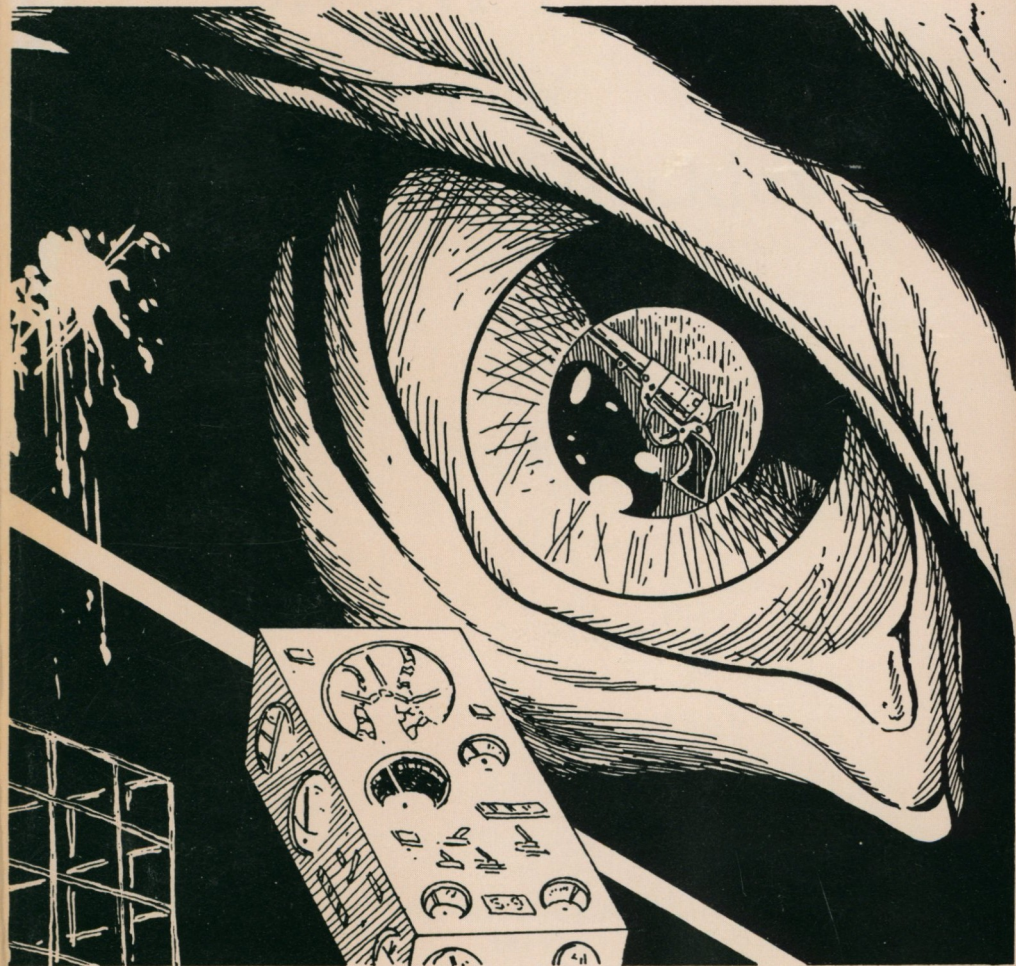


THE COLLECTED SHORT FICTION

— of —

Robert Sheckley



— Volume #5 —

Introduction by **K. W. JETER**

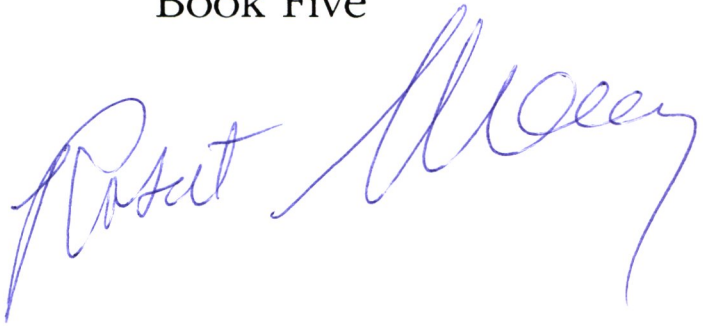
THE COLLECTED
SHORT FICTION
of
Robert Sheckley

Book Five

PULPHOUSE PUBLISHING
Box 1227
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THE COLLECTED
SHORT FICTION
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Robert Sheckley

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Robert Sheckley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Robert" and last name "Sheckley" clearly distinguishable.

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SHECKLEY AND I GO BACK A LONG WAYS

K. W. JETER

SHECKLEY AND I GO BACK A LONG WAYS

K. W. JETER

Robert Sheckley is the first science fiction writer I ever read.

Let me clear up any possible confusion about that statement. I had read other science fiction before I came across Robert Sheckley's stuff. When I was a kid, my local library stamped all the sf in its collection with a little picture of a rocket ship on the books' spines — presumably so illiterate sf fans would be able to find what they were looking for. (It wasn't until much later that I wondered why people who didn't read would be looking for particular books — I hadn't encountered the collector mentality at that point.) I started at the letter A and worked my way methodically through the stacks. I soon discovered that there were magazines, and paperback books with wild covers screaming from the drugstore rack, that also had *that stuff* in them. So I started reading those, too. Enlightenment, of a sort, came when I realized that the names attached to the books and stories — in much smaller type — were those of the people who had written them. Even more enlightenment came when I saw that there was sometimes a correlation between certain of those names and whether the story was good or bad, neat or total crap. I fell from that state of innocence in which I just read anything with a rocket ship on it, and started looking for *those names*.

The first name was Robert Sheckley.

About the third or fourth issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* that I ever bought, back when Avram Davidson was editing it into the best sf magazine that has ever been, had the first

half of Sheckley's *THE JOURNEY OF JOENES* in it. I was completely dazzled by it. I still am.

I went looking through the books on the little shelf in my bedroom. In the back of one of them was a mail-order coupon; I cut it out and mailed it in with thirty-five cents, and got back in return a copy of *UNTOUCHED BY HUMAN HANDS* — my first *name brand* sf purchase. My first sf *writer*. The book was a whole wad, a trove, of Sheckley stories I hadn't read before. They were real neat, too.

Over the years, Sheckley collections were always high on my list of book wants, outlasting more regrettable enthusiasms such as Sax Rohmer reprints. It's easy for me to recall the bright covers of *CITIZEN OF SPACE* or *PILGRIMAGE TO EARTH*. Those books were like Christmas presents from another world, lots of little boxes inside the big ones.

In a very real sense, Sheckley spoiled me as an sf reader. After *THE JOURNEY OF JOENES* and all those short stories, I thought there was going to be a lot more stuff that witty and sharp out there in the field. As it turned out, I was disappointed in that regard. If I kept an eye out for new Sheckley stories, it was because I had learned that he was just about the only connection for that particular buzz. You scored from him, or you went hurting.

Right from the start, I had realized something about Robert Sheckley's writing; that not only was he funny — Brian Aldiss correctly pegged him as the sf field's Saki — but that he was *wise* as well. (In this too he resembles Saki.) Not wise in the ponderous sense of windy moralizing or delivering ass-deadening sermons, but wise in the sense of parables or fables, the kind without the little Chinese fortune-cookie mottoes at the end; the kind where you can turn them over and over like gems and see new facets every time. When I was a kid, I thought a story such as "One Man's Poison" was clever advice on how to survive in a tricky universe; now I look at that story and, if I'm less sure of what it exactly means, I'm much more sure that it means a great deal beyond what I first got out of it.

Sheckley has always had a high meaning-to-wordage ratio. In a commercial sense, this has been his curse; he's never mastered the art of taking a little, or even nothing at all, and inflating it into a huge, empty balloon. He has that hipster art, half vaudeville *shtick*, half Zen *koan*, of getting his laugh and getting off stage, bending your mind with a few words and then shutting up with an infuriating smile.

If he could only grind out some multivolume, watered-stock Tolkien clone, he'd probably be a rich man today. But we would be the poorer.

I've been lucky; I've been able to meet a lot of my heroes in the science fiction field. I met Bob when I lived in Portland, Oregon. The fact that he was living up there was probably one more factor in my decision to travel that way; if the area held some attraction for a well-known world-citizen like Sheckley, I wanted to know what it was. I'm not sure I ever found out — in typical Sheckley fashion, he explains it as the result of a chain of circumstances that deposited him in a place where he was no more or less happy than anywhere else he had ever been. To me, this indicates how much of a truly alien creature Bob is. His stories could be regarded as reports to another world from a slightly shabby, but comfortable enough outpost, the natives of which both amuse and perplex our correspondent.

Of course, we're all being tricked by the man, even at this moment. This is not the last volume of the collected stories of Robert Sheckley; these are the collected stories *so far*. He's still writing well and often, and still hitting the high notes that are out of other writers' ranges. You can wait for Volume 6 to come along eventually, or do like me: grab each new Sheckley story as it comes flying past.

—K.W. Jeter
Los Angeles, California
10/12/90

THE ROBOT WHO LOOKED LIKE ME

Snaithe's Robotorama is an unprepossessing shop on Boulevard KB22 near the Uhuru Cutoff in Greater New Newark. It is sandwiched between an oxygenator factory and a protein store. The storefront display is what you would expect — three full-size humanoid robots with frozen smiles, dressed occupationally — Model PB2, the French Chef, Model LR3, the British Nanny, Model JX5, the Italian Gardener. All of Them Ready to Serve You and Bring a Touch of Old-World Graciousness into Your Home.

I entered and went through the dusty showroom into the workshop, which looked like an uneasy combination of slaughterhouse and giant's workshop. Heads, arms, legs, torsos, were stacked on shelves or propped in corners. The parts looked uncannily human except for the dangling wires.

Snaithe came out of the storeroom to greet me. He was a little gray worm of a man with a lantern jaw and large red dangling hands. He was some kind of a foreigner — they're always the ones who make the best bootleg robots.

He said, "It's ready, Mr. Watson." (My name is not Watson, Snaithe's name is not Snaithe. All names have been changed here to protect the guilty.)

Snaithe led me to a corner of the workshop and stopped in front of a robot whose head was draped in a sheet. He whisked off the sheet.

It was not enough to say that the robot looked like me; physically, this robot *was* me, exactly and unmistakably, feature for feature, right down to the textures of skin and hair. I studied that face, seeing as if for the first time the hint of brutality in the firmly cut

features, the glitter of impatience in the deep-set eyes. Yes, that was me. I didn't bother with the voice and behavior tests at this time. I paid Snaithe and told him to deliver it to my apartment. So far, everything was going according to plan.

I live in Manhattan's Upper Fifth Vertical. It is an expensive position, but I don't mind paying extra for a sky view. My home is also my office. I am an interplanetary broker specializing in certain classes of rare mineral speculations.

Like any other man who wishes to maintain his position in this high-speed competitive world, I keep to a tight schedule. Work consumes most of my life, but everything else is allotted its proper time and place. For example, I give three hours a week to sexuality, using the Doris Jens Executive Sex Plan and paying well for it. I give two hours a week to friendship, and two more to leisure. I plug into the Sleep-inducer for my nightly quota of 6.8 hours, and also use that time to absorb the relevant literature in my field via hypno-paedics. And so on.

Everything I do is scheduled. I worked out a comprehensive scheme years ago with the assistance of the Total Lifesplan people, punched it into my personal computer and have kept to it ever since.

The plan is capable of modification, of course. Special provisions have been made for illness, war, and natural disasters. The plan also supplies two separate subprograms for incorporation into the main plan. Subprogram one posits a wife, and revises my schedule to allow four hours a week interaction time with her. Subprogram two assumes a wife and one child, and calls for an additional two hours a week. Through careful reprogramming, these subprograms will entail a loss of no more than 2.3% and 2.9% of my productivity respectively.

I had decided to get married at age 32.5 and to obtain my wife from the Guarantee Trust Matrimonial Agency, an organization with impeccable credentials. But then something quite unexpected occurred.

I was using one of my Leisure Hours to attend the wedding of one of my friends. His fiancée's maid of honor was named Elaine. She was a slender, vivacious girl with sun-streaked blond hair and a delicious little figure. I found her charming, went home and thought no more about her. Or, I *thought* I would think no more about her. But in the following days and nights her image remained obsessively

before my eyes. My appetite fell off and I began sleeping badly. My computer checked out the relevant data and told me that I might conceivably be having a nervous breakdown; but the strongest inference was that I was in love.

I was not entirely displeased. Being in love with one's future wife can be a positive factor in establishing a good relationship. I had Elaine checked out by Discretion, Inc., and found her to be eminently suitable. I hired Mr. Happiness, the well-known go-between, to propose for me and make the usual arrangements.

Mr. Happiness — a tiny white-haired gentleman with a twinkling smile — came back with bad news. "The young lady seems to be a traditionalist," he said. "She expects to be courted."

"What does that entail, specifically?" I asked.

"It means that you must videophone her and set up an appointment, take her out to dinner, then to a place of public entertainment and so forth."

"My schedule doesn't allow time for that sort of thing," I said. "Still, if it's absolutely necessary, I suppose I could wedge it in next Thursday between nine and twelve p.m."

"That would make an excellent beginning," Mr. Happiness said.

"Beginning? How many evenings am I supposed to spend like that?"

Mr. Happiness figured that a proper courtship would require a minimum of three evenings a week and would continue for two months.

"Ridiculous!" I said. "The young lady seems to have a great deal of idle time on her hands."

"Not at all," Mr. Happiness assured me. "Elaine has a busy, completely scheduled life, just like any educated person in this day and age. Her time is completely taken up by her job, family, charities, artistic pursuits, politics, education, and so forth."

"Then why does she insist upon this time-consuming courtship?"

"It seems to be a matter of principle. That is to say, she wants it."

"Is she given to other irrationalities?"

Mr. Happiness sighed. "Well...She *is* a woman, you know."

I thought about it during my next Leisure Hour. There seemed to be no more than two alternatives. I could give up Elaine; or I could do as she desired, losing an estimated 17% of my income during

the courtship period and spending my evenings in a manner I considered silly, boring, and unproductive.

Both alternatives were unacceptable. I was at an impasse.

I swore. I hit the desk with my fist, upsetting an antique ash-tray. Gordon, one of my robot secretaries, heard the commotion and hurried into the room. "Is there anything the matter, sir?" he asked.

Gordon is one of the Sperry's Deluxe Limited Personalized Series Androids, number twelve out of a production run of twenty-five. He is tall and thin and walks with a slight stoop and looks a little like Leslie Howard. You would not know he was artificial except for the government-required stamps on his forehead and hands. Looking at him, the solution to my problem came to me in a single flash of inspiration.

"Gordon," I said slowly, "would you happen to know who handcrafts the best one-shot individualized robots?"

"Snaithe of Greater New Newark," he replied without hesitation.

I had a talk with Snaithe and found him normally larcenous. He agreed to build a robot without government markings, identical to me, and capable of duplicating my behavior patterns. I paid heavily for this, but I was content: I had plenty of money, but practically no time to spend. That was how it all began.

The robot, sent via pneumo-express, was at my apartment when I arrived. I animated him and set to work at once. My computer transmitted the relevant data direct to the robot's memory tapes. Then I punched in a courtship plan and ran the necessary tests. The results were even better than I had expected. Elated, I called Elaine and made a date with her for that evening.

During the rest of the day I worked on the Spring market offers, which had begun to pile up. At 8:00 pm I dispatched Charles II, as I had come to call the robot. Then I took a brief nap and went back to work.

Charles II returned promptly at midnight, as programmed. I did not have to question him: the events of the evening were recorded on the miniature concealed movie camera which Snaithe had built into his left eye. I watched and listened to the beginning of my courtship with mixed emotions.

It went beyond impersonation; the robot *was* me, right down to the way I clear my throat before I speak and rub my forefinger against my thumb when I am thinking. I noticed for the first time

that my laugh was unpleasantly close to a giggle; I decided to phase that and certain other annoying mannerisms out of me and Charles II.

Still, taken all together, I thought that the experiment had come off extremely well. I was pleased. My work and my courtship were both proceeding with high efficiency. I had achieved an ancient dream; I was a single ego served by two bodies. Who could ask for more?

What marvelous evenings we all had! My experiences were vicarious, of course, but genuinely moving all the same. I can still remember my first quarrel with Elaine, how beautiful and stubborn she was, and how deliciously we made up afterward.

That "making up" raised certain problems, as a matter of fact. I had programmed Charles II to proceed to a certain discreet point of physical intimacy and no further. But now I learned that one person cannot plan out every move of a courtship involving two autonomous beings, especially if one of those beings is a woman. For the sake of verisimilitude I had to permit the robot more intimacies than I had previously thought advisable.

After the first shock, I did not find this unpalatable. Quite the contrary — I might as well admit that I became deeply interested in the films of myself and Elaine. I suppose some stuffy psychiatrist would call this a case of voyeurism, or worse. But that would be to ignore the deeper philosophical implications. After all, what man has not dreamed of being able to view himself in action? It is a common fantasy to imagine one's own hidden cameras recording one's every move. Given the chance, who could resist the extraordinary privilege of being simultaneously actor and audience?

My dramas with Elaine developed in a direction that surprised me. A quality of desperation began to show itself, a love-madness of which I would never have believed myself capable. Our evenings became imbued with a quality of delicious sadness, a sense of imminent loss. Sometimes we didn't speak at all, just held hands and looked at each other. And once Elaine wept for no discernible reason, and I stroked her hair, and she said to me, "What can we do?" and I looked at her and did not reply.

I am perfectly aware that these things happened to the robot, of course. But the robot was an aspect or attribute of *me* — my shadow, twin, double, animus, doppelganger. He was a projection

of my personality into a particular situation; therefore whatever happened to him became my experience. Metaphysically there can be no doubt of this.

It was all very interesting. But at last I had to bring the courtship to an end. It was time for Elaine and me to plan our marriage and to coordinate our schedules. Accordingly, exactly two months after its inception, I told the robot to propose a wedding date and to terminate the courtship as of that night.

"You have done extremely well," I told him. "When this is over, you will receive a new personality, plastic surgery and a respected place in my organization."

"Thank you, sir," he said. His face was unreadable, as is my own. I heard no hint of anything in his voice except perfect obedience. He left carrying my latest gift to Elaine.

Midnight came and Charles II didn't return. An hour later I felt disturbed. By three a.m. I was in a state of agitation, experiencing erotic and masochistic fantasies, seeing him with her in every conceivable combination of mechano-physical lewdness. The minutes dragged by, Charles II still did not return, and my fantasies became sadistic. I imagined the slow and terrible ways in which I would take my revenge on both of them, the robot for his presumption and Elaine for her stupidity in being deceived by a mechanical substitute for a real man.

