, or shocking.

As what seemed a finishing stroke in this senseless touch-up, the trashbagger tilted the man's head slightly to one side. Then she set all of her parcels down in the aisle, reached up and took hold of her own throat with both hands, and stripped her face clean off her skull. However, it was not a skull that was revealed, but the head of some huge wasp, or great carnivorous fly. Its merciless oral machinery sank into the old man's neck. For perhaps fifteen seconds, the trashbagger fed.

Then she pulled her face back on, swept up all her goods in one arm, and supported the little body like some drunken crony on the other. Staggering down the aisle to the head of the bus as the vehicle suddenly slowed for a stop, she tendered a small something to the unseen driver. The doors gasped open, and the spiky head descended.

Knavle could not resist sitting up to peer outside. They were at an in-town park he knew, at an intersection where the neon of an all-night coffee shop added to the light of the signals, set to idiotic pulsations of red and yellow. From the intersection, he knew he was on the #33 bus.

She set the small gentleman's body on a bus-stop bench backed by the park's dark wall of foliage. She walked on toward the crosswalk, leaving him sprawled in a slovenly way which the neatness of the man himself would never have tolerated. Knavle looked at him and saw that across the street a bored waitress, leaning at her counter in the coffee shop, stared at him too. Then he glanced back at the corner and saw that he himself was being studied by the trashbagger. She had paused in her hobbling departure and now looked Knavle straight in the eyes. They stared at each other a long moment across the disjointed figure that slouched in the poison-candy-colored light. Then the bus pulled away. With a groan my friend shrank back down in his seat. Alas! In a world of glass, where can a man lie hidden?

2

A person without experience of the wino perspective could easily miss the peculiar dismalness of Knavle's position. He and his caste inhabit the waste corners of the world and have therefore the least power to hide of any class of men. Only a man who possesses things has any power to rearrange his life, to avoid or defend; as for the resolutely destitute, they are already clinging to crannies and last possibilities. There are only so many places to sleep for free, or to get a morning's work distributing supermarket advertisers, and to these places Knavle had to go.

In his account of the day following the incident his style was firm and factual, but the activities he reported betrayed how disturbed he was. In the first place, around noon, he bought and ate, not only two hot dogs, but an order of fries as well. In the second place, after his meal, he went and reported the murder on the bus to the police.

The food alone was very telling—any serious wino dislikes buying it. Wine is a corrosive which reduces and disposes of one's time. Nothing is expected of it, it commits one to nothing—its purchase expresses not even the bare assumption that the morrow will dawn. How different the act of buying food, a stark confession of belief in the future! I needed no more than this to tell me that Knavle was contemplating positive action and might even go so far as to try to save his life in a coherent and serious way.

But of course I *had* further and far more startling evidence of this. To go to the police! Knavle! He was himself shocked that he had gone to this extreme, as his letter ended by expressing. Here follows Knavle's own account:

"I went to the central station, McPittle, instead of one of the local tanks where I'm known, because I reasoned that such heavy news should go straight to the heart of the organization, for promptest action.

"The central station is a square glass building at least twenty-five stories high. It's a mirror-shaft, it reflects everything around it—sky, neighboring buildings, street traffic.

"Inside the building though, total transparency takes over. There are some floors where you can see the entire width of the place through hundreds of glass cubicle dividers. A forest of heads bobs in and out of view among the window-maze, round

black heads as numerous as the acres of little round black holes in the ceilings. These, like a field of boringly orderly stars, are hung with ugly fluorescent moons—square aluminum grids like ice-cube trays. The slightly chilled air has a mausoleum smell, I think from the presence of so much underarm deodorant.

"The first man I saw asked me if I had a record. I expected this, what with my good suit off at the cleaners, and having left my shave and my shine in my other pants. I said I had a record but I hadn't done anything lately, and that I had come to report a murder I'd witnessed last night after midnight on the #33 bus, Airport to Flanders Heights. The murder was of an elderly Japanese or perhaps Chinese gentleman, and by an even more elderly woman of a vagabondish, addled appearance. The man I spoke to turned to his partner and said, thumbing at me: 'Get this individual's name and data. I've got a feeling he has a record.'

"The partner took my name and data and I waited for about an hour on a cushioned bench without a back. Finally the report came up from down stairs that yes, I did have a record. They gave me my file number and sent me up two floors to see a detective. All the detectives were busy so I waited in the detectives' waiting room for about two hours. At last they called me to the bench. The girl asked for my file number. I had lost it.

"They telephoned downstairs, but the file number department was closed. They told me to come back in the morning and I left, blessing my luck, for I'd managed to work out of my system this strange compulsion to report this thing and without having actually to do it. More important still, I'd thought about the trashbagger through all those hours waiting, and come to realize something about her: she would never let herself get caught, and no human power would ever take her against her will."

After this, Knavle's fatalism returned—or so I believed. His letters pointedly excluded mention of the incident, and the life they reported, divided between the usual parks and missions and neighborhoods, was his old life unaltered. It would have been tactless to applaud the stoic bravery of this. We both knew that he had confronted an entity of the direst kind, which now knew him as a witness to its act. But to live on in spite of this, to make, after his initial excited folly, no move to hide or defend himself—this was no more than his wino's code of honor required. To praise an integrity which he would want his friends simply to assume him to have, would have insulted him.

But I was misled, and his behavior was in fact *not* perfectly fatalistic. After several letters he "let slip" that, not only had he not cut down on his bus riding—he had increased it and had begun to ride the #33 with especial frequency. This was a converse species of betrayal of his ethics. I wrote him so at once, my real concern, of course, being greater for his life than his code of behavior. But I stressed this point—to seek the inevitable was as mad as to flee it. What had happened to his sot's detachment? I knew his desert-fringed city well enough to know that he could get around it quite adequately without using the #33 line, and told him quite forcefully that this he ought to do. He reply was rather airy. He insisted the #33 had always been one of his entertainments. Aside from its offering, if taken round-trip, three hours of warm lodging, its cross-town course gave one an excellent panorama of the city—from its spectacular glass-and-girders heart, through successive ethnic zones, through the outlying beanfields, orchards and eucalyptus windbreaks on the town's fringe, out to the airport. Moreover, he added, he never took it at night any more. Small protection! For Knavle's second encounter was soon enough in coming. And it happened on the #33 in broad daylight, at high, glorious noon!

On the #33's return ride from the airport, the farmland is succeeded by a black-and-Latin ghetto whose streets are broad, their asphalt striped with grass-tufted seams, and on whose plank fencing or raw cinder-block walls cholo writing jostles the style-less black graffiti. The land rises into minor hills after this, where the streets are crowded with taller, more Victorian frame structures. Chinese, Korean and aged white people live here. Here, as the bus topped a rise, the cloud cover which had dimmed the whole first half of Knavle's ride, broke up before a fresh breeze. Tons of honey-colored sunlight were poured upon the steep, shingled rooftops, the winter-scoured pavements glowed white and dry. My friend rejoiced in the sight and wondered if his sole fellow-passenger did likewise. She was a little chicken-necked biddy, wattled with age, and wearing a small round Sunday hat *cum* nonfunctional fragment of blue veil. She sat near the front, Knavle the rear; he could not determine if she even saw beyond the window glass beside her. The bus, just past the rise, pulled into a stop, its big new-model brakes making barely a squeak. The door wheezed and clapped. A thornball of tallowish hair rose, like a malign, jerky sun, from the step well. Paying nothing, the old leather-faced trashbagger mumbled up the aisle

as the bus pulled away. Had there been a hum of revolution from the roll of identifying plaques set in the bus's brow? Perhaps to NOT IN SERVICE?

Oddly, Knavle did not feel directly endangered, though he was perfectly visible. Without knowing why, he felt sure from the first that the biddy was to be the old vagabond's prey. Just so. The trashbagger gasped to a seat just two aft of the biddy. She sat mumbling, rummaging without system among her multiple tacky baggage. Knavle watched, with no slightest concern to conceal the focus of his attention. The crone had not met his eyes as she came up the aisle.

Now she got up and advanced to the lady's seat—she sat, as many of them like to do, on its aislewards edge. The old nomad stood there in a bearish slouch, hugging her bags and sacks of trash, muttered down, and made a vague, uncouth movement with her head. The biddy looked up at her, and Knavle could feel, though not see, how her knobby hands fretted with the gloves they doubtless held in her lap. Yet with the disquiet there was also in that biddy's brow the same knit of fascination Knavle remembered from the little Japanese gentleman. Her thrifty, bony chin hung slack an instant, then she positively smiled, tightening the threads of age across her lean jaw. She moved in to the window, and the trashbagger plumped herself down in her place.

The she-tramp set her bundles down in the aisle, then leaned forward to massage her legs, speaking in a steady rumble the while. The biddy, whom Knavle saw in profile, wore as she listened a beaming church-social smile that he was sure was the liveliest in her repertory. She nodded to some remark, then lifted her hand with a little gesture that suggested the sliding aside of some intervening panel. Leaning close to this aperture of special confidence she had created, the biddy murmured an eager sentence to the trashbagger who, sitting up from rubbing her ankles, nodded deliberately.

They sat bent in closer conference. The spiky head spoke; the biddy's; again the spiky. And as she spoke, the trashbagger casually reached up and plucked one of the biddy's earrings off her earlobe and pocketed it. The biddy nodded dazedly—seemingly, more at something said than done. The trashbagger muttered and plucked down the second earring.

Knavle, for no clear reason, expected the old vagabond to take the Sunday hat as one of her trophies, but she did not. She took

the coat of the biddy's blue knit suit off her with surprising address and, as with the Japanese gentleman, a shoe last of all. Knavle had been asking himself if he would watch to the end. Now he sat powerless to look away as the crone seized her own throat, and wrenched off the rubbery bag of face and scalp, freeing the huge insect head with its black, nodular eyes and the compact surgical apparatus of its mouthparts.

It was not the busy, multiple scissoring movement of these that Knavle watched as they sank into the biddy's neck—but rather the eyes. Since each of them was a hemisphere and they faced opposite directions, he knew that they had wrap-around focus, and saw the bus's whole interior. Nevertheless he had the overwhelming feeling that they were aimed at himself, centrally and exclusively, in the manner of a human gaze.

For fifteen seconds he and the immense arthropod stared at each other, while the latter fed. The exuberant, unpent sunlight poured through the all-admitting windows and lit those compound eyes with a rainbow corruscation. Knavle marveled at the radiance fractured on those hundred thousand lenses; the creature seemed gilded with immortality in those moments, with the gorgeous streets and sky passing outside.

Then the trashbagger was pulling back on the wigged sack, shouldering the biddy and her bundles on either side, and shuffling out, as the bus sighed curbward for its first stop since she had gotten on. She tendered something at the driver's stall and got off. She set the biddy on the bus-stop bench and shuffled away, round the corner, gone. The biddy sat askew—coatless in her lace-throated blouse, but still wearing her Sunday hat—and seemed to sleep with a faintly abandoned air, publicly, shamelessly, like an old wino in a park.

3

After receiving Knavle's account of this second confrontation, I awaited his next letter with dread. I hoped he would decide to abandon that city, but had too much reason to expect him—not only to stay—but to seek out the trashbagger again.

When his next letter came, it brought not only the disappointment of seeing my fears justified, but a more subtle unease as well. I present that brief epistle in its entirety. Knavle's unsettling degree of intuition about the trashbagger, the particularity with which he surmises the trashbagger's aims and her laws,

strongly suggested to me that my friend was already to a critical extent subject to a kind of hypnotic influence exerted by the creature. I subjoin the document:

March 17

To Mr. J. Bradley McPittle

Dear McPittle:

A wino is a frontiersman, a romantic. He lives squarely in the wasteland that most men so furiously deny, though it surrounds them. For all our best mirrors and lenses, aimed star- or atom-wards, tell the same tale: motes of matter wheeling in gulfs of black space.

Anyone who takes a walk on the desert at night, on a clear night, can see this truth without lenses. I've often insisted, McPittle, on the fact that my city stands on a desert. Even lacking this, any big city at night is in itself a good facsimile of a desert, and a good wino is the official desert rat of all such wastelands.

Any wino who is not merely a time-server inhabits the desert out of pride, because it is the truth, or at least the truth's image. He scorns the glass mazes of responsibility, wherein so many well-upholstered heads bristle and bob and keep the ever-deepening streams of data creeping through the crooked course of systems!

But I digress. I'm on the bench at the park stop of the 33 line. It's late afternoon now—near rush hour. I'll stay on the bus all night if need be. I distributed advertisers yesterday—endless miles of advertisers! I have with me both fare and provisions. In a nice stout paper bag I have a quart of Santa Fe White Port, a quart of Italian Swiss Tawny Sherry, a quart of Thunderbird, and a pint bottle of Pagan Pink Ripple. I've got three packages of cracker-and-peanut-butter sandwichettes, fifty cents worth of beef jerky, two Three Musketeer bars and a package of Beer Nuts. Also, in a separate bag made out of red plastic netting, I have five pounds of oranges.

For the past half-hour I was wondering why I got the oranges, which I don't like—but I just remembered that we used to take them with us as kids when we rode the bus to the beach.

I'm petrified. But I am also strangely sure of one thing: it's in that last conversation you have with the Trashbagger that all is won or lost. Only if she out-talks you there, only if she hypnotizes you, does her face come off. If you out-think her and resist her will, you win your freedom.

I wish I had a gun! I couldn't even afford a kitchen knife!

There's something else I know too, McPittle. I'm convinced I'm not the only man in this city to have witnessed the Trashbagger's crimes. And I feel that her other witnesses have been as powerless to testify as I was, perhaps through fear of madness, or torpor of the will. How many of those people in that coffee shop across from me, eating there doggedly, docilely, on display, how many of them have seen and are saying nothing? Their fat, freckled earlobes, their veiny noses move slightly in mastication. Their neckless profiles are a trifle stiff with the pretense of invisibility to the roaring street. . . .

Whatever else, I won't hide. I won't—the bus, two blocks off. Must seal and send. May luck sit on my shoulder!

Yours, Knavle

4

Intended to present a digest of Knavle's subsequent letter—the last he ever wrote. But despite the vagaries of my friend's style, and the rather baroque imagery to which he was addicted, I feel it would be unfair of me to interpose myself between the reader and what must be the sole first-hand account of the Trashbagger extant.

I here present then, with the most poignant feeling, the letter itself, intact as before, despite its length:

March 17

Dear McPittle:

Taking the #33 at rush hour is a kind of drowning, an immersion in breathless waiting men. Children, or an occasional addled vociferous type will send ripples of response through the mass, but then all our engines return to *idle*. The feel of all those idling psychic dynamos around one causes at moments an unbearable suffocating suspense. How can we all wait like this, you think, packed, paralyzed? You think of the thousand unguessable impulses that any one of us could explode with at any moment. The fact that we don't, that we all sit and stand, drowned in silence—it becomes amazing, awe-inspiring in itself.

As the light fails in the sky and the interior lights come on, then we, a fluorescent-lit thicket of the drowned go more minutely on display to the sidewalks we pass. We are they, shown them as plainly as are the manikin displays in plate glass. We

flee, a little copse of shadows, across the concrete. Perhaps we look like an exhibit in some future museum of our culture. We are quietly posed, seemingly intent, unaware that our world lies buried a millennium deep in time past.

We were all agreed to sit and wait in silence. Most of the other passengers had other agreements going, such as about taking baths and washing their clothes. They resented anyone waiting in silence with them, who had not entered these other covenants too.

Therefore, since I was already in bad odor with the company to begin with (so to speak), I didn't aggravate matters by sneaking any sips. I ate my cracker sandwichettes, and then an orange, as quietly as possible in the window seat I had gotten. I waited.

Around eight it was safe to start getting a gloss on, and I did so. I wasn't yet afraid, because I really expected nothing until the post-eleven thin-out of riders. Now I nursed my wine and enjoyed the sense of being on a cruise. A bus has the same rock and surge as a boat, and at night it contains you in an alien element—the dark—just as a boat does. I peered through my reflection at the streets outside, or followed the easy-paced changes of the faces of my fellow-travelers—augmented at one door, eroding away at the other. I did the latter discreetly by watching the windows. I had the contented feeling, as I did this, of guaranteed distraction, such as watching T.V. can give—though this, of course, had far more variety than T.V.

My wine ran out at about ten-thirty. Since we were nearing the out-bound end of the run, I decided to get down at the last intersection before the bus entered the airport. I could replenish at the liquor store that stood there and get the bus again as it came back out of the airport.

Just after I got down, I realized I hadn't gotten a clear look at the driver's face. I hadn't remembered to do this on the previous encounters and had told myself to keep track of the drivers this time out.

But when I got back on, I was startled by the bus's being completely empty, and when I took my seat a ways back, I still hadn't noticed the man at the wheel.

The bus almost never left the airport without someone aboard—not before midnight, anyway. The implication of its being empty did not escape me. I sat literally on the edge of my seat, meaning to face the Trashbagger standing if she got on. This was irrational. I knew she could only be escaped through debate and that no

physical dodging could save my life, failing in this. Still I sat poised.

But absolutely no one got on. Not at the lonely stops in the rural stretch, where the dead light of the brown-vapor highway lamps lay on the black rank and file of identical orange trees. Not in the ghettoed hills where the intersections were lit by the Coors sign of a tenstool bar, the traffic signals, and an oldfashioned streetlight on a pseudo-Corinthian column of cement. And not in big-money downtown, in whose glass-box megaliths the ceiling lights formed shapeless mosaics, hanging like white larvae in hives. Not for over fifteen miles. We got onto the freeway for the last short stretch to our turn-around downtown.

This was nothing short of impossible. It was a minor order of impossibility, but it *was* one nonetheless. Not once did the bus pause to fall back into the schedule which it must surely be getting ahead of, barreling stopless on, as it was.The longer I delayed saying something to the driver—going up, for instance, and making a jocular remark about its being a busy night—the more powerless I was to speak. The bus spun through the turnaround in the downtown terminal and roared back out and onto the freeway again.

The certainty—panicky and insistent—that if I pulled the cord, the driver would not let me off, almost drove me to try, though I was resolved so fiercely to come face to face with my enemy, and though this was so clearly a premonition of our confrontation. We roared through the recrossing of the city. Once more, absolutely no one got on.

I got numb enough to my suspense to open the bottle of port I had bought when I got off. We turned through the airport without a pause, and with a deepening hum of gears, charged out on our return. I heard a snort, a cough, and a stir behind me.

I turned. Six seats back, near the rear, a tousled, unshaven face—toothless though relatively unsenile—sprouted into view, scrubbing gummy eyelids with a blackened hand whose dirtiness was so deep-lying that it was glossy. It was a fellow-wino, just ending a nap that must have been going on for hours. As I stared at him, as blank as his own scarce-wakened mind, the bus braked with a whistling gasp, and its door clapped open.

I will relive that moment of waiting for as long as is left me. We sat in that weird triptych of the interior adjoined by its differently tilted selves on either side. There we were, six winos, waiting, amid six rows of chrome arcs on the empty seatbacks,

like shiny ribcages. Up from the doorwell rose, dodderingly, the spiky, tallowish planet. The Trashbagger passed the driver without paying, and waddled toward me—*me* now. I was sure!—as the bus pulled out. I could not move. My nerves cried *rise* to my legs, but the electric impulse fell down into a bodiless gulf where no legs were.

Her body was a squat mass of dowdy brown overcoat, a matronly nonshape. Over this her burst of electric hair—like a dirtied dandelion seed-puff—and her brown face as etched with line as an oak's bark, floated with a faint tremor that suggested inner voltage, fierce, secret meditation. I looked at my reflection in the window beside me, asking myself why I did not rise, stand ready, fight, or flee.

But as she stood near my seat, looking at me, I found that I feared not so much for my life, as lest I should make a mistake. It was something like stage fright that I shook with, an over-awing sense that in this interview I must make my ultimate and all-determining account of myself and that my subsequent fate should be precisely as good as my performance now. The urgency of escape was muffled by this dread. The Trashbagger set her parcels down on a seat across the aisle and, with a whispery concussion dropped onto the seat next to me. With the panic of a nervous child who blurts the first thing he can think of, I asked her:

"Do you push around a shopping cart?" For I had seen many like her who did.

The old face aimed itself at me—the hair gave off a whiff of something like shoepolish with the movement. The walnut-shell topography of skin gullied and rivered more deeply with the tightening of a smile:

"Yes. You bet I do."

"Why?" I croaked.

"Why, to collect everything that's mine."

"And what . . . is yours?"

"All trash."

I nodded. I did not want to ask my next question:

"And what's trash?"

"Why don't you know that? It's everything, sooner or later."

Her answers came with serene clarity. Yet I could not be sure, as I stared in her face, if her lips in fact moved, or even if she used a voice.

And each answer astonished me. Not in itself—but simply that

I had received it. Without expecting for an instant that she would spare my life, I felt a mellow pang of faith in her. Her aura irresistibly inspired it. For despite her poverty and dirt, her agedness had taken on a wild-old-wicked-man quality. Hers, I felt, was the crusty, careless age of genius—Einsteinian, Whitmanesque, vital and bookish and humane.

It struck me then. To the old gentlemen she had surely seemed benevolent, Confucian. To the biddy she must have been deaconish, and oozed a pastorly unction.

But realizing this did not free me from the spell. I found it impossible to recall what her head looked like when stripped of its living mask. I felt, and could only feel, that she was wisdom itself, that she was the very center of my hope, and held the key to my salvation.

"But listen, ma'am," I said—carefully, hushedly—"*I* am not trash."

She shook her head very slightly. "But you will be."

"Tell me," I said, "just give me a hint. What must I argue? What line of defense must I take? I only want a clue."

"But what *can* you argue?" she said. My heart moved with a despairing assent to this. I saw through the reflection in the window that in this seeming-short time we had almost recrossed the city and were not far from the freeway stretch. In my stomach I felt an antlike crawliness. I remembered the maggots I had found, with horror, in the belly of a dead cat I had turned over as a boy.

"I think I understand you," I said. "All lives are chance-formed electro-chemical engines, vastly isolated in space. Then entropy . . . atrophy . . . death . . . trash. . . ."

Each word I said sank me deeper in fear, till I felt I was suffocating in my speech. Conversations with the Trashbagger led to a single end. I'd seen it. This conversation too was a brief maze leading to the same door.

"But isn't there something more, something else, that doesn't become trash?" I cried. It took great effort to say this. She exerted a kind of gravity, causing the mind to fall into her mode of thought. It was like physical toil to formulate an idea alien to her. The words came out of my mouth stillborn. Her old, eroded face was a desert my question got lost in.

"Something more? Something else?" she echoed, with remote, sad humor. Again I wondered—had she spoken with her voice, or had her eyes answered, cold black stars above her desolation of a

face? She leaned forward and scratched at a varicosity through a hole in her filthy socks. "Motes in space," she sighed as she sat up. "Wound up by accident, running down by necessity."

I might have been speaking myself, so simple and direct was my assent to what she said. I heard a concluding note in her tone and sensed our talk was ending, but could not for my life deny what she had said.

"You've got to tell me," I blurted. "Are you going to take it off?"

She bent to scratch her other leg. "Take what off?" she asked me.

"Your face."

"My face?" she asked, sitting up. She looked into my eyes for a long moment. "Yes," she said, putting her hands to her throat.

I saw the seam in the skin—crosswise to the esophagus—split cleanly, like withered lips parting. A thinner neck was unveiled within, bristling with black chitinous hairs and barbs. This could not be. There was, however, no other reality—only these three bus interiors and, outside, the arc-lit, sixty-mile-an-hour emptiness of the freeway, which we had just entered. With a flabby friction the empty bag of the old woman's face slid completely off the instrument-cluster of the Trashbagger's feeding apparatus, and off the vast compound eyes.

I looked in the window beside me and beseeched my image to move, not to sit there and die, but somehow to rise. My image did nothing. Behind me the black, multilensed planets, lit by a fluorescent sun, loomed near.

I did the impossible. I tore myself loose from my reflection. It remained still, stupefied, looking on, while I wrenched myself round to face the immense hymenopterous head. I felt as powerless to move as if there were no space around me, or as if I had become completely insubstantial. But with the same furious, blind contradictiveness, I *did* move. I heaved, and brought upward arms and hands that held something. With this something, desperately, I smote the Trashbagger.

It was my plastic bag of oranges. It weighed several pounds, and the flexible neck of the bag made blackjack-like blows possible. The fruit had a meaty sound against the stiff and surprisingly tough globes of the Trashbagger's eyes.

It was a groggy-enough blow, given her mass and strength, but it had enormous effect. The Trashbagger rocked back on the

seat, and in the same moment the bus swerved sharply; this, combined with her recoil, dumped her straight out of the seat. I had a glimpse of the wino staring on round-eyed from the rear, and then the sudden emergence of the driver's head from behind his aluminum screen brought me around.

He was a young black man with a goatee and a half-length natural. The bus still roared forward down the freeway, and yet he had brought his head and shoulders completely around, to stare back at me in outrage and shock.

"Are you crazy, man!" he shouted. "What you *doin'?* Don't you know who that *is?*"

"Jesus Christ!" I screamed back. "Look out!!"

The freeway poured toward us through the windshield behind the driver's head, and there I saw a big two-trailer truck drop sluggishly from an on-ramp and into our lane ahead. It was barely doing thirty yet, and we were at sixty-five.

The driver looked around and, in slow-motion, it seemed, pulled himself back behind the screen. Both trailers of the truck were heaped with oranges. As the vehicle struggled toward forty with dinosaurian effort, and as we began—too late, I saw—to brake and swerve aside, it seemed I saw each individual orange—dewy, porous, luminous in the freeway's arc-lights. Our wheels locked before we could quite pull out of the lane, and the bus skated sideways against the trailers of the frantically accelerating fruit truck.

A rain of oranges drummed on our roof and then our whole, long, rattling frame whirled through a half-circle and crashed rear-first against one of the legs of an overpass.

I clutched the seat through the impact, which sent the Trashbagger rolling down the aisle to the rear of the bus. Then we were motionless, and with a cough, the pneumatic doors flapped open. I sprang up, crossed the aisle, and jumped out onto the freeway. I took three running steps toward the on-ramp the truck—now sprawled ahead of us—had entered by. From behind the bus the Trashbagger stepped out and stood in my way. I stopped and lifted my sack of oranges again.

One of her antennae was bent, half-folded sideways. In the arc-light her great eyes seemed to brim with sight, each one of them like a cosmos of individuals—lenses innumerable as the tiny, relentless lives of coral in an acre of archipelago. I realized with astonishment that, save for the orange truck beyond the bus, the freeway was perfectly deserted.

"There is no place to run," the Trashbagger said. Unmistakably, it was a voice, the creature's true voice—a dry, chitinous whisper that made clicks and slotting noises serve for its consonants. "No place. Not in time. Not in space. Nowhere. Are you quite mad?"

"Yes!" I shouted, desperately eager to agree. "Yes! Stand back! Stand back or I'll hit you again!"

The Trashbagger's mouthparts, a black and green bouquet of rasps and pliers, worked, clicking and twiddling with a curious energy. As if she did not have wrap-around focus, she tilted now one and now the other globe of lenses at me, with a movement like a bird's, or a mantis' delicate head-cocking. Her shoulders shook. She made a low, pneumatic commotion. I realized that she was *laughing*.

The laughter raised every hair on my body. It had the nasty final sound of a quarter falling into a glass box. It had some of that blind, wild energy, that booming clatter of an empty bus doing seventy on a midnight freeway. The locking tomb was in it too, the gasp of the closing door. I ran past her—she made no move to stop me. I ran straight up the ivied slope of the embankment, through the lamp-lit, smog-oily leaves, cold and wet with the fog. At the top there was a cyclone fence. I climbed over it, and I ran. My God, McPittle, how I ran!

Knavle

5

Knavle never wrote another letter, as I have said. He said it was a morbid habit, and abandoned the practice.

He also abandoned the wino's life. He has become an itinerant juggler, and as a result I see him much more frequently. And though he speaks wistfully of his days as a drunkard, he realizes that their attraction is largely a matter of that fortuitous beauty all things have when they are past. He is sincerely devoted to juggling, the art of which he first assayed using those same oranges that saved his life that night.

He was here just recently, for an engagement at the local Senior Citizens Center, and he spoke of his new calling:

"Juggling, McPittle," he told me, "has given me something I never had as a wino. It is a defiance of gravity of the most beautifully direct kind. Everything that lives is a defiance of

gravity! Everything has a dance in it which it is my joy to liberate, and I mean to specialize in precisely this, until my next meeting with the Trashbagger. Everything must dance, you see—everything—until it winds up in her shopping cart, that rattling jail!''

JOHN KESSEL

ANOTHER ORPHAN

The Pequod *is unquestionably one of the best-known ships in all of literature, but who among us would want to be a member of its crew, particularly on its voyage in search of the Great White Whale? Here is an outstanding story about a young present day Chicago broker who wakes up one morning in that very predicament.*

"And I only am escaped alone to tell thee."

—Job

ONE

He woke to darkness and swaying and the stink of many bodies. He tried to lift his head and reach across the bed and found he was not in his bed at all. He was in a canvas hammock that rocked back and forth in a room of other hammocks.

"Carol?" Still half-asleep, he looked around, then lay back, hoping that he might wake and find this just a dream. He felt the distance from himself he often felt in dreams. But the room did not go away, and the smell of sweat and salt water and some overwhelming stink of oil became more real. The light slanting down through a latticed grating above became brighter; he heard the sound of water and the creak of canvas, and the swaying did

not stop, and the men about him began to stir. It came to him, in that same dreamlike calm, that he was on a ship.

A bell sounded twice, then twice again. Most of the other men were up, grumbling, and stowing away the hammocks.

"What ails you, Fallon?" someone called. "Up, now."

TWO

His name was Patrick Fallon. He was 32 years old, a broker for a commission house at the Chicago Board of Trade. He played squash at an athletic club every Tuesday and Thursday night. He lived with a woman named Carol Bukaty.

The night before, he and Carol had gone to a party thrown by one of the other brokers and his wife. As sometimes happened with these parties, this one had degenerated into an exchange of sexual innuendo, none of it apparently serious, but with undertones of suspicions and the desire to hurt. Fallon had had too much wine and had said a few things to the hostess and about Carol that he had immediately wanted to retract. They'd driven back from the party in silence, but the minute they'd closed the door it had been a fight. Neither of them shouted, but his quiet statement that he did not respect her at all and hers that she was sickened by his excess, managed quite well. They had become adept in three years at getting at each other. They had, in the end, made up, and had made love.

As Fallon had lain there on the edge of sleep, he had had the idle thought that what had happened that evening was silly, but not funny. That something was wrong.

Fallon had the headache that was the residue of the wine; he could still smell Carol. He was very hungry and dazed as he stumbled into the bright sunlight on the deck of the ship. It was there. It was real. He was awake. The ocean stretched flat and empty in all directions. The ship rolled slightly as it made way with the help of a light wind, and despite the early morning it was already hot. He did not hear the sound or feel the vibration of an engine. Fallon stared, unable to collect the scattered impressions into coherence; they were all consistent with the picture of an antiquated sailing ship on a very real ocean, all insane when compared with where his mind told him he ought to be.

The men had gone to their work as soon as they'd stretched into the morning light. They wore drab shirts and canvas trousers; most were barefoot. Fallon walked unsteadily along the deck,

trying to keep out of their way as they set to scrubbing the deck. The ship was unlike anything he had ever seen on Lake Michigan; he tried to ignore the salt smell that threatened to make it impossible for him to convince himself this was Lake Michigan. Yet it seemed absurd for such a small vessel to be in the middle of an ocean. He knew that the Coast Guard kept sailing ships for training its cadets, but these were no cadets.

The deck was worn, scarred and greasy with a kind of oily, clear lardlike grease. The rail around the deck was varnished black and weatherbeaten, but the pins set through it to which the rigging was secured were ivory. Fallon touched one—it was some kind of tooth. More ivory was used for rigging-blocks and on the capstan around which the anchor chain was wound. The ship was a thing of black wood fading to white under the assault of water and sun, and of white ivory corroding to black under the effect of dirt and hard use. Three long boats, pointed at both ends, hung from arms of wood and metal on the left—the port—side; another such boat was slung at the rear of the deck on the starboard side, and on the raised part of the deck behind the mainmast two other boats were turned turtle and secured. Add to this the large hatch on the main deck and a massive brick structure that looked like some old-fashioned oven just behind the front mast, and there hardly seemed room for the fifteen or twenty men on deck to go about their business. There was certainly no place to hide.

"Fallon! Set your elbows to that deck or I shall have to set your nose to it!" A short, sandy-haired man accosted him. Stocky and muscular, he was some authority; there was insolence in his grin, and some seriousness. The other men looked up.

Fallon got out of the man's way. He went over to one of the groups washing down the deck with salt water, large scrub brushes, and what looked like push brooms with leather flaps instead of bristles, like large versions of the squeegees used to clean windows.The sandy-haired man watched him as he got down on his hands and knees and grabbed one of the brushes.

"There's a good lad, now. Ain't he, fellows?"

A couple of them laughed. Fallon started scrubbing, concentrating on the grain of the wood, at first fastidious about not wetting the already damp trousers he had apparently slept in, soon realizing that that was a lost cause. The warm water was sloshed over them, the men leaned on the brushes, and the oil

slowly flaked up and away through the spaces in the rail into the sea. The sun rose and it became even hotter. Now and then one of the men tried to say a word or two to him, but he did not answer.

"Fallon here's got the hypos," someone said.

"Or the cholera," another said. "He does look a bit bleary about the eye. Are you thirsty, Fallon? D' your legs ache? Are your bowels knotted?"

"My bowels are fine," he said.

That brought a good laugh. "Fine, he says! Manxman!" The sailor called to a decrepit old man leaning on his squeegee. "Tell the King-Post that Fallon's bowels are fine, now! The scrubbing does seem to have eased them."

"Don't ease them here, man!" the old man said seriously. The men roared again, and the next bucket of water was sloshed up between Fallon's legs.

THREE

In the movies men had faced similar situations. The amnesiac soldier came to on a farm in Wales. But invariably the soldier would give evidence of his confusion, challenging the farm owner, pestering his fellow workers with questions about where he was and how he got there, telling them of his persistent memory of a woman in white with golden hair. Strangely—strangely even to Fallon—he did not feel that way. Confusion, yes, dread, curiosity—but no desire to call attention to himself, to try to make the obvious reality of his situation give way to the apparent reality of his memories. He did not think this was because of any strength of character or remarkable powers of adaptation. In fact, everything he did that first day revealed his ignorance of what he was supposed to know and do on the ship. He did not feel any great presence of mind; for minutes at a time he would stop working, stunned with awe and fear at the simple alienness of what was happening. If it was a dream, it was a vivid dream. If anything was a dream, it was Carol and the Chicago Board of Trade.

The soldier in the movie always managed, despite the impediments of his amnesia and the ignorance of those around him, to find the rational answer to his mystery. There always was a rational answer. That shell fragment which had grazed his forehead in Normandy had sent him back to a Wessex sanitorium,

from which he had wandered during an air raid, to be picked up by a local handyman driving his lorry to Llanelly, who in the course of the journey decided to turn a few quid by leasing the poor soldier to a farmer as his half-wit cousin laborer. So it had to be that some physicist at the University of Chicago, working on the modern equivalent of the Manhattan Project, had accidentally created a field of gravitational energy so intense that a vagrant vortex had broken free from it, and, in its lightning progress through the city on its way to extinction, had plucked Fallon from his bed in the suburbs, sucked him through a puncture in the fabric of space and time, to deposit him in a hammock on a mid-nineteenth-century sailing ship. Of course.

Fallon made a fool of himself ten times over during the day. Despite his small experience with fresh-water sailing, he knew next to nothing about the work he was meant to do on this ship. Besides cleaning the deck and equipment, the men scrubbed a hard, black soot from the rigging and spars. Fallon would not go up into the rigging. He was afraid, and tried to find work enough on the deck. He did not ask where the oil and soot had come from; it was obvious the source had been the brick furnace that was now topped by a tight-fitting wooden cover. Some of the cracks in the deck were filled with what looked like dried blood, but it was only the casual remark of one of the other men that caused him to realize, shocked at his own slowness, that this was a whaling ship.

The crew was an odd mixture of types and races: there were white and black, a group of six Orientals who sat apart on the rear deck and took no part in the work, men with British and German accents, and an eclectic colection of others—Polynesians, an Indian, a huge head-shaven black African, and a mostly naked man covered from head to toe with purple tattoos, whorls and swirls and vortexes, images and symbols, none of them quite decipherable as a familiar object or person. After the decks had been scrubbed to a remarkable whiteness, the mate named Flask set Fallon to tarring some heavy ropes in the fore part of the ship, by himself, where he would be out of the others' way. The men seemed to realize that something was wrong with him, but said nothing and apparently did not take it amiss that one of their number should begin acting strangely.

Which brought him, hands and wrists smeared with warm tar, to the next question: how did they know who he was? He was Fallon to all of them. He had obviously been there before he

awakened; he had been a regular member of the crew with a personality and role to fill. He knew nothing of that. He had the overwhelming desire to get hold of a mirror to see whether the face he wore was indeed the face he had worn in Chicago the night before. The body was the same, down to the appendix scar he'd carried since he was nine years old. His arms and hands were the same; the fatigue he felt and the rawness of his skin told him he had not been doing this type of work long. So assume he was there in his own person, his Chicago person, the *real* Fallon. Was there now some confused nineteenth-century sailor wandering around a brokerage house on Van Buren? The thought made him smile. The sailor at the Board of Trade would probably get the worst of it.

So they knew who he was, even if he didn't remember ever having been here before. There was a Patrick Fallon on the ship, and *he* had somehow been brought here to fill that role. Reasons unknown. Method unknown. Way out. . . .

Think of it as an adventure. How many times as a boy had he dreamed of similar escapes from the mundane? Here he was, the answer to a dream, twenty-five years later. It would make a tremendous story when he got back, if he could find someone he could trust enough to tell it to—if he could get back.

There was a possibility that he tried to keep himself from dwelling on. He had come here while asleep, and though this reality gave no evidence of being a dream, if there was a symmetry to insanity, then on waking the next morning, might he not be back in his familiar bed? Logic presented the possibility. He tried not to put too much faith in logic. Logic had not helped him when he was on the wrong side of the soybean market in December, 1980.

The long tropic day declined; the sunset was a travel agent's dream. They were traveling east, by the signpost of that light. Fallon waited, sitting by a coil of rope, watching the helmsman at the far end of the ship lean, dozing, on the long ivory tiller that served this ship in place of the wheel with handspikes he was familiar with from Errol Flynn movies. It had to be a bone from some long-dispatched whale, another example of the savage Yankee practicality of whoever had made this whaler. It was a queerly innocent, gruesome artistry. Fallon had watched several idle sailors in the afternoon carving pieces of bone while they ate their scrap of salt pork and hard bread.

"Fallon, you can't sleep out here tonight, unless you want the

Old Man to find you lying about." It was a tall sailor of about Fallon's age. He had come down from aloft shortly after Fallon's assignment to the tar bucket, had watched him quietly for some minutes before giving him a few pointers on how the work was done. In the falling darkness, Fallon could not make out his expression, but the voice held a quiet distance that might mask just a trace of kindness. Fallon tried to get up and found his legs had grown so stiff he failed on the first try. The sailor caught his arm and helped him to his feet. "You're all right?"

"Yes." Fallon was embarrassed.

"Let's get below, then," They stepped toward the latticed hatch near the bow.

"And there he is," the sailor said, pausing, lifting his chin aft.

"Who?" Fallon looked back with him and saw the black figure there, heavily bearded, tall, in a long coat, steadying himself by a hand in the rigging. The oil lamp above the compass slightly illuminated the dark face—and gleamed deathly white along with the ivory leg that projected from beneath his black coat. Fixed, immovable, the man leaned heavily on it.

"Ahab," the sailor said.

FOUR

Lying in the hammock, trying to sleep, Fallon was assaulted by the feverish reality of where he was. The ship rocked him like a gentle parent in its progress through the calm sea; he heard the rush of water breaking against the hull as the *Pequod* made headway, the sighing of the breeze above, heard the steps of the night-watch on deck, the occasional snap of canvas, the creaking of braces; he sweated in the oppressive heat belowdecks; he drew heavy breaths, trying to calm himself, of air laden with the smell of mildewed canvas and what he knew to be whale oil. He held his hands before his face and in the profound darkness knew them to be his own. He touched his neck and felt the slickness of sweat beneath the beard. He ran his tongue over his lips and tasted salt. Through the open hatch he could make out stars that were unchallenged by any other light. Would the stars be the same in a book as they were in reality?

In a book. Any chance he had to sleep flew from him whenever he ran up against that thought. Any logic he brought to bear on his situation crumbled under the weight of that absurdity. A

time machine he could accept, some chance cosmic displacement that sucked him into the past. But not into a book. That was insanity; that was hallucination. He knew that if he could sleep now, he would wake once more in the real world. But he had nothing to grab hold of. He lay in the darkness listening to the ship and could not sleep at all.

They had been compelled to read *Moby Dick* in the junior-year American Renaissance class he'd taken to fulfill the last of his Humanities requirements. Fallon remembered being bored to tears by most of Melville's book, struggling with his interminable sentences, his wooly speculations that had no bearing on the story; he remembered being caught up by parts of that story. He had seen the movie with Gregory Peck. Richard Basehart, king of the sci-fi flicks, had played Ishmael. Fallon had not seen anyone who looked like Richard Basehart on this ship. The mate, Flask—he remembered that name now. He remembered that all the harpooners were savages. Queequeg.

He remembered that in the end, everyone but Ishmael died.

He had to get back. Sleep, sleep, you idiot, he told himself. He could not keep from laughing; it welled up in his chest and burst through his tightly closed lips. Fallon's laugh sounded more like a man gasping for breath than one overwhelmed by humor: he barked, he chuckled, he sucked in sudden draughts of air as he tried to control the spasms. Tears were in his eyes, and he twisted his head from side to side as if he were strapped to a bed in some ward. Some of the others stirred and cursed him, but Fallon, a character in a book where everyone died on the last page, shook with helpless laughter, crying, knowing he would not sleep.

FIVE

With a preternatural clarity born of the sleepless night, Fallon saw the deck of the *Pequod* the next morning. He was a little stunned yet, but if he kept his mind in tight check the fatigue would keep him from thinking, and he would not feel the distress that was waiting to burst out again. Like a man carrying a balloon filled with acid, Fallon carried his knowledge tenderly.

He observed with scientific detachment, knowing that sleep would ultimately come, and with it perhaps escape. The day was bright and fair, a duplicate of the previous one. The whaler was clean and prepared for her work; all sails were set to take

advantage of the light breeze, and the mastheads were manned with lookouts. Men loitered on deck. On the rear deck—the quarter-deck, they called it—Ahab paced, with remarkable steadiness for a man wearing an ivory leg, between the compass in its box and the mainmast, stopping for seconds to stare pointedly at each end of his path. Fallon could not take his eyes off the man. He was much older than Fallon had imagined him from his memories of the book. Ahab's hair and beard were still black, except for the streak of white which ran through them as the old scar ran top to bottom across his face, but the face itself was deeply worn, and the man's eyes were sunken in wrinkles, hollow. Fallon remembered Tigue who had traded in the gold pit, who had once been the best boy on the floor—the burn-out, they called him now, talking a very good game about shorting the market. Tigue's eyes had the same hollow expectation of disaster waiting inevitably for him—just him—that Ahab's held. Yet when Fallon had decided Ahab had to be the same empty nonentity, the man would pause at the end of his pathway and stare at the compass, or the gold coin that was nailed to the mast, and his figure would tighten in the grip of some stiffening passion, as if he were shot through with lightning. As if he were at the focal point of some cosmic lens that concentrated all the power of the sun on him, so that he might momentarily burst into spontaneous flame.

Ahab talked to himself, staring at the coin. His voice was conversational, and higher pitched than Fallon had imagined it would be. Fallon was not the only man who watched him in wonder and fear.

"There's something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here—three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round globe is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self. . . ."

All spoken in the tone of a man describing a minor auto accident (the brown Buick swerved to avoid the boy on the bicycle, crossed over the yellow line and hit the milk truck which was going south on Main Street). As soon as he had stopped, Ahab turned and, instead of continuing his pacing, went quietly below.

One of the ship's officers—the first mate, Fallon thought—who had been talking to the helmsman before Ahab began to speak, now advanced to look at the coin. Fallon began to remember what was going to happen. Theatrically, though there was nobody there to listen to him, the mate began to speak aloud about the Trinity and the sun, hope and despair. Next came another mate, who talked of spending it quickly, then gave a reading comparing the signs of the zodiac to a man's life. Overwritten and silly, Fallon thought.

Flask now came to the doubloon and figured out how many cigars he could buy with it. Then came the old man who had sloshed the water all over Fallon the previous morning, who gave a reading of the ship's doom under the sign of the lion. Then Queequeg, then one of the Orientals, then a black boy—the cabin boy.

The boy danced around the mast twice, crouching low, rising on his toes, and each time around stared at the doubloon with comically bugged eyes. He stopped. "I look, you look, he looks, we look, ye look, they look."

I look, you look, he looks, we look, ye look, they look.

They all looked at it; they all spouted their interpretations. That was what Melville had wanted them to do to prove his point. Fallon did not feel like trying to figure out what that point was. After the dramatics, the *Pequod* went back to dull routine, and he to cleanup work on the deck, to tarring more ropes. They had a lot of ropes.

He took a break and walked up to the mast to look at the coin himself. Its surface was stamped with the image of three mountains, with a flame, a tower, and a rooster at their peaks. Above were the sun and the signs of the zodiac. REPUBLICA DEL ECUADOR: QUITO, it said. A couple of ounces, worth maybe $1,300 on the current gold market, according to the London fix Fallon last remembered. It wouldn't be worth as much to these men, of course; this was pre-inflation money. He remembered that the doubloon had been nailed there by Ahab as a reward to whoever spotted Moby Dick first.

I look, you look, he looks, we look, ye look, they look.

Fallon looked, and nothing changed. His tiredness grew as the day wore through a brutally hot afternoon. When evening at last came and the grumbling of his belly had been at least partially assauged by the meager meal served the men, Fallon fell exhausted into the hammock. He did not worry about not sleeping

this time; consciousness fell away as if he had been drugged. He had a vivid dream. He was trying, under cover of darkness, to pry the doubloon away from the mast so that he might throw it into the sea. Anxiously trying not to let the helmsman at the tiller spot him, he heard the step, tap, step, tap of Ahab's pacing a deck below. It was one of those dreams where one struggles in unfocused terror to accomplish some simple task. He was afraid he might be found any second by Ahab. If he were caught, then he would be exposed and vilified before the crew's indifferent gaze.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't get his fingers under the edge of the coin, though he bruised them bloody. He heard the knocking of Ahab's whalebone step ascending to the deck; the world contracted to the coin welded to the mast, his broken nails, the terrible fear. He heard the footsteps drawing nearer behind him as he frantically tried to free the doubloon, yet he could not run, and he would not turn around. At the last, after an eternity of anxiety, a hand fell on his shoulder and spun him around, his heart leaping into his throat. It was not Ahab, but Carol.

He woke breathing hard, pulse pounding. He was still in the hammock, in the forecastle of the *Pequod*. He closed his eyes again, dozed fretfully through the rest of the night. Morning came: he was still there.

The next day several of the other men prodded him about not having taken a turn at the masthead for a long time. He stuck to mumbled answers and hoped they would not go to any of the officers. He wanted to disappear. He wanted it to be over. The men treated him more scornfully as the days passed. And the days passed, and still nothing happened to free him. The doubloon glinted in the sun each morning, the center of the ship, and Fallon could not get away. I look, you look, he looks, we look, ye look, they look.

SIX

Fallon had assumed his sullen station by the tar bucket. There he felt at least some defense from his confusion. He could concentrate on the smell and feel of the tar; he remembered the summers on the tarred road in front of his grandparents' house in Elmira, how the sun would raise shining bubbles of tar at the edges of the re-surfaced country road, how the tar would stick to

your sneakers and get you a licking if you tracked it into grandmother's immaculate kitchen. He and his cousin Seth had broken the bubbles with sticks and watched them slowly subside into themselves. The tar bucket on the *Pequod* was something Fallon could focus on. The tar was real; the air he breathed was real—Fallon himself was real.

Stubb, the second mate, stood in front of him, arms akimbo. He stared at Fallon; Fallon lifted his head and saw the man's small smile. There was no charity in it.

"Time to go aloft, Fallon. You've been missing your turn, and we won't have any slackers aboard."

Fallon couldn't think of anything to say. He stumbled to his feet, wiping his hands on a piece of burlap. A couple of the other sailors were watching, waiting for Fallon to shy off or for Stubb to take him.

"Up with ye!" Stubb shoved Fallon's shoulder, and he turned, fumbling for the rigging. Fallon looked momentarily over the side of the ship to the sea that slid calmly by them; the gentle rolling of the deck that he had in so short a time become accustomed to now returned to him with frightening force. Stubb was still behind him. Taking a good breath, he pulled himself up and stepped barefoot onto the rail. Facing inward now, he tried to climb the rigging. Stubb watched him with dispassion, waiting, it seemed, for his failure. Expecting it. It was like trying to climb one of those rope ladders at the county fair: each rung he took twisted the ladder in the direction of his weight, and the rocking of the ship, magnified as he went higher, made it hard for his feet to find the next step. He had never been a particularly self-conscious man, but felt he was being watched by them all now, and was acutely conscious of how strange he must seem. How touched with idiocy and fear.

Nausea rose, the deck seemed farther below than it had any reason to be, the air was stifling, the wind was without freshness and did not cool the sweat from his brow and neck. He clutched the ropes desperately; he tried to take another step, but the strength seemed drained from his legs. Humiliated, burning with shame yet at the same time mortally afraid of falling—and of more than that, of the whole thing, of the fact that here he was where he ought not to be, cheated, abused, mystified—he wrapped his arms around the rigging, knees wobbly, sickness in his gut, bile threatening to heave itself up the back of his throat. Crying, eyes clenched tight, he wished it would all go away.

"Fallon! Fallon, ye dog, ye dog*fish*, why don't ye climb! You had better climb, weak-liver, for I don't want you down on my deck again if ye won't!" Stubb roared his rage. Fallon opened his eyes, saw the red-faced man staring furiously up at him. Perhaps he'll have a stroke, Fallon thought.

He hung there, half-up, half-down, unable to move. I want to go home, he thought. Let me go home. Stubb raged and ridiculed him; others gathered to laugh and watch. Fallon closed his eyes and tried to go away. He heard a sound like the wooden mallet of the carpenter.

"What is the problem here, Mr. Stubb?" A calm voice. Fallon looked down again. Ahab stood with his hand on the mainmast to steady himself, looking up. His thumb was touching the doubloon.

Stubb was taken by surprise, as if Ahab were some apparition that had been called up by an entirely inappropriate spell. He jerked his head upward to indicate Fallon.

Squinting against the sun, Ahab studied Fallon for some time. His face was unnaturally pale in comparison to the tanned faces of the others turned up to look at him. Yet against the pallor, the white scar ran, a deathlike sign, down the side of his face. His dark hair was disarrayed in the hot breeze. He was an old man; he swayed in the attempt to steady himself.

"Why don't ye go up?" Ahab called to Fallon.

Fallon shook his head. He tried to step up another rung, but though his foot found the rope, he didn't seem to have the strength he needed to pull himself up.

Ahab continued to look at him. He did not seem impatient or angry, only curious, as if Fallon were an animal sitting frozen on a traffic mall, afraid of the cars that passed. He seemed content to stand watching Fallon indefinitely. Stubb shifted nervously from foot to foot, his anger displaced and negated. The crewmen simply watched. Some of them looked above Fallon in the rigging; the ropes he clung to jerked, and he looked up himself to see that the man who had been standing at the masthead was coming down to help him.

"Bulkington!" Ahab cried, waving to the man to stop. "Let him be!" The sailor retreated upward and swung himself onto the yardarm above the mainsail. The *Pequod* waited. If there were whales to be hunted, they waited too.

Very distinctly, so that Fallon heard every word, Ahab said, "You must go up. Ye have taken the vow with the rest, and I

will not have you go back on it. Would you go back on it? You must go up, or else you must come down, and show yourself for the coward and weakling you would then be."

Fallon clung to the rigging. He had taken no vow. It was all a story. What difference did it make what he did in a story? If he was to be a character in a book, why couldn't he defy it, do what he wanted instead of following the path they indicated? By coming down he could show himself as himself.

"Have faith!" Ahab called.

Above him, Bulkington hawked and spat, timing it so that with the wind and the rocking of the *Pequod*, he hit the sea and not the deck. Fallon bent his head back and looked up at him. It was the kind sailor who had helped him below on that first night. He hung suspended. He looked down and watched Ahab sway with the rolling of the deck, his eyes still fixed on Fallon. The man was crazy. Melville was crazy for inventing him.

Fallon clenched his teeth, pulled on the ropes and pushed himself up another step toward the masthead. He was midway up the mainsail, thirty feet above the deck. He concentrated on one rung at a time, breathing steadily, and pulled himself up. When he reached the level of the mainyard, Bulkington swung himself below Fallon and helped him along. The complicated motion that came when the sailor stepped onto the ropes had Fallon clinging once again, but this time he was out of it fairly quickly. They ascended, step by dizzying step, to the masthead. The sailor got onto the crosspiece and pulled himself into the port masthead hoop, helping Fallon into the starboard. The *Pequod*'s flag snapped in the wind a couple of feet above their heads.

"And here we are, Fallon," Bulkington said. Immediately he dropped himself down into the rigging again, so nimbly and suddenly that Fallon's breath was stopped in fear for the man's fall.

Way below, the men were once more stirring. Ahab exchanged some words with Stubb; then, moving out to the rail and steadying himself by a hand on one of the stays, a foreshortened black puppet far below, he turned his white face up to Fallon once again. Cupping his hand to his mouth, he shouted, "Keep a steady eye, now! If ye see fin or flank of him, call away!"

Call away. Fallon was far above it all now, alone. He had made it. He had taken no vow and was not obligated to do anything he did not wish to. He had ascended to the masthead of his own free will, but, if he was to become a whaler, then what

harm would there be in calling out whales—normal whales? Not literary ones. Not white ones.

He looked out to the horizon. The sea stretched out to the utmost ends of the world, covering it all, every secret, clear and blue and a little choppy under the innocent sky.

SEVEN

Fallon became used to the smell of the *Pequod*. He became accustomed to feeling sweaty and dirty, to the musty smell of mildew and the tang of brine trying to push away the stench of the packing plant.

He had not always been fastidious in his other life. In the late sixties, after he had dropped out of Northwestern, he had lived in an old house in a rundown neighborhood with three other men and a woman. They had called it "The Big House," and to the outside observer they must have been hippies. "Hair men." "Freaks." "Dropouts." It was a vocabulary that seemed quaint now. The perpetual pile of dirty dishes in the sink, the Fillmore West posters, the black light, the hot and cold running roaches, the early-fifties furniture with corners shredded to tatters by the three cats. Fallon realized that that life had been as different from his world at the Board of Trade as the deck of the *Pequod* was now.

Fallon had dropped out because, he'd told himself, there was nothing he wanted from the university that he couldn't get from its library, or by hanging around the student union. It was hard for him to believe how much he had read then: Skinner's behaviorism, Spengler's history, pop physics and Thomas Kuhn, Friedman and Galbraith, Shaw, Conrad, Nabokov, and all he could find of Hammett, Chandler, Macdonald and their imitators. Later he had not been able to figure out just why he had forsaken a degree so easily; he didn't know if he was too irresponsible to do the work, or too slow, or above it all and following his own path. Certainly he had not seen himself as a rebel, and the revolutionary fervor his peers affected (it had seemed affectation ninety percent of the time) never took hold of Fallon completely. He had observed, but not taken part in, the melee at the Democratic Convention. But he put in his time in the back bedroom listening to the Doors and blowing dope until the world seemed no more than a slightly bigger version of the Big House and his circle of friends. He read *The Way of Zen*. He knew Hesse and

Kerouac. He hated Richard Nixon and laughed at Spiro Agnew. Aloft in the rigging of the *Pequod*, those years came back to Fallon as they never had in his last five years at the CBT. What a different person he had been at twenty. What a strange person, he realized, he had become at twenty-eight. What a marvelous—and frightening—metamorphosis.

He had gotten sick of stagnating, he told himself. He had seen one or another of his friends smoke himself into passivity. He had seen through the self-delusions of the other cripples in the Big House: cripples was what he had called them when he'd had the argument with Marty Solokov and had stalked out. Because he broke from that way of living did not mean he was selling out, he'd told them. He could work any kind of job; he didn't want money or a house in the suburbs. He had wanted to give himself the feeling of getting started again, of moving, of putting meaning to each day. He had quit washing dishes for the university, moved into a dingy flat closer to the center of the city, and scanned the help-wanted columns. He still saw his friends often and got stoned maybe not quite as often, and listened to music and read. But he had had enough of "finding himself," and he recognized in the others how finding yourself became an excuse for doing nothing.

Marty's cousin was a runner for Pearson Joel Chones on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange who had occasionally come by the house, gotten high and gone to concerts. Fallon had slept with her once. He called her up, and she asked around, and eventually he cut his hair short—not too short—and became a runner for Pearson, too. He became marginally better groomed. He took a shower and changed his underwear every day. He bought three ties and wore one of them on the trading floor because that was one of the rules of the exchange.

It occurred to Fallon to find Ishmael, if only to see the man who would live while he died. He listened and watched; he learned the name of every man on the ship—he knew Flask and Stubb and Starbuck and Bulkington, Tashtego, Dagoo and Queequeg, identified Fedallah, the lead Philippine boatsman. There *was* no Ishmael. At first Fallon was puzzled, then came the beginnings of hope. If the reality he was living in could be found to differ from the reality of Melville's book in such an important particular, then could it not differ in some other way—some way that would at least lead to his survival? Maybe this

Ahab caught his white whale. Maybe Starbuck would steel himself to the point where he could defy the madman and take over the ship. Perhaps they would never sight Moby Dick.

Then an unsettling realization smothered the hope before it could come fully to bloom: there was not necessarily an Ishmael in the book. "*Call* me Ishmael," it stated. Ishmael was a pseudonym for some other man, and there would be no one by that name on the *Pequod*. Fallon congratulated himself on a clever bit of literary detective work.

Yet the hope refused to remain dead. Yes, there was no Ishmael on the *Pequod*; or anyone on the ship not specifically named in the book might be Ishmael, any one of the anonymous sailors, within certain broad parameters of age and character—and Fallon wracked his brain trying to remember what the narrator said of himself—might be Ishmael. He grabbed at that; he breathed in the possibility and tried on the suit for size. Why not? If absurdity were to rule to the extent that he had to be there in the first place, then why couldn't he be the one who lived? More than that, why couldn't he make himself that man? No one else knew what Fallon knew. He had the advantage over them. Do the things that Ishmael did, and you may be him. If you have to be a character in a book, why not be the hero?

Fallon's first contact with the heart of capitalism at the CME had been frightening and amusing. Frightening when he screwed up and delivered a May buy-order to a July trader and cost the company 10,000 dollars. It was only through the grace of God and his own guts in facing it out that he had made it through the disaster. He had, he discovered, the ability to hide himself behind a facade which, to the self-interested observer, would appear to be whatever that observer wished it to be. If his superior expected him to be respectful and curious, then Fallon was respectfully curious. He did it without having to compromise his inner self. He was not a hypocrite.