The long night crept slowly by. At last I fell into a fitful sleep.

I awoke early. Charles II still had not returned. I canceled my appointments for the entire morning and rushed over to Elaine's apartment.

"Charles!" she said. "What an unexpected pleasure!"

I entered her apartment with an air of nonchalance. I was determined to remain calm until I had learned exactly what had happened last night. Beyond that, I didn't know what I might do.

"Unexpected?" I said. "Didn't I mention last night that I might come by for breakfast?"

"You may have," Elaine said. "To tell the truth, I was much too emotional to remember everything you said."

"But you do remember what happened?"

She blushed prettily. "Of course, Charles. I still have marks on my arm."

"Do you, indeed!"

"And my mouth is bruised. Why do you grind your teeth that way?"

"I haven't had my coffee yet," I told her.

She led me into the breakfast nook and poured coffee. I drained mine in two gulps and asked, "Do I really seem to you like the man I was last night?"

"Of course," she said. "I've come to know your moods. Charles, what's wrong? Did something upset you last night?"

"Yes!" I cried wildly. "I was just remembering how you danced naked on the terrace." I stared at her, waiting for her to deny it.

"It was only for a moment," Elaine said. "And I wasn't really naked, you know, I had on my body stocking. Anyhow, you asked me to do it."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, yes." I was confused. I decided to continue probing. "But then when you drank champagne from my desert boot —"

"I only took a sip," she said. "Was I too daring?"

"You were splendid," I said, feeling chilled all over. "I suppose it's unfair of me to remind you of these things now..."

"Nonsense, I like to talk about it."

"What about that absurd moment when we exchanged clothing?"

"That *was* wicked of us," she said, laughing.

I stood up. "Elaine," I said, "just exactly what in hell were you doing last night?"

"What a question," she said. "I was with you."

"No, Elaine."

"But Charles — those things you just spoke about —"

"I made them up."

"Then who were *you* with last night?"

"I was home, alone."

Elaine thought about that for a few moments. Then she said, "I'm afraid I have a confession to make."

I folded my arms and waited.

"I too was home alone last night."

I raised one eyebrow. "And the other nights?"

She took a deep breath. "Charles, I can no longer deceive you. I really had wanted an old-fashioned courtship. But when the time came, I couldn't seem to fit it into my schedule. You see, it was finals

time in my Aztec pottery class, and I had just been elected chairwoman of the Aleutian Assistance League, and my new boutique needed special attention — ”

“So what did you do?”

“Well — I simply couldn’t say to you, ‘Look, let’s drop the courtship and just get married.’ After all, I hardly knew you.”

“*What did you do?*”

She sighed. “I knew several girls who had gotten themselves into this kind of a spot. They went to this really clever robot-maker named Snaithe...Why are you laughing?”

I said, “I too have a confession to make. I have used Mr. Snaithe, too.”

“Charles! You actually sent a *robot* here to court me? How could you! Suppose I had really been me?”

“I don’t think either of us is in a position to express much indignation. Did your robot come home last night?”

“No. I thought that Elaine II and you — ”

I shook my head. “I have never met Elaine II, and you have never met Charles II. What happened, apparently, is that our robots met, courted and now have run away together.”

“But robots can’t do that!”

“Ours did. I suppose they managed to reprogram each other.”

“Or maybe they just fell in love,” Elaine said wistfully.

I said, “I will find out what happened. But now, Elaine, let us think of ourselves. I propose that at our earliest possible convenience we get married.”

“Yes, Charles,” she murmured. We kissed. And then, gently, lovingly, we began to coordinate our schedules.

I was able to trace the runaway robots to Kennedy Spaceport. They had taken the shuttle to Space Platform 5, and changed there for the Centauri Express. I didn’t bother trying to investigate any further. They could be on any one of a dozen worlds.

Elaine and I were deeply affected by the experience. We realized that we had become overspecialized, too intent upon productivity, too neglectful of the simple, ancient pleasures. We acted upon this insight, taking an additional hour out of every day — seven hours a week — in which simply to be with each other. Our friends consider us romantic fools, but we don’t care. We know that Charles II and Elaine II, our alter egos, would approve.

There is only this to add. One night Elaine woke up in a state of hysteria. She had had a nightmare. In it she had become aware that Charles II and Elaine II were the real people who had escaped the inhumanity of Earth to some simpler and more rewarding world. And we were the robots they had left in their places, programmed to believe that we were human.

I told Elaine how ridiculous that was. It took me a long time to convince her, but at last I did. We are happy now and we lead good, productive, loving lives. Now I must stop writing this and get back to work.

SLAVES OF TIME

Gleister Main Line Sequence Time Track One:

Charlie Gleister had invented a time machine, but he hadn't invented it right because it didn't work. His machine was about the size of a white plastic shoe box. Its surfaces were covered with dials and switches and levers and buttons. It made funny noises when Charlie turned it on, and its glow bulbs flashed purple and green, and it made his skin tingle. But nothing else. Charlie's machine was a very good tingler and flasher and noisemaker, but it was not a good time machine. It didn't become that until later, after Charlie had gained enough insight from the future so that he could adjust the machine to work properly in the present. (There is a paradox involved in that, of course. Time travel is full of paradoxes. The universe runs on paradox-power.)

So there was Charlie on a beautiful September afternoon in his basement laboratory on Apple Street in the unincorporated township of Harvest Falls, Indiana, tinkering with his machine and talking out loud to himself, saying things like, "Oscillation deployment factor...beat phase regeneration...infinite recycling amplitudes...second force reflection coefficient..." This is the veritable language in which genius communicates with itself, and Charlie was definitely a genius, even though Myra's father thought he was "a mite loco." Myra's father was the leading banker in Harvest Falls and a keen amateur psychometrician. Myra was Charlie's fiancée. Just now she was out for a drive with Carter Littlejohn, once the finest tailback in Hoosier history, now a locomotive salesman and the future father of Myra's illegitimate daughter, Hilda. Gleister's parents lived in a

condominium in Jupiter, Florida, played Bingo every Friday night and wrote to Charlie on the first of every month. These people play no part in the story. Gleister also had an Uncle Max who lived in Key West and was known locally as the Pinochle King of the Conches. He also plays no part in the story. Nobody plays any real part in this story except Charlie Gleister, who plays entirely too large a part, or too many parts. But that's what happens when you begin to jump time tracks, as Charlie Gleister is about to do.

In the meantime, however, he was seated at his workbench putting tiny components together and taking them apart again and getting grease on his white shirt and cursing mildly and waiting for a gestalt to form or an insight to occur or something to happen.

And then something did happen. A voice behind him said, "Er, excuse me."

Gleister Main Line Sequence Time Track One Plus Two:

The hairs on the back of Gleister's neck stood erect. He knew that he had bolted the lab door. His hand closed idiotically on the handle of a micrometer weighing perhaps thirty grams. He turned slowly.

"Didn't mean to startle you," the man behind him said, "but there was no other way. I've come about a very important matter."

Charlie relaxed his grip on the deadly micrometer. The man did not seem to be a dope-inflamed mugger. He was a tall lanky man of about Charlie's own age, with a long, homely, good-natured face. He was holding a white plastic box covered with dials and switches and levers and buttons. There was something familiar about him.

"Do I know you from somewhere?" Charlie asked.

The stranger grinned and didn't answer. Charlie looked at him, taking in the white shirt stained with grease, the khaki slacks, the Thom McCann ripple sole shoes...

"Oh my God," Charlie said, "you look just like me."

"I am you," the stranger said. "Or you are me. Or, more accurately, we're both Charlie Gleister occupying different time tracks."

"How can that be?" Gleister asked.

"That's a silly question for *you* to ask," the other Gleister said, "seeing as how you have just invented the world's first time machine and are therefore the world's leading expert on the nature of time."

"But I haven't invented it yet, not so that it works."

"Sure you have. Or you will very soon, which comes to the same thing."

"Are you certain about that? I seem to be doing something wrong. Could you give me a hint?"

"Of course," the other Gleister said. "Just remember that reality is positional and that nothing happens for the first time."

"Thanks," Gleister said doubtfully. "Let me see if I've got this straight. I'm going to get my time machine working soon, go into the future, then come back and meet myself just before I invent the time machine."

The other Gleister nodded.

"That's sort of weird, isn't it?" Charlie asked.

"Not at all," the other Gleister said. "You come back to now in order to urge yourself not to invent the time machine."

"*Not* to invent it?"

"That's right."

"Just a minute," Gleister said. "Let's start all over. I invent a time machine and go into the future and then come back to now and tell myself not to invent a time machine. Is that what I'm going to do?"

"That's it. But you don't have to keep on referring to us both as 'I.' We *are* both Charlie Gleister, of course, but we are also separate individuals, since we occupy different time tracks and are/were/will undergo different experiences at different moments in subjective time. So even though we're the same people, that makes us different, since reality is positional."

"I'll take your word for it," Gleister said. "Or my word for it...I think I'm getting a little hysterical...Why shouldn't I invent the time machine I invented?"

"Because it will be used for evil purposes."

"Could you be more specific?"

"Just take my word for it. I have to get out of here now: you and I talking together in the past constitutes a regressive temporal paradox, which can be maintained for only a few minutes and then is self-canceling. Progressive temporal paradoxes are another matter, of course; but you'll learn all of this yourself. Just believe me, do yourself a favor, don't invent that time machine."

The other Gleister began to shimmer faintly. Charlie called out, "Hey, wait! There's a couple of things — "

"Sorry, I'm smack out of duration," the other Gleister said. The shimmering intensified and his figure grew transparent. "How do you like this for an exit?" the other Gleister asked, grinning self-consciously. "See you around."

The other Gleister disappeared.

Gleister Main Line Sequence Time Track One:

After the other Gleister had gone, Charlie needed only a moment to decide not to not invent the time machine. He didn't like taking orders, not even from someone who called himself himself: which was arguable anyhow, since reality is positional. If it was so important not to invent a time machine, let the other Gleister not invent it.

Charlie went to work immediately, and, knowing that the thing was possible, needed only two hours to get his time machine working properly. Nothing happens for the first time, especially if what you're trying to do is to invent something absolutely novel and unprecedented. Of course, *if* nothing happens for the first time, that leaves the apparent problem of how anything happens at all. But the difficulty is entirely semantic: in the eternal recurrence of subatomic configurations of which our world is a simulacrum, there is no question of beginnings or endings. There are only middles, continuations, repetitions. Originality is a concept possible only to a limited viewpoint.

So there was Charlie with his fully operational time machine neatly encased in a white plastic box, and now he is going on a journey into the future. But how? Consider — time and space are potentially equivalent quantities. They can be transformed into each other via the *deus ex machina* of a time machine. Take a simple analogy. You have five oranges and three apples. You want to add them together. To do so, you must first convert apples into oranges or oranges into apples or both into something else. The formula for converting apples into oranges is Taste divided by Flavor plus the square root of Color multiplied by seeds squared. You handle space-time transpositions in the same way, but using the appropriate formula. A time machine is no more than a realtime space-into-time converter operating on recycling interface energy residues. The practical application is a little more complicated than that, of course,

and only Charlie Gleister was ever able to make it work. That may seem to be a violation of the law of Eternal Recurrence; but Exceptionality is also subject to repetition, as will be seen.

Gleister set the machine's controls for the limit of its forward ability — a matter of some millions of years of human time, or several hours from the viewpoint of a star, or a googol of chilicosms from the outlook of a paramecium. He pushed the button. Something happened.

At Gleister's level of awareness, he seemed to be traveling on a straight line extending between past and future; a line capable of countless branchings as chance or circumstance arose. But seen from a higher level of magnitude, a time track is a fixed orbit around some unimaginable center, and what feels like a deviation is mere perturbation in an inevitable circle. Only the macrocosmic outlook permits the fiction of straight lines and novelty; the microcosm is the realm of circularity and repetition. The interface between these different realities is coincidence. Rate of coincidence is a function of rate of speed. Travel fast enough and far enough and long enough and you get to see the cosmic scenery — the haunted landscapes of eternal recurrences.

Gleister experienced a brief moment of vertigo (Quaestura Effect) and then, there he was, the world's first time traveler, standing in the unimaginably far distant future. Tremulously, he looked around him.

The first thing he noticed were the policemen.

Gleister Main Line Sequence Time Track One Variation A:

...determined to keep my eyes and ears open and my mouth shut. One of the first things I notice is the accommodation effect which regularizes my experience. (Inseparability of subject and object, constancy of sense-ratios.) It is all so familiar! I suppose that an electron, traveling from one atom to another, also expects to enter a realm of unimaginable novelty. But perhaps the scenery in every part of the universe is roughly similar; since one sees in accordance with who one is rather than with what is there.

Linguistic accommodation as well. Are they speaking my language or am I speaking theirs? I can never know: the transaction cannot watch itself being transacted.

I am in the town of Mingusville 32 S. There are at least four different sets of uniformed police on the streets — municipal, political, secret and special police. I am posing as a Nepalese sociology student writing a thesis entitled "The Ecstasy of Conformity." (This theme is acceptable to officialdom of any time period and explains away my chi-chi accent and lack of presentday knowledge.)

Mingusville 32 S is a ramshackle place containing some interesting technological retrogressions: steam-operated vehicles burning dried cow dung, for example, as well as many horse-drawn vehicles (and mules, oxen, and even a few camels). Is this due to depletion of fossil fuels? And whatever happened to atomic power?

Mingusville has a rudimentary communication system, but only officials have individual telephones. Electricity is scarce and expensive, and equipment maintenance is haphazard. I estimate that two-thirds of the homes use kerosene lighting. No structure is higher than three stories: cinderblock construction sometimes faced with brick or tile. Center of town is dominated by large open-air market facing gigantic police barracks. My impression is that the people around here lead uneventful, slothful, unchallenging lives. This is reflected in their willingness to drop whatever they're doing and talk for hours with a stranger such as myself.

I learn that various diseases are endemic here: equivalents of trachoma, encephalitis, tick fever, etc. (Cholera and bubonic plague devastated this region six years ago.) There are many beggars in the streets, although this is forbidden by the Emperor. Blacks and whites are present in roughly equal quantities. I am unable to detect any appreciable difference in social status on a racial basis: everybody here seems to be equally deprived.

Government is the only interesting game in town. One man rules the world — the Emperor Mingus. He maintains a standard police state. Mingus is your typical paranoid fascist, has everybody watching everybody else. There are cameras and recorders everywhere, miles of film and tape, legions of people monitoring all of this, other people monitoring the monitors, and so on and so on until you get to the Emperor, the ultimate monitor. I wouldn't have believed you could control a world in this way, but Mingus is giving it a pretty good try.

He is aided in all this by a secret weapon. It seems that Mingus possesses a time machine. When something goes wrong, he can

(subject to certain natural restrictions) go back in time and correct it. It's a hell of a good way to take out underground leaders: don't bother combing a city or countryside for them, just go back to before they went underground — to when they were children, say — and then kill them.

The main restriction on all this is physical. Mingus has to do it all himself. He can't entrust the time machine to anyone else, because then that person could go back and kill Mingus and become Emperor himself.

Even with this limit, the machine gives him absolute and uncanny powers. Yet in spite of it, there is a resistance movement. Not everybody can be located via time machine. The vulnerable ones have been weeded out already. Mingus's entire creaky organization is devoted to finding and destroying those enemies that Mingus cannot personally destroy.

People tell me that the time machine looks like a shoe box. It is made of white plastic. People nightly curse Gleister, the fiend who invented the thing. The word "gleister" has entered all languages. "I'll gleister you" is the ultimate threat; "you damned gleister" is the ultimate insult.

There is a great deal more to learn about this place, but it'll have to wait. I've just learned that I am an absolute and unmitigated gleister and that I have gleistered the human race but good. I must do something about it.

Gleister Main Line Sequence Time Track One Variation A Continuation 12 plus Gleister Main Line Sequence Time Track 5 plus Gleister Minor Sequence 32:

Gleister sat down on a bench in Mingus Memorial Park to think things over. What should he do? The first thing that occurred to him was to go back to just before he invented the time machine and not invent it. But that could not be done, to judge by the experience of the other Gleister. Not only can you not step into the same river twice; it is not even the same you who can't step into the same river twice. Everything modifies everything. There was no niche in the past waiting for him to come back and occupy it. Nature will tolerate a paradox, but she abhors a vacuum.

There seemed to be no point in trying to go back and convince another Gleister not to invent the time machine. (Again!) There

wasn't one Gleister to convince, anyhow; there were a multiplicity of potential Gleisters, each of them identical to him up to the moment of contact, and each of them different from him from that moment on. That too was inevitable: like the universe, the mind is a plenum constantly cycling its contents. A novel input redistributes the contents and changes their cycling rate. Gleister could remain himself only if he didn't interfere with himself.

But the situation he had presented to the world was intolerable. He was determined to do something about it. But what should he do?

He sat and thought, uncomfortably aware that at least one other Gleister had done the same thing. How many more Gleisters would sit on this spot and consider the alternatives?

But that was defeatist thinking. From one viewpoint there were (potentially) a multiplicity of Gleisters; but from another viewpoint there was only one, and he was that one. After all, it didn't matter what these other people called themselves or where they came from; he was only the person he was here and now, the person whom he experienced. Reality is positional, ego is relational and nature doesn't deal in abstractions.

What could he do, specifically? He could stay here in the future (which operationally was the present), assume a disguise and wait for a chance to strike a blow against the Emperor.

He could go back fifty or a hundred years, to a time before Mingus's accession to power, locate the future Emperor as Mingus had located others, kill him.

Or, if Mingus was able to protect himself through the powers of the time machine, Gleister could form an organization to overthrow the Emperor, starting his organization before the Emperor assumed power.

It was impossible to juggle all of the variables presented by his various plans. He would just have to pick one and go with it. But which one? Aye, there was the rub: man proposes, but the hidden law of temporality disposes. Which plan? Random sampling — eenie meenie...

Gleister looked up as a man sat down on the bench beside him. He was in his fifties, bearded, somberly dressed. He carried an attaché case. He looked like a businessman or a minor official.

"You new around here?" the man asked.

"Sort of new," Gleister admitted reluctantly. "I'm a student."

"Where from?"

"The University of East Bengal. The new one, not the old one. I'm here to do a study." Stop babbling, he ordered himself.

"School days are the best time of all," the man said, smiling. "How well I remember my own."

"Where did you go to school?" Gleister asked.

"I attended the University of Ohio," the man said. "But I never did graduate. Too much work for me to do out there in the world. Ah well, it can't be helped."

"No, it can't be," Gleister said. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable. He too had attended the University of Ohio.

"What do you use that white box for?" the man asked abruptly. "School books?"