The amusing part came after he had it all down and he began to watch the market like an observer at a very complex monopoly game. Or, more accurately, like a baseball fan during a pennant race. There were at least as many statistics as in a good baseball season, enough personalities, strategies, great plays, blunders, risk and luck. Fallon would walk onto the floor at the beginning of the day—the huge room with its concert-hall atmosphere, the banks of price boards around the walls, the

twilight, the conditioned air, the hundreds of bright-coated traders and agents—and think of half time at homecoming. The floor at the end of the day, as he walked across the hardwood scattered with mounds of paper scraps like so much confetti, was a basketball court after the NCAA finals. Topping it all off, giving it that last significant twist that was necessary to all good jokes, was the fact that this was all supposed to mean something; it was real money they were playing with, and one tick of the board in Treasury Bills cost somebody eleven-hundred dollars. This was serious stuff, kid. The lifeblood of the nation—of the free world. Fallon could hardly hold in his laughter, could not stop his fascination.

Fallon's first contact with the whale—his first lowering—was in Stubb's boat. The man at the forward masthead cried out, "There she blows! Three points off starboard! There she blows! Three—no, four of 'em!"

The men sprang to the longboats and swung them away over the side. Fallon did his best to look as if he was helping. Stubb's crew leapt into the boat as it was dropped into the swelling sea, heedless to the possibility of broken bones or sprained ankles. Fallon hesitated a second at the rail, then threw himself off with the feeling of a man leaping off the World Trade Center. He landed clumsily and half-bowled over one of the men. He took his place at a center oar and pulled away. Like the man falling off the building, counting off the stories as they flew past him, Fallon thought, "So far, so good." And waited for the crash.

"Stop snoring, ye sleepers, and pull!" Stubb called, halfway between jest and anger. "Pull, Fallon! Why don't you pull? Have you never seen an oar before? Don't look over your shoulder, lad, *pull!* That's better. Don't be in a hurry, men—softly, softly now—but damn ye, pull until you break something! Tashtego! Can't you harpoon me some men with backs to them? *Pull!*"

Fallon pulled until he thought the muscles in his arms would snap, until the small of his back spasmed as if he were indeed being harpooned by the black-haired Indian behind him in the bow. The sea was rough, and they were soon soaked with spray. After a few minutes Fallon forgot the whales they pursued, merged into the rhythm of the work, fell in with the cunning flow of Stubb's curses and pleas, the crazy sermon, now whispered, now shouted. He concentrated on the oar in his hands, the bite of

the blade into the water, the simple mechanism his body had become, the working of his lungs, the dry rawness of the breath dragged in and out in time to their rocking, back-breaking work. Fallon closed his eyes, heard the pulse in his ears, felt the cool spray and the hot sun, saw the rose fog of the blood in his eyelids as he faced into the bright and brutal day.

At twenty-five, Fallon was offered a position in the office upstairs. At twenty-seven, he had an offer from DCB International to become a broker. By that time he was living with Carol. Why not? He was still outside it all, still safe within. Let them think what they would of him; he was protected, in the final analysis, by that great indifference he held to his breast the way he held Carol close at night. He was not a hypocrite. He said nothing he did not believe in. Let them project upon him whatever fantasies they might hold dear to themselves. He was outside and above it all, analyzing futures for DCB International. Clearly, in every contract that crossed his desk, it was stated that DCB and its brokers were not responsible for reverses that might be suffered as a result of suggestions they made.

So he had spent the next four years, apart from it, pursuing his interests, which, with the money he was making, he found were many. Fallon saw very little of the old friends now. Solokov's cousin told him he was now in New York, cadging money from strangers in Times Square. Solokov, she said, claimed it was a pretty good living. He claimed he was still beating the system. Fallon had grown up enough to realize that no one really beat the system—as if there were a system. There was only buying and selling, subject to the forces of the market and the infirmities of the players. Fallon was on the edges of it, could watch quietly, taking part as necessary (he had to eat), but still stay safe. He was no hypocrite.

"To the devil with ye, boys, will ye be outdone by Ahab's heathens? Pull, spring it, my children, my fine heartsalive, smoothly, smoothly, bend it hard starboard! Aye, Fallon, let me see you sweat, lad, can you sweat for me?"

They rose on the swell, and it was like rowing uphill; they slid down the other side, still rowing, whooping like children on a toboggan ride, all the time Stubb calling on them. Fallon saw Starbuck's boat off to his right; he heard the rush of water

beneath them, and the rush of something faster and greater than their boat.

Tashtego grunted behind him.

"A hit, a hit!" Stubb shouted, and beside Fallon the whaleline was running out with such speed that it sang and hummed and smoked. One of the men sloshed water over the place where it slid taut as a wire over the gunnel. Then the boat jerked forward so suddenly that Fallon was nearly knocked overboard when his oar, still trailing in the water, slammed into his chest. Gasping at the pain, he managed to get the oar up into the air. Stubb had half-risen from his seat in the stern.

They flew through the water. The whaleboat bucked as it slapped the surface of every swell the whale pulled them through. Fallon held on for dear life, not sure whether he ought to be grateful he hadn't been pitched out when the ride began. He tried to twist around to see the monster that was towing them, but able to turn only halfway, all he could see for the spray and the violent motion was the swell and rush of white water ahead of them. Tashtego, crouched in the bow, grinned wickedly as he tossed out wooden blocks tied to the whaleline in order to tire the whale with their drag. You might as well try to tire a road grader.

Yet he could not help but feel exhilarated, and he saw that the others in the boat, hanging on or trying to draw the line in, were flushed and breathing as hard as he.

He turned again and saw the whale.

Fallon had been a very good swimmer in high school. He met Carol Bukaty at a swimming pool about a year after he had gone to work at the CME. Fallon first noticed her in the pool, swimming laps. She was the best swimmer there, better than he, though he might have been stronger than she in the short run. She gave herself over to the water and did not fight it; the kick of her long legs was steady and strong. She breathed easily and her strokes were relaxed, yet powerful. She did not swim for speed, but she looked as if she could swim for days, so comfortable did she seem in the water. Fallon sat on the steps at the pool's edge and watched her for half an hour without once getting bored. He found her grace in the water arousing. He knew he had to speak to her. He slid into the pool and swam laps behind her.

At last she stopped. Holding onto the trough at the end of the

pool, she pushed her goggles up onto her forehead and brushed the wet brown hair away from her eyes. He drew up beside her.

"You swim very well," he said.

She was out of breath. "Thank you."

"You look as if you wouldn't ever need to come out of the water. Like anything else might be a comedown after swimming." It was a strange thing for him to say, it was not what he wanted to say, but he did not know what he wanted, besides her.

She looked puzzled, smiled briefly, and pulled herself onto the side of the pool, letting her legs dangle in the water. "Sometimes I feel that way," she said. "I'm Carol Bukaty." She stuck out her hand, very businesslike.

"Pat Fallon."

She wore a gray tank suit; she was slender and small-breasted, tall, with a pointed chin and brown eyes. Fallon later discovered that she was an excellent dancer, that she purchased women's clothing for one of the major Chicago department stores, that she traveled a great deal, wrote lousy poetry, disliked cooking, liked children, and liked him. At first he was merely interested in her sexually, though the first few times they slept together it was not very good at all. Gradually the sex got better, and in the meantime Fallon fell in love.

She would meet him at the athletic club after work; they would play racquet ball in the late afternoon, go out to dinner and take in a movie, then spend the night at his or her apartment. He met her alcoholic father, a retired policeman who told endless stories about ward politics and the Daley machine, and Carol spent a Christmas with him at his parents'. After they moved in together, they settled into a comfortable routine. He felt secure in her affection for him. He did not want her, after a while, as much as he had that first day, those first months, but he still needed her. It still mattered to him what she was doing and what she thought of him. Sometimes it mattered to him too much, he thought. Sometimes he wanted to be without her at all, not because he had anything he could only do without her, but only because he wanted to *be* without her.

He would watch her getting dressed in the morning and wonder what creature she might be, and what that creature was doing in the same room with him. He would lie beside her as she slept, stroking the short brown hair at her temple with his fingertips, and be overwhelmed with the desire to possess her, to hold her head between his hands and know everything that she was; he

would shake with the sudden frustration of its impossibility until it was all he could do to keep from striking her. Something was wrong with him, or with her. He had fantasies of how much she would miss him if he died, of what clothes she would wear to the funeral, of what stories she would tell her lovers in the future after he was gone.

If Carol felt any of the same things about him, she did not tell him. For Fallon's part, he did not try to explain what he felt in any but the most oblique ways. She should know how he felt, but of course she did not. So when things went badly, and they began to do so more and more, it was not possible for him to explain to her what was wrong, because he could not say it himself, and the pieces of his discontent were things that he was too embarrassed to admit. Yet he could not deny that sometimes he felt as if it was all over between them, that he felt nothing—and at others he would smile just to have her walk into the room.

Remarkable creature though the whale was, it was not so hard to kill one after all. It tired, just as a man would tire under the attack of a group of strangers. It slowed in the water, no longer able so effortlessly to drag them after it. They pulled close, and Stubb drove home the iron, jerked it back and forth, drew it out and drove it home again, fist over fist on the hilt, booted foot over the gunnel braced against the creature's flesh, sweating, searching for the whale's hidden life. At last he found it, and the whale shuddered and thrashed a last time, spouting pink mist, then dark blood, where once it spouted feathery white spray. Like a man, helpless in the end, it rolled over and died. Stubb was jolly, and the men were methodical; they tied their lines around the great tail and, as shadows grew long and the sun fell perpendicularly toward the horizon, drew the dead whale to the *Pequod*.

EIGHT

During the cutting up and boiling down of the whale that night, Fallon, perhaps in recognition of his return to normality as indicated by his return to the masthead, was given a real job: slicing the chunks of blubber that a couple of other sailors were hewing out of the great strips that were hauled over the side into "bible leaves." Fallon got the hang of it pretty quickly, though he was not fast, and Staley, the British sailor who was cutting

beside him, kept poking at him to do more. "I'm doing all the work, Fallon," he said, as if his ambition in life were to make sure that he did no more than his own share of the work.

Using a sharp blade like a long cleaver, Fallon would position the chunk of blubber, skin side down on the cutting table, and imitating Staley, cut the piece into slices like the pages of a book, with the skin as its spine. The blubber leaves flopped outward or stuck to each other, and the table became slick with grease. Fallon was at first careful about avoiding his hands, but the blubber would slide around the table as he tried to cut it if he didn't hold it still. Staley pushed him on, working with dexterity, though Fallon noted that the man's hands were scarred, with the top joint of the middle finger of his left hand missing.

His back and shoulders ached with fatigue, and the smoke from the try-works stung his eyes. When he tried to wipe the tears away, he only smeared his face with grease. But he did a creditable job, cursing all the time. The cursing helped, and the other men seemed to accept him more for it. When finally they were done, and the deck was clean the next day, they were issued a tot of grog and allowed to swim within the lee of the stationary ship. The men were more real to him than when he had sat and watched from the outcast's station of the tar bucket. He was able to speak to them more naturally than he had ever done. But he did not forget his predicament.

"Ye are too serious, Fallon," Staley told him, offering Fallon some of his grog. "I can see you brooding there, and looking how it set you into a funk. Ye are better now, perhaps, but mind you stick to your work and ye may survive this voyage."

"I won't survive it. Neither will you—unless we can do something about Captain Ahab."

Bulkington, who had been watching them, came by. "What of Captain Ahab?"

Fallon saw a chance in this. "Does his seeking after this white whale seem right to you?"

"The whale took his leg," Staley said.

"Some say it unmanned him," the other said, lower. "That's two legs you'd not like to lose yourself, I'll daresay."

Fallon drew them aside, more earnest now. "We will lose more than our balls if we do nothing about this situation. The man is out of his mind. He will draw us all down with him, and this ship with all of us, if we can't convince Starbuck to do something. Believe me, I know."

Friendly Bulkington did not look so friendly. "You do talk strange, Fallon. We took an oath, and we signed the papers before we even sailed a cable from shore. A captain is a captain. You are talking mutiny."

He had to go carefully.

"No, wait. Listen to me. Why are we sent on this trip? Think of the—the stockholders, or whatever you call them. The owners. They sent us out to hunt whales."

"The white whale is a whale." Staley looked petulant.

"Yes, of course it's a whale. But there are hundreds of whales to be caught and killed. We don't need to hunt that one. Hasn't he set his sights on just Moby Dick? What about that oath? That gold piece on the mast? That says he's just out for vengeance. There was nothing about vengeance in the papers we signed. What do you think the owners would say if they knew about what he plans? Do you think they would approve of this wild goose chase?"

Staley was lost. "Goose chase?"

Bulkington was interested. "Go on."

Fallon had his foot in the door; he marshaled the arguments he had rehearsed over and over again. "There's no more oil in Moby Dick than in another whale. . . ."

"They say he's monstrous big," Staley interjected.

Fallon looked pained. "Not so big as any two whales, then. Ahab is not after any oil you can boil out of the whale's flesh. If the owners knew what he intended, the way I do, if they knew how sick he was the week before he came out of that hole of a cabin he lives in, if they saw that light in his eye and the charts he keeps in his cabinet. . . ."

"Charts? What charts? Have you been in his cabin?"

"No, not exactly," Fallon said. "Look, I know some things, but that's just because I keep my eyes open and I have some sources."

"Fallon, where do you hail from? I swear that I cannot half the time make out what you are saying. Sources? What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, Jesus!" He had hoped for better from Bulkington.

Staley darkened. "Don't blaspheme, man! I'll not take the word of a blasphemer."

Fallon saw another opening. "You're right! I'm sorry. But look, didn't the old man himself blaspheme more seriously than I ever could the night of that oath? If you are a god-fearing man,

Staley, you'll know that that is true. Would you give your obedience to such a man? Moby Dick is just another of God's creatures, a dumb animal. Is it right to seek vengeance on an animal? Do you want to be responsible for that? God would not approve."

Staley looked troubled, but stubborn. "Do not tell me what the Almighty approves. That is not for the likes of you to know. And Ahab is the captain." With that he walked to the opposite side of the deck and stood there watching them as if he wanted to separate himself as much as possible from the conversation, yet still know what was going on.

Fallon was exasperated and tired.

"Why don't you go with Staley, Bulkington? You don't have to stick around with me, you know. I'm not going to do your reputation any good."

Bulkington eyed him steadily. "You are a strange one, Fallon. I did not think anything of you when I first saw you on the *Pequod*. But you may be talking some sense."

"Staley doesn't think so."

Bulkington took a pull on his grog. "Why did you try to persuade Staley of Ahab's madness? You should have known that you couldn't convince such a man that the sky is blue, if it were written in the articles he signed that it was green. Starbuck perhaps, or me. Not Staley. Don't you listen to the man you are talking to?"

Fallon looked at Bulkington; the tall sailor looked calmly back at him, patient, waiting.

"Okay, you're right," Fallon said. "I have the feeling I would not have a hard time convincing you, anyway. You know Ahab's insane, don't you?"

"It's not for me to say. Ahab has better reasons than those you give to him." He drew a deep breath, looked up at the sky, down at the men who swam in the shadow of the ship. He smiled. "They should be more wary of sharks," he said.

"The world does look a garden today, Fallon. But it may be that the old man's eyes are better than ours."

"You know he's mad, and you won't do anything?"

"The matter will not bear too deep a looking into." Bulkington was silent for a moment. "You know the story about the man born with a silver screw in his navel? How it tasked him, until one day he unscrewed it to divine its purpose?"

Fallon had heard the joke in grade school on the South Side. "His ass fell off."

"You and Ahab are too much like that man."

They both laughed. "I don't have to unscrew my navel," Fallon said. "We're all going to lose our asses anyway."

They laughed again. Bulkington put his arm around his shoulders, and they toasted Moby Dick.

NINE

There came a morning when, on pumping out the bilge, someone noticed that considerable whale oil was coming up with the water. Starbuck was summoned and, after descending into the hold himself, emerged and went aft and below to speak with Ahab. Fallon asked one of the others what was going on.

"The casks are leaking. We're going to have to lay up and break them out. If we don't, we stand to lose a lot of oil."

Some time later Starbuck reappeared. His face was red to the point of apoplexy, and he paced around the quarter-deck with his hands knotted behind his back. They waited for him to tell them what to do; he stared at the crewmen, stopped, and told them to be about their business. "Keep pumping," he told the others. "Maintain the lookout." He then spoke briefly to the helmsman leaning on the whalebone tiller, and retreated to the corner of the quarter-deck to watch the wake of the ship. After a while Ahab himself staggered up onto the deck, found Starbuck, and spoke to him. He then turned to the men on deck.

"Furl the t'gallantsails," he called, "and close reef the topsails, fore and aft; back the main-yard; up Burtons, and break out in the main hold."

Fallon joined the others around the hold. Once the work had commenced, he concentrated on lifting, hauling, and not straining his back. The Manxman told them that he had been outside Ahab's cabin during the conference and that Ahab had threatened to shoot Starbuck dead on the spot when the mate demanded they stop chasing the whale to break out the hold. Fallon thought about the anger in Starbuck's face when he'd come up again. It struck him that the Starbuck of Melville's book was pretty ineffectual; he had to be to let that madman go on with the chase. But this Starbuck—whether like the one in the book or not—did not like the way things were going. There was no

reason why Fallon had to sit around and wait for things to happen. It was worth a shot.

But not that afternoon.

Racism assured that the hardest work in the dank hold was done by the colored men—Dagoo, Tashtego, and Queequeg. They did not complain. Up to their knees in the bilge, clambering awkwardly over and about the barrels of oil in the murderous heat and unbreathable air of the hold, they did their jobs.

It was evening before the three harpooneers were told they could halt for the day and they emerged, sweaty, covered with slime, and bruised. Fallon collapsed against the side of the try-works; others sat beside him. Tall Queequeg was taken by a coughing fit, then went below to his hammock. Fallon gathered his strength, felt the sweat drying stickily on his arms and neck. There were few clouds, and the moon was waxing full. He saw Starbuck then, standing at the rear of the quarter-deck, face toward the mast. Was he looking at the doubloon?

Fallon got shakily to his feet; his legs were rubbery. The first mate did not notice him until he was close. He looked up.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Starbuck, I need to speak to you."

Starbuck looked at him as if he saw him for the first time. Fallon tried to look self-confident, serious. He'd gotten that one down well at DCB.

"Yes?"

Fallon turned so that he was facing inward toward the deck and Starbuck had his back to it to face him. He could see what was happening away from them and would know if anyone came near.

"I could not help but see that you were angry this morning after speaking to Captain Ahab."

Starbuck looked puzzled.

"I assume that you must have told Ahab about the leaking oil, and he didn't want to stop his hunt of the whale long enough to break out the hold. Am I right?"

The mate watched him guardedly. "What passed between Captain Ahab and me was none of your affair, or of the crew's. Is that what you've come to trouble me with?"

"It is a matter that concerns me," Fallon said. "It concerns the rest of the crew, and it ought to concern you. We are being bound by his orders, and what kind of orders is he giving? I know what you've been thinking; I know that this personal

vengeance he seeks frightens and repulses you. I *know* what you're thinking. I could see what was in your mind when you stood at this rail this afternoon. He is not going to stop until he kills us all."

Starbuck seemed to draw back within himself. Fallon saw how beaten the man's eyes were; he did not think the mate was a drinker, but he looked like someone who had just surfaced after a long weekend. He could almost see the clockwork turning within Starbuck, a beat too slow, with the belligerence of the drunk being told the truth about himself that he did not want to admit. Fallon's last fight with Stein Jr. at the brokerage had started that way.

"Get back to your work," Starbuck said. He started to turn away.

Fallon put his hand on his shoulder. "You have to—"

Starbuck whirled with surprising violence and pushed Fallon away so that he nearly stumbled and fell. The man at the tiller was watching them.

"To work! You do not know what I am thinking! I'll have you flogged if you say anything more! A man with a three-hundreth lay has nothing to tell me. Go on, now."

Fallon was hot. "God damn you. You stupid—"

"Enough!" Starbuck slapped him with the back of his hand, the way Stein had tried to slap Fallon. Stein had missed. It appeared that Mr. Starbuck was more effectual than Stein Jr. Fallon felt his bruised cheek. The thing that hurt the most was the way he must have looked, like a hangdog insubordinate who had been shown his place. As Fallon stumbled away, Starbuck said, in a steadier voice, "Tend to your own conscience, man. Let me tend to mine."

TEN

Lightning flashed again.

"I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and even for that thou canst but kill, and all are killed!"

Ahab had sailed them into the heart of a typhoon. The sails were in tatters, and the men ran across the deck shouting against the wind and trying to lash the boats down tighter before they were washed away or smashed. Stubb had gotten his left hand caught between one of the boats and the rail; he now held it with his

right and grimaced. The mastheads were touched with St. Elmo's fire. Ahab stood with the lightning rod in his right hand and his right foot planted on the neck of Fedallah, declaiming at the lightning. Fallon held tightly to a shroud to keep from being thrown off his feet. The scene was ludicrous; it was horrible.

"No fearless fool now fronts thee!" Ahab shouted at the storm. "I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me! In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here!"

Terrific, Fallon thought. Psychobabble. Melville writes in a storm so Ahab can have a backdrop against which to define himself. They must not have gone in for realism much in Melville's day. He turned and tried to lash the rear quarter boat tighter; its stern had already been smashed in by a wave that had just about swept three men, including Fallon, overboard. Lightning flashed, followed a split-second later by the rolling thunder. Fallon recalled that five-seconds' count meant the lightning was a mile away; by that measure the last bolt must have hit them in the ass. Most of the crew were staring open-mouthed at Ahab and the glowing, eerie flames that touched the masts. The light had the bluish tinge of mercury vapor lamps in a parking lot. It sucked the color out of things; the faces of the frightened men were the sickly hue of fish bellies.

"Thou canst blind, but I can then grope. Thou canst consume, but I can then be ashes!" You bet. "Take the homage of these poor eyes, and shutter-hands. I would not take it. . . ." Ahab ranted on. Fallon hardly gave a damn anymore. The book was too much. Ahab talked to the storm and the God behind it; the storm answered him back, lighting flash for curse. It was dramatic, stagy; it was real: Melville's universe was created so that such dialogues could take place; the howling gale and the tons of water, the crashing waves, flapping canvas, the sweating, frightened men, the blood and seawater—all were created to have a particular effect, to be sure, but it was the real universe, and it would work that way because that was the way it was set up to work by a frustrated, mystified man chasing his own obsessions, creating the world as a warped mirror of his distorted vision.

"There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical. . . ."

There is an ex-sailor on a farm in Massachusetts trying to

make ends meet while his puzzled wife tries to explain him to the relatives.

"The boat! The boat!" cried Starbuck. "Look at thy boat, old man!"

Fallon looked, and backed away. A couple of feet from him the harpoon that was lashed into the bow was tipped with the same fire that illuminated the masts. Silently within the howling storm, from its barbed end twin streamers of electricity writhed. Fallon backed away to the rail, heart beating quickly, and clutched the slick whalebone.

Ahab staggered toward the boat; Starbuck grabbed his arm. "God! God is against thee, old man! Forbear! It's an ill voyage! Ill begun, ill continued; let me square the yards while we may, old man, and make a fair wind of it homewards, to go on a better voyage than this."

Yes, yes, at last Starbuck had said it! Fallon grabbed one of the braces; he saw others of the crew move to the rigging as if to follow Starbuck's order before it was given. They cried, some of them in relief, others in fear, others as if ready at last to mutiny. Yes!

Ahab threw down the last links of the lightning rod. He grabbed the harpoon from the boat and waved it like a torch about his head; he lurched toward Fallon.

"You!" he shouted, staggering to maintain his balance under the tossing deck, hoisting the flaming harpoon to his shoulder as if he meant to impale Fallon on the spot. "But cast loose that rope's end and you will be transfixed—by this clear spirit!" The electricity at the barb hummed inches before him; Fallon could feel his skin prickling and smelled ozone. He felt the rail at the small of his back, cold. The other sailors fell away from the ropes; Starbuck looked momentarily sick. Fallon let go of the brace.

Ahab grinned at him. He turned and held the glowing steel before him with both hands like a priest holding a candle at mass on a feast day.

"All your oaths to hunt the white whale are as binding as mine; and heart, soul, and body, lung and life, old Ahab is bound. And that you may know to what tune this heart beats; look ye here! Thus I blow out the last feat!"

He blew out the flame.

* * *

They ran out the night without letting the anchors over the side, heading due into the gale instead of riding with the wind at their backs, with tarpaulins and deck truck blown or washed overboard, with the lightning rod shipped instead of trailing in the sea as it ought to, with the man at the tiller beaten raw about the ribs trying to keep the ship straight, with the compass spinning round like a top, with the torn remains of the sails not cut away until long after midnight.

By morning the storm had much abated, the wind had come around, and they ran before it in heavy seas. Fallon and most of the other common sailors, exhausted, were allowed to sleep.

ELEVEN

The argument with Starbuck and his attempts to rouse others to defy Ahab had made Fallon something of a pariah. He was now as isolated as he had been when he'd first come to himself aboard the *Pequod*. Only Bulkington did not treat him with contempt or fear, but Bulkington would do nothing about the situation. He would rather talk, and they often discussed what a sane man would do in their situation, given the conflicting demands of reason and duty. Fallon's ability to remain detached always failed him somewhere in the middle of these talks.

So Fallon came to look upon his stints at the masthead as escape of a sort. It was there that he had first realized that he could rise above the deck of the *Pequod*, both literally and figuratively, for some moments; it was there that he had first asserted his will after days of stunned debility. He would not sing out for the white whale, if it should be his fortune to sight it, but he did sing out more than once for lesser whales. The leap of his heart at the sight of them was not feigned.

They were sailing the calm Pacific east and south of Japan. They had met the *Rachel*, and a thrill had run through the crew at the news that she had encountered Moby Dick and had failed to get him, losing several boats, and the captain's son, in the process. Fallon's memory was jogged. The *Rachel* would pick up Ishmael at the end of the book, when all the others were dead.

They met the *Delight*, on which a funeral was in process. From the mainmast lookout, Fallon heard the shouted talk between Ahab and her captain about another failed attempt at the

white whale. He watched as the dead man, sewn up in his hammock, was dropped into the sea.

It was a clear, steel-blue day. The sea rolled in long, quiet swells; the *Pequod* moved briskly ahead before a fair breeze, until the *Delight* was lost in the distance astern. The air was fresh and clear out to the rim of the world, where it seemed to merge with the darker sea. It was as fair a day as they had seen since Fallon had first stood a watch at the masthead.

Up above the ship, almost out of the world of men entirely, rolling at the tip of the mast in rhythm to the rolling of the sea swells, which moved in time with his own easy breathing, Fallon lost his fear. He seemed to lose even himself. Who was he? Patrick Fallon, analyst for a commodities firm. Perhaps that had been some delusion; perhaps that world had been created somewhere inside of him, pressed upon him in a vision. He was a sailor on the *Pequod*. He thought that this was part of some book, but he had not been a reader for many years.

Memories of his other life persisted. He remembered the first time he had ever made love to a woman—to Sally Torrance, in the living room of her parents' house while they were away skiing in Minnesota. He remembered cutting his palm playing baseball when the bat had shattered in his hand. The scar in the middle of his hand could not be denied.

Who denied it? He watched an albatross swoop down from above him to skim a few feet above the water, trying to snag some high-leaping fish. It turned away, unsuccessful, beating its wings slowly as it climbed the air. There was rhythm to its unconscious dance. Fallon had never seen anything more beautiful. He hung his arms over the hoop that surrounded him, felt the hot sun beating on his back, the band of metal supporting him.

This was the real world; he accepted it. He accepted the memories that contradicted it. I look, you look, he looks. Could his mind and heart hold two contradictory things? What would happen to him then? He accepted the albatross, the fish, the sharks he could see below the water's surface from his high vantage point. He accepted the grace of the sea, its embrace on this gentlest of days, and he accepted the storm that had tried to kill them only days before. The *Delight*, reason told him—let reason be; he could strain reason no further than he had—the *Delight* might perhaps have been a ship from a story he had read, but he had no doubt that the man who had been dropped to his watery grave as Fallon watched had been a real man.

The blue of sky and sea, the sound of the flag snapping above him, the taste of the salt air, the motion of the sea and earth itself as they swung Fallon at the tip of the mast, the memories and speculations, the feel of warm sun and warm iron—all the sensual world flowed together for Fallon then. He could not say what he felt. Joy that he could hardly contain swelled in his chest. He was at one with all his perceptions, with all he knew and remembered, with Carol, wherever or whatever she might be, with Bulkington and Dagoo and Starbuck and Stein Jr. and the Big House and Queequeg and the CBT and Ahab. Ahab.

Why had Fallon struggled so long against it? He was alive. What thing had driven him to fight so hard? What had happened to him was absurd, but what thing was not absurd? What thing had made him change from the student to the dropout to the analyst to the sailor? Who might Patrick Fallon be? He stretched out his right arm and turned his hand in the sun.

"Is it I, or God, or who, that lifts this arm?" Fallon heard the words quite distinctly, as if they were spoken only for him, as if they were not spoken at all but were only thoughts. God perhaps did lift Fallon's arm, and if that were so, then who was Fallon to question the wisdom or purpose of the motion? It was his only to move.

A disturbance in the blue of the day.

Why should he not have a choice? Why should that God give him the feeling of freedom if in fact He was directing Fallon's every breath? Did the Fates weave this trancelike calm blue day to lead Fallon to these particular conclusions, so that not even his thoughts in the end were his own, but only the promptings of some force beyond him? And what force could that be if not the force that created this world, and who created this world but Herman Melville, a man who had been dead for a very long time, a man who had no possible connection with Fallon? And what could be the reason for the motion? If this was the real world, then why had Fallon been given the life he had lived before, tangled himself in, felt trapped within, only to be snatched away and clumsily inserted into a different fantasy? What purpose did it serve? Whose satisfaction was being sought?

The moment of wholeness died; the world dissolved into its disparate elements. The sea rolled on. The ship fought it. The wind was opposed by straining canvas. The albatross dove once again, and skimming over the surface so fast it was a white blur,

snatched a gleam of silver—a flying fish—from midflight. It settled to the ocean's surface, tearing at its prey.

The day was not so bright as it had been. Fallon tried to accept it still. He did not know if there was a malign force behind the motion of the earth in its long journey, or a beneficent one whose purpose was merely veiled to men such as himself—or no force at all. Such knowledge would not be his. He was a sailor on the *Pequod*.

Upon descending, Fallon heard from Bulkington that Starbuck and Ahab had had a conversation about turning back to Nantucket, that the mate had seemed almost to persuade the captain to give up the hunt, but that he had failed.

Fallon knew then that they must be coming to the end of the story. It would not be long before they spotted the white whale, and three days after that the *Pequod* would go down with all hands not previously killed in the encounter with the whale—save one. But Fallon had given up the idea that he might be that one. He did not, despite his problems, qualify as an Ishmael. That would be overstating his importance, he thought.

TWELVE

He woke suddenly to the imperative buzzing of his alarm clock. His heart beat very fast. He tried to slow it by breathing deeply. Carol stirred beside him, then slept again.

He felt disoriented. He walked into the bathroom, staring, as if he had never seen it before. He slid open the mirrored door of the medicine chest and looked inside at the almost-empty tube of toothpaste, the old safety razor, the pack of double-edged blades, the Darvon and Tetracycline capsules, the foundation make-up. When he slid the door shut again, his tanned face looked back at him.

He was slow getting started that morning; when Carol got up, he was still drinking his coffee, with the radio playing an old Doors song in the background. Carol leaned over him, kissed the top of his head. It appeared that she loved him.

"You'd better get going," she said. "You'll be late."

He hadn't worried about being late, and it hit him for the first time what he had to do. He had to get to the Board of Trade. He'd have to talk to Stein Jr., and there would be a sheaf of notes on his desk asking him to return calls to various clients

who would have rung him up while he was gone. He pulled on the jacket of his pinstriped suit, brushed back his hair, and left.

Waiting for the train, he realized that he hadn't gone anywhere to return from.

He had missed his normal train and arrived late. The streets were nowhere near as crowded as they would have been an hour earlier. He walked north on LaSalle Avenue between the staid, dark old buildings. The sky that showed between them was bright, and already the temperature was rising; it would be a hot one. He wished it were the weekend. Was it Thursday? It couldn't still be Wednesday. He was embarrassed to realize he wasn't sure what day it was.

He saw a very pretty girl in the lobby of the Board of Trade as he entered through the revolving doors. She was much prettier than Carol, and had that unself-conscious way of walking. But she was around the corner before he had taken more than a few steps inside. He ran into Joe Wendelstadt in the elevator, and Joe began to tell him a story about Raoul Lark from Brazil who worked for Cacex in Chicago, and how Lark had tried to pick up some feminist the other night. And succeeded. Those Brazilians.

Fallon got off before Joe could reach the climax. In his office Molly, the receptionist, said Stein wanted to see him. Stein smelled of cigarettes, and Fallon suddenly became self-conscious. He had not brushed his own teeth. When did he ever forget that? Stein had an incipient zit on the end of his nose. He didn't really have anything to talk to Fallon about; he was just wasting time as usual.

Tigue was sick or on vacation.

Fallon worked through the morning on various customer accounts. He had trouble remembering where the market had closed the day before. He had always had a trick memory for such figures, and it had given him the ability to impress a lot of people who knew just as much about the markets as he did. He spent what was left of the morning on the phone to his clients, with a quick trip down to the trading floor to talk to Parsons in the soybean pit.

Carol called and asked him if he could join her for lunch. He remembered he had a date with Kim, a woman from the CME he had met just a week before. He made his excuses to Carol and took off for the Merc.

Walking briskly west on Jackson, coming up on the bridge across the river, he realized he had been rushing around all day

and yet could hardly remember what he'd done since he had woken up. He still couldn't remember whether it was Wednesday or Thursday.

As he crossed the bridge with the crowds of lunch-hour office workers, the noontime sun glared brightly for a second from the oily water of the river. Fallon's eyes did not immediately recover. He stopped walking and somebody bumped into him.

"Excuse me," he said unconsciously.

There was a moment of silence, then the noise of the city resumed, and he could see again. He stood at the side of the bridge and looked down at the water. The oil on the surface made rainbow-colored black swirls. Fallon shook his head and went on.

Kim stood him up at the restaurant. She did not arrive to meet him, and he waited a long time by the cashier. Finally he made the woman seat him at a table for two. He looked at his watch but had some trouble reading the time. Was he due back at the office?

Just then someone sat down opposite him. It was an old man in a dark suit who had obviously undergone some great ordeal. His face held a look of great pain or sorrow—with hate burning just beneath it. Though his hair was still black (and quite unforgivably unkempt for midtown Chicago, as was his rough suit), a shock of white fell across his forehead, and a scar ran from the roots of that white hair straight down the man's face, leaping the brow and eye to continue across the left cheek, sinewing down the jaw and neck to disappear beneath his shirt collar.

He looked strangely familiar.

"It won't work," the man said. "You cannot get away. You have signed the articles, like the rest, and are in for a three-hundredth lay?"

"Three-hundredth lay?" Fallon was bewildered.

"A three-hundreth part of the general catastrophe is yours. Don't thank me. It isn't necessary." The old man looked even more sorrowful and more wild, if it were possible to combine those seemingly incompatible emotions.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "I wouldn't hold you to the contract if it were strictly up to me." He shrugged his shoulders and opened his palms before him. "But it isn't."

Fallon's heart was beating fast again. "I don't remember any contract. You're not one of my clients. I don't trade for you.

I've been in this business for a long time, mister, and I know better than to sign. . . .''

The wildness swelled in the man. There was something burning in him, and he looked about to scream, or cry.

''*I* have been in the business longer than *you!*'' He swung his leg out from beneath the table and rapped it loudly with his knuckle. Fallon saw that the leg was of white bone. ''And *I* can tell *you* that you signed the contract when you signed aboard this ship—there's no other way to get aboard—and you must serve until you strike land again or it sinks beneath you!''

The diners in the restaurant dined on, oblivious. Fallon looked toward the plate glass at the front of the room and saw the water rising rapidly up it, sea-green and turbid, as the restaurant and the city fell to the bottom of the sea.

THIRTEEN

Once again he was jerked awake, this time by the din of someone beating on the deck of the forecastle above them with a club. The other sleepers were as startled as Fallon. He rolled out of the hammock with the mists of his dream still clinging to him, pulled on his shirt and scrambled up to the deck.

Ahab was stalking the quarter-deck in a frenzy of impatience. ''Man the mastheads!'' he shouted.

The men who had risen with Fallon did just that, some of them only half-dressed. Fallon was one of the first up and gained one of the hoops at the main masthead. Three others stood on the mainyard below him. Fallon scanned the horizon and saw off to starboard and about a mile ahead of them the jet of mist that indicated a whale. As it rose and fell in its course through the rolling seas, Fallon saw that it was white.

''What do you see?'' Ahab called from far below. Had he noticed Fallon's gaze fixed on the spot in front of them?

''Nothing! Nothing, sir!'' Fallon called. Ahab and the men on deck looked helpless so far below him. Fallon did not know if his lying would work, but there was the chance that the other men in the rigging, not being as high as he, would not be able to make out Moby Dick from their lower vantage points. He turned away from the whale and made a good show of scanning the empty horizon.

''Top gallant sails!—stunsails! Alow and aloft, and on both sides!'' Ahab ordered. The men fixed a line from the mainmast

to the deck, looped its lower end around Ahab's rigid leg. Ahab wound the rope around his shoulders and arm, and they hoisted him aloft, twisting with the pressure of the hemp, toward the masthead. He twirled slowly as they raised him up, and his line of sight was obscured by the rigging and sails he had to peer through.

Before they had lifted him two-thirds of the way up, he began to shout.

"There she blows—there she blows! A hump like a show-hill! It is Moby Dick!"

Fallon knew enough to begin shouting and pointing immediately, and the men at the other two masts did the same. Within a minute everyone who had remained on the deck was in the rigging trying to catch a glimpse of the creature they had sought, half of them doubting his existence, for so many months.

Fallon looked down toward the helmsman, who stood on his toes, the whalebone tiller under his arm, arching his neck trying to see the whale.

The others in the rigging were now arguing about who had spotted Moby Dick first, with Ahab the eventual victor. It was his fate, he said, to be the first one to spot the whale. Fallon couldn't argue with that.

Ahab was lowered to the deck, giving orders all the way, and three boats were swung outboard in preparation for the chase. Starbuck was ordered to stay behind and keep the ship.

As they chased the whale, the sea became calmer, so the rowing became easier—though just as back-breaking—and they knifed through the water, here as placid as a farm pond, faster than ever. Accompanying the sound of their own wake, Fallon heard the wake of the whale they must be approaching. He strained arms, back, and legs, pulling harder in time to Stubb's cajoling chant, and the rushing grew. He snatched a glance over his shoulder, turned to the rowing, then looked again.

The white whale glided through the sea smoothly, giving the impression of immeasurable strength. The wake he left was as steady as that of a schooner; the bow waves created by the progress of his broad, blank brow through the water fanned away in precise lines whose angle with respect to the massive body did not change. The three whaleboats rocked gently as they broke closer through these successive waves; the foam of Moby Dick's wake was abreast of them now, and Fallon saw how quickly it subsided into itself, giving the sea back its calm face, innocent

of knowledge of the creature that had passed. Attendant white birds circled above their heads, now and then falling to or rising from the surface in busy flutterings of wings and awkward beaks. One of them had landed on the broken shaft of a harpoon that protruded from the snow-white whale's humped back; it bobbed up and down with the slight rocking of the whale in its long, muscular surging through the sea. Oblivious. Strangely quiet. Fallon felt as if they had entered a magic circle.

He knew Ahab's boat, manned by the absurd Filipinos, was ahead of them and no doubt preparing to strike first. Fallon closed his eyes, pulled on his oar, and wished for it not to happen. For it to stop now, or just continue without any change. He felt as if he could row a very long time; he was no longer tired or afraid. He just wanted to keep rowing, feeling the rhythm of the work, hearing the low and insistent voice of Stubb telling them to break their backs. Fallon wanted to listen to the rushing white sound of the whale's wake in the water, to know that they were perhaps keeping pace with it, to know that, if he should tire, he could look for a second over his shoulder and find Moby Dick there still. Let the monomaniac stand in the bow of his boat—if he was meant to stand there, if it was an unavoidable necessity—let him stand there with the raised lance and concentrate his hate into one purified moment of will. Let him send that will into the tip of that lance so that it might physically glow with the frustrated obtuseness of it. Let him stand there until he froze from the suspended desire, and let the whale swim on.

Fallon heard a sudden increase in the rushing of the water, several inarticulate cries. He stopped pulling, as did the others, and turned to look in time to see the whale lift itself out of the water, exposing flanks and flukes the bluish white of cemetery marble, and flip its huge tail upward to dive perpendicularly into the sea. Spray drenched them, and sound returned with the crash of the waves coming together to fill the vacuum left by the departure of the creature that had seconds before given weight and direction, place, to the placeless expanse of level waters. The birds circled above the subsiding foam.

They lifted their oars. They waited.

"An hour," Ahab said.

They waited. It was another beautiful day. The sky was hard and blue as the floor of the swimming pool where he had met Carol. Fallon wondered again if she missed him, if he had indeed disappeared from that other life when he had taken up residence in

this one—but he thrust those thoughts away. They were meaningless. There was no time in that world after his leaving it; that world did not exist, or if it existed, the order of its existence was not of the order of the existence of the rough wood he sat on, the raw flesh of his hands and the air he breathed. Time was the time between the breaths he drew. Time was the duration of the dream he had had about being back in Chicago, and he could not say how long that had been, even if it had begun or ended. He might be dreaming still. The word "dream" was meaningless, and "awake." And "real," and "insane," and "known," and all those other interesting words he had once known. Time was waiting for Moby Dick to surface again.

The breeze freshened. The sea began to swell.

"The birds!—the birds!" Tashtego shouted, so close behind Fallon's ear that he winced. The Indian half-stood, rocking the whaleboat as he pointed to the sea birds, which had risen and were flying toward Ahab's boat twenty yards away.

"The whale will breach there," Stubb said.

Ahab was up immediately. Peering into the water, he leaned on the steering oar and reversed the orientation of his boat. He then exchanged places with Fedallah, the other men reaching up to help him through the rocking boat. He picked up the harpoon, and the oarsmen stood ready to row.

Fallon looked down into the sea, trying to make out what Ahab saw. Nothing, until a sudden explosion of white as the whale, rocketing upward, turned over as it finally hit the surface. In a moment Ahab's boat was in the whale's jaws, Ahab in the bows almost between them. Stubb was shouting and gesturing, and Fallon's fellows fell to the oars in a disoragnized rush. The Filipinos in the lead boat crowded into the stern while Ahab, like a man trying to open a recalcitrant garage door, tugged and shoved at Moby Dick's jaw, trying insanely to dislodge the whale's grip. Within seconds filled with crashing water, cries and confusion, Moby Dick had bitten the boat in two, and Ahab had belly-flopped over the side like a swimming-class novice.

Moby Dick then began to swim tight circles around the smashed boat and its crew. Ahab struggled to keep his head above water. Neither Stubb nor Flask could bring his boat close enough to pick him up. The *Pequod* was drawing nearer, and finally Ahab was able to shout loudly enough to be heard, "Sail on the whale—drive him off!"

It worked. The *Pequod* picked up the remnants of the whale-

boat while Fallon and the others dragged its crew and Ahab into their own boat.

The old man collapsed in the bottom of the boat, gasping for breath, broken and exhausted. He moaned and shook. Fallon was sure he was finished whale chasing, that Stubb and the others would see the man was used up, that Starbuck would take over and sail them home. But in a minute or two Ahab was leaning on his elbow asking after his boat's crew, and a few minutes after that they had resumed the chase with double oarsmen in Stubb's boat.

Moby Dick drew steadily away as exhaustion wore them down. Fallon did not feel he could row any more after all. The *Pequod* picked them up and they gave chase in vain under all sail until dark.

FOURTEEN

On the second day's chase all three boats were smashed in. Many men suffered sprains and contusions, and one was bitten by a shark. Ahab's whalebone leg was shattered, with a splinter driven into his own flesh. Fedallah, who had been the captain's second shadow, was tangled in the line Ahab had shot into the white whale, dragged out of the boat, and drowned. Moby Dick escaped.

FIFTEEN

It came down to what Fallon had known it would come down to eventually.

In the middle of that night he went to talk to Ahab, who slept in one of the hatchways as he had the night before. The carpenter was making him another leg, wooden this time, and Ahab was curled sullenly in the dark lee of the after scuttle. Fallon did not know whether he was waiting or asleep.

He started down the stairs, hesitated on the second step. Ahab lifted his head. "What do you need?" he asked.

Fallon wondered what he wanted to say. He looked at the man huddled in the darkness and tried to imagine what moved him, tried to see him as a man instead of a thing. Was it possible he was only a man, or had Fallon himself become stylized and distorted by living in the book of Melville's imagination?

"You said—talking to Starbuck today—you said that every-

thing that happens is fixed, decreed. You said it was rehearsed a billion years before any of it took place. Is it true?''

Ahab straightened and leaned toward Fallon, bringing his face into the dim light thrown by the lamps on deck. He looked at him for a moment in silence.

''I don't know. So it seemed as the words left my lips. The Parsee is dead before me, as he foretold. I don't know.''

''That is why you're hunting the whale.''

''That is why I'm hunting the whale.''

''How can this hunt, how can killing an animal tell you anything? How can it justify your life? What satisfaction can it give you in the end, even if you boil it all down to oil, even if you cut Moby Dick into bible-leaves and eat him? I don't understand it.''

The captain looked at him earnestly. He seemed to be listening, and leaping ahead of the questions. It was very dark in the scuttle, and they could hardly see each other. Fallon kept his hands folded tightly behind him. The blade of the cleaver he had shoved into his belt lay cool against the skin at the small of his back; it was the same knife he used to butcher the whale.

''If it is immutably fixed, then it does not matter what I do. The purpose and meaning are out of my hands, and thine. We have only to take our parts, to be the thing that it is written for us to be. Better to live that role given us than to struggle against it or play the coward, when the actions must be the same nonetheless. Some say I am mad to chase the whale. Perhaps I am mad. But if it is my destiny to seek him, to tear, to burn and kill those things that stand in my path—then the matter of my madness is not relevant, do you see?''

He was not speaking in character.

''If these things are not fixed, and it was not my destiny to have my leg taken by the whale, to have my hopes blasted in this chase, then how cruel a world it is. No mercy, no power but its own controls it; it blights our lives out of merest whim. No, not whim, for there would then be no will behind it, no builder of this Bedlam hospital, and in the madhouse, when the keeper is gone, what is to stop the inmates from doing as they please? In a universe of cannibals, where all creatures have preyed upon each other, carrying on an eternal war since the world began, why should I not exert my will in whatever direction I choose? Why should I not bend others to my will?'' The voice was reasonable, and tired. ''Have I answered your question?''

Fallon felt the time drawing near. He felt light, as if the next breeze might lift him from the deck and carry him away. "I have an idea," he said. "My idea is—and it is an idea I have had for some time now, and despite everything that has happened, and what you say, I can't give it up—my idea is that all that is happening . . ." Fallon waved his hand at the world, ". . . is a story. It is a book written by a man named Herman Melville and told by a character named Ishmael. You are the main character in the book. All the things that have happened are events in the book.

"My idea also is that I am not from the book, or at least I wasn't originally. Originally I lived a different life in another time and place, a life in the real world and not in a book. It was not ordered and plotted like a book, and. . . ."

Ahab interrupted in a quiet voice: "You call this an ordered book? I see no order. If it were so orderly, why would the whale task me so?"

Fallon knotted his fingers still tighter behind him. Ahab was going to make him do it. He felt the threads of the situation weaving together to create only that bloody alternative, of all the alternatives that might be. In the open market, the price for the future and price for the physical reality converged on delivery day.

"The order's not an easy thing to see, I'll admit," Fallon said. He laughed nervously.

Ahab laughed louder. "It certainly is not. And how do you know this other life you speak of was not a play? A different kind of play. How do you know your thoughts are your own? How do you know that this dark little scene was not prepared just for us, or perhaps for someone who is reading about us at this very moment and wondering about the point of the drama just as much as we wonder at the pointlessness of our lives?" Ahab's voice rose, gaining an edge of compulsion. "How do we know anything?" He grabbed his left wrist, pinched the flesh and shook it.

"How do we know what lies behind this matter? This flesh is a wall, the painting over the canvas, the mask drawn over the player's face, the snow fallen over the fertile field, or perhaps the scorched earth. I know there is something there; there must be something, but it cannot be touched because we are smothered in this flesh, this life. How do we know—"

"Stop it! Stop it!" Fallon shouted. "Please stop asking things!

You should not be able to say things like that to me! Ahab does not talk to me!''

''Isn't this what I am supposed to say?''

Fallon shuddered.

''Isn't this scene in your book?''

He was dizzy, sick. ''No! Of course not!''

''Then why does that disturb you? Doesn't this prove that we are not pieces of a larger dream, that this is a real world, that the blood that flows within our veins is real blood, that the pain we feel has meaning, that the things we do have consequence? We break the mold of existence by existing. Isn't that reassurance enough?'' Ahab was shouting now, and the men awake on deck trying to get the boats in shape for that last day's chase and the *Pequod*'s ultimate destruction put aside their hammers and rope and listened now to Ahab's justification.

It was time. Fallon, shaking with anger and fear, drew the knife from behind him and leapt at the old man. In bringing up the blade for the attack he hit it against the side of the narrow hatchway. His grip loosened. Ahab threw up his hands, and despite the difference in age and mobility between them, managed to grab Fallon's wrist before he could strike the killing blow. Instead, the deflected cleaver struck the beam beside Ahab's head and stuck there. As Fallon tried to free it, Ahab brought his forearm up and smashed him beneath the jaw. Fallon fell backward, striking his head with stunning force against the opposite side of the scuttle. He momentarily lost consciousness.

When he came to himself again, Ahab was sitting before him with his strong hands on Fallon's shoulders, supporting him, not allowing him to move.

''Good, Fallon, good,'' he said. ''You've done well. But now, no more games, no more dramas, no easy way out. Admit that this is not the tale you think it is! Admit that you do not know what will happen to you in the next second, let alone the next day or year! Admit that we are both free and unfree, alone and crowded in by circumstance in this world that we indeed did not make, but indeed have the power to affect! Put aside those notions that there is another life somehow more real than the life you live now, another air to breathe somehow more pure, another love or hate somehow more vital than the love or hate you bear me. Put aside your fantasy and admit that you are alive, and thus may momentarily die. Do you hear me, Fallon?''

Fallon heard, and saw, and felt and touched, but he did not know. The *Pequod*, freighted with savages and isolatoes, sailed into the night, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

LEST LEVITATION COME UPON US

Sainthood is not easily attained. It comes about through the performance of good deeds and an occasional, or even single, miracle. Consider then the consternation of a housewife and mother, who, although she had naturally done good deeds for her family and friends, finds herself unexpectedly performing miracles at the most inconvenient times and in the most inconvenient places.

If it had been only her circumstances, her own convenience, only her own *self* to be considered, Valeria thought she might in fact have been able to manage. There would have been adjustments and accommodations, but she was a woman; and, accustomed as all women are to adjustments and accommodations, she would have coped somehow. If nothing else, she could have let a tale be leaked, one bit of triva at a time . . . little note cards in a spidery hand with weak excuses on them, and the word going round of a chronic disease. Nothing fatal, and nothing ugly; but something that would have made coming by to see her a chore to avoid, while at the same time explaining why she was never seen in public anymore. And pretty soon she would have been forgotten, one of those enigmatic and eccentric Southern ladies with a decomposing corpse to protect in the cupboard . . . the teenager

who delivered her paper, and the elderly man who could still be hired to deliver groceries if the order was kept to just a bag or two, they would have set things down on her front porch and made hasty tracks. For fear of what they might see behind Valeria Elizabeth Carterhasty's spotless white curtains.

But it was *not* like that, as she was no longer a Carterhasty, nor could she consider her own self. She was much-married, mother of three, wife to Julian B. Cantrell, up-and-coming attorney-at-law, and consideration of self was far down the list of her priorities, somewhere below keeping the flea collars up to date on the requisite dog and pair of Siamese cats. Clearly, she was going to have to think of some way to deal with this inexplicable affliction an unknown diety had seen fit to visit upon her.

That Julian had been furious the first time it happened seemed to her entirely reasonable; after all, a lawyer does not maintain a practice at $100,000 a year and support a family without maintaining a certain image. The elegant home, with the redwood deck. The pleasant wife with the knack for noncontroversial conversation. The matched set of well-groomed and well-behaved children, each with a hobby that might in time become a profession. Daryl, with his microscope and his white mice. Philip, with the ranks of labeled shoeboxes each containing an electronic something-or-other, and the lust for a personal computer—even without a printer—that Julian sternly refused to satisfy. "When you have earned and saved half the money for it, I'll match that with the other half, young man." That was Julian's way. And Charlotte. With Charlotte it was ballet. Charlotte had not really wanted to take up ballet . . . had wanted to go into baton-twirling, actually . . . but when it was explained to her that there would be a problem making that fit into Daddy's image, she had sighed, and exchanged glances with her mother, and gone dutifully into the ballet classes as requested. Whether she ever took out the wooden baton with the gold dust and the red tassel and the cheap silver cord, won at a carnival and put away in her closet, Valeria did not know and was careful not to ask.

They had been at the Far Corner, she and Julian and a Mr. and Mrs. Tabbitt from Memphis, right between the cocktails and the trip to the salad bar, and Valeria had known Julian was satisfied by the way things were going. He'd leaned back a little in his chair, and the tension in his hands that came from trying to quit smoking had relaxed a bit. The light was dim enough to make everyone look attractive, but not so dark you couldn't see what

you were eating, and the Muzak was doing "Rhapsody in Blue," when it happened. Mr. Tabbitt . . . Wayne? . . . she thought he had been a Wayne . . . had leaned forward and peered at her, his eyebrows a little vee of intense interest, and remarked that however she achieved the effect it was surely very becoming. And when she'd asked what effect, he had said that he was talking about the way she glowed.

"Glow? Do I?" Valeria had turned to Julian and pointed out how nice it was of Mr. Tabbitt to pay her the compliment, and found him staring at her too, and all the relaxation replaced by the kind of tight-strung attention he paid to juries he wasn't sure of yet.

"It must be the light in here," he'd said slowly.

"Must be," agreed the Tabbitts, especially Mrs. Tabbitt, whose name Valeria could no longer remember.

"It would have to be," Julian added. "I wonder how they do it? They should make a fortune at it."

Valeria sat there, fiddling with her glass, wondering; and the murmurs from behind their table began to work their way through to her conscious attention. And about that time the rose petals started falling, and that was really the last straw. Julian was a patient man ordinarily, for the stress that he was under, but he took her out of there as fast as if she'd thrown up on the table, and the Tabbitts not only didn't give him their malpractice suit to handle, they were practically at a full run by the time they reached the parking lot.

Julian's main concern, after the loss of the Tabbitts, had been for the publicity.

"How the hell are we going to keep it out of the papers?" he had demanded, handing her brusquely into their Mercedes in a way that made her elbow ache and coming very close to slamming the door on her white silk skirt. She only just managed to snatch it free in the nick of time.

"Keep what out of the papers, Julian?"

"Oh, come *on*, Valeria!"

"Sweetheart, if you don't look at the road once in a while I don't see how you can drive—it can't be a good idea."

"Well, damn it, Valeria, just look at yourself! Go on—*look* at you!"

She had held her arms out in front of her, obediently, and sure enough, she did glow. Not just the rosy glow of health, or the

metaphorical glow that came from the right sort of cosmetics and a good hairdresser. You could have read a newspaper by her.

"My goodness," she said. "How embarrassing for you . . . I'm sorry, Julian."

"Yeah." Julian swerved viciously around a dog that wasn't bothering anybody. "Your goodness. What the bloody hell is going on with you, anyway?"

Well, she didn't know, so far as that went. What it reminded her of more than anything else was one of those white plastic statues of Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild, that came for $6.98 from a radio station that broadcasts all night long from the very depths of Texas. The statue, according to the preacher hawking it, not only glowed in the dark with the light of *Truth* and the light of Sal*va*tion and the ever*last*ing light—provided you put the batteries in, presumably—it also could be made to revolve slowly on its stand. Valeria was grateful that she was not revolving, either slowly or in any other manner. But the glow was really in very bad taste. It was not soft, it was *bright*, and it was the same shade of gold as the stuff glued to the top of her daughter's carnival baton. And it spread out from her skin to a distance of a good two inches or so.

Tacky, thought Valeria, and brushed off a rose petal that Julian had missed while he was hustling her out of the restaurant.

"My dear," she said, genuinely concerned because she could see that he was, "you don't need to worry about the papers. Really."

"I don't, eh? I suppose you think people are *used* to going out for a quiet dinner in an expensive restaurant and seeing the woman at the next table light up like a damned Christmas tree, not to mention having rose petals rain down on her from the ceiling. For God's *sake*, Valeria . . . I mean, the people who go to the Far Corner are reasonably sophisticated, but they won't have seen *that* number before."

"Julian."

"What, Valeria? What?"

"It won't be in the papers," she said.

"The hell it won't."

"It *won't*," she insisted.

"One reason why not, Valeria—just one!"

"Because, when people see something like that, they won't admit it. Not to each other, not to themselves . . . not to the

papers. By the time they've all finished eating they'll be convinced they didn't see anything at all, or they'll think it was a stunt for my birthday with the waiters throwing roses at me or something. I assure you."

"You think so?"

"Julian, if any of those people were to suddenly look up and see an angel, twenty feet tall and with a wingspread like a 747, you know what they'd say? 'Biggest damned bird I ever saw,' that's what they'd say. And then they'd order another strawberry daiquiri."

"You really think—"

"I really do, dear heart. There's absolutely nothing for you to worry about. Even the Whatsits—"

"Tabbitts. They were a damned good *case*, Valeria."

"Even the Tabbitts . . . they won't be three blocks away before they've convinced themselves they didn't see anything either."

She saw the tightness go out of his shoulders. She patted his hand, and waited.

When they pulled into the driveway he finally asked her, tentatively, if she could—maybe—explain it.

"No, Julian," she said calmly, "I'm afraid I can't. But I'm sure it won't happen again."

"Like those stories you read about it raining frogs."

"Something like that."

Valeria was quite wrong. It happened over and over again. The children didn't appreciate rose petals in their breakfast pancakes when it happened while she was cooking. Julian set out for her logically the reasons why, since he differed from almost every other American husband by not snoring, it was unfair and unreasonable for her to keep him awake by glowing at him in the dark. Her protests that she had no control over it at all, and no warning either, didn't help matters, and Julian suggested to her that she stay home as much as possible until they could work something out.

She *was* at home when the cookies thing occurred. It was Charlotte's turn to have Camp Fire Girls, and Maryann Whipple's mother was supposed to have sent the refreshments; but, Mrs. Whipple being the sort of woman she was (not Maryann's fault, and a nicer child you couldn't have asked for), there weren't nearly enough cookies to go around. There Valeria was with a

plate of cookies—store-bought, too, and not a bakery, either—with only one dozen cookies on it. And seventeen Camp Fire Girls holding glasses of Kool-Aid and looking at her expectantly.