"Yes. I mean no," Gleister said. "It's a little too small for books. I keep tapes of some of my lectures in there."

"Is that a fact?" the man said. "You know, it's a weird coincidence. I've got one just like it." He opened his attache case. Within it Gleister saw a white box identical to his own, cushioned in red velvet. Beside it, there was a large blue-steel automatic.

The man picked up the automatic and pointed it at Gleister.

"Hey, wait a minute, don't fool around with that thing," Gleister said. Already he was beginning to feel a faint twist of sickness in his stomach. He was afraid that he knew all too well what was happening.

"Hand over that white box of yours," the man said. "Handle it real slow and don't try to push any buttons."

"Who are you?" Gleister asked.

"I'm known by various names in various regions of the Earth," the man said. "But I'm best known as Mingus."

"You're the Emperor!" Gleister said.

"At your service," the bearded man said. "Now, very slowly, give me the box."

Gleister's forefinger rested on the operation button. He could feel the Emperor's eyes on his hand, daring him to press the button. Gleister remembered that there was a lag between turning the machine on and physically leaving a place. He decided that he had no chance at all. Slowly he began to extend the white box.

"That's it, slow and easy," the Emperor said.

Then Gleister noticed a shimmering in the air some ten feet behind the Emperor. Something was about to happen, and, considering the circumstances, it could only help Gleister.

"Look," he said, "can't we talk this over? Maybe we could reach a compromise."

"What are you up to?" Mingus's forefinger tightened on the trigger. An involuntary movement of Gleister's eyes warned him that something was happening. He whirled just as another Gleister materialized behind him.

The Emperor fired at the new arrival at pointblank range, but with no apparent effect. Charlie Gleister, noticing the faint red haze around the newcomer, had realized in an instant that it was not an actual corporeal person; obviously, to the trained eye, it was a solidified pseudo-doppler reflection caused by Gleister's passage through time. As he watched, the image disappeared.

The Emperor turned toward him again; but Gleister had already punched the OPERATE button of his time machine.

Gleister Main Line Sequence Time Track One Sub One Low Probability Closed Loop 12:

Nothing goes right when you're in a hurry. Charlie Gleister hit the OPERATE button so hard that he broke the interlock on the OVERRIDE assembly. Unrationalized power surged crazily through the time machine, turning the primary circuits into roulette accelerometers, and causing an instant multiplication of geometric accumulators. Energy flooded the available networks of n-dimensional pasts/presents/futures, then searched for new outlets and found them by jumping an entire magnitude — to the universe of low-probability actualities.

When Gleister came to himself, he was standing on a flat, featureless plain. The glaring white sky above pulsed with bulges of darkness. He could hear a low, melancholy crooning. It seemed to come from a piece of white limestone rock near his right foot.

"Is that you singing?" Gleister asked.

"Yeah, baby, it's me," the limestone rock answered in a deep mournful voice. "I been singing the blues ever since the world began."

"How long has that been?" Gleister asked.

"About three hundred years, close as I can figure it. You got any idea what or where or why this place is?"

"I can make an educated guess," Gleister said. "It seems reasonable to hypothesize that we are in a low-probability universe. The theoretical existence of such a place is quite certain. High and low probability are terms of statistical intuition relative to our experience, of course. Do you follow me so far?"

"Well, baby, not too closely," said the limestone rock. "When you said an educated guess, you really meant *educated*. Could you maybe put it into English for me?"

"Well...in my own particular case there was like one hell of an explosion and I was blown clean out of the world into this place."

"Hey, that's just what happened to me," said the limestone rock. "How I came to be playing tenor sax in the Wigwam Club in downtown Hiroshima on that fateful day in 1945 is a story which I won't go into right now. You got any idea how we get out of here?"

"I think we must simply wait until it happens," Gleister said. "In normal high-probability terms, there's not much chance of that happening. But if this is a universe where low-probability is the law, then all odds are reversed and our chances for getting out of here are very good indeed."

"Ask a man a serious question and he gives me," the limestone rock said.

"No, I meant what I said quite seriously."

"In that case, baby, and excuse my saying it, you are a real weirdo."

"At least I'm not a limestone rock," Gleister said, then added hastily, "not that I consider you in any way inferior because of your igneous appearance."

"Sure, baby, sure," the limestone rock said, with sarcasm so thick that you could cut it with a knife and spread it on a piece of Tibetan barley bread that had just appeared on the low oaken bench that supported the various instruments that Gleister needed to make a reasonable assessment of the validity of his previous statements.

In a universe of non-sequiturs — which is what low-probability is all about — it is difficult to find continuities, tough to keep a grip on sequences, hard to hang on to certainties. Historically, the low-probability levels have been considered paradise. They are the

vacation spots of the hashishin, the mystagogue, the dooper. They are usually fun places, which is why most people can't get into them.

There are some low-probability worlds in which nothing much happens and the whole thing is as boring as being kept after school. But usually, a good time is enjoyed by all.

Gleister's world was a pretty good place. There were always a lot of girls around, asking, "Hey, man, is this Katmandu?" A big rock candy mountain appeared, and a pibil tree, and the congestion cleared up around the synapses affording a view all the way to the lemon factory.

As the limestone rock remarked, "Maybe it ain't reality, but it'll just have to do until the real thing comes along."

So it was with a definite sense of regret that Gleister saw one morning, emblazoned across the sky, the words: "Th-th-th-th that's all, folks!" Quickly he said goodbye to the limestone rock, now revealed as an anti-Gleisterian particle, and to the girls, who were in actuality anima-Gleisterian wave forms. Then he held his breath, quite unnecessarily, for the brief transition that followed.

Gleister Main Line Sequence plus Multiple Time Track Conjunctions:

Gleister surfaced in a large, dusty, crowded auditorium located (as he learned later) in the Crich-Kridarin foothills near the ruins of Norfolk. It was some 234 years before the accession of the Emperor Mingus.

There were perhaps a hundred men in the auditorium. Most of them looked like Gleister. This was only reasonable, since all of them *were* Gleister.

Charlie Gleister learned that these people were trying to hold a meeting, but couldn't figure out how to do it. Obviously, they needed someone to act as chairman: but how can you have a chairman without first having an organization to elect him with? And how can you have an organization without a chairman to be elected by it? It was a perplexing problem, especially for the Gleister line, which had never been strong on social studies.

Everyone turned to Charlie Gleister, who, as the newest arrival, might have some ideas on the subject.

"Well," Charlie said, "I read once that among the Flathead Indians, the tallest brave was usually chosen to lead the war party or

the hunting party or whatever there was to do. Or maybe it was among the Shoshones."

All the Gleisters nodded in vigorous agreement. They had all known that, of course; they just hadn't thought about it.

In no time at all the tallest Gleister was found, elected Chairman *ad hoc* and *pro tem* and sent up to the stage.

"I hereby call this meeting to order," the tallest Gleister said. "Look, before we get to anything else, it seems to me that we simply *cannot* all keep on calling ourselves 'Charlie Gleister.' It's simply too confusing. For purposes of communication between us, I suggest we all take on different first names. What do you think about that?"

There was a loud murmur of agreement.

"May I suggest that we each try to pick an unusual name," the Chairman said, "since fifty Toms or Georges wouldn't be much of an improvement over a hundred Charlies. I will start the ball rolling by calling myself Egon. I declare a fifteen-minute recess while the rest of you christen yourselves."

After a moment's thought, Charlie Gleister (the one whose time-track we've been following) named himself Hieronymous. He shook hands with Michelangelo Gleister on his right and Chang Gleister on his left. Then the Chairman called the meeting to order.

"Members of the Gleister Coequality Line of Potentialities," Egon said, "I bid you welcome. Some of you have searched for and found this place, others stumbled across it apparently by accident, others found themselves here while going somewhere else. This definitely appears to be a Gleister collection-point, for reasons that escape me at the moment. However, let that be. I think I am expressing the common sentiment when I name this the Time-Space Center for Resistance to the Rule of the Emperor Mingus. The Emperor probably knows about this place and what we're up to. We are the only serious threats to his reign. Many of us have had inexplicable near-fatal accidents at some point before inventing the time machine. Some of those were surely caused by Mingus. We may expect other attempts on our lives.

"That's about all I have to say. I would welcome remarks from the floor."

A man stood up and identified himself as Chalmers Gleister. "Has anyone learned the identity of this Mingus?"

"Not to my knowledge," Egon Gleister said. "He has concealed his origins most effectively. There is an official biography which states that the Emperor was born in Clearwater, Florida, the only child of Anton and Myra Waldheim."

"Has anyone checked this?" Chalmers asked.

A man stood up. "Marcos Gleister. I looked into it. I can tell you that Clearwater was demolished some thirty years before Mingus's rule, when the Sage Creek reactor went up."

"Did you attempt to go to Clearwater before its destruction?"

"I tried," Marcos said, "but I didn't learn anything positive. The Waldheim family might not have been living there at that time, or evidence may have been concealed or Mingus might have picked Clearwater as a convenient cover."

Chalmers asked, "Has anyone gone to the Hall of Records in Washington, or the Library of Congress, or whatever their equivalents are now? If the Waldheim records have been removed, it will be important negative evidence as to Mingus's identity."

"It hasn't been done yet," said Chairman Egon Gleister, after waiting for a response from the audience. "Perhaps you would care to take on the assignment?"

"I wouldn't know how to begin," Chalmers said.

"None of us would. Our collective talents lie in other directions. But the job ought to be done."

"Very well, I'll try," Chalmers said sulkily, and sat down.

There was a great deal of general discussion after that. The Gleisters were thoroughly confused about time travel, its possibilities, ramifications, limits and consequences. Nor could they reconcile the various types and aspects of temporality which they had encountered — subjective time, objective time, past time, future time, multiple time rates, and the paradoxical crossing and recrossing of time tracks. What was the past, what was the future? Were "past," "present," and "future" no more than fictions — false separations imposed upon a unified field? And if that were so, how could an individual time traveler orient himself? The situation seemed comparable to a mad chess game in which either opponent could correct any previous moves at any time, in a game which had perhaps been concluded before it had begun.

Hieronymous Gleister — still our hero despite certain technical difficulties in differentiation and identification — had not paid much

attention to the discussion. He was watching the audience, for the Gleisters seemed nearly as remarkable to him as time travel itself.

There were Gleisters of every apparent age between twenty and sixty years. All possessed the same somatotype. Beyond this, their differences were more striking than their similarities.

Each Gleister had experienced similar stresses and influences, but at different subjective moments. Events had come upon each man at a particular and unique moment in psychotime, polarizing and modifying the whirling Lullian wheels of his internal world system, producing in each man new and unexpected emotional configurations, modifying and delineating him, and turning him into an individual unlike all the other Gleisters.

To judge by appearances, there were frightened Gleisters and courageous Gleisters, high-strung ones and phlegmatic ones, sociable and solitary ones, clever and confused ones.

As he was thinking about these things, a man stood up and introduced himself as Mordecai Gleister. He asked permission to address the audience on certain urgent matters. Egon invited him to the stage.

"I will make my remarks brief," Mordecai said. "It seems to me that the matter of the Emperor has not been impartially examined. We have blindly assumed that the man and his goals are evil. Yet is this so evident? Consider —"

Hieronymous Gleister stared at him. He had seen this confident, bearded man in his fifties before. But where?

Then it came to him.

Hieronymous Gleister stood up and ran to the stage. "Grab that man!" he shouted. "He's Mingus! He's the Emperor!"

Egon hesitated for a moment, then made his decision. He and Hieronymous moved toward Mordecai Gleister. Several other Gleisters were on their feet and climbing on to the stage. Then everyone stopped.

Mordecai Gleister had taken a blue-steel automatic out of his pocket and was aiming it at Egon.

"Please resume your seats," Mordecai said. "All except Chairman Egon and this young man, whose lives depend upon your good behavior. I have a statement to make."

Everyone sat down except for Egon and Hieronymous. Mordecai said, "This weapon I am holding is not a projectile weapon,

though it is housed in the case of a Colt .45 automatic. It is an invention of mine — or ours — which operates on a laser-diffusion principle. At fifteen feet its first effect is paralysis; death follows seconds later if the beam is not turned off. Whatever you decide to do now, you should take this weapon into your calculations.”

Mordecai paused to let his words take effect. Then smiling, he said, “My worthy brothers and loyal subjects, the Emperor Mingus greets you.”

Main Lines Junction #2:

“My reading of the situation,” Mingus said, “is that I invented a time machine and went to a point in the distant future. I underwent various experiences there which shaped my subsequent decisions. The world I came to was a sad, brutish place, depleted of its physical and mental resources, divided into tiny, squabbling kingdoms. I took over. The time machine gave me matchless power, of course. But my success was due to more than that: the times were right for organization, and I was the right man for the job.

“Those of you who have seen a little of my empire don’t think much of it. But you judge too quickly. You forget the materials I had to work with. I assure you that I aim toward peace and prosperity for everyone; yes, and political freedom as well, as soon as men have the intelligence and self-control to use it.

“You think that my empire looks like a twentieth-century Latin American or African dictatorship. Granted. But when I took over, this world was in chaos. There was no peace, and strength was the only recognizable law. I have given people a measure of security and continuity from which to rebuild a civilization.

“All of us here are products of American democracy. ‘Empire’ and ‘Emperor’ are dirty words to us. But I earnestly request that you not judge my work by political reflex. What would you have had me do? Extend the vote to the serfs and slaves and abolish the robber-barons? Even with the time machine I wouldn’t have lasted a week.

“Should I have lectured them on all men being equal? Those people *knew* that all men were not equal, and that justice was the exclusive prerogative of the ruling class. They viewed all egalitarian ideas as devilish perversions, to be resisted to the death.

“Democracy is not natural law. Men must be educated to it. Democracy is a difficult and advanced concept for men whose

instinct is to band together in wolf packs under a single leader. Effective democracy requires the exercise of responsibility and fairness to others. For the people of the future Earth, this was an outlandish concept; *others* were there only to be used.

"Given this state of affairs, what would any of you have done? Would you have witnessed the misery and squalor of the world and turned away from it, returning to your own happier times? Or would you have stayed and put together a token democracy, to be overwhelmed as soon as you were no longer in physical control? Or would you have done as I did — formed the only political organization that the people could understand, and then tried to educate them in the difficult practices of freedom and responsibility?

"I did what I thought was best for the people, not for myself. I took over. But then you Gleisters — my alter egos, my brothers — kept coming up from the past, bent upon assassinating me. I tried to kidnap some of you and re-educate you. But there were too many Gleisters, the dynamics of the situation were against me.

"I learned about your organization. I came back here and infiltrated it. I have taken it over now.

"I have explained the situation as fairly as I can. I most sincerely beg you to cooperate with me, assist me, help me to change a regressed and savage Earth into the sort of place we have all dreamed of."

There was a long silence. At last Chairman Egon Gleister said, "I believe there may be considerable merit in what you have explained to us."

Hieronymous asked, "Have you forgotten already what you saw in his future? All of the suspicion and misery, and all those police!" He turned to Mingus. "Why don't you just leave them alone? I really don't care what your motives are. Hasn't Earth had enough emperors, dictators, generalissimos, war lords, Great Khans, Shahinshahs, Caesars, whatever you want to call them? Some of them had admirable motives — but the only people they really helped were themselves."

"I suppose you feel that a state of anarchy is preferable?" Mingus asked.

"I think it probably is," Hieronymous said. "The main defect of anarchy is its vulnerability to people like you."

There was no sound at all from the audience. Hieronymous went on: "In any event, it's not your age your tampering with, it's someone else's. You come here from the happy and enlightened twentieth century and impose your obsolete political solutions on them. Really, Mingus, you're acting just like any other colonizer."

Mingus appeared shaken. "I must think about this. I honestly believed..." He shook his head irritably. "It is strange," he said, "that all of us are one person, yet we represent widely differing viewpoints."

"It's not so strange," Egon said. "One person is many people even under normal circumstances."

Hieronymous said, "Perhaps we should call for a vote on what the Gleisters are to do — if you think we are civilized enough to vote."

"Taking power is a responsibility," Mingus said. "But giving power up is equally a responsibility. This will require careful thought on my part."

"Perhaps not," Egon said. "Perhaps you won't have to think about it at all."

"Why do you say that?" Mingus said.

The Chairman smiled and said, "I think you have made a fatal misreading of the sequence of events. By coming back here, you have ceased to be the Emperor. So there is nothing for you to think about."

"Explain yourself," Mingus said. "Who is the real Emperor then?"

"There is no 'real' emperor," Egon told him. "There is only a Gleister who went to the future, seized power and became Emperor. He found himself opposed by an organization, returned to the past in an attempt to take over the organization. He was killed in the attempt."

"Be careful," Mingus said.

"There's nothing to be careful about," Egon said. "We know that time travel necessarily involves duplication. One law we are sure of, governing time travel and its events, is: nothing happens for the first time. You, my dear Mordecai, have the honor of having been the first Emperor. But it can't remain that way. Since time travel is involved, there must be a second Emperor for the Emperor-line of probability to take place at all."

"And you think that the first Emperor dies?" Mingus asked.

"Or goes into retirement, perhaps," Egon said. "Give me the gun."

"You crown yourself Emperor?"

"Why not? I'm a Gleister, and therefore a legitimate heir to the royal line. Give me the gun and I'll let you go in peace."

Hieronymous said urgently to Mordecai-Mingus, "Do it. Give him the gun. He's right, time travel necessitates the overdetermination of events. There must be a second Emperor."

"Very well," Mordecai-Mingus said. "I'll give you the gun. And since you are the future Emperor, you won't mind which end you get first."

He aimed the gun at Egon and pulled the trigger. A look of shock came over Mordecai's face. He went rigid, then fell. The gun dropped from his hand and clattered across the floor, coming to rest at Hieronymous's feet.

Hieronymous picked up the weapon. He bent over Mordecai for a moment, then looked at Egon. "He's dead."

Egon said, "We seem to have a new Emperor."

"We do indeed," Hieronymous said, and handed the gun to him butt-first.

Gleister Emperor Line #2:

"That's good of you, cousin," Egon said, hefting the weapon. "You have no imperial ambitions, then?"

"Ambitions, but not imperial ones. Besides, Egon, I've had a premonition."

"I'm not Egon anymore," the Chairman said. "For the sake of symmetry, I'm renaming myself Mingus...What was your premonition?"

"I thought I heard a voice say: 'The Emperor is the slave of time.'"

"Just that and no more?"

"That's all I heard," Hieronymous said.

"How strange, dark and ominous," the new Mingus said, grinning. "How do you interpret it?"

"It hints at something unpleasant, but I don't know what. Take it for what it's worth."

"Well," Mingus said. "You have given me an oracle and an empire, and I thank you most kindly for both, but especially the Empire. Now, what can I do for you?"