She had just opened her mouth to excuse herself, meaning to go to the kitchen and see what she had in *her* cooky jar, when she heard Charlotte make a funny little strangled noise and cover it with a cough.

"Oh, how nice of your Mama!" the child said—she was one quick thinker, was Charlotte—and before Valeria could say anything to confuse the issue, Charlotte had whisked the plate out of her hands and was passing it around just as bland as you please. If any of the girls had seen the one dozen nondescript lemon supermarket cookies on that plate suddenly become a pyramid of dainty little cakes, each one with its own icing and its own trim of chopped nuts or candied cherries or silver sprinkles, that girl hadn't mentioned it. So far as Valeria knew, it was just herself and Charlotte who had seen it happen, and Mrs. Whipple would never remember that she'd sent a plain white plate and gotten back good china with a narrow rim of gold, and that made two things to be thankful for.

"*Really,* Mother!" Charlotte had said, when the door closed behind the last of the Camp Fire Girls. "*Really!*"

"You handled it very well, dear, I must say," said Valeria. "I was impressed."

"Thank you, Mother," said Charlotte, tight-lipped and fuming, her arms folded over her chest just exactly like Julian.

"Charlotte," Valeria chided, "that's not attractive."

"I don't care if it's attractive or *not!*" wailed Charlotte. "*Really,* Mother—what are you going to do *next? ? ?*"

"Ah," said Valeria solemnly, "if I knew that, I would be much more comfortable about this whole thing. I could plan ahead, you see, if I knew that."

"And you think *that* is attractive?"

Valeria raised her eyebrows, thinking that Charlotte had more than a touch of the Cantrell temper from her father's father's side, and that puberty was going to be a storm-tossed sea for the child, but she said nothing. She only looked, until the girl's eyes dropped and a high flush spread over her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Mother," said Charlotte. "That was sassing, and it was uncalled for. I know you don't do it on purpose."

"I surely don't," Valeria answered.

"Can you stop, do you think? I mean, that's not sass, Mama, it's just that I want to know. Do you think you can?"

Valeria sighed.

"I think it will stop of itself," she said slowly. "The way everybody around a town sees UFO's or hears mysterious thumps or something for a week or two . . . and then it just stops. Provided you don't pay a lot of attention to it."

"And if it doesn't stop?"

"Well! If it doesn't stop, then I will have to get some sort of help, naturally. We must wait and see."

She stayed home more and more that summer, and Julian went so far as to let the word get out that the doctor thought she might be just a touch anemic and ought to stay in bed a good deal. But there were times when she really did have to go out, and no way to avoid it. When your next-door neighbor is in labor, and there's not a single soul around to take her to the hospital, and her husband's away in Atlanta on business and her parents clear off in California . . . might as well be on the moon as be in California . . .! Well. Valeria had yet to see the day when she would send a woman off to the maternity ward in a taxi, always supposing they could have gotten a taxi, which was not anything you could have counted on. Before it was over she was to wish fervently that she had called an ambulance, or delivered the baby herself (which would have been no great shucks, through the mere suggestion had nearly sent the mother into hysterics); but at the time, her duty had been as clear to her as the freckles over the bridge of her nose. And she had bundled up Carol Sue and the suitcase and headed straight for Skyway Memorial without giving it one more minute's thought—as would any other woman, under similar circumstances.

That time it did get in the papers. Never mind what people might have thought they did or didn't see. The traffic helicopter that was doing the feature for the six o'clock news about the tangled mess at the intersection by the defense plant got pictures that had nothing to do with subjective impressions. There was the Mercedes, on the six o'clock news, and her, Valeria Carterhasty Cantrell, at the wheel, rising into the air every time there was a little bit of a knot in the traffic and just wafting right over it to the next empty space before settling sedately back into the row of cars and their flabbergasted drivers.

It got them to the hospital in record time, and the inconvenient

glow got them past the Admitting Office without one word about insurance *or* money, which had to be a first, but if it didn't mark the baby it would be a miracle. And nobody was speaking to Valeria. Not her husband, not her children, not Carol Sue, not Carol Sue's husband (back from Atlanta) . . . Carol Sue's parents, flying in in great haste from California, had been threatening to sue until they learned that Julian was an attorney.

Julian once more had a good deal to say about last straws. Not divorce, of course; Cantrells did not divorce. Divorce, furthermore, would do nothing for his carefully made plans to move one day into the Governor's Mansion. It could be added that he was truly fond of Valeria, and aware that she could not be easily replaced.

Valeria, who appreciated both his concern for her and his concern about her, came to the rueful conclusion that it was not just going to go away of itself as she had hoped, like a spree of UFO sightings. She would, she told Julian, do something about the problem.

"The problem."

She did not like the way he was looking at her; it had overtones of *naming* the problem, perhaps *defining* the problem. Valeria did not think that would be in Julian's best interests.

"This afternoon," she said quickly. "I'll see to it."

"How? What?"

"But right now, Julian, you are late for the Jaycees Luncheon. That Municipal Center thing."

"God, I forgot all about it!"

"Well, you'd better go, dear, hadn't you?"

"I'm not sure I have the guts."

"I beg your pardon, Julian?"

"I am going to hear one hell of a lot about what they saw on the six o'clock news, Valeria. And the ten o'clock news. *This* time, it's a horse of a different color. Television cameras do not imagine they see . . . what they saw."

"Mmmmm."

"Valeria?"

"Julian," she said, tapping her lower lip with her finger, "I suggest that if they bring it up—which would be extraordinarily rude of them, I must say—you tell them that we are bringing suit against Mercedes for one million dollars. And another couple of million on behalf of Carol Sue and her baby."

Julian stared at her, and she could have sworn there was a flash of admiration in his eyes.

"I never would have thought of that, darling," he said, grabbing his briefcase.

He wouldn't have, either. Valeria had explained to Charlotte, on the single occasion when the child insisted on knowing what was the *matter* with men, anyway, that they lacked motherwit; and that this was an inherent deficiency that could not be held against them.

"I don't see why not," Charlotte fretted. "They could learn . . . they learn law stuff and medical stuff and how to blow up the whole world, don't they?"

"Not the same thing at all."

"What's motherwit?"

"Motherwit is what makes you notice the messes men get themselves into, Charlotte Rose. And what gives you sense enough not to let on you notice."

"And to clean up the messes after them."

"Precisely. And we will never mention this again."

"Can I tell Judette McElroad? We've been best friends going on three years this March."

"No."

"Not even Judette? Mama!"

"Not even Judette. It's up to Judette's mother to tell her."

"Like the Curse."

"We do not say 'the Curse,' Charlotte. It's tacky."

As was this situation.

"Can you just give me a simple description of your problem?" the priest had asked her, no doubt wondering what a nice Methodist lady like herself was doing in a place like his, crucifixes on the wall and candles flickering in niches, and him with his long black gown.

She had tried, beginning with the disastrous dinner that had lost Julian the Tabbitts case and going straight on to the end, with the trip to the hospital and the Mercedes.

He looked at her, when she paused, in precisely the way she had expected him to look, and she knew he had not watched the news. He looked at her dubiously, for which she could in no way blame him. And then the look in his eyes changed abruptly, and his fingers flickered through the sign of the cross, mutter-mutter-mutter, and she assumed she must have begun doing something convincing. Glowing. Rotating. Levitating. Whatever.

"—and the Holy Spirit. Amen," said the priest. Adding, "Oh dear. Oh dear me."

"Why, Father?" asked Valeria, as reasonably as she could after the dreary recital of her humiliations, and feeling as if she had a bit part in one of those Italian movies about devout peasants with flocks of goats. "It seems to me that *I* am the one who should be saying 'oh dear.' "

The priest, to her astonishment, lowered his head to his hands and gripped it fiercely, all ten fingers buried deep in the thick black curls of his hair, and he moaned. Moaned!

"Father?"

Valeria waited, and then tried again.

"Father!"

From the depths of his hands came a muffled "Please allow me to compose myself" and some mumbling about not having believed it even if the call *did* come from the Bishop, but now he'd seen it with his own eyes, and "Please forgive me," and then he was at last looking at her. Or perhaps through her. Beads of sweat on his upper lip and forehead, and a bit shocky-looking, but no longer in a state of collapse.

He cleared his throat twice, and folded his hands, and said, "Mrs. Cantrell, I fear I am in over my head."

"As if I needed an ophthalmologist and you were an oculist."

"An excellent analogy, dear lady."

"Nevertheless," said Valeria, "we could *discuss* this. It is, in some sense of the word, your field . . . and you are the expert, isn't that right?"

"A most inadequate expert, I'm afraid."

"That's twice now you've said you were afraid. You have nothing to be afraid of."

He shook his head vehemently—he did have beautiful curls! —and crossed himself again.

"Oh my, oh my," he said. "You're wrong there, Mrs. Cantrell."

"In what way?"

"Either you are a visitation of the Dear Lord, in which case I have good reason to be afraid—I was never in the presence of a living saint before, you see, and I don't have the remotest idea how to behave. Or you are a visitation of the Evil One, in which case I have good reason to be terrified right out of my cassock, if you'll pardon a feeble joke."

"Is that possible?"

"Is what possible?"

"That all this might be the Devil's doing," said Valeria. "It never occurred to me, but it would surely simplify things."

His jaw dropped, and then he shut his mouth in a way that made his teeth click.

"I don't see it, I'm afraid . . . there, I've said it again. But I *am* afraid. And I don't know why you would prefer the workings of the Devil to the workings of the Almighty."

"Because," Valeria pointed out, "if I am bewitched, or possessed, or whatever the label is, there's a cure for that. You just haul out your exorcism kit and fix me up, and I can go home to my family and tell them life is normal once again. I would much prefer that, Father, to the other thing."

"Tell me again," he said flatly.

"All of it?"

"All of it. This time I will be able to listen more carefully, since I know what's coming. Please don't leave out anything, not the smallest detail."

She told him again, feeling bored and hopeless, while he steepled his fingers and peered at her over them and, every now and again, made a soft noise like a half dozen bees.

"Mrs. Cantrell," he asked when she got to the end of it again, "have you always been a devout woman?"

"Never," she said promptly.

"Never!"

"Never. I'm a Methodist. I went to Sunday School when I was a child because my parents made me go, and I go to church now because my husband's law practice would suffer if I didn't—and I make my children go for the same reason. I suppose my mother made *me* go for the sake of my father's medical practice, come to think of it."

"Do you pray?"

"Of my own accord, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Father Genora—if there is a God, a matter on which I'm no authority—I would certainly have better taste and better manners than to think that He or She was interested in the kind of things I have to pray about. Can you imagine a God that would be interested in my profound hope that my daughter won't have to wear braces on her teeth? Can you imagine a God that would be concerned about that rash I get when Julian tries a different aftershave lotion. . . . Father, I don't think for one moment that

God doesn't respect my ability to manage my own affairs. And I have an equivalent respect for God's ability to run the celestial mechanics, so to speak."

"You don't want to be any trouble to Him," said the priest gently.

"Or Her. As the case may be."

The priest winced visibly, but Valeria did not apologize.

"My dear child," said the priest, "there really isn't any question about it. I don't think there has been any question, from the beginning. I don't *understand* it—but then I don't understand Job, either, or Judas, or Biafra. My Bishop would have my head on a platter if he heard me say this, but I would be a coward if I didn't—my dear child, you are . . . for some utterly unfathomable divine reason . . . a saint. Not a *certified* saint; for that you have to be dead. But a saint all the same."

"Father Genora, couldn't you be mistaken? I think the Devil version is far more likely, now you've brought it up. The Devil's not nearly so choosy, as I understand it."

"If you were possessed," said the priest firmly, "you could not look me in the eye and talk of . . . the Almighty the way you have. You wear the armor of holy innocence, and I can only say that in this situation I wish *I* did."

Valeria drew a long breath, and asked: "And do you have something in your procedures manual for that? You can cast out devils in the name of God—can you cast out angels, or whatever it is I've caught?"

He shook his head, and his fingers seemed to be searching in his cassock for someplace to hide.

"You must try to understand," he told her. "The Church cannot even imagine such a thing as wishing to be . . . unsainted."

"Well, that's absurd. It's a terrible nuisance."

"I imagine it must be. The masses have always loved the saints, and their families have always hated them. Nobody wants to *live* with one . . . some of them have done the most repulsive, stomach-turning, not to mention outright demented things. But if God picks you to be a saint, my child, the Church is assuredly not going to presume to question His choice. Do you see what I mean?"

Valeria was thinking hard. Here she was, with her marriage falling apart, and her children turning against her, and Julian's entire future on the line, and all this holy man could do was make excuses.

"Father Genora, what if you were to say the exorcism service backward? Do you suppose . . . oh dear. Father, I apologize. I did *not* realize it would upset you so much—it's an entirely empirical question, you know. Put a car in forward, it goes forward; put it in reverse, it goes backward. Do an exorcism, you undevil the bedeviled; do an *anti*-exorcism, you might unsaint the besainted. But I can see that you wouldn't care to try that, so I'll have to manage on my own, won't I?"

The priest was pale and shuddering, but he managed to ask her how she intended to proceed. Valeria thought it best to be gentle with him.

"Father," she said, "you'll be far better off if you don't know."

"Mrs. *Cantrell!* How do you suppose that I am to live with my conscience, if I let you just walk out of here like this? A saint comes to me, to *me*, for spiritual counsel; and all I can do is mumble and sweat. You must give me an opportunity to discuss this, to see if there is not some solution, to. . . ."

She did not really like to cut him off in mid-stream, having learned long ago that a man frustrated in that way would tend to take it out on somebody else at the first opportunity, but she was tired. Tired, and disgusted; after all, she had not asked for this. She had *not* gone about doing good, trying to entice the birds and the squirrels and the butterflies to light upon her person, healing the sick and the maimed, praying and preaching. She had been going about her business, *minding* her own business, and not bothering anybody, and then to have this happen—it was a bit much. And this priest, this holy tinkerer who appeared not to know one end of a religious question from another, was a great disappointment to her. It just went to show how limited her experience had been.

"Father," she said carefully, "sainthood is something you get into by not sinning enough. I intend to go home and *sin* until I have become too wicked to be a saint. If you want to help me, you might save me some time by explaining to me what the *worst* sin is—that one against the Holy Ghost. I could start with that and skip some of the minor infringements."

There he went again. Oh dearing. Oh dear me-ing. It was more than she could bear, and to avoid beginning her career as a sinner by the wanton murder of a man of God, she simply left him nattering and went home. She was late in any case, and Julian did not like for her to be late.

* * *

Valeria believed in *system*. Flounder about, doing things at random, and you got nowhere. She began, therefore, with the Ten Commandments, althought she was not quite willing to go through them in order.

The one about having no other gods was easy enough. Valeria went down to an import shop where she was accustomed to getting those paper lanterns you put in the garden to help people wander around outside at parties without breaking their necks. She bought a Buddha, a Kwan-Yin, an Indian deity with far more arms than any god ought to need, a very badly done Venus, and something the clerk swore was a statue of Isis—if she was mistaken it didn't really matter, it was sure to be some minor god or other. That made *five* forbidden gods, all of them graven images (or cast images, which ought to be equally wicked, given the Almighty's own knowledge of how things had changed since Moses and that calf), and she set them all up in her sewing room, locked the door, and bowed down to each and every one of the five in turn. While she was at it, getting two commandments with one stone, so to speak, she took the Lord's name in vain repeatedly, feeling that the Lord had it coming anyway.

Sunday, instead of going to church with the rest of the family, she hemmed a whole set of curtains, carting them into the sewing room where she could sit surrounded by her heathen images and getting up every now and then to bow to each one of them. And on the off chance that the sabbath day mentioned in Exodus was Saturday instead of Sunday, she spent a Saturday in there, too, taking the hems out and putting them back in again despite the fact that they'd been done perfectly in the first place. When she found that she'd spotted one of the panels with blood, sticking her finger with a pin, she turned her face up to the heavens and said aloud: "God damn it. God damn it all the way to hell and back."

When Charlotte knocked on the door to find out if she was ever coming out to fix lunch, Valeria took a deep breath and said "Fix it yourself, God damn it!"

"Mother!"

"You heard me," said Valeria. "Now, God damn it, do what I told you. I'm very, very busy."

Next came dishonoring . . . no, failing to honor was all that was required, thank goodness . . . failing to honor her father and her mother. She took care of that and worked false witness into it

at the same time, telling Julian's mother on the telephone that he wasn't home when he was standing right behind her. Valeria had never lied to Mother Cantrell before, and didn't enjoy doing it now, but putting things off wasn't going to help.

"No, Mother Cantrell," she went on, "I don't know when he'll be back. He didn't say. You know how Julian is, he does as he pleases, goes where he pleases, and shows up when the spirit moves him. God damn it."

Lies, all of it. Julian wouldn't have gone around the block without giving Valeria an exact schedule, and if he'd turned any one of that block's four corners later than promised, he would have stopped to call her and let her know.

Moving right along, she tried coveting. She coveted everything she could get at. She put her back into it and coveted an awful phony waterfall in Carol Sue's yard, along with the phony boulders that made its basin, and she hoped she was making a good impression.

Stealing was a nuisance, but she did it; she stole a girdle from Macy's, ostentatiously parading it through the store inside her blouse, and throwing it into a Salvation Army pickup box on the way home when nobody so much as questioned her about it. Killing was easier; she got an assortment of spray cans and killed everything that crawled or flew within the reach of her narrow stream of noxious chemical death. She stepped viciously on spiders she would ordinarily have carried carefully out to the rosebushes. And she reminded herself that each and every time she showered, each and every time she brushed her teeth, she slaughtered tens of millions of innocent bacteria and assorted bystanders. In the long run, it must count up.

Thinking that *combined* sins were more efficient, she went to see her father and his new wife, lied to the wife about her father's age, stole a crystal vase of her mother's, stunned both father and bride with her incessant string of "God damns," and resolutely flushed down the toilet a tropical fish that any fool except her father could have seen was swimming at that bizarre angle because it was sick and in pain. As the fish gurgled out of sight, Valeria said, "Thank you, holy Isis."

By the end of her first week as a dedicated sinner, Valeria felt fouled from the gut out and wondered how the habitual sinner stood it, not to mention all the *time* it took. But it wasn't working. It seemed to her that the more she sinned, the more brightly she glowed and the worse the rose petals falling about

her stank, and when Julian moved to the bed in the guest room she did not blame him one bit. In his place, she would have moved even sooner.

Somehow, Valeria had thought she would surely be excused from the last of the proscribed activities, but it clearly was not to be. Like Job, or Aristotle, or somebody, she was going to have to drink her nasty poison to its last dregs. And that meant adultery. It was not an interesting sin, but she could not think of anything wickeder, and the complicated arrangements it involved made it possible to drag in a number of associated sins in the false witness line along with it. She did it twice, with two separate willing strangers; and then to top it off she did it with a few of the husbands in the neighborhood. Afterward, she understood why so many of the women she knew were so cross and vicious, and she treated them with special tenderness. She had had no idea what they had been putting up with, or how lucky she was to have Julian competently sharing her bed—or at least visiting it.

And that didn't work, either. She'd run through the whole list, much of it dozens of times, and things were no better. Putting in tulip bulbs, and trying to keep her mind on doing that properly, Valeria fretted and wept and impatiently brushed away a herd of butterflies that insisted on settling around her, and swore terrible oaths.

"I will be *damned*," she cried desperately in the general direction of the heavenly parapets, waving her trowel, "I will be damned if I will murder a human being just for Your satisfaction! I warn You, You will go too far, do You hear me? You hear me down here? I am *blas*pheming, damn it! Praise Isis! Praise Zeus! Praise Satan, for that matter!"

And when the pure white dove came out of the puffy cloud above her and flew down to circle over her head, Valeria lay down in the ditch she had dug for her flowers, heedless of the carefully worked-in manure, and wept in desperate earnest. And the burden of her complaint was: "My God, my God—what will it take to get You to forsake me?"

It was Maryann Whipple's mother, of all unlikely people, who finally solved her problem. Nobody would call Ruby Whipple a saint, that was for sure and for certain. A trollop, perhaps, a liar and a thief and an awesomely poor excuse for a mother *or* a daughter—but never a saint. Valeria, forsaken by everyone she

loved and tormented by a god whose attentions she had never sought but could not now get rid of, went to Ruby Whipple and told her the whole story. Valeria was long past caring if Ruby believed her or not and Ruby, monumentally fortified with straight Scotch at ten o'clock of a Tuesday morning, was in no condition to doubt anything.

"Shoot, honey," said Ruby, leaning back on the pillows her couch was piled with and knocking half a dozen onto the floor, "you haven't been sinning at all."

"I have!" Valeria was furious. "I have been sinning *so* hard—"

"Yeah, yeah," scoffed Ruby. "Sure you have. Honey, I am a Baptist minister's daughter, and I know whereof I speak, and I am here to tell you that you can't sin for *shit*."

"Nonsense!"

"Nonsense, my rosy butt," Ruby said. "You tell me *why* you're racing around like a chicken with its head cut off, lying and stealing and cussing and hopping in and out of bed with anything that can get it up and plenty that can't! Not to mention bowing to Isis and Kwan-Yin and hemming drapes on both Saturdays and Sundays!"

Ruby lay back and laughed fit to burst, spilling Scotch down her front, and Valeria's heart ached for Maryann Whipple.

"Every one of those things," she said firmly, "every last one that you find so funny, is supposed to be a sin. Every single one has a special commandment all its own forbidding it. You *can't* say I haven't sinned."

"Valeria . . . tell me *why*. You haven't been doing it because it was fun, have you?"

"Fun?" Valeria moaned as the priest had moaned. "I have never in my life done anything so tiresome and so boring as all these sins. Fun!"

"Then why?"

"Because Julian and the children are entitled to a normal wife and mother and a normal ordinary wholesome life, that's why, and I am determined that they shall have them!"

"Uh-huh," said Ruby emphatically. "That's the problem, sweet thing. You sin for the sake of those you love, you lay down your soul for your friend. Valeria, that doesn't *count*. You've been wasting your time, child."

"It's not fair!"

"No, it's not," agreed Ruby Whipple, "but then, nothing is." And she passed out cold on the couch.

* * *

Well, even a saint has limits to her patience, and Valeria came to the end of hers that day. She could see what Ruby meant, and was fervently grateful that she'd listened to Ruby before she took the next step she had been contemplating. True, old Mr. Hackwood would have been released from his misery, lying there with all those tubes and monitors and lights and buzzers in a strange place he hated, with nothing but his agony for company. True, his poor wife, not really well herself, would have been released from the seemingly endless burden of watching him die by fractions of inches and hearing him plead for release around the clock; Adam Hackwood no longer knew that the woman who'd shared his life for over fifty years was in the room, but he hadn't stopped believing that there was a Jesus somewhere who would step in and set things to rights if you only asked Him often enough and nicely enough. True, the nurses on the floor where Mr. Hackwood was would have had more time to spend with other patients who were *not* dying, and would have had to spend less time comforting the ones in the rooms nearby his who had a tendency to weep at what they heard from their "terminal" colleague. True, if the Bible were to be believed, Adam Hackwood would have traded a hard bed, with a stiff rubber sheet and every invention of misery a fecund modern medical science could provide, for residence in Paradise and nothing more uncomfortable to do but learn to tolerate the brightness of the Almighty's shining face and the duty of praising Him everlastingly. All true.

Well, let it be true. All of it. She, Valeria, was *not going to do it*. Let them all suffer, let them writhe and bleed and wail; she was going to grit her teeth and let it pass her by, because nothing she had done so far had helped one bit and nothing she had in mind along the same lines impressed her as having any greater potential for releasing her from *her* misery.

She hadn't the heart to go back and torment the priest further, but she knew what she needed now, and she thought she could manage. She needed a way to work within the system, instead of against it. She needed to break a rule that the High-and-Mighty would have no choice but to pay attention to. No more Mrs. Nice Lady, no sir . . . not *this* saint! Valeria set her teeth and headed for the theology section of the University library. And it turned out that the books on fornication and adultery and murder and all their repulsive ilk weren't even *in* the theology section; if you wanted to read those, you had to go to the social science shelves,

or Family Studies. No doubt Ruby Whipple could have told her that.

She learned a lot in the theology stacks. She learned that women were the gateway to Hell. She learned that despite claiming that what they had seen and experienced could not possibly be expressed in words, the mystics went right on and expressed it at extraordinary length. She learned that the Vatican had curious problems, and that it was possible to commit a crime called "fishing in Papal waters." She learned vast amounts about things that not only did not interest her but clearly had not interested those wrote about them, and it became obvious to her that if all theology were written in Latin it would be no great loss. Her frustration grew, but she did not let that distract her from her task, and would have been ashamed to do so; she was literate, and she had been a Carterhasty, and nobody was going to tell her that she couldn't get to the bottom of this.

And there came the day when she found what she was looking for. Lying and murder and other-gods-before-me and stealing and working your tail off on the sabbath . . . those, she discovered to her amazement, were piddly little sinlets hardly worth mentioning. Those were such everyday common garden variety in the way of sinning that it was no wonder Ruby Whipple had laughed, and Valeria flushed along the delicate ridge of her cheekbones, remembering. The place to find out about sins was not in the Bible, it was in the books that mortal men had written *about* the Bible, and it was there that Valeria learned the name of the sin that would get you smacked no matter how well you might be doing otherwise.

"Hallelujah!" she said, right out loud and no reverence intended.

Who would have ever guessed that the Sin of Sins would not be something interesting like infant cannibalism, but simply *pride?* She shook her head, overwhelmed.

Pride. Pride! That was the one that wouldn't be tolerated and, from what Valeria read, it was a source of real difficulty for anybody fool enough to go out for sainthood, since the more good and pure and holy you were, the more likely you were to tumble into the pit of being proud of your own goodness. People might watch Valeria lie and cheat and fornicate (horrible prospect!) and learn nothing at all from that; the Almighty could afford to ignore that, what with everybody and his housecat doing it right and left all the day and all the night long. But pride, now! If Valeria were allowed to get away with pride—even to *seem* to

get away with pride, especially now that they were trying to get her to go on television talk shows—that would set a precedent the Almighty wouldn't dare overlook.

Valeria slammed the book shut, chuckling to herself, and went straight home to call up the television pests and say she'd be delighted to appear on their fool show. Julian roared and swore she'd ruin him, and the children all threatened to run away, but Valeria was not to be budged.

"You just wait and see," she told them. "I know what I'm doing."

"You do not!" snapped Charlotte. "You absolutely do not."

"This time I do," said Valeria.

"Valeria, if you go on that television show and millions of people all over the country get a long look at your little bag of tricks—"

"Julian Cantrell," she said, thin-lipped and sounding almost snappish, "I said I know what I'm doing, and I do. Now, I don't want to hear any more about it, not one word. You just go on about your business, and I'll go on about mine. Daryl, I'm going to need your help."

"My help?" Daryl was bewildered.

"I need you to go shopping with me," she told him.

"Mother—"

"Valeria—"

"Mo*ther*—" That was Charlotte.

"Daryl will know where we should go," Valeria insisted, "he's the right age." And Julian threw up his arms in despair and went off to work.

"All right, Mother," sighed Daryl. "I don't understand, but then I haven't understood any of this yet. Sure, I'll go with you . . . what are we going after?"

"Bumper stickers," she said. "And those little round buttons with the pins on the back that make a hole in your clothes when you wear them. And maybe a T-shirt, though I'd rather not."

"Oh, I see," said Daryl.

"Well, I don't," Philip muttered, and Charlotte declared that her mother had gone over the hill at last and should be restrained instead of taken shopping, which obliged Valeria to explain the difference between joking and Taking Liberties.

"You *will* see," she said comfortingly. "I promise."

* * *

She knew she had gotten it right when she appeared on the talk show and nothing happened. They were very nice about it, considering; they explained that they were always getting people who could bend spoons just by staring at them hard at home and in their friendly neighborhood bars but then couldn't do it on television.

"It's the lights," they said. "And the stress. You're not used to all this confusion around you, you know." And they assured her that they firmly and truly did believe that when she wasn't on television she had showers of rose petals falling around her and doves flying over her head and that she glowed not only in the dark but even in daylight.

But they didn't. It was obvious that they didn't. They just felt sorry for her because she'd sat there in front of all those people and nothing had happened. Valeria was encouraged, and she tugged at the button on her lapel to be sure everybody noticed it, and she threw a couple of handfuls of buttons into the audience, and left a stack of her bumper stickers in the studio for anybody who wanted them.

"I'm of the opinion," she said happily, "that it's over. I really think it's all been just . . . an oversight."

And she was right. Valeria Carterhasty Cantrell is a saint no longer. The masses don't even know she exists. She is a mere codicil to a footnote in the obscure histories of religious phenomena. But her *family* adores her.

Daryl has a scholarship to Cornell, and will be going into law as his father hoped he would; he has given his microscope and his white mice to the Boys Club. Philip has just become an Eagle Scout, and he is only thirteen dollars short of the money needed to pay for his half of the computer. Charlotte is dancing in everything she can get permission to dance in and saving every penny to set up a school of baton twirling in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the minute she turns eighteen. All three children refer to Valeria's little episode as, "when Mother was so nervous," and are especially gentle and tender with her lest it happen again.

For their anniversary, Julian gave Valeria a mink jacket and a pair of diamond earrings and promised never to change shaving lotions again; for Christmas he is giving her a small vacation cottage on an island off the coast of Maine. He worships her; their marriage is the envy of every couple who knows them; he has not slept anywhere but in her arms (except on business trips)

for two years. And last year he made $350,000 *after* taxes.

Valeria, for her part, no longer feels obliged to wear the lapel button, and never was forced to buy the T-shirt or go on to the sky-writing that she had saved as a backup if her first plan failed her. But she keeps the bumper sticker, and when it gets faded she has a new one made to replace it. Valeria does not intend to take any chances.

She doesn't drive the Mercedes anymore; she drives her own car. (After all, putting the bumper sticker on Julian's Mercedes would have been a bit much to ask of him.) It's the bright red sports car—with the shiny wheels and the ooga-horn and the fur upholstery and the quad sound system—that costs more than an average person earns in a year or so.

It's the car you see on the freeway with Valeria at the wheel, driving along flat on the ground like everybody else, tangled up in the traffic jams like any other sinner.

It's the car with the bumper sticker that reads, in giant Gothic letters:

HELLO THERE! I AM A HOLY BLESSED SAINT! FOLLOW ME!

RICHARD CHRISTIAN MATHESON

SENTENCES

Many people believe that our lives are predetermined, that the scripts have already been written, and the future is as immutable as the past. Harry Addley's life up to now was definitely not one of joy, and the future looked equally unprepossessing. So one day, having read an ad guaranteeing to change his life, he really didn't know what to expect when he was directed to a writer's dingy office above a delicatessen.

Harry first noticed the advertisement as he rode on the subway. The ad made him straighten up and take notice as he draped the paper across his lap and ran his finger over the print.

Do you want to know what's really wrong with your life? WE HAVE THE ANSWER! *If you are tired of:* drugs, sex, religion, T.M., EST, psychoanalysis, etc. . . . NO WONDER!! *None of these contain the answer! Only we have that. If you want your life to make sense to you, call the following number for a personal consultation . . .*

To say the least, Harry was jolted. He had been looking for something like this for months. He was, to the point of outrage, fed up with his life and felt it was high time he got to the bottom of the shoddy hand he'd been dealt.

Shoving and shouldering his way out of the subway at the next station, he headed for a glass-enclosed phone booth and placed a call to the number indicated in the ad. His call answered, he was calmly assured by a cordial secretary that the service specified was sincere and completely effective. He was also informed of the rate—a flat $500.

As convinced as was possible after so short a call, Harry made an appointment to come in the following day, stipulating no commitment. The secretary readily agreed to the terms.

The following afternoon, Harry was sitting in the office of Mr. Lance Webb, one of the agent-counselors for the business which Harry had by now discovered was called Script Sure. Smiling, Webb sat behind his formidable pecan desk and regarded Harry.

"Well, I suppose you're here to find out how it all works," he said. "Am I right?"

"You are," replied Harry. "I'd like to know just how you are able to do what you claim in your ad."

Webb smiled. "We prefer, of course, to have the payment first," he said, pleasantly stroking his thin moustache.

"But . . . how can I be sure?" Harry's voice was rich with doubt. "I don't mean to be impolite, but if I lose five hundred bucks on some con scheme, that'll be the last straw."

"I understand your hesitation, Mr. Addley. However, we at Script Sure are solidly backed by all of our customers. Some of their letters of accolade hang on the wall behind me."

Gesturing to several framed letters, Webb continued: "However, if you prefer to decline our services, I will respect your wishes and terminate this meeting." Webb was icily polite. "Others are waiting." Harry stared at Webb and the letters and thought for a good minute. Then he reached into his coat pocket.

"All right," he said, making out a check. "I'm afraid the fact of the matter is, I really haven't much to lose."

Webb nodded approvingly as he examined the check Harry handed to him. Placing it in a desk drawer, he leaned forward in his chair. "I would like to take as little of your time as possible, Mr. Addley. Therefore, to be quite simple and clear," he said matter-of-factly, "your life in its totality, is a script. That's the answer."

"What?" said Harry, unimpressed.

"A script," repeated Webb.

"I don't follow you," said Harry, squinting with budding

frustration. "What is this, Transactional Analysis or something? I've read all that garbage. I thought this was completely different."

Webb laughed. "No, no, Mr. Addley. You see, this is completely different. The script I referred to is a tangible structure, not just a loose concept. You are living a script. It was written, by a writer, just for you."

Harry stared at Webb, unflinchingly. "You're crazy," he said.

"Less than you think," said Webb, happily.

Harry eyed him for a moment, trying to assemble a response worthy of reason. Instead he slammed his hands down on the armrests of his chair. "Oh, good God," he exclaimed, "this is nonsense." Harry was about to demand his money back but stopped for a moment. An idea was sifting through his mind and his mouth formed a stringent, knowing smile. He could beat Webb at his own game.

"Well," began Harry, "if what you say is true, Mr. Webb, then perhaps you might have some idea as to how I could get my script changed."

"Do you mean rewritten?" asked Webb.

"Exactly," said Harry, his effective entrapment causing him to gloat as he crossed his arms.

Webb didn't bat an eye. "That would naturally require an additional expenditure," he said smoothly. "Another two thousand, to be exact. But if you are definitely interested . . ."

Surprised as he found himself by this reply, Harry was, of course, interested. Still much confused, he wrote down an address Webb read to him from a little black book and, after suspiciously shaking the agent's hand, left. As he rode through the city in a dingy cab, Harry thought about the notion of his life being scripted. He didn't believe it. But on the off chance that what Webb said was true, Harry knew one thing: his script was no comedy—it was more like a sordid, low-budget melodrama.

The driver pulled over to the curb in front of 229 South Maple and Harry got out and paid him. As the cabbie roared away, Harry looked up at the sign on the storefront—ABE'S DELI. He shook his head incredulously and walked toward the door.

Harry was met inside by a gust of chilly air-conditioning and the rich scent of cold cuts. He approached the front display case and leaned over it. There was a butcher standing behind the counter with his back to Harry. Harry discerned that it was likely Abe himself.

"Excuse me," said Harry.

"Yeah, what'll it be?" asked the man, turning to face Harry. He had a bloody cleaver in one hand and wiped his free hand of animal innards, smearing them on the starched apron that covered his paunch.

"I was sent over here by Mr. Webb at Script Sure," said Harry.

"Oh, yeah, yeah," grunted the man, "you're looking for Eddie. He's upstairs. Office is the last one on the right." He gestured toward the upstairs area with his cleaver.

"Thank you," said Harry, his suspicions of a clumsy con renewed.

"And tell him we're out of sliced almonds for his ice cream, will you," said the corpulent butcher.

"Sure," said Harry, heading for the stairs. "Why not?"

Once upstairs, Harry easily found the office. Standing outside its door, he could faintly hear the cadence of a muted typewriter clacking inside. As he knocked, he noticed that the name Edward Omney was hand-painted on the glass pane insert.

"Come in!" yelled a voice from inside the office. "It's open!"

Harry walked into a minuscule office virtually immobilized by disorder. The floor, cheaply carpeted, was covered almost wall to wall with notebook binders of various colors. The binders also covered the battered desk in the right center of the tiny office, barely leaving room for the worn typewriter. On one of two chairs before the desk sat a humming blade-fan, tossing three ribbons tied to its front. The walls had a chipped caramel patina, coats of nicotine thin on their surface. Behind the desk, seated on a squeaking chair, was a tiny, harried-looking man of about fifty. He was clearly bald and resembled a scaled-down Ritz brother with a manner suggesting the patience of a lit stick of dynamite.

"Hi ya," welcomed the man, with a teeter-totter Yiddish accent, "what's the good word?"

"Good afternoon," said Harry. "Are you Eddie?"

"Last time I checked," said Eddie, dropping a heaping spoonful of Bromo-Seltzer into a glass of water. "You like vanilla ice cream?" he asked, as he stirred the frothing drink with his finger. "Because if you do," he continued, "I'm stuffed and there's a whole dish in my little fridge, there." He pointed over to to the corner.

"No, thank you," said Harry, his appetite poor since the onset of his problems. "I haven't been eating well lately."

"Sorry to hear that," said Eddie. "You ought to get a hobby. Myself, I do sit-ups. Lots of sit-ups. And look at me. I'm fit as a fiddle." He patted his stomach hard with his palm, then leaned back in his chair and gulped down his fizzing brew.

"By the way, the butcher downstairs says he's out of nuts for your ice cream," said Harry, as he watched Eddie finish the drink.

"It's just as well," said Eddie, wiping foam from his lips; "they give me indigestion. Can't write with indigestion. Listen, you sure you don't want some ice cream?"

"No," said Harry, eager to get down to business. "Look, Eddie, I'll get directly to the point. I was sent here by Script Sure. I'm very unhappy with my script and I want it rewritten."

"Naturally," said Eddie, "everybody's a writer. What's the matter with it?" he asked, muffling several burps brought on by the Bromo.

"What *isn't* the matter with it," said Harry. "My life is a disaster. Every day is more horrible than the one before it."

"Oh yeah?" said Eddie, beginning to get interested.

"How could you do this to me?" asked Harry, miserably. "My wife has left me for a trumpet player, my boss laid me off last week, my kid is on pills, and I'm getting an ingrown toenail."

"Right!" yelled Eddie. "Now I remember. That was a good one. But I only worked on the final draft—knocked it out over a weekend, as I recall."

"How long do you usually take?" asked Harry, deeply upset at having the approximate importance of a thrown-together high-school book report.

"Oh, on and off for a week or two," said Eddie, "give or take—"

"And you did mine in a weekend?" Harry was beginning to feel more like the Cliff's Notes which inspired the book report.

"Pretty sure I did," said Eddie. "The wife was out of town, seeing her mother, I think." He stared at the ceiling, trying to remember. "Or did I have the flu?"

"Oh, great," said Harry.

"Hey, don't be put off," said Eddie, "I do some of my best work under pressure."

Harry made a displeased face.

"Now what were you saying about wanting it changed?" asked Eddie.

Harry realized that it was definitely in his best interest to find out how the company to which he was entrusting his future operated. After all, he wouldn't buy a car without kicking the tires good and hard, once or twice.

"Not so fast," said Harry. "There're a few things I'd like to know first. Like for instance, how long have people had scripts?"

"Long time," replied Eddie. "Since the beginning, I would expect."

"Don't you know?" asked Harry.

"No," said Eddie, lighting a cheap cigar, "not really. I just started here a while ago."

Harry was having a hard time absorbing this information and felt an ulcerous twitch. "Well, what did you do before?" he asked.

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that," replied Eddie. "Mostly just bummed around. Wrote poetry, taught judo."

Harry visibly cringed at this revelation. There was a minimal comfort in the prospect of putting his future in the hands of a deadbeat poet who splintered two-by-fours with his feet. Harry wanted more from a rewrite man.

"Look, Eddie," said Harry, "I'm not so sure about your credentials. I mean your background sounds pretty shaky to me."

"Big deal," said Eddie. "Lincoln was born in a log cabin. You gonna stand there and tell me Abe Lincoln wasn't a terrific President?"

"Well, no, but—"

"*But* nothing. I rest my case. What's to talk? Tell me what you want and let me get to work." Eddie sounded a bit testy at having had his credentials slighted. And Harry was getting more confused and upset by the minute. He was beginning to hyperventilate.

"Look, Eddie," said Harry. "This is all pretty new to me. I mean, I don't understand where this thing with scripts came from. Or whose idea it was, for that matter. I don't get it. I just don't understand what the hell is going on." Harry's voice sounded almost crumbly. "I just never thought it would be like this," he whined, rising from his chair and walking to the window. He looked out onto the busy avenue. "I mean, it's crazy! It's totally crazy!" he muttered.

"Hey come on, buddy, it's not that bad. Take it easy." Eddie was trying to comfort him. "Hey, what's your name, anyway? You never told me."

"Don't you know? I thought you knew everything."

"Can't remember them all. I do a lot of scripts."

Harry turned from the window. "Harry. Harry Addley."

"Right. I remember something like that," said Eddie. "Well look, Harry, I can't remember how I wrote you. Are you a religious man?"

"Fairly," said Harry, sniffing to himself. "I respond spiritually to organ music."

"Right," said Eddie. "Well, what I'm getting at here is that, if you are, you might not want to know how this all works. It might shake you up. Things aren't always as they seem."

"For instance," said Harry, "most people don't think of the Lord as a Jewish writer who works out of a deli."

"Well, I'm only one of the many that Script Sure employs, but you're getting the idea. See, I didn't do such a bad job. You're pretty quick." With a sigh, Harry sat down and pointed the fan at his face. He was feeling slightly faint.

"Hey! I'm burning up in here as it is," squawked Eddie.

"Why don't you make it snow?" Harry asked.

"You see. There you go again," said Eddie. "That's all just a stereotype. That stuff has all been updated. No more lofty images. Things are more efficient these days. We even advertise to cover office expenses. We run a little in the red. You know, paper clips, coffee cups . . . it all adds up."

"Sure," said Harry morosely, his mind elsewhere. "And to think I bothered going to Sunday school. I should have prayed for better dialogue and characterization. For that matter, the Bible should have been written by Eugene O'Neill. He probably would have picked up the pace a little."

"Hell of a writer," agreed Eddie. Harry reflected on his situation and decided to make the best of it. "Well look, Eddie, when can you get to my script?"

"You got the two Gs?" asked Eddie.

"Yeah, I can get the money," said Harry. "It'll be worth it. I mean it's my damn life."

Eddie got a hurt expression on his face. "Sure, it's easy for you to talk about my writing like that. You try writing one of these babies sometime. Gives you migraine headaches!" said Eddie.

"Sorry," said Harry, "you know what I meant."

"It's okay," said Eddie. "I'll live."

"Well, when do you think I could have it?" asked Harry.

"Week and a half. I'll change everything. Believe me, you'll love it."

"I want to be happy, Eddie. I want my wife back, I want a better job with a raise, I want my kid straightened out, and I want my toe fixed."

"Don't worry. You've let me know all of your problems and now I can fix them. Of course, I can't change anything that's gone before although I can usually fix things up. I can make you stronger, quicker, etcetera. I can cure diseases or have that trumpet player lose his lips, but I can't change the fact that the disease was there or that the trumpet player ran off with your wife. Yes, I can fix any problem you have."

"Well, I've just told you my problems. I'm sure they'll be easy to fix for a man of your, eh, talents. I won't argue, of course, if you make my life a bit more exciting, give me a pile of money and any other goodies, but don't tell me about them. Surprise me!"

"Okay," said Eddie, "I'll take it from here. I know exactly what you're after. Listen, Harry, I have a terrific idea. Why don't you take a vacation until I have the script ready. You ski?"

"No," said Harry. "I guess you didn't have time to put that in. Your wife must have come home."

"Aw, come on, Harry. Don't be nasty. We'll fix everything up for you. I'll throw something together this afternoon for you to go skiing in Aspen, Colorado. How does that sound? Is Eddie looking out for you or isn't he?" Eddie smiled.

Harry looked at him and sighed. "We'll see," he said.

Four days after his conversation with Eddie, Harry was on the slopes at Aspen. He had never been on skis in his entire life, yet he was expertly executing even the most complicated maneuvers. He was able to slalom down the steepest slope on a single ski. Even his ingrown toenail had miraculously grown out. He realized this was all Eddie's doing and no longer did he question the writer's competence. He wasn't such a bad guy, thought Harry. He just worked for Script Sure because he needed the money. Christ, somebody had to do the job.

That day, after warm soup and hot chocolate at the chalet, Harry decided to go cross-country skiing. He would take some

food and head for the unspoiled flats of Aspen's most spectacular country. There, beneath the towering mountains, he could celebrate the prospect of his new life. He finished his lunch and went to get his equipment.

Hunched over his typewriter, far from the magnificence of the Aspen peaks, sat Eddie, assiduously rewriting Harry's script. As he worked on the cross-country skiing section, he decided to do an extra-special job to make up for the trouble Script Sure had already caused Harry. He'd give Harry a really exciting run for his $2,000.

Florid descriptions began to roll off Eddie's fingertips as he furiously typed scene after scene for Harry's stimulating new revision. He included a breakneck escape from an avalanche which Harry was to barely avert at the last second. He also included, with much chuckling to himself, an encounter between Harry and a beautiful young lady, culminating with Harry and the lithe lovely making wild love throughout the night before a fireplace.

As if this wasn't enough, Eddie made Harry's next day even more action-filled and death-defying. He was to make a three-hundred-foot ski jump and land perfectly on one ski, then immediately afterward win a tequila drinking contest by successfully downing four bottles of the hot liquor. That evening he would arm-wrestle a Norwegian ski instructor for the instructor's woman and overwhelm the massive Nordic giant after a two-hour, sweat-drenched struggle.

Later that evening, having ditched his original ski lovely, he would be made love to by his arm-wrestling prize. She would be an indefatigable, sensual amazon who would take Harry to her private chalet and show him bizarre anatomical innovations that he would theretofore have thought were certainly federal offenses. It would be a deeply gratifying evening.

For the following day, Eddie described Harry's Porsche race through the ice-covered Aspen roads against the then-reigning world champion race driver. Harry would win by a nerve-wracking hair, coming close to death when his turbo-powered car would almost skid off a cliff. The former champion would later weep before a gathered crowd and present the trophy to Harry, congratulating him for being a brilliant competitor and a gentleman. Before bringing him back to give him his new job, Eddie included a few more vacation thrills for Harry. Included among

these were the eventual killing of the Norwegian ski instructor, in self-defense, by snipping the cable to his chair lift. He also threw in a new sexy moustache for Harry on a face which had formerly been capable of producing only sparse peach fuzz.

What a script it was! Eddie was exultant. This was the best one he had ever written.

"Now let's see," Eddie said aloud to himself, "more excitement, more money . . ."

A couple of weeks later, Eddie was still busy honing Harry's rewrite. He had put it down after a couple of days of hard writing and now had some terrific new ideas to add. Suddenly the telephone rang. "Hello," said Eddie, putting the phone in the crook of his shoulder so he could continue typing.

"How about lunch?" asked his friend Jerry.

"Think I'll have to take a raincheck, Jer. I'm caught up with a rewrite and it's coming out great."

"Oh, come on, Eddie. If I can put down my scripts for a while, so can you. Me and some of the boys are going for sandwiches. Larry's coming, and so's Sid."

"Jeez, Jer, I'd love to, but I really can't."

"They're busy with rewrites too, Eddie."

"I know. But this script is the best one I've ever done. It might win me the annual Soul Award from Script Sure."

"That good, huh?" asked Jerry.

"Better," said Eddie, confidently. "It's brilliant, and I'd really rather stay in till I'm done with it."

"What's it about?" asked Jerry, curious and a little envious.

"This guy came in a few weeks ago with a bad script. Same story we've all heard a million times. He wanted a rewrite. Seems his wife left him, his kid was on pills, he got laid off his job. Even had an ingrown toenail."

"Eddie, you're gonna hate me for this, but did the guy's wife leave him for a trumpet player?"

"Yeah, that's right. How'd you know?"

Jerry laughed. "I worked on that script. Did the first draft way back. It's a good thing that guy came in to see you. Things were only going to get worse on that script, as I recall."

"What do you mean?" asked Eddie, wondering if something like this would disqualify him from the Soul Award competition.

"Well, of course, with that condition of his—"

"Condition!" Eddie interrupted. "What condition? All he had was an ingrown toenail."

"Oh, you must have missed it. Yeah, as I remember, I gave him a very weak heart. But don't worry. Just don't give him anything too strenuous in your rewrites," said Jerry cheerily. "Or else have him fixed up by some doctor. Now, how about that lunch?"

Eddie didn't answer. He just leaned back in his chair, his face expressionless.

R.A. LAFFERTY

SQUARE AND ABOVE BOARD

Irish castles, so legend has it, are almost all haunted. Here is a tale of one of those castles, afflicted not only by ghosts, but also by a curse, and even a sea monster. All this sounds very forbidding, but depend on the unique and puckish talent of R.A. Lafferty, himself of the Irish, to spin a tale that is anything but ominous.

The people were young and the season was springtime.

It was said of young Midas Muldoon that he was a complex man, but this was a lie. He was as straightforward as a crooked man could be. He wanted power, he wanted prestige, and he wanted whopping wealth. He wanted to be envied. He wanted to be hated and admired at the same time. He wanted to make people crawl. He wanted to make people quake in fear. Certainly those were all straightforward aims, and in Midas there was never any element of concealment.

Midas had been given his curious name by his father Croesus Muldoon, a confidence man who always swore that he would live and die in a great stone castle. And he did die in a great stone castle of sorts, one of the outskirts of McAlester Oklahoma. Midas, like his father, liked to bet. And he liked to fight. He was athletic, magnetic, and champion at the game of checkers or draughts.

In contrast to Midas, his best friend, Cristopher Kearny, was an intricate and convoluted fellow. He often stopped to think things over, and you can get eaten alive doing that. This being-eaten-alive was never fatal to Cris however. For him, it was one way of getting to the very inside of a situation, or a corporation. He was an inventor, a promoter, an investor. He had only a nominal lust for wealth, and yet he began to acquire rapid wealth while still quite young; and he did this by being an insider in very many ways.

Cris was not athletic; he was not magnetic (he said that only the base metals were magnetic); and he was not a checkers champion. His game was chess. He did not like to fight, or bet. He won a lot of bets, it's true, some of them large ones, some of them from Midas Muldoon. In these cases, however, Cris was not betting. Midas was always betting, but Cris was always riding an inside sure thing. Midas Muldoon and Cristopher Kearney were rivals in many things.

One of the things that they were rivals for was Bridie Caislean, a very pretty and devious and intelligent girl. And Midas Muldoon always seemed to be very far ahead on this particular rivalry.

When Cris Kearny was twenty-two years old, his auditor Linus Caislean told him that he had just become a millionaire.

"It couldn't have happened to a nicer fellow," Linus said, "nor could the other good news that Bridie has just told me of you have happened to a nicer fellow. I heartily welcome you into the family."

Something about this came very near to puzzling Cris, but he hadn't become a millionaire at twenty-two by allowing himself to be puzzled very much or very long. So when Bridie Caislean came into Cris' little office exactly one minute after her father Linus Caislean had walked out of it. Cris looked at her and asked her only one word: "When?"

"There's two things I like about you, Cris honey," Bridie said. "One of them is that you catch onto things quick. The other one is that you're a millionaire now. I've been doing the work on your account for papa, you know. Oh, one month from today, the first day of June we'll get married. Midas Muldoon will whip you when he hears about it, of course. He may even kill you. That's the day when *he* was supposed to marry me, and he doesn't know any different yet."

"Midas will neither whip me nor kill me, but neither will he give you up as easily as that. He'll stay in the race all the way

down to the wire, and he's especially tricky in the back-stretch. But there's no way that he can acquire a million dollars within a month; and I can't think of anything that could hook you better than a million dollars."

"Neither can I," Bridie Caislean said.

Bridie herself was quite magnetic. She had sufficient of base metal, iron and steel, in her for that. She also had an amalgamated heart: one part pure gold, one part quick mercury, and eight parts brass.

Bridie had been beauty queen at North-Central State A & M Tech (she'd have been beauty queen even at Harvard if she'd gone there) and she was an extravagantly attractive girl. She was as straightforward in her aims as was Midas Muldoon, and she had a talent for being on the inside of things that was at least equal to that of Cris Kearny. She was full of fun and interests, and she was the only thing that Cris had ever envied Midas. Now he was quite pleased to be marrying her.

"What are you thinking about, dear?" Bridie asked Cris one sunny day during their engagement.

"Oh, of all the ancient terrors," Cris said, "of the Sea Monster that is the most primordial of the terrors, of the loathsome and murderous disease that will be diverted from its victim only by another victim, of ghosts that return with the sea-wrack of their deaths still on them. And most of all I was thinking of the terror of falling, though in the sunny little daydream reverie I've just been having the fall is only a piddling thousand feet. But the terror of falling is the most over-riding terror of them all. Did you know that even bright Lucifer, a winged creature, was so terrified of the depths before him that he forgot to use his wings and so fell like lightning?"

"Cris, Cris, maybe you are just terrified of marrying me."

"Fear of marriage is one of the ancient terrors, yes, but it's a minor one of them. But strangely enough, in my afternoon daydream, I do *not* marry you."

"Then throw that daydream away. It's flawed. Forget it. Is your cousin Colin Kearny coming to our wedding, have you heard? I've phoned him. He says that he may come. I just believe that I will phone him again and make sure that he comes. Hey, we sure did get acquainted fast on that transatlantic telephone!"

"How did you know that I had a cousin named Colin Kearny?"

"How did I know that you have a cousin who has five times

as much money as you have? Honey, would I miss something like that when I was running a check on you? I'm thorough. Two million Irish pounds, and a Castle in Ireland besides. Oh, I'll get him to come somehow!''

''Bridie, in your slippery little mind you're not thinking of switching to a man you've never even seen? You're capable of it.''

''Of course I'm capable of it, but I'll stick to Plan A for the moment at least, and you're Plan A. You are Colin's first cousin. He has a terminal disease that will allow him to live less than two years more. How sad that it should happen to one so young! You are his only kindred in the world, and he has not made a will yet. That must be remedied. He must come to our wedding and he must make his will to us.''

''How do you know that he hasn't made his will?''

''Oh, I learned that from a chatterbox young lady who works for Colin's lawyer in Cork. There's lots of information to be garnered by transatlantic phone. I learned too that the name of his Castle, Cearnog Ficheall, means the Chess Squares. The chatterbox who laughs with a brogue told me that it's because the Castle is above Chess Square Valley where there are alternate fields of light flax and dark hops that look like a checkerboard. And every seven years they change them and grow the hops where the flax had been and the flax where the hops had been. The chatterbox and myself have become great friends. I asked her how much she weighed and she said fifteen stone. Fifteen stone translates into pounds as 'fat.' The ideal world is one in which all the girls except myself are fat. Why didn't you tell me that you had a cousin with two million Irish pounds, a castle, and a terminal disease?''

''All three are recent acquisitions. Until a year ago he was only a poor relation in the castle of a rich uncle. And the name of the Castle, Cearnog Ficheall or Chess Squares, is really an euphemism for Cearnog Fuil or Bloody Squares. Cearnog is our family name. 'Kearny,' and it does mean a square, or squares.''

''How apt, beloved square! How opportune! Oh, things will go swimmingly!''

And things did go swimmingly, right up to the eve of the wedding, even though Bridie hadn't been able to get Cousin Colin to make a will during the week he had been in town.

''Oh, I couldn't will such a monstrous castle and the monstrous entailments that accompany it to two such nice people as

you and Cris," Cousin Colin always said. "No, no, you two have become much too dear to me for that."

"The more monstrous the castle the better," Bridie insisted. "It isn't any prosaic castle that I intend to inherit. Does it have a ghost?"

"Indeed it does, half a dozen ghosts, and the bones of some of them are still far below the castle on the rocky and forbidding shore. It's quite a fall that they take when they go through the floor in the Great Checkerboard Dining Hall of the castle. It breaks almost every bone they have. And then the Sea Monster (he's carried on the Castle Rolls as the 'Old Retainer of the Castle') comes and strips all the flesh off the new bones. The whole situation has given the castle something of a bad name."

"You're being droll, Cousin Colin," Bridie said. "My own name, Bridie Caislean, means both Brigid of the Castle or Bride of the Castle, and I insist that my name shall be fulfilled. See! I already have done all the work. I have the will drawn up here. All you have to do is sign it."

"Some days I just don't believe in signing documents after noon."

"But yesterday you said that some days you don't believe in signing documents *before* noon, and then I never could find you after noon."

"Some days it's one way, Bridie, and some days it's the other way," Cousin Colin said.

But it was Midas Muldoon who struck up an exceptionally close friendship with Colin Kearny during the week that Colin was in town before the wedding of Cris and Bridie. They played checkers together a lot. Midas said that he was champion of America. Colin said that he was champion of Ireland and of all Europe as well as the Straits Settlements and Madagascar and Patagonia. Colin had sought his fortune in the latter three places while he was in his late teens. They played very close, and a canny observer would have noticed that both of them were holding back a little bit.

Then, at Cris' bachelor party the night before the wedding, Midas and Colin tied one on together. It was quite sloppy, but here also an astute observer might have noticed that each was holding something back. They slashed their arms and mingled their blood and became blood brothers forever. It was that kind of bash. Then they began to play checkers for extravagant stakes,

though each of them seemed to have trouble even seeing the board. They played for such high stakes as almost to preclude their being serious.

Finally, when the fiasco had run its course, Midas Muldoon had won the Castle in Ireland as well as the two million Irish pounds from Colin. And Colin just happened to have deeds and assignment papers in his pockets, and he spread them out to sign everything over to Midas. Then Cris pulled Colin aside.

"Cousin Colin, I cannot allow this nonsense to go any further," Cris said. "Do not sign anything. Not anything."

"Don't spoil it, Cris," Cousin Colin said in a low voice, and he was totally sober. "Don't spoil it now. Oh, I've conned this fellow into becoming blood brother of me, and he thinks he's conned me into it. I've conned him into taking deed to the castle and taking conveyance to the two million Irish pounds that are one of the entailments of the castle. And he never even suspects, Cris. Oh, I love myself when I pull a smart one like this. It gives me top pleasure to outsmart people."

"However have you outsmarted Midas Muldoon, Cousin Colin? There's been a horrible mistake."

"I love you, Cousin Cris, when you pretend not to understand a trick like this," Cousin Colin chortled. "Oh wonderful, wonderful! Don't spoil it."

So the mysterious business was consummated.

Bridie Caislean came by Cris' place and waked him quite early the next morning. Cris was pleasantly befuddled from the Imperial Irish Brandy (a gift of Cousin Colin) that they had indulged in the night before, and he had a feeling that something had gone amiss. And he did not, for the barest moment there, quite catch the import of Bridie's chatter.

"There is no reason for Midas and I to be out expense when everything for a luxury wedding is already standing ready and is already paid for by you, Cris," Bridie was saying. "I've always loved your habit of paying all extraordinary expenses immediately and on the spot. And Midas and I can use the same airplane tickets and hotel reservations (how nice that you paid them in advance) for our honeymoon just as well as you and I could have used them."

"You and Midas Muldoon?" Cris asked.

"Well sure," Bridie bubbled. "Midas won the Castle and the two million Irish pounds from Cousin Colin (that's about five

million American dollars, with a Castle thrown in), so of course I'm marrying Midas instead of you this morning. There's a sort of poetic justice here too. This is the day I was supposed to marry Midas in the first place, before I was supposed to marry you, and now I'm supposed to marry him again. Isn't it nice that things always work out so nice for me?''