"You grant me an imperial boon?"

"Yes, anything."

"Then go rule your Empire, and let me and the rest of us do what we have to do."

"It's doubtless unwise," Mingus said, "but I'll do it. God knows what complications would ensue if I started killing Gleisters. Just remember —"

Mingus stopped. A man had just materialized onto the stage beside him.

Main Lines Junction #3:

The man was old, he had a gray beard and a ravaged face. His eyes were shadowy and lined.

"Who are you?" Mingus demanded.

"I am you, Egon. I am Mordecai, I am Hieronymous, I am the others. I am the Emperor you will become. I have come here to beg you to abdicate now and change what still can be changed."

"Why should I do that?" Mingus asked.

"Because the Emperor is the slave of time."

"That makes no sense whatsoever, old man. Who are you really? Hieronymous, this looks like the sort of theatrical stunt you might come up with someday."

"I can give no promise for the behavior of my old age, if that's what this is."

"Abdicate," the old man said.

"Nobody likes a nag," Mingus said, aimed his gun and fired.

There was no apparent effect. The old man shook his head irritably. "I can't be killed — not here, not now, not by you! Reality is positional, as you will learn when you grow up. Now I must return to my work."

"What work is that?" Hieronymous asked.

"All slaves perform identical meaningless work," the old man said, and disappeared.

Mingus rubbed his chin irritably. "Nothing like a ghost to keep the comedy moving! Hieronymous, are you going somewhere?"

Hieronymous had been adjusting his time machine. He looked up and said, "I'm going on a trip."

"Where?"

"To visit an old friend."

"Who? What are you talking about?"

"You'll see, in good time."

Mingus said, "Wait, Hieronymous! Stay with me and help me build a true civilization. We'll do it your way."

"No," Hieronymous said, and pushed the button.

Main Lines Junction #4:

This time Gleister came out near Krul in the late years of the Mingus Imperium. He bartered clothing for money and took the day coach to Washington. From the station he walked to the White House, seat of Imperial power and now a Byzantine city within a city. He told the sergeant of the Exterior Guard to announce him to the Emperor.

"What kind of a joke is this?" the sergeant said. "Put your petition through proper channels."

"Announce me for the sake of your own continued welfare," Gleister said. "Tell him that Hieronymous is here."

The sergeant was skeptical, but unwilling to take a risk. He rang up the captain of the guard, who contacted the commandant of the guard. Nothing happened for ten minutes, then things began to happen very quickly.

"I beg your pardon," the sergeant said. "I'm new at this post. I hadn't received the standing order concerning you. Please come this way, sir."

Hieronymous was led through winding gray corridors, into an elevator, through more corridors, to a steel-plate door painted crimson. The sergeant let him in and closed the door behind him.

Hieronymous was in a small white audience room. There was a man present, seated at a small table. The man stood up when he entered.

"It's good to see you again," Egon-Mingus said.

"Good to see you, too," Hieronymous replied. "How fares the Empire?"

"Well...it's not too successful, as you perhaps foresaw. In fact, it's disastrous." Mingus smiled painfully. He was old now, a tall man with a gray beard and ravaged eyes.

"What's the trouble?"

"Don't you know?"

Hieronymous shook his head. "I had a premonition, not a vision. Are Gleisters still trying to overthrow you?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Mingus said. "I don't even bother trying to stop them. Our family possesses a deep-seated ineptitude where politics are concerned. The Gleisters have no head for intrigue! They come into my empire in their twentieth-century clothing, brandishing strange weapons and talking in concepts the populace can't understand. People think they represent some mad foreign overlord, or are just plain crazy. At the first opportunity they turn them over to the police."

"And what do you do with them?"

"I educate them."

"Ah!"

Mingus made a face. "I hope you don't think I'm using a euphemism for violence. I assure you that I educate them most conventionally, with lectures, guided tours, films and books. Then I find some place in the Empire for them to stay."

"Do they all choose to live here?"

"Most of them. One must live somewhere, after all, and their original places in their own time are occupied by other Gleisters."

"Well...That sounds all right. What's the trouble?"

"Hieronymous, you need some education yourself! Maybe you should go on the guided tour."

"Just tell me about it."

"Very well. It's actually quite simple. The first or original or Ur-Gleister built a time machine and went into the future. Nature, which tolerates a paradox but abhors a vacuum, was left with a hole in the space-time fabric. A Gleister was missing from his normal position. Nature, therefore, supplied an identical or near-identical Gleister from wherever she keeps the spare parts."

"I know all of this," Hieronymous said.

"You haven't thought it through to the end. Each time a Gleister uses a time machine there is a displacement, another hole in the space-time fabric, which Nature fills by producing yet another Gleister."

"I'm beginning to understand," Hieronymous said.

"Now we have numerous Gleisters," Mingus went on, "all whizzing around on their various missions. We have a Gleister-sequence

that becomes the Emperor, another sequence that forms an organization against the Emperor. And there are other sequences. Each sequence involving time travel results in the duplication of a Gleister. Each new Gleister time travels and is instrumental in the creation of more new Gleisters."

Mingus paused to let that sink in, then said: "Gleisters are being produced at a geometric rate."

"Well," Hieronymous said, "that's a hell of a lot of Gleisters."

"You still don't grasp the scale," Mingus said. "Geometric progressions tend to get out of hand very early. Hundreds become thousands, thousands become millions, which become trillions and quadrillions. Do you get it now?"

"I get it," Hieronymous said. "Where do they all go?"

"They come here," Mingus said. "There's really no other place for them to go."

"And where do you put them?"

"I've managed to house about twelve million to date. But the Empire is running out of resources, and they're coming thicker than ever!"

"Is there no way of stopping them?"

Mingus shook his head. "Even if the Army shot them on sight, we couldn't control the mounting progression. Soon there will be nothing but Gleisters; the Earth will be carpeted in Gleisters, and new ones will continue to pour in. The Emperor is truly the slave of time."

"What have you done about a solution?"

"Everything possible. I'm open to suggestions."

"The only thing that occurs to me," Hieronymous said, "is that the original Gleister must be killed before he can invent the time machine."

"It can't be done. Many of us have tried, but we can't get back far enough in time. We can only encounter Gleister after the invention. And each Gleister who goes back and fails further expands the progression."

"Yes, I see."

"Do you have any ideas?"

"Only one, and I don't much like it."

Mingus waited. Hieronymous said, "As it stands now, the Gleister-series is an infinite expansion. Therefore a limit must be introduced in order to make the series capable of termination."

"What limit?"

"Death is the only natural limit," Hieronymous said. "Termination must be introduced as early as possible in the series, so that it will expand simultaneously with the series, render it self-limiting, and finally self-canceling."

"Many of us have died," Mingus said. "It hasn't effected the expansion."

"Of course not. All the Gleister-deaths so far have been normal terminations of individual time tracks. What is needed is an early death out of continuity — a suicide."

"In order to introduce a short-term recycling death factor," Mingus said. "Suicide...Yes. It will be my final imperial act."

"Not yours, mine," Hieronymous said.

"I am still the Emperor," Mingus said. "It is my responsibility."

"You're too old, for one thing," Hieronymous said. "A young Gleister must die as early in his time track as possible."

"Then we'll draw lots among the younger Gleisters."

Hieronymous shook his head. "I'm afraid it must be me."

"Would you mind explaining why?"

"At the risk of seeming egotistical," Hieronymous said, "I must tell you that I believe that I am the original Gleister, and only my suicide can end what I began."

"Why do you think you are the original Gleister?"

"It's an intuition."

"That's not much to go on."

"No, but it's something. Do you have an intuition like that?"

"No, I don't," Mingus said. "But I don't believe that I'm — unreal!"

"You're not," Hieronymous said. "We're all equally real. I'm just the first, that's all."

"Well...It doesn't matter, I suppose. I hope that you're right."

"Thanks," Hieronymous said, setting his time machine. "Do you still have that laser gun?" Mingus handed it to him and Hieronymous put it in his pocket. "Thanks. I'll be seeing you."

"That seems unlikely."

"If my assumptions are correct," Hieronymous said, "then you will have to see me again."

"Explain that!" Mingus said. "That makes no sense..."

But Hieronymous had pushed the button and was gone.

Gleister Main Line Sequence Termination #1:

It was a beautiful September afternoon in Harvest Falls, Indiana. Charlie Gleister walked past Apple Street and looked wistfully at the white frame house in which he had had his laboratory. He thought about going in and having a word with himself, but decided against it. He'd had his fill of Gleisters.

He continued walking, out of town on Route 347. Cars passed him, but he didn't try to hitch a ride. He didn't have far to go.

He turned off the route and crossed a stubbled field. He went through woods and came to a little brook. He had fished here as a boy, catching an occasional sunfish. The big oak tree was still where he remembered it, and Charlie sat down and leaned his back against it.

He took out the gun and looked at it. He felt numb, self-conscious. He rubbed his nose and looked at the sunlight on the water for several minutes.

Then, irritably, he said, "All right, let's get it over with." He put the muzzle of the gun in his mouth, gagging slightly over the taste of oily metal. He shut his eyes and pulled the trigger and died.

Gleister Series Initial Termination Recycling:

Charlie Gleister opened his eyes. The imperial audience room was as he had remembered it. On a table in front of him were the latest statistics: over twelve million Gleisters settled to date, more coming every minute. He shook his head and ran his fingers absentmindedly through his beard. Then he looked at the young man standing in front of him.

"Good luck," he said, and handed him the laser gun.

Egon Gleister said, "Thank you," pushed the button on his time machine, and was gone.

Alone, Charlie looked around the audience room. He would have to accustom himself to imperial duties, for of course he had to take his turn as Emperor, just as all the others would have to do. He and they would have to take all of the Gleister roles as the termination proceeded, until at last only he was left, in the end as in the beginning.

But for now he was the Emperor, and that might be interesting. He was grateful that he had gotten the suicide-part out of the way. He would have to do it again, of course; but not yet, not until all the others had done it.

VOICES

Like many of us, Mr. West sometimes found it difficult to make decisions. But unlike many of us, he refused to seek irrational forms of assistance. No matter how acute his problem, Mr. West refused to let himself be guided by the I Ching, or by spreading the Tarot cards or by consulting a horoscope. He was a large, glum, secretive man who worked for the New York accounting firm of Adwell, Gipper and Gascoigne, and believed that everyone should make up his own mind in a rational manner.

The way Mr. West did this was by referring his problems to a Voice in his head. The Voice always told him what to do, and the Voice was always right.

West's Voice-in-head system worked well for many years. But trouble came during the week when the engineers were testing the generators in the newly constructed Conglomerate Building across the street from his apartment. It must also be mentioned that sun-spot activity was unusually high that week, cosmic ray output reached a ten-year maximum, and the Van Allen belts temporarily shifted four degrees to the south.

Mr. West had two big problems on his mind that week. One had to do with Amelia — lovely, desirable, willing and attainable — but also fourteen years old, his niece, and feeble-minded. She was staying with him while her parents were in Europe. The very thought of her made his hands itch and his nose tremble. But then he thought about the penalties for statutory incest-rape and decided to postpone that one.

The other problem concerned his shares of South African Sweatshops, Ltd. They had been slumping lately, and he was thinking of cashing them in and buying International Thanatopsis Corporation.

To come to a valid market decision, Mr. West had to assess such factors as leverage, margin, seasonal variation, investor confidence, the Dow-Jones averages, Alfalfa futures and many other things. No one can be expected to think about those things himself. It was obviously a job for the Voice.

The Voice considered the problem overnight, then, during breakfast, said, "Okay, I think we got a solution. The difficulty was in discounting certain properties which may be induced in tensile web structures."

"What?" said Mr. West.

"Rigidity and flexibility can be combined as a single gradient function," the Voice went on, "but an absolute one in terms of self-enclosed systems homeostasis. Therefore, molar incrementation will result in exponentially increased product strength."

"What are you talking about?" Mr. West asked.

"The apparent reversal of Frochet's Law is due to the fact that energy flowing through end-oriented web-and-pebble systems can be considered a simple bipolar variable. Once you understand that, the industrial applications for this form of lamination are obvious."

"Not to me they're not," West shouted. "What's going on here? Who are you?"

There was no reply from the Voice. It had signed off.

During the rest of the day, he could hear numerous Voices in his head. They were saying all sorts of strange things:

"Martin Bormann is alive and well and working as a Scientology auditor in Manaus, Brazil."

"Leaping Lady in the third at Aqueduct."

"You are a potential ruler of the solar system, but your evil pseudo-parents have trapped you in an unclean mortal body."

That sort of talk alarmed Mr. West. He figured that one Voice in the head was rational, normal and perfectly okay. But hearing a lot of Voices was one of the signs of a crazy person. And, worst of all, he couldn't get any answers from his own individual Voice.

He kept calm over the next few days and tried to solve his own problems unaided. He sold Sweatshops, Ltd., and it promptly went up five points. He bought Thanatopsis Corporation and it fell to a record low when *Time* magazine announced a new immortality serum as "imminent."

He tried to solve the Amelia problem. He rubbed his twitching nose with his sweating hands and thought, "Let's see, I could sneak

into her room at night wearing a black mask. She'd probably know who I was anyhow but I could deny the whole thing in court and who'd take the word of a dummy? Or I could tell her that the latest technique in sex education was actual demonstration..."

But he knew that these solutions were filled with danger. He was simply no good at solving his own problems, and there was no reason why he should be. That was work for his Voice — which he pictured as a miniature Mr. West about the size of a pea who sat in the part of his brain labeled "Control Central" and looked out at the world through Mr. West's senses and sorted things out and made decisions.

That was the normal, rational way that nature had intended. But his own personal Voice was no longer speaking to him, or had disappeared, or simply wasn't getting through.

Toward the end of the week he became impatient. "Solve something, damn you!" he shouted, pounding his forehead with his fist. But nothing happened except that various Voices told him how to fix liquid helium at room temperature, how to build a multiple-takeoff substance-extractor out of an old washing machine and how to vary his collage technique with overprinted rotogravure backgrounds.

Then, at last, the generator tests were completed, sunspot activity started to decline, cosmic ray activity returned to normal, the Van Allen belts shifted four degrees north, and Mr. West stopped hearing Voices.

The last two messages he received were these:

"Try wearing a strapless pushup bra one size too small. If that doesn't get his attention, nothing will!"

And,

"Go forth, then, and lead My Children to Sanctuary on Mount Alluci, and tell them to render praises unto Me, for only this Place of Righteousness shall remain after the Evil Nations have destroyed each other with Fire and Plague, and make sure that you buy with Clear Title as much unentailed land as you can, because the price of real estate around here is going to go Sky High after the Balloon goes up next year."

However, that was not quite the end of the matter. For on the day that the Voices stopped, Mr. West read an interesting item in *The New York Times*. The item told how a municipal policeman in Rio

Grande do Sul, moved by what he called a "message in my head," went to Manaus and discovered Martin Bormann, alive and well and working as a Scientology auditor.

Mr. West also glanced at the sports pages and found that Leaping Lady had won the third race at Aqueduct the previous day.

The following evening, on the seven o'clock news, Mr. West heard that the Smithsonian had been blown up with great loss of stuffed animals.

Mr. West found this disturbing. He hurried out and bought an armload of newspapers and magazines. In *Art Times* he read how Calderon Kelly, in his latest one-man show, had varied his collage technique with overprinted rotogravure backgrounds, achieving an effect at once profound and lighthearted. And *Science Briefs* had a column about John Wolping, who had just announced a new form of lamination utilizing energy flows through end-oriented web-and-pebble systems. The Wolping Method was expected to revolutionize lamination techniques.

Mr. West was especially interested in a New York *Post* feature story about a new religious colony on the northern slope of Mount Alluci in eastern Peru. Two dozen Americans had followed Elihu Littlejohn Carter (known as "The Last Prophet") to this desolate place. They were confidently awaiting the end of the world.

Mr. West put down the newspaper. He felt strange and numb and disoriented. Like a sleepwalker he picked up the telephone, got the number of Pan Am, called and booked a flight to Lima for the following day.

As he put down the telephone, a clear, unmistakable Voice in his head — *his* Voice — said to him, "You should never have sold Sweatshops, Ltd., but you can still recoup by doubling up on Thanatopsis, which is really going to take off next month."

The miniature Mr. West was back at Control Center! "Where have you been?" the big Mr. West asked.

"I've been here all along. I just haven't been able to get a connection until now."

"Did you happen to hear anything about the world coming to an end next year?" Mr. West asked.

"I don't listen to that irrational weirdo stuff," the miniature Mr. West said. "Now look, about Amelia — all you have to do is spike her Kool-Aid with two Nembutals tonight and you can figure out the rest for yourself."

Mr. West canceled his trip to Peru. Thanatopsis Corporation split ten for one at the end of the month, and Amelia is hooked on nembies. Every man must follow the dictates of his own inner Voice.

A SUPPLICANT IN SPACE

1

Detringer had been banished from his home planet of Ferlang for “acts of incredible grossness” — he had sucked his teeth insolently during the Meditation Frolic, and had switched his tail widershins when the Regional Grand Ubiquitor condescended to spit at him.

These impertinences would normally have earned him no more than a few dozen years of Plenary Ostracism. But Detringer had aggravated his offenses by Willful Disobedience during Godmemory Meeting; at which time he had persisted in audibly reminiscing upon certain of his rather unsavory sexual exploits.

His final asocial act was unprecedented in the recent history of Ferlang: he had meted out Overt Malevolent Violence upon the person of a Ukanister, thus performing the first act of Open Public Aggression since the primitive era of the Death Games.

It was this last repulsive act, resulting in minor bodily injury but major ego damage to the Ukanister, that earned Detringer the supreme punishment of Extraterrestrial Banishment.

Ferlang is the fourth planet from its sun in a fifteen-planet system situated near an edge of the galaxy. Detringer was taken deep into the void between galaxies via star ship, and then set adrift in a tiny, underpowered Sportster. He was voluntarily accompanied by his loyal mechanical servant, Ichor.

Detringer's wives — gay, flighty Maruskaa, tall, thoughtful Gwenkifer, and floppy-eared, irrepressible Uu — all divorced him in a solemn Act of Eternal Revulsion. His eight children performed

the Office of Parental Repudiation — though Bethanie, the youngest, was heard to mutter afterward, "I don't care what you did, Daddy, I still love you."

Detringer was not to be afforded the comfort of knowing this, of course. Cast loose upon the infinite sea of space, the inadequate energy systems of his tiny craft inexorably ran down. He came to know hunger, cold, thirst, and the continual throbbing headache of oxygen deprivation as he voluntarily put himself upon stringent rations. The immense deadness of space spread on all sides of him, broken only by the merciless glare of distant stars. He had turned off the Sportster's engines immediately: there was no use wasting its small fuel capacity in the intergalactic void that taxed the resources of the enormous star ships. He would save his fuel for planetary maneuvering, if that unlikely opportunity should ever be vouchsafed him.

Time was a motionless black jelly in which he was encased. Deprived of its familiar moorings, a lesser mind must have cracked. But it is a measure of the being that, instead of giving in to the despair whose objective correlatives were all around him, he rallied, forced himself to take an interest in the minutest routines of the dying ship, gave a concert every "night" for his tone-deaf servant Ichor, performed calisthenics, practiced High Speed Meditation, erected elaborate autosexual rituals as set forth in the Solitude Survival Book and in a hundred ways diverted himself from the crushing realization of his own almost certain death.

After an interminable period, the character of space changed abruptly. The doldrums gave way to unsettled conditions. There were elaborate electrical displays presaging new peril. At last a line storm swept down on a narrow front, caught up the Sportster and swept it pell-mell into the heart of the void.

The very inadequacy of the little spaceship served to preserve it. Unresistingly driven by the storm front, the ship survived by yielding; and when the storm had run its course, the ship's hull still reserved its integrity.

Little need be said about the ordeal of the occupants at this time, except that they survived. There was a period of unconsciousness. Then Detringer opened his eyes and groggily looked around him. After that he looked out the spaceports, and then through his navigational instruments.

"We've completely crossed the Void," he told Ichor. "We are approaching the outer limits of a planetary system."

Ichor raised himself on one aluminum elbow and asked, "Of what type is the sun?"

"It is an O type," Detringer said.

"Praise be to God's Memory!" Ichor intoned, then collapsed due to discharged batteries.

2

The last currents of the storm subsided before the Sportster crossed the orbit of the outermost planet, nineteenth out from the sturdy, medium-sized life-giving O-type sun. Detringer recharged Ichor from the ship's accumulators, although the mechanical protested that the current might better be saved for a possible ship's emergency.

This emergency came sooner than Detringer had imagined. His instrument reading had shown that the fifth planet out from the sun was the only one that could support Detringer's life requirements without the assistance of imported artificialities. But it was too far away for the ship's remaining fuel, and now space was doldrum-calm again, affording no impetus to aid them toward their goal.

One course of action would be to sit tight, wait, and hope that a stray inbound current would come their way, or even another storm. This plan was admittedly conservative. It bore the danger that no current or storm would come during the short period in which they could sustain themselves on the ship's resources. Additionally, there was the risk that, if a current or storm should arise, it would bear them in an incompatible direction.

Still, there were risks no matter what course of action was taken. Characteristically, Detringer chose the more enterprising and perhaps more dangerous plan. Plotting the most economical course and speed, he set forth to cover whatever portion of the journey his ship's fuel would allow, prepared to trust to Providence thereafter.

By painstaking piloting and hand-metering of the fuel, he managed to come within two hundred million miles of their destination. Then Detringer had to shut down the engines, leaving himself only a scant hour's worth of fuel for intra-atmospheric maneuvering.

The Sportster drifted through space, still moving toward the fifth planet, but so slowly that a thousand years would barely suffice to bring it within the planet's atmospheric limits. By a very slight effort of the imagination, the ship could be considered a coffin, and Detringer its premature occupant. But Detringer refused to dwell upon this. He began again his regime of calisthenics, concerts, High Speed Meditation, and auto-sexual rituals.

Ichor was somewhat shocked by all this. Himself of an orthodox turn of mind, he gently pointed out that Detringer's acts were inapropos of the situation, and therefore insane.

"You're quite right, of course," Detringer replied cheerfully. "But I must remind you that Hope, even though judged incapable of fulfillment, is still considered one of the Eight Irrational Blessings, and therefore (according to the Second Patriarch) of a higher order of magnitude than the derived Sanity Injunctions."

Confuted by scripture, Ichor gave his grudging assent to Detringer's practices, and even went so far as to sing a hymn in harmony with him (with results as ludicrous as they were cacophonous).

Inexorably their energy ran down. Half- and then quarter-rations impaired their efficiency and brought them near the point of complete dysfunction. In vain did Ichor beg his master to drain his own personal batteries into the ship's chilly heaters.

"Never mind," said Detringer, shuddering with cold, "we'll go out together as equals, in possession of what senses we've got, if we go out at all, which I consider doubtful despite impressive evidence to the contrary."

Perhaps Nature is influenced by Temperament. Surely only for Detringer would She have obliged by sending a strong inbound current just when their energy resources had dwindled to no more than memories.

The landing itself was simple enough for a pilot of Detringer's skill and luck. He brought them down upon the green and inviting surface of the fifth planet light as thistledown. And when he shut down the engines for the last time there were some thirty-eight seconds of fuel remaining.

Ichor fell to his ferrominium knees and praised the Godmemory that had remembered to bring them to this place of refuge. But Detringer said, "Let's see first if we can live here before we go maudlin with thanks."

The fifth world proved hospitable enough, and all of the necessities of life could be found with moderate effort, though few of the amenities. Escape was impossible: only an advanced technological civilization could produce the complex fuel needed for the ship's engines. And a brief aerial survey had shown that the fifth planet, although a picturesque and inviting world, had no civilizations, nor even any sign of intelligent beings.

By a simple cross-wiring procedure, Ichor prepared himself psychologically for the prospect of spending the rest of his lifespan in this place. He advised Detringer similarly to accept the inevitable. After all, he pointed out, even if they did somehow obtain fuel, where would they go? The odds against finding an advanced planetary civilization, even for a well-equipped exploration ship, were astronomical. For a small vessel like the *Sportster*, the attempt would be tantamount to suicide.

Detringer was unimpressed by this reasoning. "Better to search and die," he said, "than to vegetate and live."

"Master," Ichor pointed out respectfully, "that is heresy."

"I suppose it is," Detringer said cheerfully. "But it is how I feel. And my intuition tells me that something will turn up."

Ichor shuddered and was glad for the sake of his master's soul that, despite Detringer's hopes, he was to receive the Unction of Perpetual Solitude.

3

Captain Edward Makepeace Macmillan stood in the Main Control Room of the exploration ship *Jenny Lind* and scanned the tape as it came out of the 1100 Series Coordinating Computer. It was apparent that the new planet was safe within the measuring ability of the ship's instruments.

Macmillan had come a long way to reach this moment. A brilliant Life-Sciences major at the University of Taos, Macmillan had gone on to do graduate work in Nucleonic Theory and Control. His Ph.D. thesis, entitled "Some Preliminary Notes on Certain Considerations Concerning the (Projected) Science of Interstellar Maneuvering," had been enthusiastically accepted by his committee, and later successfully published for the general public under the title "Lost and Found in Deepest Space." That, plus his long article in *Nature*, titled "The

Use of Declension Theory in Spacecraft Landing Modalities," made him the only serious choice for captain of America's first interstellar ship.

He was a tall, handsome, strongly built man. His hair was prematurely flecked with gray, belying his thirty-six years. His reactions concerning navigation were quick and sure, and his instinct for the integrity of his ship was awesome.

Less awesome were his dealings with men. Macmillan was cursed with a certain shyness, a diffidence toward others, a knowledge of dubiety which sapped the decision-making process, and which, however admirable it might be in a philosopher, was a potential weakness in a leader of men.

There was a knock on the door, and Colonel Kettelman entered without bothering to be asked, "Looks good down there, hah?" he said.

"The planetary profile is quite favorable," Macmillan said stiffly.

"That's fine," Kettelman said, looking uncomprehendingly at the computer tape. "Anything interesting down there?"

"A great deal," Macmillan said. "Even a long-distance survey has shown what might well be some unique vegetative structures. Additionally, our bacteria scan shows some anomalies which —"

"I didn't mean *that* kind of stuff," Kettelman said, evincing the natural indifference a career soldier sometimes feels for bugs and plants. "I meant important stuff like alien armies and space fleets and like that."

"There is no sign of any civilization down there," Macmillan said. "I doubt if we will even find traces of intelligent life."

"Well, you can never tell," Kettelman said hopefully. He was a stocky, barrel-chested ramrod of a man. He was a veteran of the American Assistance Aid Campaigns of '34, and had fought as a major in the jungles of western Honduras in the so-called United Fruit War, emerging as a lieutenant colonel. He had received his full colonelcy during the ill-fated New York Insurrection, at which time he had personally led his men in storming the Subtreasury Building, and then had held down the 42nd Street Line against the crack Gay Battalion.

Utterly fearless, known as a soldier's soldier, possessing an impeccable combat record, wealthy in his own right, a friend of many U.S. Senators and Texas oilmen, and not unintelligent, he had won

the coveted appointment of Commandant of Alien Military Operations aboard the *Jenny Lind*.

Now he awaited the long-desired moment when he would lead his combat team of twenty Marines onto the surface of the fifth planet. And, despite the instruments readings, Kettelman knew that anything might be down there waiting to strike and maim and kill, unless he did so first, as he planned to do.

"There is one thing," Macmillan said. "We have detected a spacecraft on the surface of the planet."

"Ah!" Kettelman said. "I knew there'd be something! You spotted only one ship?"

"Yes. A small one, displacing less than a twentieth the volume of our craft, and apparently unarmed."

"That's what they'd like you to believe, of course," said Kettelman. "I wonder where the others are."

"What others?"

"The other alien spaceships and crews and ground-to-space weapon-systems and all the rest of it, of course."

"The presence of one alien spacecraft does not logically imply any other alien spacecraft," Captain Macmillan said.

"No? Listen, Mac, I learned my logic in the jungles of Honduras," Kettelman said. "The logic there was, if you found one runt with a machete you could be sure of finding another fifty or so hiding in the bushes waiting to cut your ears off if you gave them a chance. You could get killed if you waited around for logical inferences."

"The circumstances were somewhat different," Captain Macmillan pointed out.

"So what does that matter?"

Macmillan winced and turned away. Talking with Kettelman was painful for him, and he avoided it as much as he could. The Colonel was a disputatious individual, stubborn, easily driven to wrath, and possessed of many positive opinions, most of which were founded upon a bedrock of nearly invincible ignorance. The Captain knew that the antipathy between them was mutual. He was well aware that Kettelman considered him an indecisive and ineffective person except perhaps in his special scientific areas.

Luckily, their areas of command were sharply defined and delineated. Or they had been to date.

4

Detringer and Ichor stood in a clump of trees and watched as the large alien spacecraft settled down to a faultless landing.

"Whoever is piloting that ship," Detringer said, "is a master pilot beyond compare. I would like to meet such a being."

"Doubtless you will get your chance," Ichor said. "It is surely no accident that, given the entire surface of this planet to choose from, they have elected to put down almost beside us."

"They must have detected us, of course," Detringer said. "And they must have decided to take a bold line; exactly as I would do, given their position."

"That makes sense," Ichor said. "But what will you do, given *your* position?"

"Why, I'll take a bold line, of course."

"This is an historic moment," Ichor said. "A representative of the Ferlang People will soon meet the first intelligent aliens our race has ever encountered. How ironic that this opportunity should be vouchsafed to a criminal!"

"The opportunity, as you call it, was forced upon me, I assure you that I did not seek it. And by the way: I think we will say nothing about my little differences with the Ferlang authorities."

"Do you mean that you are going to lie about who you are and what you are doing here?"

"That is a harsh way of putting it," Detringer said. "Let us say that I am going to spare my people the embarrassment of having a criminal as their first emissary to an alien race."

"Well...I suppose that will be all right," Ichor said.

Detringer looked hard at his mechanical servant. "It seems to me, Ichor, that you do not entirely approve of my expedencies."

"No, sir, I do not. But please understand: I am faithful to you without cavil. I would sacrifice myself for your welfare without hesitation. I will serve you unto death, and beyond, if that is possible. But loyalty to a person does not affect one's religious, social, and ethical beliefs. I love you, sir; but I cannot approve of you."

"Well, then, I am warned," Detringer said. "And now back to our alien friends. A port is opening. They are coming out."

"Soldiers are coming out," Ichor said.

5

The new arrivals were bipedal, and also had two upper limbs. Each individual had only one head, one mouth and one nose, like Detringer himself. They had no visible tails or antennae. They were obviously soldiers, to judge by the equipment they carried. Each individual was heavily laden with what could be deduced as projectile weapons, gas and explosive grenades, beam projectors, short-range atomics, and much else besides. They wore personal armor and their heads were encased in clear plastic bubbles. There were twenty of them so equipped, and one, obviously their leader, who had no visible weaponry but carried a sort of whippy stick — probably a badge of office — with which he tapped himself on the upper left pedal appendage as he marched at the head of his soldiers.

The soldiers advanced, well spread out, taking momentary concealment behind natural objects, and posturally demonstrating an attitude of extreme suspicion and wariness. The officer walked directly forward without taking cover, his posture evidently portraying nonchalance, bravado, or stupidity.

"I don't think we should skulk around these bushes any longer," Detringer said. "It is time for us to go forward and meet them with the dignity that befits an emissary of the Ferlang people."

He stepped forward immediately and strode toward the soldiers, followed by Ichor. Detringer was magnificent at that moment. Amazingly enough, he looked just like the Lithuanian Ambassador Prokolchuff being presented for the first time at the court of Louis XIV.

6

Everybody on the *Jenny Lind* knew about the alien spacecraft only a mile away. So it should have proven no surprise when the alien ship turned out to have an alien aboard who was at that moment advancing boldly to meet Kettelman's Marines.

But it did prove a surprise. No one was prepared to meet a genuine, honest-to-god, weird-looking, live-and-kicking *alien*. It opened up too many imponderables. To name just one what do you *say* when you finally meet an alien? How do you live up to the awesome historicity of the moment? Whatever you come up with is

going to sound like, "Dr. Livingston, I presume?" People are going to laugh at you and your words — pompous or banal — for centuries. Meeting an alien has enormous potential for embarrassment.

Both Captain Macmillan and Colonel Kettelman were feverishly rehearsing opening lines and rejecting them, and half-hoping that the C31 Translating Computer would blow a transistor. The Marines were praying, "Jesus, I hope he don't try to talk to *me*." Even the ship's cook was thinking, "Christ, I suppose first thing out he'll want to know all about what we eat."

But Kettelman was in the lead. He thought, "To hell with this, I'm sure as hell not going to be the first to talk to him." He slowed down to let his men go ahead of him. But his men stopped in their tracks, waiting for the Colonel, because *they* sure as hell weren't going to be the first to talk to him. Captain Macmillan, standing just behind the Marines, also stopped, and wished that he hadn't worn his full-dress uniform complete with decorations. He was the most resplendent man on the field and he just knew that the alien was going to walk straight over to him and begin talking.

All of the Terrans stood stock-still. The alien continued to advance. Embarrassment gave way to panic in the Terran ranks. The Marines looked at the alien and thought, "*Jesus*, what's happening?" They wavered, obviously on the verge of flight. Kettelman saw this and thought, "*They are going to disgrace the Corps and me!*"

The realization sobered him. Suddenly he remembered the newsmen. Yes, the newsmen! Let the newsmen do it, that's what they were paid for!

"Platoon, halt!" he called, then set his men at port arms. The alien stopped, perhaps to see what was going on.

"Captain!" he called, "I suggest that for this historic moment we unleash — I mean *bring forth* — the newsmen!"

"An excellent suggestion!" Captain Macmillan said, and gave the order to take the newsmen out of Stasis Freeze and bring them forth immediately.

Then everybody waited until the newsmen came.

7

The newsmen were laid out in a special room. A sign on the door read: "STASIS FREEZE. No Admittance Except to Authorized

Personnel." Hand-lettered beneath that were the words: "Not to be Awakened Except for Top Story."

Within the room, each stretched out on his own cot, were four newsmen and one newswoman. They had all agreed that it would be a waste of subjective time to live through the uneventful years required for the *Jenny Lind* to reach any destination at all. So they had all agreed to go into Stasis Freeze, with the understanding that they would be resuscitated immediately if anything newsworthy occurred. They left the decision as to what constituted news to Captain Macmillan, who had worked as a reporter on the *Phoenix Sun* during his junior and sophomore years at the University of Taos.

Ramon Delgado, the Scots engineer with the strange life story, received the order to wake up the newspeople. He made the necessary adjustments in their individual life-support systems. In fifteen minutes they were all somewhat groggily conscious and demanding to know what was going on.

"We've landed on a planet," Delgado said. "It's an Earth-type place, but seems to have no civilizations, nor any indigenous intelligent beings."

"You woke us up for *that*?" asked Quebrada of the Southeastern News Syndicate.

"There's more," Delgado said. "There is also an alien spaceship on this planet, and we have contacted an intelligent alien."

"That's more like it," said Millicent Lopez of *Women's Wear Daily* and others. "Did you happen to notice what this alien is wearing?"

"Could you ascertain how intelligent he is?" asked Mateos Upmann of the *N. Y. Times* and the *L. A. Times*.

"What has he said so far?" asked Angel Potemkin of NBC-CBS-ABC.

"He hasn't said anything," Engineer Delgado said. "Nobody has spoken to him yet."

"Do you mean to say," said E.K. Quetzala of the Western News Syndicate, "that the first alien ever encountered by the people of Earth is standing out there like a dope and *nobody is interviewing him*?"

The newspeople rushed out of the Stasis Freeze room, many of them still trailing tubes and wires, paused only to pick up their cassette recorders in the Reporters' Ready Room and hurried outside.

Once outside, blinking in strong sunlight, three of them picked up the C31 Translating Computer. They all rushed forward, brushing Marines aside, and surrounded the alien.

Upmann turned the C31 on, took one of its microphones and handed another to the alien, who hesitated a moment, then took it.

"Testing, one, two, three," Upmann said. "Did you understand what I said?"

"You said, 'Testing, one, two, three,'" Detringer said, and everyone gave a sigh of relief for the first words had finally been said to Earth's first alien, and Upmann was going to look like a real idiot in the history books. But Upmann didn't care what he looked like as long as he was *in* the history books, so he went right on interviewing, and so did the others.

Detringer had to tell what he ate, how long and how often he slept, his sex life and its deviations from the Ferlang norm, his first impressions of Earthmen, his personal philosophy, how many wives he had and how he got along with them, how many children he had, how it felt to be him, his occupation, his hobbies, his interest or lack of interest in gardening, his recreations, whether he ever got intoxicated, and in what manner, his extramarital sexual practices, if any, what sort of sports he engaged in, his views on interstellar amity between intelligent races, the advantages or disadvantages of having a tail, and much more.

Captain Macmillan, now feeling a little ashamed of himself for neglecting his official duties, came forward and rescued the alien, who was bravely trying to explain the inexplicable and making heavy work of it.