So this other not-too-mysterious business was consummated also. Midas Muldoon and Bridie Caislean were married that morning. And Cristopher Kearny was left with an empty sort of feeling.

It was just one year later that Bridie Muldoon phoned Cris Kearny from Castle Cearnog Ficheall in Ireland.

''Come and visit us, Cris, and the sooner the better,'' she said. ''We are so happy here that we want to share our happiness with somebody, and as the best friend of both of us you are the logical choice. If you start sometime today you can be here sometime tomorrow.''

''That'd be a good slogan for a travel agency to use. What's your angle, girl of a thousand angles?''

''No angle, Cris. This is the new Bridie. I'm kind, I'm benevolent, unselfish, altruistic, and one other word that I forget. Where's your gambling instinct? Come and take a chance on a visit to us.''

''I never gamble, Bridie. I go only for sure things.''

''It's a sure thing that we want to see you, Cris. Do come.''

Cris left sometime that day and his plane was over Ireland sometime the next day. From the air he saw the checkerboard of light and almost white fields of flax and of dark and almost black fields of hops. He saw the Castle (for they were already in their descent), and something twanged in his heart-strings like a harp tuned a little bit flat. It may have been the piles of whiteness on the stony shore below the Castle that gave him the queer flat feeling. And no more than twenty miles from the Castle he was down at Cork International Airport.

He went first to the office of a lawyer in Cork. This was the lawyer of Cousin Colin, and he was also the lawyer of Cris Kearny now, for Irish affairs at least. The lawyer was not in, but the lawyer's assistant was full of news and good cheer and advice.

''Remember that you are in Ireland now,'' said the assistant

who was a merry and ample person who laughed with a brogue. "This place is full of *draiocht*."

"Yes, *draiocht*, magic, especially the voices of the people," Cris agreed.

"Moreover you are in County Cork. And here, especially in the castles and the crags, it is likely to be the *draiocht dorcha*."

"Oh yes, dark magic or baleful magic. And what do you recommend to ward off this dark or baleful magic, lawyer assistant?"

"Chicken blood. I'll draw some for you from the cock in the yard before you leave. And be advised also that the terminal disease, called here only the 'loathsome disease,' can be entailed along with the castle, like any other entailment, onto the new owner of the castle. If the entailment rite is not broken, then the new owner will have the fatal disease, and the old owner will have it no longer. And the new and entailed owner of the castle will die of the disease within two years. Medical science now confirms that this really happens."

"I'm a great admirer of medical science myself. Is there a specific against the entailment of loathsome disease? And how *is* Cousin Colin these days?"

"Chicken blood is the specific against the loathsome entailment, as it is against so many other things. I'll draw some for you from the cock in the yard before you leave. And your Cousin Colin is currently vacationing in foreign parts. Rio, I believe, is the name of the place. He had several recent fortunes that were *not* entailed, you know. He has willed them to you, but you may have to wait a hundred or more years to inherit them considering the exuberant and brawny health he has enjoyed for this last year. Remember too, Cristopher Kearny, that old precept: 'Beware of the Overseas Irish bearing Castles.' "

"I thought it was: 'Beware of Greeks bearing Gifts.' "

"Same thing. Look at an Overseas Irishman sideways and he could just as well be a Greek. You will be offered a castle, yes, and its double entailment; aye, and a thousand years free supply of bones on the shore below it into the bargain. When you accept the deed to the castle you will sign a very curious codicil to that deed."

"How do you know that it is a curious codicil, lawyer's assistant?"

"Oh, I drew it up for them at the castle. This entailed gift will come about through the bloody swearing of the blood-brotherhood

and through the checker-playing in big Checkerboard Hall. When you play those dire games of checkers you will lose if you lose, and you will only seem to win if you win. If you win you will lose by dying of the loathsome terminal disease within two years."

"And again, lawyer's assistant, is there not a specific against this terrible misfortune of the checker games turning against me and gobbling me up?" What a pleasant and *roomy* person this lawyer's assistant was!

"Once again the specific against this luckless gaming is chicken blood. I'll draw some for you from the cock in the yard before you leave. And there is one square in Checkerboard Hall on which the Master of the Castle has himself placed when he is in his last agony from the loathsome disease. At the moment of his death, the square opens and dumps him on the rocks a thousand feet below: and a friendly Sea Monster comes and strips the flesh from the bones. It's a good arrangement. Persons dying of the loathsome disease may not be buried in Irish Ground lest they contaminate it. And they become *so* smelly when left unburied. Some of the bones are from old guests who were robbed and had their throats cut by old Castle Masters; and then, being placed on the dire square, they were likewise dumped at their death moment and had their bones stripped."

"All Irish castles have mottos. What is the motto of this Castle Cearnog Ficheall, lawyer's assistant?"

"The motto of Castle Cearnog Ficheall is *Carnog Agus Cionn Mbord* or 'Square and Above Board.' And yet with a different intonation and a different viewpoint, that out of the eyes of a dead person on the stony shore below the Castle for instance, the motto could as well be Englished 'Och, *That Square* in the Board Above!' and this would be in the tone of a warning. And now you must be going if you're to be in time for supper at the Castle. But first we'll gather the blood."

Out in the yard, the lawyer's assistant drew a small sackful of blood from the cock. It stood still for the drawing, and then it crowed in a loud voice.

The lawyer's assistant drew a second sackful of blood from the cock. It stood still for the drawing, and then it crowed in a weak voice.

The lawyer's assistant drew a third sackful of blood from the cock. It stood still for the drawing, and then it crowed in a sad and broken voice and fell over dead.

"He'll be good for after-midnight supper tonight," the lawyer's assistant said. "I love blooded rooster roasted on a spit. My mother will pluck it and draw it and roast it and have it ready. I'll drive you to the castle now. It's but twenty miles or thirty *cilomeadar*. Och, it's no trouble. I often drive that far in a single week."

The lawyer's assistant got Cris to the Castle at suppertime.

"How old are you, lawyer's assistant?" Cris Kearny asked.

"I'm twenty-two this springtime, and everyone else in the world is twenty-three," she said. "How ideal! I'll be back for you about midnight. Your business at the Castle should be consummated by then."

Then she laughed, with a brogue.

Cristopher Kearny blew the burnished trumpet that was set into the front door of Castle Cearnog Ficheall or Chess Squares Castle, and at the same time he splatted one sack of the cock's blood on the same door as a specific against misfortune coming to him within.

Then Midas Muldoon flung the door open, and Bridie and Midas greeted him with great affection. Oh, they made big over him, and they showed him all around the wonderful Castle. He saw everything that could be seen by torchlight. Bridie even introduced him to three of the Castle Ghosts. These were quite urbane and elegant entities and somewhat more at their ease than were Midas and Bridie Muldoon. The Muldoons seemed to have just a touch of the jitters.

And then it was no time at all till they were all sat down to a wonderful supper in the Great Checkerboard Dining Hall. There is something excessively black-and-whitish about the term 'checkerboard,' but in the Dining Hall it was not so. The great squares (each the dimension of the First Master of the Castle and he had been a tall man) were royally colored. The white was really a sort of golden ivory, and the black was really midnight ocean-blue with touches of French Lilac and Royal Purple. And by the torchlight of the Dining Hall (Irish Castles have electricity only in the bathrooms; it would be a vulgar intrusion anywhere else) the effect was enchanting.

The courses of that supper were like a litany of the great dishes of 'Super in Heaven': Gamecock, Rampant Ram, Truculent Trout (each trout glared at one with angry and living eyes from the plate, but that could only have been the effect of the

torchlight), Gored Ox, Young Foal of Horse: what great dishes they were on that supper table! There were seven sorts of brandy to go with the seven courses, and seven little piles of snuff were on the serviette at each place.

Seven brandies made each of them a little drunk and more than a little effusive. There came the moment when Midas Muldoon insisted that he and Christopher should slash their forearms and mingle their blood and so become blood brothers.

Cris was thankful that it was torchlight as he worked his bloody deception with the second sackful of blood. The outcome, of course, was that Midas Muldoon became blood-brother of a cock that was two-and-a-half hours dead. Had it been otherwise, the loathsome disease would have passed out of the blood of Midas and into that of Cris as part of the deeding-and-entailment rite.

And then the supper was cleared away, and a checkerboard and more brandy brought. And Midas suggested that they play checkers for moderately high stakes and for the championship of America and Ireland and all Europe as well as the Straits Settlements and Madagascar and Patagonia, which later string of titles Midas had won from Colin Kearny just one year before. Cris agreed, but first (thankful again that they had naught but torchlight) he went to one of the squares of the great checkerboard floor (the lawyer's assistant had told him which one it would be) and dribbled a little blood from the third sack on it.

"Be careful of that one square, Cris honey," Bridie warned. "It's—ah—a little precarious."

Then Cris sprinkled the remainder of the third sack of blood on the checkerboard on which they were to play.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Midas," he said. "It is only some of our brothership blood that was still on my arm."

"Wonderful, wonderful," Midas Muldoon gloated. " 'Twill make the rite all the more binding."

They played, and Cris won. They played, and Cris continued to win. They played, and Cris won bigger and bigger bets. They played, and Cris won Castle Cearnog Ficheall itself from Midas Muldoon as well as two million Irish pounds in entailment with the Castle and also 'a more intimate entailment sealed in the blood of undying brotherhood.' The Castle and attending kale consolidated all Midas' losses for the evening.

Bridie Muldoon had all the papers ready. Cris received the deed to the Castle and the assignment of the two million pounds. And in turn he signed a codicil to each paper, to the deed, and to the

assignment. The codicil to the deed said that Cris would not take possession of the castle until two years and one day had gone by; and in case of his untimely death before that time, ownership of the Castle would revert to the Muldoons. The codicil to the assignment of the two million pounds said that the money would be held in escrow by a legal firm in Cork for two years and one day, after which it would be paid to Cris Kearny; but in case of the untimely death of Mr. kerny before that time, the money would be returned to the Muldoons.

"It's all *pro forma* stuff, honey," Bridie said. "You don't even need to read it if you don't want to. Just sign it."

"Fine, fine," Cris laughed as he signed the codicils. "All Square and Above Board."

"How odd that you should use that phrase," Midas commented. "You could not have known it, but that is the motto of this Castle Cearnog Ficheall which you now own tentatively."

"Haven't you grown skinnier since your marriage, Bridie?" Cris asked.

"Not at all. I've gained two stone since I've been married. That's twenty-eight pounds. Subconsciously I did it for you. I remember you used to say that I was perfect but that I would be even more perfect if I were a bit more ample. And now I am that."

"Somehow you seem skinnier, Bridie," Cris said.

Daydreams of amplitude. Rather, waking torchlight night dreams of amplitude. The beauties of spaciousness. Why was Cris musing on such things?

At midnight the trumpet that was inset in the front door blew the merriest tune that ever was heard, like a signature tune of somebody.

"That is a friend who is taking me back to Cork tonight," Cris said. "I'll look in on you at the Castle again tomorrow perhaps."

"Wonderful!" Midas shouted. "It's been wonderful to see you again, Cris."

And after Cris had left, Midas shouted still more loudly: "Wonderful, wonderful! Now I have transmitted the fatal loathsome disease to Cris through the brotherhood rite and the entailment rite. And I am free of the sickness, and he will die of it before two years have gone by. And the Castle and the funds will revert to us. Nothing can go wrong, nothing."

"Nothing can go wrong for me at least," Bridie shouted

inwardly to herself. "Even if this trick doesn't work, it will work for me. Even if the disease somehow was not transmitted, even if Midas dies of it instead of Cris, I can always marry Cris. He loves me eternally, and nobody else can ever take my place with him. Maybe it will be even better for me if this doesn't work. Then I will have all the fortunes of both Midas and Cris. Isn't it nice that things always turn out so nice for me!"

But Bridie was wrong about nobody ever being able to take her place. And she'd be furious when she found out who it was. Bridie had the beauty, yes, but beauty wasn't everything.

There were such things as amplitude, as Cris realized when he got into the car with the lawyer's assistant at midnight and had an ample kiss from her. There were such things as spaciousness, and merriment. There were even such things as that business of laughing with a brogue.

Oh, Bridie was beautiful, but Sharon (Sharon McSorley was the name of the lawyer's assistant) would make two of her with a bit left over. And you can't have too much of a good thing.

They plighted their troth over an after-midnight supper of rooster hot from the spit, and Spanish sherry.

"When we move into the Castle, in two years and a day, I'm going to make only one change," said full-bodied Sharon. "I'm going to fix that trickly square in Checkerboard Dining Hall so that nobody will ever exit that way again. I've already told the Sea Monster. He says that he can get by on bodies as seldom as one every seven years, but I've told him that there'll be no more at all. He thinks that he may get another appointment at a Castle that overhangs Dingle Bay in Kerry County. Sea-rumor says that there's a good fall of bodies from that Castle.

"I've told the Castle Ghosts that they may remain after we move in. They are pleased entirely with the arrangement. They say that it's always been the case that when the Castle has an ample mistress there will be merry times in the old place."

JANE YOLEN

THE MALAYSIAN MER

Although this story is not autobiographical in any way, the author actually did discover a Malaysian mer in an antique shop in Greenwich, England. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, it had already been sold. Anyone who has ever read a story by Jane Yolen already knows that she is perfectly capable of weaving her own form of magic, as the following story so clearly shows.

The shops were not noticeable from the main street and almost lost in the back-alley maze as well. But Mrs. Stambley was an expert at antiquing. A new city and a new back alley got up her hunting and gathering instincts, as she liked to tell her group at home. That this city was half a world away from her comfortable Salem, Massachusetts, home did not faze her. In England or America she guessed she knew how to look.

She had dozed in the sun as the boat made its way along the Thames. At her age naps had become important. Her head nodded peacefully under its covering of flowers draped on a wine-colored crown. She never even heard the tour guide's spiel. At Greenwich she had debarked meekly with the rest of the tourists, but she had easily slipped the leash of the guide, who took the rest of the pack up to check out Greenwich Mean Time. Instead, Mrs. Stambley, her large black leather pocketbook clutched in a sturdy gloved grip, had gone exploring on her own.

To the right of the harbor street was a group of shops and, she sensed, a back alley or two. The smell of it—sharp, mysterious, inviting—drew her in.

She ignored the main street and its big-windowed stores. A small cobbled path ran between two buildings and she slipped into it as comfortably as a foot into a well-worn slipper. There were several branchings, and Mrs. Stambley checked out each one with her watery blue eyes. Then she chose one. She knew it would be the right one. As she often said to her group at home, "I have a gift, a power. I am *never* wrong about it."

Here there were several small, dilapidated shops that seemed to edge one into the other. They had a worn look as if they had sat huddled together, the damp wind blowing off the river moldering their bones, while a bright new town had been built up around them. The windows were dirty, finger-streaked. Only the most intrepid shopper would find the way into them. There were no numbers on the doors.

The first store was full of maps. And if Mrs. Stambley hadn't already spent her paper allowance (she maintained separate monies for paper, gold and oddities) on a rare chart of the McCodrun ancestry, she might have purchased a map of British waters that was decorated with tritons blowing "their wreathed horns" as the bent-over shopkeeper had quoted. She had been sorely tempted. Mrs. Stambley collected "objets d'mer," as she called them. Sea artifacts and antiques. Sea magic was her specialty in the group. But the lineage of the Clan McCodrun—the reputed descendants of the selchies—had wiped out her comfortable paper account. And Mrs. Stambley, who was always precise in her reckonings, never spent more than her allotment. As the group's treasurer she had to keep the others in line. She could do no less for herself.

So she oohed and aahed at the map for the storekeeper's benefit and because it *was* quite beautiful and probably 17th century. She even managed to talk him down several pounds on the price, keeping her hand in as it were. But she left, smiling her thanks. And he had been so impressed with the American lady's knowledge of the sea and its underwater folk that he smiled back even though she had bought nothing.

The next two shops were total wastes of time. One was full of reproductions and second-hand, badly painted china cups and cracked glassware. Mrs. Stambley sniffed as she left, muttering under her breath "Junk—spelled j-u-n-q-u-e," not even mind-

ing that the lady behind the counter heard her. The other store had been worse, a so-called craft shop full of handmade tea cosies and poorly crocheted afghans in simply appalling colors.

As she entered the fourth shop, Mrs. Stambley caught her breath. The smell was there, the smell of deep-sea magic. So deep and dark it might have been called up from the Mariana Trench. In all her years of hunting, she had never had such a find. She put her right hand over her heart and stumbled a bit, scuffing one of her sensible shoes. Then she straightened up and looked around.

The shop was a great deal longer than it was wide, with a staircase running up about halfway along the wall. The rest of the walls were lined with china cupboards in which Victorian and Edwardian cups and saucers were tastefully displayed. One in particular caught her eye because it had a Poseidon on the side. She walked over to look at it, but the magic smell did not come from there.

Books in stacks on the floor blocked her path, and she looked through a few to see what there was. She found an almost complete Britannica, the 1913 edition, missing only the thirteenth volume. There was a first edition of Fort's *Book of the Damned* and a dark grimoire so waterstained she could make out none of the spells. There were three paperback copies of *Folklore of the Sea*, a pleasant volume she had at home. And even the obscure *Melusine, Or the Mistress From the Sea* in both English and French.

She walked carefully around the books and looked for a moment at three glass cases containing fine replicas of early schooners, even down to the carved figureheads. One was of an Indian maiden, one an angel, one an unnamed muse with long, flowing hair. But she already had several such at home, her favorite a supposed replica of the legendary ship of the Flying Dutchman. Looking cost nothing, though, and so she looked for quite a while, giving herself time to become used to the odor of the deep magic.

She almost backed into a fourth case, and when she turned around, she got the shock of her life.

In a glass showcase with brass fittings, resting on two wooden holders, was a Malaysian mer.

She had read about them, of course, in the footnotes of obscure folklore journals and in a grimoire of specialized sea

spells, but she had never in her wildest imaginings thought to see one. They were said to have disappeared totally.

They were not really mermen, of course. Rather, they were constructs made by Malaysian natives out of monkeys and fish. The Malaysians killed the monkeys, cut off the top half, from the navel up, and sewed on a fish tail. The mummified remains were then sold to innocent British tars in Victorian times. The natives had called the mummies mermen and the young sailors believed them, brought the mers home and gave them to loved ones.

And here, resting on its wooden stands, was a particularly horrible example of one, probably rescued from an attic where it had lain all these years, dust-covered, rotting.

It was gray-green, with gray more predominant, and so skeletal that its rib cage reminded Mrs. Stambley of the pictures of starving children in Africa. Its arms were held stiffly in front as if it were doing an out-of-water dog paddle. The grimacing face, big-lipped, big-eared, stared out at her in horror. She could not see the stitches that held the monkey half to the fish.

"I see you like our mer," came a voice from behind her, but Mrs. Stambley did not turn. She simply could not take her eyes from the grotesque mummy in the glass and brass case.

"A Malaysian mer," Mrs. Stambley whispered. One part of her noticed the price sticker on the side of the glass—three hundred pounds. Six hundred American dollars. It was more than she had with her . . . but . . .

"You know what it is, then," the voice went on. "That is too bad. Too bad."

The mer blinked its lashless lids and turned its head. Its eyes were entirely black, without irises. When it rolled its lips back, it showed sharp yellow-gray teeth. It had no tongue.

Mrs. Stambley tried to look away and could not. Instead she felt herself being drawn down, down, down into the black deeps of those eyes.

"That really is *too* bad," came the voice again, but now it was very far away and receding quickly.

Mrs. Stambley tried to open her mouth to scream, but only bubbles came out. All around her it was dark and cold and wet, and still she was pulled downward until she landed, with a jarring thud, on a sandy floor. She stood, brushed her skirts down, and settled her hat back on her head. Then, as she placed

her pocketbook firmly under one arm, she felt a grip on her ankle, as if seaweed wanted to root her to that spot. She started to struggle against it when a change in the current against her face forced her to look up.

The mer was swimming toward her, lazily, as if it had all the time in the world to reach her.

She stopped wasting her strength in fighting the seaweed manacle, and instead cautiously fingered open her pocketbook. All the while she watched the mer, which had already halved the distance between them. Its mouth was opening and closing with terrifying snaps. Its bony fingers, with the opaque webbings, seemed to reach out for her. Its monkey face grinned. Behind it was a dark, roiling wake.

The water swirled about Mrs. Stambley, picking at her skirt, flipping the hem to show her slip. Above the swimming mer, high above, she could see the darker shadows of circling sharks waiting for what the mer would leave them. But even they feared to come any closer while he was on the hunt.

And then he was close enough so that she could see the hollow of his mouth, the scissored teeth, the black nails, the angry pulsing beat of the webbings. The sound he made came to her through the filtering of the water. It was like the groans and creaks of a sinking ship.

Her hand was inside the pocketbook now, fingers closing on the wallet and poking into the change purse for the wren feathers she kept there. She grabbed them up and held them before her. They were air magic, stronger than that of the sea, and blessed in church. It was luck against seafolk. Her hand trembled only slightly. She spoke a word of power that was washed from her lips into the troubled water.

For a moment the mer stopped, holding his gray hands before his face.

The seaweed around Mrs. Stambley's ankle slithered away. She kicked her foot out and found she was free.

But above, a Great White Shark turned suddenly, sending a wash of new water across Mrs. Stambley's front. The tiny feathers broke and she had to let them go. They floated past the mer and were gone.

He put down his hands, gave the monkey grin at her again, and resumed swimming. But she knew—as he did—that he was not immune to her knowledge. It gave her some slight hope.

Her hand went back into her purse and found the zippered pocket. She unzipped it and drew out seven small bones, taken from a male horseshoe crab found on the Elizabeth Islands off the coast near New Bedford. They were strong sea magic and she counted heavily on them. She wrapped her fingers around the seven, held them first to her breast, then to her forehead, then flung them at the mer.

The bones sailed between them and in the filtered light seemed to dance and grow and change and cling together at last into a maze.

Mrs. Stambley kicked her feet, sending up a trough of bubbles, and, holding her hat with one hand, her purse with the other, eeled into the bone-maze. She knew that it would hold for only a minute or two at best.

Behind her she could hear the hunting cry of the mer as it searched for a way in. She ignored it and kicked her feet in a steady rhythm, propelling herself into the heart of the maze. Going in was always easier than coming out. Her bubble trail would lead the mer through once he found the entrance. For now she could still hear him knocking against the walls.

Her purse held one last bit of magic. It was a knife that had been given up by the sea, left on a beach on the North Shore, near Rockport. It had a black handle with a guard and she had mounted a silver coin on its haft.

The seawater laid shifting patterns on the blade that looked now like fire, now like air, the calligraphy of power. Mrs. Stambley knew better than to try to read it. Instead she turned toward the passage where the mer would have to appear. The knife in her right hand, her hat askew, the purse locked under her left arm, Mrs. Stambley guessed she did not look like a seasoned fighter. But in magic, as any good witch knew, *seeming* was all important. And she was not about to give up.

"Great Lir," she spoke, and her human tongue added extra urgency to the bubbles which flowered from her mouth. "Bull-roarer Poseidon, spear-thrower Neptune, mighty Njord, shrewish Ran, cleft-tailed Dagon, hold me safe in the green palms of your hands. Bring me safely from the sea. And when I am home, I will gift you and yours."

From somewhere near, an animal called, a bull, a horse, a great sea serpent. It was her answer. In moments she would

know what it meant. She put her right hand with the knife behind her and waited.

The water in the maze began to churn angrily and the mer came around the final turning. Seeing Mrs. Stambley backed against the flimsy wall, he laughed. The laugh cascaded out of his mouth in a torrent of bubbles. Their popping made a peculiar punctuation to his mirth. Then he showed his horrible teeth once again, swung his tail to propel himself forward, and moved in for the kill.

Mrs. Stambley kept the knife hidden until the very last moment. And then, as the mer's skeletal arms reached out for her, as the fingers of his hands actually pressed against her neck, and his sharp incisors began to bear down on her throat, she whipped her arms around and slashed at his side. He drew back in pain, and then she knifed him again, as expertly as if she were filleting a fish. He arched his back, opened his mouth in a silent scream of bubbles, and rose slowly toward the white light of the surface.

The maze vanished. Mrs. Stambley stuffed the knife back into her purse, then put her hands over her head, and rose too, leaving a trail of bubbles as dark as blood behind.

"*Too* bad," the voice was finishing.

Mrs. Stambley turned around and smiled blandly, patting her hat into place. "Yes, I know," she said. "It's too bad it is in such condition. For three hundred pounds, I would want something a bit better cared for."

She stepped aside.

The shopkeeper, a wizened, painted old lady with a webbing between her second and third fingers, breathed in sharply. In the showcase, the mummied mer had tipped over on its back. Along one side was a deep, slashing wound. The chest cavity was hollow. It stank. Under the body were seven small knobby sticks that looked surprisingly like bones.

"Yes," Mrs. Stambley continued, not bothering to apologize for her hasty exit, "rather poor condition. Shocking what some folk will try to palm off on tourists. Luckily I know better." She exited through the front door and was relieved to find that the sun lit the alleyway. She put her hand to her ample bosom and breathed deeply.

"Wait, just wait until I tell the group," she said aloud. Then she threaded her way back to the main street where the other

tourists and their guide were coming down the hill. Mrs. Stambley walked briskly toward them, straightening her hat once again and smiling. Not even the thought of the lost triton map could dampen her spirits. The look of surprise on the face of that old witch of a shopkeeper had been worth the scare. Only what gift could she give to the gods that would be good enough? It was a thought that she could puzzle over happily all the way home.

HARLAN ELLISON

DJINN, NO CHASER

It is not especially surprising that a djinn who, due to the ineptitude of some ancient sorcerer, has been trapped in a lamp for 10,000 years will have developed a particularly disagreeable disposition. Possession of such a lamp would very likely lead to some extremely nightmarish situations, such as those faced by the newlyweds in the following tale. Rely, however, on the good common sense of a clever young bride to find a way out for everyone.

"Who the hell ever heard of Turkish Period?" Danny Squires said. He said it at the top of his voice, on a city street.

"Danny! People are staring at us; lower your voice!" Connie Squires punched his bicep. They stood on the street, in front of the furniture store. Danny was determined not to enter.

"Come on, Connie," he said, "let's get away from these junk shops and go see some inexpensive modern stuff. You know perfectly well I don't make enough to start filling the apartment with expensive antiques."

Connie furtively looked up and down the street—she was more concerned with a "scene" than with the argument itself—and then moved in toward Danny with a determined air. "Now listen up, Squires. *Did* you or did you *not* marry me four days ago, and promise to love, honor and cherish and all that other good jive?"

Danny's blue eyes rolled toward Heaven; he knew he was losing ground. Instinctively defensive, he answered, "Well, sure, Connie, but—"

"Well, then, I am your wife, and you have not taken me on a honeymoon—"

"I can't *afford* one!"

"—have not taken me on a honeymoon," Connie repeated with inflexibility. "Consequently, we will buy a little furniture for that rabbit warren you laughingly call our little love nest. And *little* is hardly the term: that vale of tears was criminally undersized when Barbara Fritchie hung out her flag.

"So to make my life *bearable*, for the next few weeks, till we can talk Mr. Upjohn into giving you a raise—"

"Upjohn!" Danny fairly screamed. "You've got to stay away from the boss, Connie. Don't screw around. He won't give me a raise, and I'd rather you stayed away from him."

"Until then," she went on relentlessly, "we will decorate our apartment in the style I've wanted for years."

"Turkish Period?"

"Turkish Period."

Danny flipped his hands in the air. What was the use? He had known Connie was strong-willed when he'd married her.

It had seemed an attractive quality at the time; now he wasn't so sure. But he was strong-willed too; he was sure he could outlast her. Probably.

"Okay," he said finally, "I suppose Turkish Period it'll be. What the hell *is* Turkish Period?"

She took his arm lovingly, and turned him around to look in the store window. "Well, honey, it's not *actually* Turkish. It's more Mesopotamian. You know, teak and silk and . . ."

"Sounds hideous."

"So you're starting up again!" She dropped his arm, her eyes flashing, her mouth a tight little line. "I'm really ashamed of you, depriving me of the few little pleasures I need to make my life a blub, sniff, hoo-hoo . . ."

The edge was hers.

"Connie . . . Connie . . ." She knocked away his comforting hand, saying, "You beast." That was too much for him. The words were so obviously put-on, he was suddenly infuriated:

"Now, goddammit!"

Her tears came faster. Danny stood there, furious, helpless,

outmaneuvered, hoping desperately that no cop would come along and say, "This guy botherin' ya, lady?"

"Connie, okay, okay, we'll *have* Turkish Period. Come on, come on. It doesn't matter what it costs, I can scrape up the money somehow."

It was not one of the glass-brick and onyx emporia where sensible furniture might be found (if one searched hard enough and paid high enough and retained one's senses long enough as they were trying to palm off modernistic nightmares in which no comfortable position might be found); no, it was not even one of those. This was an antique shop.

They looked at beds that had canopies and ornate metalwork on the bedposts. They looked at rugs that were littered with pillows, so visitors could sit on the floors. They looked at tables built six inches off the floor, for low banquets. They inspected incense burners and hookahs and coffers and giant vases until Danny's head swam with visions of the courts of long-dead caliphs.

Yet, despite her determination, Connie chose very few items; and those she did select were moderately-priced and quite handsome . . . for what they were. And as the hours passed, and as they moved around town from one dismal junk emporium to another, Danny's respect for his wife's taste grew. She was selecting an apartment full of furniture that wasn't bad at all.

They were finished by six o'clock, and had bills of sale that totaled just under two hundred dollars. Exactly thirty dollars less than Danny had decided could be spent to furnish the new household . . . and still survive on his salary. He had taken the money from his spavined savings account, and had known he must eventually start buying on credit, or they would not be able to get enough furniture to start living properly.