Colonel Kettelman came, too, for he was after all in charge of security and it was his duty to penetrate deeply into the nature and intentions of the alien.

There was a short clash of wills between these two officials concerning who should have the first meeting with Detringer, or whether it should be held jointly. It was finally decided that Macmillan, as symbolic representative of the Earth peoples, should meet first with the alien. But it was understood that this would be a purely ceremonial meeting. Kettelman would meet later, but it was understood that that meeting would be action-oriented.

That solved matters nicely, and Detringer went off with Macmillan. The Marines returned to the ship, stacked their arms and went back to polishing their boots.

Ichor stayed behind. The news representative from Midwest News Briefs had grabbed him for an interview. This representative,

Melchior Carrerra, was also commissioned to do articles for *Popular Mechanics*, *Playboy*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Automation Engineers' Digest*. It was an interesting interview.

8

Detringer's talk with Captain Macmillan went very well. They shared relativistic outlooks on most things, both possessed natural tact, and each was willing to attempt the sympathetic understanding of a viewpoint not his own. They liked each other, and Captain Macmillan felt with some astonishment that Detringer was less alien to him than was Colonel Kettelman.

The interview with Kettelman, which followed immediately afterward, was a different matter. Kettelman, after brief courtesies, got right down to business.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Detringer had been prepared for the necessity of explaining his situation. He said, "I am an Advance Scout for the spatial forces of Ferlang. I was blown far off my course by a storm, and put down here when my fuel ran out."

"So you're marooned," Kettelman said.

"I am indeed. Temporarily, of course. As soon as my people can spare the necessary equipment and personnel, they will send a relief ship out to pick me up. But that would take quite a while. So if you wouldn't mind letting me have a little fuel, I would be deeply grateful."

"Hmmm," said Colonel Kettelman.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Hmmm," said the C31 Translating Computer, "is a polite sound made by Terrans to denote a short period of silent cogitation."

"That's a lot of double-talk," Kettelman said. "'Hmmm' doesn't mean anything at all. You say that you need fuel?"

"Yes, Colonel, I do," Detringer said. "From various external signs I believe that our propulsion systems are comparable."

"The propulsion system of the *Jenny Lind* — " began the C31.

"Wait a minute, that's *classified*," Kettelman said.

"No, it's not," said the C31. "Everyone on Earth has been using the system for the last twenty years, and it was officially declassified last year."

"Hmmm," said the Colonel, and looked unhappy as the C31 explained the ship's propulsion system.

"Just as I thought," Detringer said. "I won't even have to modify the formula. I can use your fuel just as it is. If you can spare any, that is."

"Oh, there's no difficulty there," Kettelman said. "We've got plenty. But I think we have a few things to talk over first."

"Like what?" Detringer asked.

"Like whether it would serve the interests of our security to give you the fuel."

"I fail to see any problem," Detringer said.

"It should be obvious. Ferlang is obviously a highly advanced technological civilization. As such, you pose a potential threat to us."

"My dear Colonel, our planets are in different galaxies."

"So what? We Americans have always fought our wars as far from home as possible. Maybe you Ferlangs do the same. What does distance matter, as long as you can get there at all?"

Detringer controlled his temper and said, "We are peaceful people, defense-minded, and deeply interested in interstellar amity and cooperation."

"So you say," Kettelman said. "But how can I be sure?"

"Colonel," Detringer said, "aren't you being a little bit..." He fumbled for the word, then supplied it in his own language. "*Urmuguabtt.*"

The C31 said, "He wants to know if you aren't being a little bit paranoid."

Kettelman bristled. Nothing got him angrier than when people implied that he was paranoid. It made him feel persecuted.

"Don't get me sore," he said ominously. "Now, suppose you tell me why I shouldn't order you killed and every vestige of your ship destroyed in the interests of Terran security. By the time your people got here, we'd be long gone and the Ferlangers or whatever you call them wouldn't know a damned thing about us."

"That would be a possible course, security-wise," Detringer said, "were it not for the fact that I radioed my people as soon as I saw your ship, and continued my broadcast right up to the moment I came out to meet you. I told Base Command all I could about you, including an educated guess as to the type of sun required for your

physiques, and another guess as to the direction your world lies in, based upon ion-trail analysis."

"You *are* a clever fellow, aren't you?" Kettelman said peevishly.

"I also told my people that I was going to request some fuel from your obviously copious stores. I suppose they would account it an extremely unfriendly act if you refused me this favor."

"I never thought of that," Kettelman said. "Hmmm. I *am* under orders not to provoke an interstellar incident..."

"So," Detringer said, and waited.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. Kettelman hated the thought of giving what amounted to military assistance to a being who might be his next enemy. But there seemed no way around it.

"All right," he said at last, "I'll send the fuel over tomorrow."

Detringer thanked him and talked quite openly and frankly about the enormous size and complex weaponry of the Ferlang interspatial armed forces. He exaggerated somewhat. In fact, not one word did he say that was true.

9

Early in the morning, a human came over to Detringer's ship carrying a canister of fuel. Detringer told him to set it down anywhere, but the human insisted upon carrying it personally through the Sportster's tiny cabin and pouring it into the fuel tank. Those were the Colonel's orders, he said.

"Well, that's a beginning," Detringer said to Ichor. "Only about sixty more cans to go."

"But why are they sending them one at a time?" Ichor asked. "Surely that is inefficient."

"Not necessarily. It depends what Kettelman is hoping to achieve."

"What do you mean?" Ichor asked.

"Nothing, I hope. Let's wait and see."

They waited, and long hours passed, and at last evening came, but no more fuel was sent over. Detringer walked over to the Ter-ran ship. Brushing the reporters aside, he requested an interview with Kettelman.

An orderly led him to the Colonel's quarters. The room was simply furnished. On the walls were a few mementos — two rows

of medals mounted on black velvet in a solid gold frame, a photograph of a Doberman pinscher with fangs bared, and a shrunken head taken during the Siege of Tegucigalpa. The Colonel himself, stripped down to khaki shorts, was squeezing a rubber ball in each hand and one in each foot.

"Yes, Detringer, what can I do for you?" the Colonel asked.

"I came to ask you why you have stopped sending the fuel," Detringer said.

"Have you now?" Kettelman released all the rubber balls and sat down in a leather-backed Director's Chair with his name stenciled on it. "Well, I'll answer that by asking you a question. Detringer, how did you manage to send radio messages to your people without any radio equipment?"

"Who says I have no radio equipment?" Detringer asked.

"I sent Engineer Delgado over with that first can of fuel," Kettelman said. "He was under orders to see what sort of rig you were using. He told me that there were no signs of radio equipment in your ship. Engineer Delgado is an expert on that sort of thing."

"We miniaturize our equipment," Detringer said.

"So do we. But it still requires a lot of hardware, which you don't seem to have. I might add additionally that we have been listening on all frequencies ever since we got close to this planet. We have detected no transmissions of any kind."

Detringer said, "I can explain all of that."

"Please do so."

"It's simple enough. I lied to you."

"That much is evident. But it explains nothing."

"I wasn't finished. We Ferlangers have our security too, you know. Until we know more about you, it is only common sense to reveal as little about ourselves as possible. If you were gullible enough to believe that we relied on so primitive a system of communication as radio, it might be a small advantage for us in case we ever met again under unfriendly circumstances."

"So how do you communicate? Or don't you?"

Detringer hesitated, then said, "I suppose it doesn't matter if I tell you. You were bound to find out sooner or later that my species is telepathic."

"Telepathic? You are claiming that you can send and receive thoughts?"

"That is correct," Detringer said.

Kettelman stared at him for a moment, then said, "Okay, what am I thinking now?"

"You're thinking that I'm a liar," Detringer said.

"That's right," Kettelman said.

"But that was obvious and I didn't learn that by reading your mind. You see, we Ferlangers are telepathic only among members of our own species."

"Do you know something?" Colonel Kettelman said. "I still think you're a damned liar."

"Of course," Detringer said. "The question is, can you be sure?"

"I'm damned sure," Kettelman said grimly.

"But is that good enough? For the requirements of your security, I mean? Consider: If I am telling the truth, then yesterday's reasons for giving me fuel are equally valid today. Do you agree?"

The Colonel nodded grudgingly.

"Whereas, if I'm lying, and you give me fuel, no harm will be done. You will have helped a fellow being in distress, thus putting me and my people in your debt. That would be a promising way to begin the relationship between us. And, with both our races pushing out into deep space, it is inevitable that our peoples will meet again."

"I suppose it is inevitable," Kettelman said. "But I can maroon you here and postpone official contact until we are better prepared."

"You can *try* to postpone the next contact," Detringer said. "But it still could happen at any time. This, now, is your chance to make a good beginning. The next time might not be so auspicious."

"Hmmm," Kettelman said.

"So there are good reasons for helping me even if I am lying," Detringer said. "And remember, I may be telling the truth. In that case, your refusing me fuel would have to be considered an extremely unfriendly act."

The Colonel paced up and down the narrow room, then whirled, and, in a fury, said, "You argue too damned well!"

"It is just my good luck," Detringer said, "that logic happens to be on the side of helping me."

"He's right, you know," said the C31 Translating Computer. "About the logic part, I mean."

"Shut up!" Kettelman shouted.

"I thought it was my duty to point that out," the C31 said.

The Colonel stopped pacing and rubbed his forehead. "Dettringer, go away," he said wearily. "I'll send over the fuel."

"You won't regret it," Dettringer said.

"I regret it already," Kettelman said. "Now please go away."

10

Dettringer hurried back to his ship and told Ichor the good news. The robot was surprised. "I didn't think he would do it," he said.

"He didn't think so, either," Dettringer said. "But I managed to convince him." He told Ichor of his conversation with the Colonel.

"So you lied," Ichor said sadly.

"Yes. But Kettelman knows I lied."

"Then why is he helping you?"

"Out of fear that I just might conceivably be telling the truth."

"Lying is both a sin and a crime, Master."

"But letting myself stay in this place is something worse," Dettringer said. "It would be a gross stupidity."

"That is not an orthodox view."

"Perhaps it would be just as well for us not to discuss orthodoxy any longer," Dettringer said. "Now I've got some work to do. Suppose you go out and see if you can find me anything to eat."

The servant silently obeyed, and Dettringer sat down with a star atlas in hopes of figuring out where to go from here, assuming he could get out of here.

11

Morning came, bright and resplendent. Ichor went over to the Earth ship to play chess with the robot dishwasher, with whom he had struck up an acquaintance the previous day. Dettringer waited for the fuel.

He was not entirely surprised when noon came and no fuel had been sent over. But he was disappointed and dejected. He waited another two hours, then walked over to the *Jenny Lind*.

He had been expected, so it seemed, for he was led at once to the Officers' Lounge. Colonel Kettelman was seated in a deep armchair. An armed Marine flanked him on either side. The Colonel's

expression was stern, but there was a nimbus of malevolent joy playing about his battered features. Seated nearby was Captain Macmillan, his handsome features unreadable.

"Well, Detringer," the Colonel said, "what is it this time?"

"I came to ask about the fuel which you promised me," Detringer said. "But I see now that you had no intention of keeping your word."

"You got me all wrong," the Colonel said. "I had every intention of giving fuel to a member of the Armed Forces of Ferlang. But what I see before me is not that person at all."

"What do you see, then?" Detringer said.

Kettelman stifled an ugly grin. "Why, I see a criminal, so judged by his own people's highest court. I see a felon whose evil acts were considered unprecedented in the annals of modern Ferlang jurisprudence. I see a being whose unspeakable behavior earned him the most extreme sentence known to his people; namely, perpetual banishment into the depths of space. *That* is who I see standing before me. Or do you deny it?"

"For the moment, I neither deny or affirm," Detringer said. "I would first like to know the source of your remarkable information."

Colonel Kettelman nodded to one of the Marines. The soldier opened a door and led in Ichor, followed by the robot dishwasher.

The mechanical servant burst out, "Oh, Master! I told Colonel Kettelman the true account of the events leading up to our exile on this planet. And now I have doomed you! I beg the privilege of immediate auto-destruct, in partial reparation for my disloyalty."

Detringer was silent, thinking furiously. Captain Macmillan leaned forward and asked, "Ichor, why did you betray your master?"

"I had no choice, Captain!" the miserable mechanical cried. "Before the Ferlang authorities allowed me to accompany my master, they imprinted certain orders upon my brain, which they reinforced with devious circuitry."

"What were these orders?" Macmillan asked.

"They pertained to the covert role of policeman and gaoler which the authorities forced upon me. They demanded that I take appropriate action, should Detringer, by some miracle, find himself able to escape exile and death."

The robot dishwasher burst out, "He told me all about it yesterday, Captain. I begged him to resist his orders. It all seemed to me rather a bad show, sir, if you know what I mean."

"And indeed, I did resist for as long as I could," Ichor said. "But as my master's chance for escape became imminent, my compulsion to prevent this became more imperative. Only an immediate excision of the special circuits could have stopped me."

The robot dishwasher said, "I offered to try to operate on him, sir, though the only tools in my possession were spoons, knives and forks."

Ichor said, "I would have gladly undergone the operation; indeed, I wanted to destroy myself, thus preventing any word from escaping my involuntarily treacherous voice box. But the Ferlang authorities had considered these possibilities, and I was under compulsion not to allow myself willingly to be tampered with or destroyed until I had done the State's bidding. Yet still I resisted until this morning, and then, my strength drained away through value-conflict, I came to Colonel Kettelman and told all."

"And there you have the whole sordid story," Kettelman said to the Captain.

"Not quite all," Captain Macmillan said quietly. "What exactly were your crimes, Detringer?"

Detringer recited them in a steady voice — his Acts of Incredible Grossness, his offense of Willful Disobedience and his final Act of Overt Malevolent Violence. Ichor nodded in forlorn agreement.

"I think we have heard enough," Kettelman said. "I will now pronounce judgement upon this case."

"One moment, Colonel," said Captain Macmillan. He turned to Detringer. "Are you now, or have you at any time been, a member of the Armed Forces of Ferlang?"

"No," Detringer said, and Ichor corroborated his statement.

"Then this being is a civilian," Captain Macmillan said, "and must be judged and sentenced by a civilian authority rather than a military one."

"Well, I don't know about that," Kettelman said.

"The position is quite clear," Captain Macmillan said. "He is a civilian under sentence by a civilian court. No state of war exists between his people and ours. Therefore it is not a military matter."

"I still think I should handle this," Kettelman said. "I know more about these matters than you do, sir — with all due respect."

"I will judge this matter," Macmillan said. "Unless you wish to take over the command of this ship by force of arms."

Kettelman shook his head. "I'm not going to put any black mark on *my* record. Go ahead and sentence him."

Captain Macmillan turned to Detringer. "Sir," he said, "you must understand that I cannot follow my personal inclinations in this matter. Your State has judged you, and it would be ill-advised, impertinent and unpolitic of me to rescind that judgement."

"Damn right," Kettelman said.

"Therefore I continue your sentence of perpetual exile. But I shall enforce it more stringently than has been done heretofore."

The Colonel grinned. Ichor made a despairing sound. The robot dishwasher murmured, "Poor fellow!" Detringer stood firmly and looked at the Captain with unwavering gaze.

Macmillan said, "It is the judgement of this court that the prisoner continue his exile. Furthermore, the court rules that the prisoner's sojourn on this pleasant planet is an amenity unintended by the Ferlang authorities. Therefore, Detringer, you must quit this refuge immediately and return to the empty fastnesses of space."

"That's socking it to him," Colonel Kettelman said. "You know, Captain, I really didn't think you had it in you."

"I'm glad that you approve," Captain Macmillan said. "I hereby request that you see the sentence carried out."

"It'll be a pleasure."

"By using all of your men," Macmillan went on, "I calculate that you can fill the prisoner's fuel tanks in approximately two hours. After that is done, the prisoner must leave this planet at once."

"I'll get him moving before nightfall," Kettelman said. Then a thought occurred to him. "Hey! Fuel for his tanks! That's what Detringer wanted all along!"

"The court is uninterested in what the prisoner may or may not have wanted," Macmillan said. "His desires are not germane to the judgement of this court."

Kettelman said, "But damn it, man, can't you see that you're *letting him go?*"

"I am *making* him go," Macmillan said. "It is quite a different thing."

"We'll see what they say about this back on Earth," Kettelman said ominously.

Detringer bowed to show acquiescence. Then, managing to keep a straight face, he left the Earth ship.

12

At nightfall Detringer blasted off. The faithful Ichor was with him — now more faithful than ever since he had discharged his compulsion. Soon they were in the depths of space, and Ichor asked, "Master, where are we going?"

"To some marvelous new world," Detringer said.

"Or perhaps to our deaths?"

"Perhaps," Detringer said. "But with full fuel tanks, I refuse to worry about that."

They were silent for a while. Then Ichor said, "I hope that Captain Macmillan doesn't get into trouble over this."

"He seemed quite capable of taking care of himself," Detringer said.

13

Back on Earth, Captain Macmillan's action was the cause of much controversy. Before any official decision could be reached about it, however, a second, official contact was made between Ferlang and Earth. The Detringer case came up inevitably, and was found too intricate to allow any quick decision. The matter was turned over to a panel of jurists from the two civilizations.

The case provided full-time employment for five hundred and six Ferlang and Terran lawyers. Arguments pro and con were still being heard years later, by which time Detringer had found a safe refuge and respected position among the Oumenke Peoples of the rim-star civilization.

ZIRN LEFT UNGUARDED, THE JENGHIK PALACE IN FLAMES, JON WESTERLEY DEAD

The bulletin came through blurred with fear. "Somebody is dancing on our graves," said Charleroi. His gaze lifted to include the entire Earth. "This will make a fine mausoleum."

"Your words are strange," she said. "Yet there is that in your manner which I find pleasing...Come closer, stranger, and explain yourself."

I stepped back and drew my sword from its scabbard. Beside me I heard a metallic hiss; Ocpetis Marn had drawn his sword, too, and now he stood with me, back to back, as the Megenth Horde approached.

"Now shall we sell our lives dearly, Jon Westerley," said Ocpetis Marn in the peculiar guttural hiss of the Mnerian race.

"Indeed we shall," I replied. "And there will be more than one widow to dance the Passagekeen before this day is through."

He nodded. "And some disconsolate fathers will make the lonely sacrifice to the God of Deteriorations."

We smiled at each other's staunch words. Yet it was no laughing matter. The Megenth bucks advanced slowly, implacably, across the green and purple moss sward. They had drawn their *raftii* — those long, curved, double-pointed dirks that had struck terror in the innermost recesses of the civilized galaxy. We waited.

The first blade crossed mine. I parried and thrust, catching the big fellow full in the throat. He reeled back, and I set myself for my next antagonist.

Two of them came at me this time. I could hear the sharp intake of Ocpetis's breath as he hacked and hewed with his sword. The situation was utterly hopeless.

I thought of the unprecedented combination of circumstances that had brought me to this situation. I thought of the Cities of the Terran Plurality, whose very existence depended upon the foredoomed outcome of this present impasse. I thought of autumn in Carcassone, hazy mornings in Saskatoon, steel-colored rain falling on the Black Hills. Was all this to pass? Surely not. And yet — why not?

We said to the computer: "These are the factors, this is our predicament. Do us the favor of solving our problem and saving our lives and the lives of all Earth."

The computer computed. It said: "The problem cannot be solved."

"Then how are we to go about saving Earth from destruction?"

"You aren't," the computer told us.

We left sadly. But then Jenkins said, "What the hell — that was only one computer's opinion."

That cheered us up. We held our heads high. We decided to take further consultations.

The gypsy turned the card. It came up Final Judgement. We left sadly. Then Myers said, "What the hell — that's only one gypsy's opinion."

That cheered us up. We held our heads high. We decided to take further consultations.

"You said it yourself: 'A bright blossom of blood on his forehead.' You looked at me with strange eyes. Must I love you?"

It all began so suddenly. The reptilian forces of Megenth, long quiescent, suddenly began to expand due to the serum given them by Charles Engstrom, the power-crazed telepath. Jon Westerley was hastily recalled from his secret mission to Angos II. Westerley had the supreme misfortune of materializing within a ring of Black Force, due to the inadvertent treachery of Ocpetis Marn, his faithful Mnerian companion, who had, unknown to Westerley, been trapped

in the Hall of Floating Mirrors, and his mind taken over by the renegade Santhis, leader of the Entropy Guild. That was the end for Westerley, and the beginning of the end for the rest of us.

The old man was in a stupor. I unstrapped him from the smoldering control chair and caught the characteristic sweet-salty-sour odor of manginee — that insidious narcotic grown only in the caverns of Ingidor — whose insidious influence had subverted our guardposts along the Wall Star Belt.

I shook him roughly. "Preston!" I cried. "For the sake of Earth, for Magda, for everything you hold dear — tell me what happened."

His eyes rolled. His mouth twitched. With vast effort he said, "Zirn! Zirn is lost, is lost, is lost!"

His head lolled forward. Death rearranged his face.

Zirn lost! My brain worked furiously. That meant that the High Star Pass was open, the negative accumulators no longer functioning, the drone soldiers overwhelmed. Zirn was a wound through which our lifeblood would pour. But surely there was a way out?

President Edgars looked at the cerulean telephone. He had been warned never to use it except in the direst emergency, and perhaps not even then. But surely the present situation justified?...He lifted the receiver.

"Paradise Reception, Miss Ophelia speaking."

"This is President Edgars of Earth. I must speak to God immediately."

"God is out of his office just now and cannot be reached. May I be of service?"

"Well, you see," Edgars said, "I have this really bad emergency on my hands. I mean, it looks like the end of everything."

"Everything?" Miss Ophelia asked.

"Well, not *literally* everything. But it does mean the destruction of us. Of Earth and all that. If you could just let me bring this to God's attention..."

"Since God is omniscient, I'm sure he knows all about it."

"I'm sure he does. But I thought that if I could just speak to him personally, just this once — "

"I am afraid that is not possible at this time. But you could leave a message. God is very good and very fair, and I'm sure he will

consider your problem when he has a moment and do what is right and Godly. He's wonderful, you know. I love God."

"We all do," Edgars said sadly.

"Is there anything else?"

"No. Yes! Could you connect me with Mr. Joseph J. Edgars, please?"

"Who is that?"

"My father. He died about ten years ago."

"I am sorry, sir. That is not permitted."

"Can you at least tell me if he's up there with you people?"

"Sorry, we are not allowed to give out that information."

"Well, can you tell me if *anybody* is up there? I mean, is there really an afterlife? Or is it maybe only you and God up there? Or maybe only you?"

"For information concerning the afterlife," Miss Ophelia said, "kindly contact your nearest priest, minister, rabbi, mullah or anyone else on the accredited list of God's representatives. Thank you for calling."

There was a sweet tinkle of chimes. Then the line went dead.

"What did the Big Fellow say?" asked General Muller.

"All I got was double-talk from his secretary."

"Personally, I don't believe in superstitions like God," General Muller said. "Even if it happens to be true, I find it healthier not to believe. Shall we get on with it?"

They got on with it.

Testimony of the robot who might have been Dr. Zach:

"My true identity is a mystery to me, and one which, under the circumstances, I do not expect to be resolved. But I was at the Jenghik Palace. I saw the Megenth warriors swarm over the crimson balustrades, overturn the ceremonial bronze cauldrons, smash, kill, destroy. The governor died with a sword in his hand. The Terran Guard made their last stand in the Dolorus Keep, and perished to a man after mighty blows given and received. The ladies of the court defended themselves with daggers so small as to appear symbolic. They were granted quick passage. I saw the great fire consume the silver eagles of Earth. I watched the Jenghik Palace — that great pile, marking the furthest extent of Earth's suzerainty, topple soundlessly into the dust from which it sprung. And I knew then that all

was lost, and that the fate of Terra — of which planet I consider myself a loyal son, despite the fact that I was (presumably) crafted rather than created, produced rather than born — the fate of divine Terra, I say, was to be annihilated utterly, until not even the memory of a memory remained."

"You said it yourself: 'A star exploded in his eye.' In these last hours I must love you. The rumors are heavy tonight, and the sky is red. I love it when you turn your head just so. Perhaps it is true that we are chaff between the iron jaws of life and death. Still, I prefer to keep time by my own watch. So I fly in the face of the evidence, I fly with you.

"It is the end, I love you, it is the end."

SNEAK PREVIEWS

Peter Honorious looked through his mail one bright September morning and found a peremptory Directive from his local Consanguinity Board demanding that he be married by October 1 or be found in contempt of the State and Federal Pair-Bonding Regulations and subject to various penalties and a possible one-to-five year stretch at Lunaville.

Honorious was dismayed; in August he had filed an Extension of Current Status form, which should have been routinely accepted. It would have given him another six months for his selection of a wife. Now he had a scant two weeks left in which either to comply with the Directive or light out quick for Mexico. And that was not a really desirable alternative in the year 2038.

Damnation!

Over lunch that day Honorious discussed the situation with his oldest friend, Earl Ungerfjord. "It's damned unfair of them," Honorious said. "Somebody up there is persecuting me. But why? I'm no rebel. I know as well as anyone that marriage is the minimum social transaction and the foundation of the State's security. Hell, I even *want* to get married! I just haven't found the right one yet."

"Perhaps you're being too fussy," Ungerfjord suggested. He had been married for almost a month. Human relationships looked quite simple to him.

Honorious shook his head. "Right now I'd settle for anything short of a disaster. The trouble is, despite computer profiles and modern matchup techniques, you can't tell whether you'll pick a good one until you try it out, and then it's too late to do anything about it."

"Yes," Ungerfjord said complacently, "that is the situation most people find themselves in."

"Are there exceptions?"

"As a matter of fact, there *is* a way around a good deal of the uncertainty. I used it myself. It's how I found Janie. I hadn't mentioned it before because I know you don't like to do illegal things."

"Of course I try to live ethically," Honourous said. "But this is really important and I'm prepared to be flexible. Who do I have to kill?"

"It's not as bad as that," Ungerfjord said. He scribbled an address. "Go and speak to Mr. Euler. He is head of Clandestine Computer Services. Tell him I sent you."

Clandestine Computer Services had located for the moment in a suite of dusty offices in the derelict Lincoln Center area, where it masqueraded under the title "Used Softwear Jobbers, Inc." Euler's secretary, a pretty and efficient young woman named Dinah Grebs, showed Honourous into Euler's private office. Euler was a short, plump, balding, friendly, red-cheeked little man with intelligent brown eyes and a disarming manner. He had decorated his office to look like an English drawing room, but had succeeded only in making it look like a corner of a furniture warehouse.

"You've come to the right place," Euler assured him, once the problem had been explained. "The State demands that we marry for the sake of social stability, since it is well-known that most malcontents, rebels, psychopaths, child molesters, social reformers, anarchists, and the like are single, unmarried persons who have nothing to do but selfishly care for themselves and plot the overthrow of the State. Marriage is therefore the obligatory act of loyalty to one's government. And of course no one disputes this or any of the other findings of the National Board of Mothers. We all accept the necessity of marriage; we stipulate only that it should be a good one, or at least tolerable, since that best serves both the individual and the State."

"Yes," Honourous said, "that is why I came here. Do you have any practical —"

Euler was not to be robbed of his peroration. "What is needed is a scientific means of taking the guesswork out of marriage. The

computerized matchups are not good enough; we need a way to look at the *actual events* of one's proposed marriage, and then to make up one's mind about it. We need to see how it plays before we set it to running in our homes for sixty or seventy years."

"If only we could!" Honorious said. "But it is impossible. Or do you happen to know a talented gypsy with a working crystal ball?"

"There is a way," Euler said, smiling.

"Has someone invented a time machine?"

"You know it under a different name. You call it the Political Factors Synthesizer and Simulator."

"I've heard about it," Honorious said. "It's that super computer hidden under a mountain in North Dakota that's always figuring out what one country is going to perpetrate on some other country. But I don't see what it could say about my future wife unless she happened to be a general or something."

"Consider, Mr. Honorious! Here is a machine designed to predict and simulate interactions between various groups and subgroups of people. What if it were used to predict and simulate the probable interactions between two individuals."

"That would be great," Honorious said. "But the PFSS is guarded tighter than Fort Knox."

"My boy, it is easy to guard gold, but difficult to hide information, even if you put a mountain over it! In the hands of corrupt or idealistic operators, the very input channels upon which the Simulator depends for information can be converted to output. I won't even hint as to how: we have our ways. I will only say that the Simulator can lay out your probable future with any woman whatsoever, and simulate the results for you alone."

"I don't see how you can get within ten miles of the Simulator."

"We don't have to. We are in possession of a captive terminal outlet."

Honorious whistled softly under his breath, marveling at the cool effrontery of this pleasant little man. "Mr. Euler, when can I begin?"

The matter of fee was quickly settled and Euler consulted a schedule. "Since your case is urgent, I can give you ten minutes of computer time the day after tomorrow. Be here at noon and Miss Grebs will take you to the terminal and instruct you in the procedure. Don't forget to bring the data cards for yourself and your prospective wives!"

* * *

Honorious was prompt for his appointment. In an envelope he carried data cards for fifteen prospective wives. These women had been selected for him by Computerized Marriage Matchup Services, an exclusive Madison Avenue Agency that had handpicked these fifteen out of the National Availability Pool of American Single Women (NAPASAW) on the basis of answers to 1006 carefully chosen questions. These women were known to Honorious only by their numbers, anonymity being preserved until an Official Pair-Bonding Decision had been made. These women had all elected instant-available status; that meant that all Honorious had to do was signify his willingness to marry any one of them, and that would be that. (Honorious's data card showed that, among other things, he was tall, curly-haired, good-looking, of stable temperament, kind to children and small animals, and pulled in thirty-five thousand a year as the youngest president in the history of Glip Electronics with unlimited prospects before him. Most candidates were willing to take a chance on specs like these; Honorious was the kind of marital mistake that many women would like to make.)

Miss Grebs took Honorious to a used car lot on DeKalb Avenue. The computer terminal was hidden there in the back of a furniture van. Two technicians, disguised as derelicts, led Honorious into the blacked-out inner room where the terminal softly hummed. They put him into the command chair and fastened the psychomental electrodes to his forehead and wrists.

Miss Grebs took the cards. "You'll only have time for one of them today," she said. "You'll be getting five years' events compressed into ten minutes of realtime, so stay on your toes. Which card shall I do?"

"It doesn't matter," Honorious said. "They're all alike. The cards, I mean. Take the top one."

Miss Grebs fed the card into the terminal. It made soft noises, and Honorious felt a tingling behind his eyes. His vision grew misty. When it cleared, he was looking at himself and a pretty, petite girl with long dark hair. This was Miss 1734-AV-2103C.

The information was presented to him in a series of visual vignettes and montages. He saw himself and 1734 eating dinner together in a quaint Italian restaurant and then strolling down Bleeker Street hand in hand. Here they were in Washington Square

beside the fountain, and she was playing a guitar and singing a folk song. How pretty she was! How happy they seemed! Now they were lying together in front of a tiny fireplace in a small apartment on Gay Street. She had taken to parting her hair in the middle. She wore sunglasses and was reading a script; she was going to be in a movie! But nothing came of it and next they were living in a stunning apartment on Sutton Place and she was sullenly frying hamburgers. (They had quarreled; they weren't talking; he read his *Wall Street Journal* and she studied her astrology books.) And now they lived in Connecticut in a beautiful old house with a big sunny nursery, which they used as a storage room. He did a lot of lonely skiing while she studied tantra at a Buddhist study group in Maryland. When she returned she had cut her hair short and she could sit interminably in full lotus. Her unblinking gaze looked right through him and she found lovemaking an unwelcome distraction from her mandalic visualizations. A year later they didn't live together anymore. She had joined an ashram outside of Schenectady, and he had a girlfriend in Brattleboro. And that was enough of Miss 1734. The next available Simulator time was three days later.

The second one, Miss 3543, was a tall, rangy, merry girl with sandy hair and a fetching spray of freckles across the bridge of her nose. She and Honourous set up housekeeping in Malibu where she played tennis every day and read interior decorating magazines. How beautiful she looked as she served him his Waldorf salad beside the barbecue pit while the cocker spaniel rollicked at his feet! Then they were in Paris, the spaniel had become a sad-eyed dachshund, and she was very drunk in Montparnasse and shouting something abusive at him. Then there were similar scenes in Rome, Villefranche, Ibiza. She was a lush now, and they seemed to have acquired a child but misplaced the dachshund, and then there was another child and two cats, and then a housekeeper to keep it all together while 3543 dried out in a very good sanatorium near Grissons. And here they were in London. She was always sober now, a tall, skinny, serious woman who held her mouth in a funny way while she handed out Scientology leaflets in Trafalgar Square and that was the end of five years with Miss 3543.

All that Honourous could remember about the third one was that she had begun as a charming shy girl who glorified his Easthamp-

ton twilights with her long, sexy silences. Two years later, in a suite at the Cattleman in Tulsa, he was screaming at her, "Say something, dummy! Anything! Just for Chrissakes *speak!*" Number four discovered her secret talent at age 27 and became a roller derby star. Number five was the suicidal one who never got around to it. Or was that number six?

By September 29, after viewing fourteen of his potential marriages, Honorious was alarmed and despondent. He went to his final appointment in a state of heavy gloom, almost resigned to contract an alliance with number eleven, the Giggler with the Two Stupid Brothers. At least she was not totally disastrous.

For security reasons the terminal had been taken from its DeKalb Avenue location and set up in a washroom down the hall from Euler's office. Honorious plugged in and saw himself walking on a beach at Martha's Vineyard with 6903, a nice-looking, brown-haired girl who reminded him of somebody he once knew. Here they were walking across the George Washington Bridge, very happy and quite unaware of what lay in store for them as next they ate goat's cheese and drank wine on a limestone rock that jutted out over the Aegean. Here they were on a long rocky plain with white-capped mountains rising in the distance. Tibet? Peru? And then they were in Miami, she was wearing his raincoat and they were running in the rain, laughing. And then they were in a low white house, very much in love, and he was walking up and down the living room with their colicky baby and that was the end of the five-year forecast.

Honorious went at once to Euler's office. "Euler!?" he cried. "I've found her at last! I think I'm in love with 6903!"

"Congratulations, my boy," Euler said. "I was beginning to worry. When do you want to make the Pair-Bond Agreement?"

"I'll do it right now," Honorious said. "Turn on the Public Records Machine! 6903 is quite an attractive number, isn't it? I wonder what her name is?"

"I can find that out for you immediately," Euler said. "This is Clandestine Computer Services, you know! Let me punch that number into the data processor...Right. She is Miss Dinah Grebs of 4885 Railroad Street, Flushing, Queens."

"I think I have heard that name before," Honorious said.

"So have I," Euler said. "It's hauntingly familiar. Grebs, Grebs..."

"Did you call me, sir?" asked Miss Grebs from the other room.

"It's you!" Euler cried.

"It's her!" Honorious cried. "I thought she looked familiar! She is 6903!"

It took a moment for Euler to assimilate this. Then he said sternly, "Miss Grebs, can you tell me how your data card happened to get into Mr. Honorious's selected list of candidates?"

"I will explain that to Mr. Honorious alone," she said in a shaky but defiant voice.

After Euler left, Honorious and Grebs confronted each other. Honorious said, "Would you mind telling me why, Miss Grebs?"

"Well, you *are* a good catch," said Dinah Grebs. "But actually I fell for you the first time you came here. I could see at once that you and I were perfect for each other. I didn't need the most complicated machine in the world to tell me that. But your high-class matrimonial service wouldn't even process my card, and you never looked at me. I wanted you, Honorious, so I did what I had to do in order to get you and I've got nothing to be ashamed of!"

"I see," Honorious said. "I must tell you that in my opinion you don't have a valid legal claim on me. However, I will not object to making a reasonable cash settlement for your time and trouble."

"Did I really hear that?" Grebs asked. "You're offering me money to let you go?"

"Certainly," Honorious said. "I want to do the fair thing."

"Wow," Grebs said. "Well, it won't cost you one cent to get rid of me. As a matter of fact you just lost me."

"Now wait a minute," Honorious said. "I really object to the tone you're taking in this. I am the injured party, you know, not you."

"*You* are the injured party? I fall in love with you, cheat and perjure myself for you, make a fool of myself in front of you, and you stand there and tell me that you are the injured party!"

"But you tried to trap me! I suppose you tampered with the data cards, too?"

"That's right. I'm sure any of them will be suitable for your simpleminded needs. I recommend number three, the one who doesn't talk. At least you'll win some arguments that way."

Honorious said something that sounded like a curse and moved closer to her. Grebs swung her fist at him. Honorious seized her

wrist and they found themselves, not exactly in each other's arms, but definitely in contact and breathing hard. They looked at each other.

Love, the secret and unofficial heart of pair-bonding behavior, is a force to be reckoned with but never predicted. Love supercedes all other directives and cancels previous obligations. The shared look of love is love's preview, presenting a foretaste of the joys and sorrows to come, and setting into motion the automatic mating machinery upon which the success and stability of the State depends.

Later Honourous said, "Hey, was that future of ours for real? Or did you doctor up your own data?"

"You'll just have to wait and find out," Dinah told him, not for the last time.