He was tired, but content. She'd shopped wisely. They were in a shabby section of town. How had they gotten here? They walked past an empty lot sandwiched in between two tenements—wet-wash slapping on lines between them. The lot was weed-overgrown and garbage-strewn.

"May I call your attention to the depressing surroundings and my exhaustion?" Danny said. "Let's get a cab and go back to the apartment. I want to collapse."

They turned around to look for a cab, and the empty lot was gone.

In its place, sandwiched between the two tenements, was a little shop. It was a one-story affair, with the dingy facade, and its front window completely grayed-over with dust. A hand-painted line of elaborate script on the glass-panel of the door, also opaque with grime, proclaimed: MOHANADUS MUKHAR, CURIOS.

A little man in a flowing robe, wearing a fez, plunged out the front door, skidded to a stop, whirled and slapped a huge sign on the window. He swiped at it four times with a big paste-brush, sticking it to the glass, and whirled back inside, slamming the door.

"No," Danny said.

Connie's mouth was making peculiar sounds.

"There's no insanity in my family," Danny said firmly. "We come from very good stock."

"We've made a small visual error," Connie said.

"Simply didn't notice it," Danny said. His usually baritone voice was much nearer soprano.

"If there's crazy, we've both got it," Connie said.

"Must be, if you see the same thing I see."

Connie was silent a moment, then said, "Large seagoing vessel, three stacks, maybe the Titanic. Flamingo on the bridge, flying the flag of Lichtenstein?"

"Don't play with me, woman," Danny whimpered. "I think I'm losing it."

She nodded soberly. "Right. Empty lot?"

He nodded back, "Empty lot. Clothesline, weeds, garbage."

"Right."

He pointed at the little store. "Little store?"

"Right."

"Man in a fez, name of Mukhar?"

She rolled her eyes. "Right."

"So why are we walking toward it?"

"Isn't this what always happens in stories where weird shops suddenly appear out of nowhere? Something inexorable draws the innocent bystandes into its grip?"

They stood in front of the grungy little shop. They read the sign. It said:

BIG SALE! HURRY! NOW! QUICK!

"The word *unnatural* comes to mind," Danny said.

"Nervously," Connie said, "she turned the knob and opened the door."

A tiny bell went tinkle-tinkle, and they stepped across the threshold into Mohanadus Mukhar's shop.

"Probably not the smartest move we've ever made," Danny said softly. The door closed behind them without any assistance.

It was cool and musty in the shop, and strange fragrances chased one another past their noses.

They looked around carefully. The shop was loaded with junk. From floor to ceiling, wall to wall, on tables and in heaps, the place was filled with oddities and bric-a-brac. Piles of things tumbled over each other on the floor; heaps of things leaned against the walls. There was barely room to walk down the aisle between the stacks and mounds of things. Things in all shapes, things in all sizes and colors. Things. They tried to separate the individual items from the jumble of the place, but all they could perceive was stuff . . . things! Stuff and flotsam and bits and junk.

"Curios, effendi," a voice said, by way of explanation.

Connie leaped in the air, and came down on Danny's foot.

Mukhar was standing beside such a pile of tumbled miscellany that for a moment they could not separate him from the stuff, junk, things he sold.

"We saw your sign," Connie said.

But Danny was more blunt, more direct. "There was an empty lot here; then a minute later, this shop. How come?"

The little man stepped out from the mounds of dust-collectors and his little nut-brown, wrinkled face burst into a million-creased smile. "A fortuitous accident, my children. A slight worn spot in the fabric of the cosmos, and I have been set down here for . . . how long I do not know. But it never hurts to try and stimulate business while I'm here."

"Uh, yeah," Danny said. He looked at Connie. Her expression was as blank as his own.

"Oh!" Connie cried, and went dashing off into one of the side-corridors lined with curios. "This is perfect! Just what we need for the end table. Oh, Danny, it's a dream! It's absolutely the *ne plus ultra!*"

Danny walked over to her, but in the dimness of the aisle between the curious he could barely make out what it was she was holding. He drew her into the light near the door. It had to be:

Aladdin's lamp.

Well, perhaps not that *particular* person's lamp, but one of the ancient, vile-smelling oil burning jobs: long thin spout, round-bottom body, wide, flaring handle.

It was algae-green with tarnish, brown with rust, and completely covered by the soot and debris of centuries. There was no contesting its antiquity; nothing so time-corrupted could fail to be authentic. "What the hell do you want with that old thing, Connie?"

"But Danny, it's so *per*-fect. If we just shine it up a bit. As soon as we put a little work into this lamp, it'll be a beauty." Danny knew he was defeated . . . and she'd probably be right, too. It probably would be very handsome when shined and brassed-up.

"How much?" he asked Mukhar. He didn't want to seem anxious; old camel traders were merciless at bargaining when they knew the item in question was hotly desired.

"Fifty drachmae, eh?" the old man said. His tone was one of malicious humor. "At current exchange rates, taking into account the fall of the Ottoman Empire, thirty dollars."

Danny's lips thinned. "Put it down, Connie; let's get out of here."

He started toward the door, dragging his wife behind him. But she still clutched the lamp; and Mukhar's voice halted them. "All right, noble sir. You are a cunning shopper, I can see that. You know a bargain when you spy it. But I am unfamiliar in this time-frame with your dollars and your strange fast-food native customs, having been set down here only once before; and since I am more at ease with the drachma than the dollar, with the shekel than the cent, I will cut my own throat, slash both my wrists, and offer you this magnificent antiquity for . . . uh . . . twenty dollars?" His voice was querulous; his tone one of wonder and hope.

"Jesse James at least had a horse!" Danny snarled, once again moving toward the door.

"Fifteen!" Mukhar yowled. "And may all your children need corrective lenses from too much TV-time!"

"Five; and may a hundred thousand syphilitic camels puke into your couscous," Danny screamed back over his shoulder.

"Not bad," said Mukhar.

"Thanks," said Danny, stifling a smile. Now he waited.

"Bloodsucker! Heartless trafficker in cheapness! Pimple on

the fundament of decency! Graffito on the subway car of life! Thirteen; my last offer; and may the gods of ITT and the Bank of America turn a blind eye to your venality!'' But *his* eyes held the golden gleam of the born haggler, at last, blessedly, in his element.

''Seven, not a penny more, you Arabic anathema! And may a weighty object drop from a great height, flattening you to the niggardly thickness of your soul.'' Connie stared at him with open awe and admiration.

''Eleven! Eleven dollars, a pittance, an outright theft we're talking about. Call the security guards, get a consumer advocate, gimme a break here!''

''My shadow will vanish from before the evil gleam of your rapacious gaze before I pay a penny more than six bucks, and let the word go out to every wadi and oasis across the limitless desert, that Mohanadus Mukhar steals maggots from diseased meat, flies from horse dung, and the hard-earned drachmae of honest laborers. Six fuckface, and that's it!''

''My death is about to become a reality,'' the Arab bellowed, tearing at the strands of white hair showing under the fez. ''Rob me, go ahead, rob me; drink my life's blood! Ten! A twenty dollar loss I'll take.''

''Okay, Okay.'' Danny turned around and produced his wallet. He pulled out one of the three ten dollar bills still inside and, turning to Connie, said, ''You sure you want this ugly, dirty piece of crap?'' She nodded, and he held the bill naked in the vicinity of the little merchant. For the first time Danny realized Mukhar was wearing pointed slippers that curled up; there was hair growing from his ears.

''Ten bucks.''

The little man moved with the agility of a ferret, and whisked the tenner from Danny's outstretched hand before he could draw it back. ''Sold!'' Mukhar chuckled.

He spun around once, and when he faced them again, the ten dollars was out of sight. ''And a steal, though Allah be the wiser; a hot deal, a veritable steal, blessed sir!''

Danny abruptly realized he had been taken. The lamp had probably been picked up in a junkyard and was worthless. He started to ask if it was a genuine antique, but the piles of junk had begun to waver and shimmer and coruscate with light. ''Hey!'' Danny said, alarmed, ''What's this now?''

The little man's wrinkled face drew up in panic. ''Out! Get

out, quick! The time-frame is sucking back together! Out! Get out now if you don't want to roam the eternities with me and this shop . . . and I can't afford any help! Out!''

He shoved them forward, and Connie slipped and fell, flailing into a pile of glassware. None of it broke. Her hand went out to protect herself and went right through the glass. Danny dragged her to her feet, panic sweeping over him . . . as the shop continued to waver and grow more indistinct around them.

''Out! Out! Out!'' Mukhar kept yelling.

Then they were at the door, and he was kicking them—literally planting his curl-slippered foot in Danny's backside and shoving—from the store. They landed in a heap on the sidewalk. The lamp bounced from Connie's hand and went into the gutter with a clang. The little man stood there grinning in the doorway, and as the shop faded and disappeared, they heard him mumble happily, ''A clear nine-seventy-five profit. What a lemon! You got an Edsel, kid, a real lame piece of goods. But I gotta give it to you; the syphilitic camel bit was inspired.''

Then the shop was gone, and they got to their feet in front of an empty, weed-overgrown lot.

A lame piece of goods?

''Are you asleep?''

''Yes.''

''How come you're answering me?''

''I was raised polite.''

''Danny, talk to me . . . come on!''

''The answer is no. I'm not going to talk about it.''

''We have to!''

''Not only don't we *have* to, I don't *want* to, ain't *going* to, and shut up so I can go to sleep.''

''We've been lying here almost an hour. Neither one of us can sleep. We *have* to discuss it, Danny.''

The light went on over his side of the bed. The single pool of illumination spread from the hand-me-down daybed they had gotten from Danny's brother in New Jersey, faintly limning the few packing crates full of dishes and linens, the three Cuisinarts they'd gotten as wedding gifts, the straight-back chairs from Connie's Aunt Medora, the entire bare and depressing reality of their first home together.

It would be better when the furniture they'd bought today was delivered. Later, it would be better. Now, it was the sort of

urban landscape that drove divorcees and aging bachelors to jump down the airshaft at Christmastime.

"I'm going to talk about it, Squires."

"So talk. I have my thumbs in my ears."

"I think we should rub it."

"I can't hear you. It never happened. I deny the evidence of my senses. It never happened. I have these thumbs in my ears so I cannot hear a syllable of this craziness."

"For god's sake, Squires, I was *there* with you today. I saw it happen, the same as you. I saw that weird little old man and I saw his funky shop come and go like a big burp. Now, neither of us can deny it!"

"If I could hear you, I'd agree; and then I'd deny the evidence of my senses and tell you . . ." He took his thumbs from his ears, looking distressed. ". . . tell you with all my heart that I love you, that I have loved you since the moment I saw you in the typing pool at Upjohn, that if I live to be a hundred thousand years old I'll never love any one or any thing as much as I love you this very moment; and then I would tell you to fuck off and forget it, and let me go to sleep so that tomorrow I can con myself into believing it never happened the way I know it happened.

"Okay?"

She threw back the covers and got out of bed. She was naked. They had not been married that long.

"Where are you going?"

"You know where I'm going."

He sat up in the daybed. His voice had no lightness in it. "Connie!"

She stopped and stared at him, there in the light.

He spoke softly. "Don't. I'm scared. Please don't."

She said nothing. She looked at him for a time. Then, naked, she sat down cross-legged on the floor at the foot of the daybed. She looked around at what little they had, and she answered him gently. "I have to, Danny. I just have to . . . if there's a chance; I have to."

They sat that way, reaching across the abyss with silent imperatives, until—finally—Danny nodded, exhaled heavily, and got out of the daybed. He walked to one of the cartons, pulled out a dustrag, shook it clean over the box, and handed it to her. He walked over to the window ledge where the tarnished and rusted oil lamp sat, and he brought it to her.

"Shine the damned thing, Squires. Who knows, maybe we actually got ourselves a 24 carat genie. Shine on, oh mistress of my Mesopotamian mansion."

She held the lamp in one hand, the rag in the other. For a few minutes she did not bring them together. "I'm scared, too," she said, held her breath, and briskly rubbed the belly of the lamp.

Under her flying fingers the rust and tarnish began to come away in spots. "We'll need brass polish to do this right," she said; but suddenly the ruin covering the lamp melted away, and she was rubbing the bright skin of the lamp itself.

"Oh, Danny, look how nice it is, underneath all the crud!" And at that precise instant the lamp jumped from her hand, emitted a sharp, gray puff of smoke, and a monstrous voice bellowed out in the apartment:

AH-HA! It screamed, louder than a subway train. AH-HA!

FREE AT LAST! FREE—AS FREE AS *I'LL* EVER BE—AFTER TEN THOUSAND YEARS! FREE TO SPEAK AND ACT, MY WILL TO BE KNOWN!

Danny went over backward. The sound was as mind-throttling as being at ground zero. The window glass blew out. Every light bulb in the apartment shattered. From the carton containing their meager chinaware came the distinct sound of hailstones as every plate and cup dissolved into shards. Dogs and cats blocks away began to howl. Connie screamed—though it could not be heard over the foghorn thunder of the voice—and was knocked head over ankles into a corner, still clutching the dustrag. Plaster showered down on the little apartment. The window shades rolled up.

Danny recovered first. He crawled over a chair and stared at the lamp with horror. Connie sat up in the corner, face white, eyes huge, hands over her ears. Danny stood up and looked down at the seemingly innocuous lamp.

"Knock off that noise! You want to lose us the lease?"

CERTAINLY, OFFSPRING OF A WORM!

"I said: stop that goddamn bellowing!"

THIS WHISPER? THIS IS A NAUGHT TO THE HURRICANE I SHALL LOOSE, SPAWN OF PARAMECIUM!

"That's it," Danny yelled. "I'm not getting kicked out of the only apartment in the city of New York I can afford just because of some loudmouthed genie in a jug . . ."

He stopped. He looked at Connie. Connie looked back at him.

"Oh, my god," she said.

"It's real," he said.

They got to their knees and crawled over. The lamp lay on its side on the floor at the foot of the daybed.

"Are you really in there?" Connie asked.

WHERE ELSE WOULD I BE, SLUT!

"Hey, you can't talk to my wife that way—"

Connie shushed him. "If he's a genie, he can talk any way he likes. Sticks and stones; namecalling is better than poverty."

"Yeah? Well, *nobody* talks to my—"

"Put a lid on it, Squires. I can take care of myself. If what's in this lamp is even half the size of the genie in that movie you took me to the Thalia to see . . ."

"*The Thief of Bagdad* . . . 1939 version . . . but Rex Ingram was just an actor, they only made him *look* big."

"Even so. As big as he was, if this genie is only *half* that big, playing macho overprotective chauvinist hubby—"

SO HUMANS CONTINUE TO PRATTLE LIKE MONKEYS EVEN AFTER TEN THOUSAND YEARS! WILL NOTHING CLEANSE THE EARTH OF THIS RAUCOUS PLAGUE OF INSECTS?

"We're going to get thrown right out of here," Danny said. His face screwed up in a horrible expression of discomfort.

"If the cops don't beat the other tenants to it."

"Please, genie," Danny said, leaning down almost to the lamp. "Just tone it down a little, willya?"

OFFSPRING OF A MILLION STINKS! SUFFER!

"You're no genie," Connie said smugly. Danny looked at her with disbelief.

"He's no genie? Then what the hell do you *think* he is?"

She swatted him. Then put her finger to her lips.

THAT IS WHAT I AM, WHORE OF DEGENERACY!

"No you're not."

I AM.

"Am not."

AM.

"Am not."

AM SO, CHARNEL HOUSE HARLOT! WHY SAY YOU NAY?

"A genie has a lot of power; a genie doesn't need to shout like that to make himself heard. You're no genie, or you'd speak softly. You *can't* speak at a decent level, because you're a fraud."

CAUTION, TROLLOP!

"Foo, you don't scare me. If you were as powerful as you make out, you'd tone it way down."

is this better? are you convinced?

"Yes," Connie said, "I think that's more convincing. Can you keep it up, though? That's the question."

forever, if need be.

"And you can grant wishes?" Danny was back in the conversation.

naturally, but not to you, disgusting grub of humanity.

"Hey, listen," Danny replied angrily, "I don't give a damn what or *who* you are! You can't talk to me that way." Then a thought dawned on him. "After all, I'm your master!"

ah! correction, filth of primordial seas. there are some djinn who are mastered by their owners, but unfortunately for you i am not one of them, for i am not free to leave this metal prison. i was imprisoned in this accursed vessel many ages ago by a besotted sorcerer who knew nothing of molecular compression and even less of the binding forces of the universe. he put me into this thrice-cursed lamp, far too small for me, and i have been wedged within ever since. over the ages my good nature has rotted away. i am powerful, but trapped. those who own me cannot request anything and hope to realize their boon. i am unhappy, and an unhappy djinn is an evil djinn. were i free, i might be your slave; but as i am now, i will visit unhappiness on you in a thousand forms!

Danny chuckled. "The hell you will. I'll toss you in the incinerator."

ah! but you cannot. once you have bought the lamp, you cannot lose it, destroy it or give it away, only sell it. i am with you forever, for who would buy such a miserable lamp?

And thunder rolled in the sky.

"What are you going to do?" Connie asked.

do? just ask me for something, and you shall see!

"Not me," Danny said, "you're too cranky."

wouldn't you like a billfold full of money?

There was sincerity in the voice from the lamp.

"Well, sure, I want money, but—"

The djinn's laughter was gigantic, and suddenly cut off by the rain of frogs that fell from a point one inch below the ceiling, clobbering Danny and Connie with small, reeking, wriggling green bodies. Connie screamed and dove for the clothes closet.

She came out a second later, her hair full of them; they were falling in the closet, as well. The rain of frogs continued and when Danny opened the front door to try and escape them, they fell in the hall. He slammed the door—he realized he was still naked—and covered his head with his hands. The frogs fell, writhing, stinking, and then they were knee-deep in them, with little filthy, warty bodies jumping at their faces.

what a lousy disposition i've got! the djinn said, and then he laughed. And he laughed again, a clangorous peal that was silenced only when the frogs stopped, disappeared, and the flood of blood began.

It went on for a week.

They could not get away from him, no matter where they went. They were also slowly starving: they could not go out to buy groceries without the earth opening under their feet, or a herd of elephants chasing them down the streets, or hundreds of people getting violently ill and vomiting on them. So they stayed in and ate what canned goods they had stored up in the first four days of their marriage. But who could eat with locusts filling the apartment from top to bottom, or snakes that were intent on gobbling them up like little white rats?

First came the frogs, then the flood of blood, then the whirling dust storm, then the spiders and gnats, then the snakes and then the locusts and then the tiger that had them backed against a wall and ate the chair they used to ward him off. Then came the bats and the leprosy and the hailstones and then the floor dissolved under them and they clung to the wall fixtures while their furniture—which had been quickly delivered (the moving men had brought it during the hailstones)—fell through, nearly killing the little old lady who lived beneath them.

Then the walls turned hot and melted, and then the lightning burned everything black, and finally Danny had had enough. He cracked, and went gibbering around the room, tripping over the man-eating vines that were growing out of the light sockets and the floorboards. He finally sat down in a huge puddle of monkey urine and cried till his face grew puffy and his eyes flame-red and his nose swelled to three times normal size.

"I've got to get *away* from all this!" he screamed hysterically, drumming his heels, trying to eat his pants' cuffs.

you can divorce her, and that means you are voided out of the

purchase contract: she wanted the lamp, not you, the djinn suggested.

Danny looked up (just in time to get a ripe Black Angus meadow muffin in his face) and yelled, "I won't! You can't make me. We've been married a week and four days and I won't leave her!"

Connie, covered with running sores, stumbled to Danny and hugged him, though he had turned to tapioca pudding and was melting. But three days later, when ghost images of people he had feared all his life came to haunt him, he broke completely and allowed Connie to call the rest home on the boa constrictor that had once been the phone. "You can come and get me when this is over," he cried pitifully, kissing her poison ivy lips. "Maybe if we split up, he'll have some mercy." But they both doubted it.

When the downstairs buzzer rang, the men from the Home for the Mentally Absent came into the debacle that had been their apartment and saw Connie pulling her feet out of the swamp slime only with difficulty; she was crying in unison with Danny as they bundled him into the white ambulance. Unearthly laughter rolled around the sky like thunder as her husband was driven away.

Connie was left alone. She went back upstairs; she had nowhere else to go.

She slumped down in the pool of molten slag, and tried to think while ants ate at her flesh and rabid rats gnawed off the wallpaper.

i'm just getting warmed up, the djinn said from the lamp.

Less than three days after he had been admitted to the Asylum for the Temporarily Twitchy, Connie came to get Danny. She came into his room; the shades were drawn, the sheets were very white; when he saw her his teeth began to chatter.

She smiled at him gently. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you weren't simply overjoyed to see me, Squires."

He slid under the sheets till only his eyes were showing. His voice came through the covers. "If I break out in boils, it will definitely cause a relapse, and the day nurse hates mess."

"Where's my macho protective husband now?"

"I've been unwell."

"Yeah, well, that's all over. You're fit as a fiddle, so bestir your buns and let's get out of here."

Danny Squire's brow furrowed. This was not the tone of a woman with frogs in her hair. "I've been contemplating divorce or suicide."

She yanked the covers down, exposing his naked legs sticking out from the hem of the hospital gown. "Forget it, little chum. There are at least a hundred and ten positions we haven't tried yet before I consider dissolution. Now will you get out of that bed and *come on?*"

"But . . ."

". . . a thing I'll kick, if you don't move it."

Bewildered, he moved it.

Outside, the Rolls-Royce waited with its motor running. As they came through the front doors of the Institute for the Neurologically Flaccid, and Connie helped Danny from the discharge wheelchair, the liveried chauffeur leaped out and opened the door for them. They got in the back seat, and Connie said, "To the house, Mark." The chauffeur nodded, trotted briskly around and climbed behind the wheel. They took off to the muted roar of twin mufflers.

Danny's voice was a querulous squeak. "Can we afford a rented limo?"

Connie did not answer, merely smiled, and snuggled closer to him.

After a moment Danny asked, "What house?"

Connie pressed a button on the console in the armrest and the glass partition between front and back seats slid silently closed. "Do me a favor, will you," she said, "just hold the twenty questions till we get home? It's been a tough three days and all I ask is that you hold it together for another hour."

Danny nodded reluctantly. Then he noticed she was dressed in extremely expensive cothes. "I'd better not ask about your mink-trimmed jacket, either, right?"

"It would help."

He settled into silence, uneasy and juggling more than just twenty unasked questions. And he remained silent until he realized they were not taking the expressway into New York. He sat up sharply, looked out the rear window, snapped his head right and left trying to ascertain their location, and Connie said, "We're not going to Manhattan. We're going to Darien, Connecticut."

"Darien? Who the hell do we know in Darien?"

"Well, Upjohn, for one, lives in Darien."

"Upjohn!?! Ohmigod, he's fired me and sent the car to bring me to him so he can have me executed! I *knew* it!"

"Squires," she said, "Daniel, my love, Danny heart of my heart, will you just kindly close the tap on it for a while! Upjohn has nothing to do with us any more. Nothing at all."

"But . . . we live in New York!"

"Not anymore we don't."

Twenty minutes later they turned into the most expensive section in Darien and sped down a private road.

They drove an eighth of a mile down the private road lined with Etruscan pines, beautifully maintained, and pulled into a winding driveway. Five hundred yards farther, and the drive spiraled in to wind around the front of a huge, luxurious, completely tasteful Victorian mansion. "Go on," Connie said. "Look at your house."

"Who lives here?" Danny asked.

"I just told you: *we* do."

"I thought that's what you said. Let me out here, I'll walk back to the nuthouse."

The Rolls pulled up before the mansion, and a butler ran down to open the car door for them. They got out and the servant bowed low to Connie. Then he turned to Danny. "Good to have you home, Mr. Squires," he said. Danny was too unnerved to reply.

"Thank you, Penzler," Connie said. Then, to the chauffeur, "Take the car to the garage, Mark; we won't be needing it again this afternoon. But have the Porsche fueled and ready; we may drive out later to look at the grounds."

"Very good, Mrs. Squires," Mark said. Then he drove away.

Danny was somnambulistic. He allowed himself to be led into the house where he was further stunned by the expensive fittings, the magnificent halls, the deep-pile rugs, the spectacular furniture, the communications complex set into an entire wall, the Art Deco bar that rose out of the floor at the touch of a button, the servants who bowed and smiled at him, as if he belonged there. He was boggled by the huge kitchen, fitted with every latest appliance; and the French chef who saluted with a huge ladle as Connie entered.

"Wh-where did all this *come* from?" He finally gasped out the question as Connie led him upstairs on the escalator.

"Come on, Danny; you know where it all came from."

"The limo, the house, the grounds, the mink-trimmed jacket, the servants, the Vermeer in the front hall, the cobalt-glass Art Deco bar, the entertainment center with the beam television set, the screening room, the bowling alley, the polo field, the Neptune swimming pool, the escalator and six-strand necklace of black pearls I now notice you are wearing around your throat . . . all of it came from the genie?"

"Sorta takes your breath away, don't it?" Connie said, ingenuously.

"I'm having a little trouble with this."

"What you're having trouble with, champ, is that Mas'úd gave you a hard time, you couldn't handle it, you crapped out, and somehow I've managed to pull it all out of the swamp."

"I'm thinking of divorce again."

They were walking down a long hall lined with works of modern Japanese illustration by Yamazaki, Kobayashi, Takahiko Li, Kenzo Tanii and Orai. Connie stopped and put both her hands on Danny's trembling shoulders.

"What we've got here, Squires, is a bad case of identity reevaluation. Nobody gets through *all* the battles. We've been married less than two weeks, but we've known each other for three years. You don't know how many times I folded before that time, and I don't know how many times you triumphed before that time.

"What I've known of you for three years made it okay for me to marry you; to think 'This guy will be able to handle it the times I can't.' That's a lot of what marriage is, to my way of thinking. I don't have to score every time, and neither do you. As long as the unit maintains. This time it was my score. Next time it'll be yours. Maybe."

Danny smiled weakly. "I'm not thinking of divorce."

Movement out of the corner of his eye made him look over his shoulder.

An eleven foot tall black man, physically perfect in every way, with chiseled features like an obsidian Adonis, dressed in an impeccably-tailored three-piece Savile Row suit, silk tie knotted precisely, stood just in the hallway, having emerged from open fifteen-foot-high doors of a room at the juncture of corridors.

"Uh . . ." Danny said.

Connie looked over her shoulder. "Hi, Mas'úd. Squires, I would like you to meet Mas'úd Jan bin Jan, a Mazikeen djinn of

the ifrit, by the grace of Sulaymin, master of *all* the jinni, though Allah be the wiser. Our benefactor. My friend."

"How *good* a friend?" Danny whispered, seeing the totem of sexual perfection looming eleven feet high before him.

"We haven't known each other carnally, if that's what I perceive your squalid little remark to mean," she replied. And a bit wistfully she added, "I'm not his type. I think he's got it for Lena Horne." At Danny's semi-annoyed look she added, "For god's sake, stop being so bloody suspicious!"

Mas'úd stepped forward, two steps bringing him the fifteen feet intervening, and proferred his greeting in the traditional Islamic head-and-heart salute, flowing outward, a smile on his matinee idol face. "Welcome home, Master. I await your smallest request."

Danny looked from the djinn to Connie, amazement and copelessness rendering him almost speechless. "But . . . you were stuck in the lamp . . . bad-tempered, oh boy were you bad-tempered . . . how did you . . . how did she . . ."

Connie laughed, and with great dignity the djinn joined in.

"You were in the lamp . . . you gave us all this . . . but you said you'd give us nothing but aggravation! Why?"

In deep, mellifluous tones Danny had come to associate with a voice that could knock high-flying fowl from the air, the djinn smiled warmly at them and replied, "Your good wife freed me. After ten thousand years cramped over in pain with an eternal bellyache, in that most miserable of dungeons, Mistress Connie set me loose. For the first time in a hundred times ten thousand years of cruel and venal master after master, I have been delivered into the hands of one who treats me with respect. We are friends. I look forward to extending that friendship to you, Master Squires." He seemed to be warming to his explanation, expansive and effusive. "Free now, permitted to exist among humans in a time where my kind are thought a legend, and thus able to live an interesting, new life, my gratitude knows no bounds, as my hatred and anger knew no bounds. Now I need no longer act as a Kako-daemon, now I can be the sort of ifrit Rabbi Jeremiah bin Eliazar spoke of in Psalm XLI.

"I have seen much of this world in the last three days as humans judge time. I find it most pleasing in my view. The speed, the shine, the light. The incomparable Lena Horne. Do you like basketball?"

"But how? How did you *do* it, Connie? How? No one could get him out . . ."

She took him by the hand, leading him toward the fifteen-foot-high doors. "May we come into your apartment, Mas'úd?"

The djinn made a sweeping gesture of invitation, bowing so low his head was at Denny's waist as he and Connie walked past.

They stepped inside the djinn's suite and it was as if they had stepped back in time to ancient Basra and the Thousand Nights and a Night. Or into a Cornel Wilde costume epic.

But amid all the silks and hangings and pillows and tapers and coffers and brassware, there in the center of the foyer, in a lucite case atop an onyx pedestal, lit from an unknown source by a single glowing spot of light, was a single icon.

"Occasionally magic has to bow to technology," Connie said. Danny moved forward. He could not make out what the item lying on the black velvet pillow was. "And sometimes ancient anger has to bow to common sense."

Danny was close enough to see it now.

Simple. It had been so simple. But no one had thought of it before. Probably because the last time it had been needed, by the lamp's previous owner, it had not existed.

"A can opener," Danny said. "A can opener!?! A simple, stupid, everyday can opener!?! That's all it took? I had a nervous breakdown and you figured out a can opener?"

"Can do," Connie said, winking at Mas'úd.

"Not cute, Squires," Danny said. But he was thinking of the diamond as big as the Ritz.

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