WELCOME TO THE STANDARD NIGHTMARE

Johnny Bezique was a spaceship-driver for SBC Explorations, Inc. He was surveying a fringe of the Seergon Cluster, which at that time was terra incognita. The first four planets showed nothing interesting. Bezique went to the vicinity of the fifth. The standard nightmare began then.

His ship's loudspeaker came on, apparently activated by remote control. A deep voice said, "You are approaching the planet Loris. We presume that you intend to put down here."

"That's right," Johnny said. "How come you speak English?"

"One of our computers deduced the language from inferential evidence available during your approach to our planet."

"That's pretty good going," Johnny said.

"It was nothing," the voice said. "We will now speak directly to your ship's computer, feeding it landing orbit, speed and other pertinent data. Is that agreeable to you?"

"Sure, go ahead," Johnny said. He had just made Earth's first contact with alien life. That was how the standard nightmare always began.

John Charles Bezique was a bandylegged little man with ginger-colored hair and an irascible disposition. He was mechanically competent at his job. He was also conceited, disputatious, ignorant, fearless and profane. In short, he was perfectly suited for deep-space exploration. It takes a particular kind of man to endure the shattering immensities of space and the paranoid-inducing stresses of threats from the unknown. It takes a man with a large and impervious ego and a consistently high degree of aggressive self-confidence. It takes a kind of a nut. So exploring spaceships are piloted by men like

Bezique, whose self-complacency is firmly based upon unconquerable self-conceit and supported by impenetrable ignorance. The Conquistadores had possessed that psychic makeup. Cortez and his handful of cutthroats conquered the Aztec empire by not realizing that the thing was impossible.

Johnny sat back and watched as the control panel registered an immediate change in course and velocity. The planet Loris appeared in his viewplate, blue and green and brown. Johnny Bezique was about to meet the folks next door.

It's nice to have intelligent neighbors, speaking intergalactically, but it's not nice if those neighbors are a great deal smarter than you are, and maybe quicker and stronger and more aggressive, too. Neighbors like that might want to do things for us or to us or about us. It wouldn't necessarily have to go that way, but let's face it, it's a tough universe, and the primordial question is always, who's on top?

Expeditions were sent out from Earth on the theory that, if there is anything out there, it would be better for us to find them, rather than to have them come dropping by on us some quiet Sunday morning. Earth's standard nightmare scenario always began with contact with a formidable alien civilization. After that, there were variations. Sometimes the aliens were mechanically advanced, sometimes they had incredible mental powers, sometimes they were stupid but nearly invincible — walking plant-people, swarming insect people, and the like. Usually they were ruthlessly amoral, unlike the good guys on Earth.

But those were minor details. The main sequence of the nightmare was always the same: *Earth contacts a powerful alien civilization, and they take us over.*

Bezique was about to learn the answer to the only question that seriously concerned Earth: *Can they lick us or can we lick them?*

So far, he wouldn't care to make book on the outcome.

On Loris you could breathe the air and drink the water. And the people were humanoid. This, despite the fact that the Nobel Prize winner Serge Von Blut had stated that the likeliness of this was contraindicated to the tune of 10^{23} to one.

The Lorians gave Bezique a hypnopaedic knowledge of their language and a guided tour around their major city of Athisse, and the more Johnny saw the gloomier he got, because these people really had an impressive setup.

The Lorians were a pleasant, comely, stable, inventive and progressive people. They had had no wars, rebellions, insurrections or the like for the last five hundred years, and none seemed imminent. Birth- and death-rates were nicely stabilized: there were plenty of people, but enough room and opportunity for everyone. There were several races, but no racial problems. The Lorians had a highly developed technology, but also maintained a beautiful ecological balance. All individual work was creative and freely chosen, since all brute labor had been given over to self-regulating machines.

The capital city of Athisse was a cyclopean place of enormous and fantastically beautiful buildings, castles, palaces, and the like, all public of course, and all visually exciting in their bold asymmetry. And this city had everything: bazaars, restaurants, parks, majestic statues, houses, graveyards, funparks, hot-dog stands, playgrounds, even a limpid river — you name it, they had it. And everything was free, including all food, clothing, housing, and entertainment. You took what you wanted and gave what you wanted, and it all balanced out somehow. Because of this there was no need for money on Loris, and without money you don't need banks, treasuries, vaults, or safe-deposit boxes. In fact, you don't even need locks: on Loris all doors were opened and closed by simple mental command.

Politically, the government mirrored the near-unanimous collective mind of the Lorian people. And that collective mind was calm, thoughtful, *good*. Between public desire and government action there was no discernible distortion, gap or lag.

In fact, the more Johnny looked into it, the more it seemed that Loris had just about no government at all, and what little it did have governed mostly by not governing. The closest thing to a ruler was Veerhe, Chief of the Office of Future Projections. And Veerhe never gave any orders — he just issued economic, social, and scientific forecasts from time to time.

Bezique learned all of this in a few days. He was helped along by a specially assigned guide named Helmis, a Lorian of Johnny's age whose wit, forbearance, sagacity, gentleness, irrepressible humor, keen insights and self-deprecatory manner caused Johnny to detest him immeasurably.

Thinking it all over in his beautifully appointed suite, Johnny realized that the Lorians came about as close to human ideals of

perfection as you could expect to find. They seemed to be really fine people, and paragons of all the virtues. But that didn't change Earth's standard nightmare. Humans, in their perversity, simply do not want to be governed by aliens, not even wonderfully good aliens, not even if it is for Earth's own good.

Bezique could see that the Lorians were a pretty unaggressive stay-at-home people with no desire for territory, conquest, spreading their civilization and other ego trips. But on the other hand, they seemed smart enough to realize that unless they did something about Earth, Earth was sure as hell going to do something about them, or kick up a lot of dust trying.

Of course, maybe it would be no contest; maybe a people as wise and trusting and peaceful as the Lorians would have no armament to speak of. But he learned that that was an incorrect assumption on the following day, when Helmis took him to look at the Ancient Dynasty Spacefleet.

This was the last heavy armament ever built on Loris. The fleet was a thousand years old and all seventy ships worked as if they had been built yesterday.

"Tormish II, last ruler of the Ancient Dynasty, intended to conquer all civilized planets," Helmis said. "Luckily, our people matured before he could launch his project."

"But you've still got the ships around," Johnny said.

Helmis shrugged. "They're a monument to our past irrationality. And practically speaking, if someone *did* try to invade us...we could perhaps cope."

"You just might be able to at that," Johnny said. He figured that one of those ships could handle anything Earth might put into space for the next two hundred years or so. No doubt about it, the Lorians had a lot going for them.

So that was life on Loris, just like the standard nightmare scenario said it would be. Too good to be true. Perfect, dismayingly, disgustingly perfect.

But was it really so perfect? Bezique had the Earthman's abiding belief in the doctrine that every virtue had its corresponding vice. This he usually expressed as: "There's gotta be a loophole in this thing somewhere." Not even God's own heaven could run that well.

He looked at everything with a critical eye. Loris *did* have policemen. They were referred to as monitors, and were excruciatingly polite. But they were cops. That implied the existence of criminals.

Helmis set him straight on that. "We have occasional genetic deviants, of course, but no criminal class. The monitors represent a branch of education rather than of law enforcement. Any citizen may ask a monitor for the ruling on a pertinent question of personal conduct. Should he break a law inadvertently, the monitor will point this out."

"And then arrest him?"

"Certainly not. The citizen will apologize, and the incident will be forgotten."

"But what if a citizen breaks the law over and over again? What do the monitors do then?"

"Such a circumstance never arises."

"But if it did?"

"The monitors are programmed to take care of such problems, if they should ever arise."

"They don't look so tough to me," Johnny said. Something didn't quite convince him. Maybe he couldn't afford to be convinced. Still...Loris worked. It worked damned well. The only thing in it that didn't work right was John Charles Bezique. This was because he was an Earthman — which is to say, an unbalanced primitive. Also, it was because Johnny was getting increasingly morose, depressed and savage.

The days went by, and everything went along beautifully. The monitors moved around like gentle maiden aunts. Traffic flowed evenly without tie-ups or frayed nerves. The million automatic systems brought in vital products and took away wastes. The people strolled along, delighting in each other's company, and pursuing various art forms. Every last mother's son of them seemed to be an artist of some sort, and all of them seemed to be good at it.

No one worked at a paying job, no one felt guilty about it. Work was for machines, not people.

And they were all so reasonable about everything! And so accommodating! And so sweet natured! And so highly intelligent and attractive.

Yes, it was paradise all right. Even Johnny Bezique had to admit that. And that made his increasingly bad mood even more difficult to understand, unless you happen to be an Earth person yourself.

* * *

Put a man like Johnny in a place like Loris and you have to get trouble. Johnny behaved himself for nearly two weeks. Then one day he was out for a drive. He had the car on manual control, and he made a left turn without signaling.

A car behind him and on his left hand had just moved up to pass. Johnny's abrupt turn almost beat the other vehicle's automatic reflexes. Not quite, but it was a near thing. The two cars slowed around and ended up nose to nose. Johnny and the other driver both got out.

The other driver said mildly, "Well, old man, it seems we have had a mix-up here."

"Mix-up hell," Johnny said, "you cut me off."

The other driver laughed a gentle laugh. "I think not," he said. "Though, of course, I'm aware of the possibility that..."

"Look," Johnny said, "you cut me off and you could have killed us both."

"But surely you can see that since you were ahead of me, and since you began to make an unauthorized left turn..."

Johnny put his face within an inch of the other driver's face. In a low, unpleasant snarl, he said, "Look, Mac, you were in the wrong. How many times I gotta tell you that?"

The other driver laughed again, a little shakily now. "Suppose we leave the matter of guilt to the judgement of the witnesses," he said. "I'm sure that these good people standing here..."

Johnny shook his head. "I don't need no witnesses," he said. "I *know* what happened. I *know* you were in the wrong."

"You seem very sure about that."

"Sure I'm sure," Johnny said. "I'm sure because I know."

"Well, in that case, I..."

"Yeah?" Johnny said.

"Well," the man said, "in that case, I guess there's nothing for me to do but apologize."

"I think it's the least you could do," Johnny said, and stalked to his car and drove away at an illegal speed.

After that, Bezique felt a little better, but more stubborn and recalcitrant than ever. He was sick of the superiority of the Lorians, sick of their reasonableness, sick of their virtues.

He went back to his room with two bottles of Lorian medicinal brandy. He drank and brooded for several hours. A social adjustment counselor came to call on him and pointed out that Johnny's behavior concerning the near-accident had been provocative, impolite, dominating, and barbaric. The counselor said all of that in a very nice way.

Johnny told him to get lost. He was not being especially unreasonable — for a Terran. Left alone, he would probably have apologized in a few days.

The counselor continued to remonstrate. He advised social-adjustment therapy. In fact, he insisted upon it: Johnny was too subject to angry and aggressive moods, he was a risk to citizens at large.

Johnny told the counselor to leave. The counselor refused to leave with the situation still unresolved. Johnny resolved the situation by punching him out.

Violence offered to a citizen is serious; violence actually performed is grave indeed. The shocked counselor picked himself off the floor and told Johnny that he would have to accept restraint until the case was cleared.

"Nobody's going to restrain me," Johnny said.

"Make it easy on yourself," the counselor said. "The restraint will not be unpleasant or of long duration. We are aware of the cultural discrepancies between your ways and ours. But we cannot permit unchecked and unmotivated violence."

"If people don't bug me I won't pop off again," Johnny said. "In the meantime, make it easy on yourself and don't try to lock me up."

"Our rules are clear on this," the counselor said. "A monitor will be here soon. I advise you to go along quietly with him."

"You really do want trouble," Johnny said. "Okay, baby, you do what you have to do and I'll do what I have to do."

The counselor left. Johnny brooded and drank. A monitor came. As an official of the law, the monitor expected Johnny to go along voluntarily, as requested. He was baffled when Johnny refused. No one refuses! He went away for new orders.

Johnny continued drinking. The monitor returned in an hour and said he was now empowered to take Johnny by force, if necessary.

"Is that a fact?" Johnny said.

"Yes, it is. So please don't force me to — " Johnny punched him out, thus sparing the monitor from being forced to do anything.

Bezique left his room a little unsteadily. He knew that assault on a monitor was probably very bad stuff indeed. There was no easy way of getting out of this one. He thought he had better get to his ship and get out. True, they could prevent his take-off or blow him out of the sky. But perhaps, once he was actually aboard, they wouldn't bother. They'd probably be glad to get rid of him.

Bezique was able to reach his ship without incident. He found about twenty workmen swarming over it. He told their foreman that he wanted to take off at once. The foreman was desolated by his inability to oblige. The ship's main drive had been removed and was being cleaned and modernized — a gift of friendship from the Lorian people.

"Give us five more days and you'll have the fastest ship west of Orion," the foreman told him.

"A hell of a lot of good that does me now," Johnny snarled. "Look, I'm in a hurry. What's the quickest you can give me some sort of propulsion?"

"Working around the clock and going without meals, we can have the job done in three and a half days."

"That's just great," Bezique snarled. "Who told you to touch my ship, anyhow?"

The foreman apologized. That got Bezique even angrier. Another act of senseless violence was averted by the arrival of four monitors.

Bezique shook off the monitors in a maze of winding streets, got lost himself and came out in a covered arcade. The monitors appeared behind him. Bezique ran down narrow stone corridors and found his way blocked by a closed door.

He ordered it to open. The door remained closed — presumably ordered so by the monitors. In a fury, Bezique demanded again. His mental command was so strong that the door burst open, as did all doors in the immediate vicinity. Johnny outran the monitors, and finally stopped to catch his breath in a mossy piazza.

He couldn't keep on rushing around like this. He had to have some plan. But what plan could possibly work for one Earthman

pursued by a planetful of Lorians? The odds were too high, even for a conquistador-type like Johnny.

Then, all on his own, Johnny came up with an idea that Cortez had used, and that had saved Pizarro's bacon. He decided to find the ruler of this place and threaten to kill him unless people were willing to calm down and listen to reason.

There was only one flaw in the plan: these people didn't have any ruler. It was the most inhuman thing about them.

However, they did have one or two important officials. A man like Veerhe, Chief of the Office of Future Projections, seemed to be the nearest thing the Lorians had to an important man. A big shot like that ought to be guarded, of course; but on a crazy place like Loris, they just might not have bothered.

A friendly native supplied him with the address. Johnny was able to get within four blocks of the Office of Future Projections before he was stopped by a posse of twenty monitors.

They demanded that he give himself up. But they seemed unsure of themselves. It occurred to Bezique that even though arresting people was their job, this was probably the first time they had actually had to perform it. They were reasonable, peaceful citizens, and cops only secondarily.

"Who did you want to arrest?" he asked.

"An alien named Johnny Bezique," the leading monitor said.

"I'm glad to hear it," Johnny said. "He's been causing me considerable embarrassment."

"But aren't you —"

Johnny laughed. "Aren't I the dangerous alien? Sorry to disappoint you, but I am not. The resemblance *is* close, I know."

The monitors discussed the situation. Johnny said, "Look, fellows, I was born in that house right over there. I can get twenty people to identify me, including my wife and four children. What more proof do you want?"

The monitors conferred again.

"Furthermore," Johnny said, "can you honestly believe that I really am this dangerous and uncontrolled alien? I mean, common sense ought to tell you —"

The monitor apologized. Johnny went on, got within a block of his destination and was stopped by another group of monitors. His former guide, Helmis, was with them.

They called on him to surrender.

"There's no time for that now," Bezique said. "Those orders have been countermanded. I am now authorized to reveal my true identity."

"We know your true identity," Helmis said.

"If you did, I wouldn't have to reveal it now, would I? Listen closely. I am a Lorian of Planner classification. I received special aggression-training years ago to fit me for my mission. It is now accomplished. I returned — as planned — and performed a few simple tests to see if everything on Loris was as I had left it, psychologically. You know the results, which, from a galactic survival standpoint, are not good. I must now report on this and various other high matters to the Chief Planner at the Office of Future Projections. I can tell you, informally, that our situation is grave and there is no time to spare."

The monitors were confused. They asked for confirmation of Johnny's statements.

"I told you that the matter is urgent," Bezique said. "Nothing would please me better than to give you confirmation if there were only time."

Another conference. "Sir, without orders, we can't let you go."

"In that case, the probable destruction of our planet rests on your own heads."

A high monitor officer asked, "Sir, what rank do you hold?"

"It is higher than yours," Johnny said promptly.

The officer reached a decision. "In that case, what are your orders, sir?"

Johnny smiled. "Keep the peace. Calm any worried citizens. More detailed orders will be forthcoming."

Bezique went on confidently. He reached the door of the Planning Office and ordered it to open. It opened. He was about to walk through...

"Put up your hands and step away from that door!" a hard voice behind him said.

Bezique turned and saw a group of monitors. There were ten of them, they were dressed in black and they were holding weapons.

"We are empowered to shoot to kill if need be," one of them said. "You needn't try any of your lies on us. Our orders are to ignore anything you say and take you in."

"No sense in my trying to reason with you, huh?"

"No chance at all. Come along."

"Where?"

"We've put one of the ancient prisons into service just for you. You will be held there and given every amenity. A judge will hear your case. Your alienness and low level of civilization will be taken into consideration. Beyond doubt you will get off with a warning and a request to leave Loris."

"That doesn't sound so bad. Do you really think it'll go like that?"

"I've been assured of it," the monitor said. "We are a reasonable and compassionate people. Your gallant resistance to us was, indeed, exemplary."

"Thank you."

"But it is all over now. Will you come along peacefully?"

"No," Johnny said.

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"There's a lot you don't understand about me or about Terrans. I'm going through that door."

"If you try, we will shoot."

There is an infallible way of telling the true conquistador type, the genuine berserker, the pure and unadulterated kamikaze or crusader, from ordinary people. Ordinary people faced with an impossible situation tend to compromise, to wait for a better day to fight. But not your Pizarros or Goeffry of Bouillons or Harold Hardradas or Johnny Beziques. They are gifted with great stupidity or great courage or both.

"All right," Bezique said. "So shoot, and the hell with you."

Johnny walked through the door. The special monitors did not shoot. He could hear them arguing as he went down the corridors of the Office of Future Projections.

Soon he came face to face with Veerhe, the Chief Planner. Veerhe was a calm little man with an aging pixie face.

"Hello," the Chief Planner said. "Take a seat. I've completed the projection on Earth vis-a-vis Loris."

"Save it," Johnny said. "I've got one or two simple requests to make, which I'm sure you won't mind doing. But if you do —"

"I think you'll be interested in this forecast," Veerhe said. "We've extrapolated your racial characteristics and matched them against ours. It looks like there's sure to be a conflict between our peoples over preeminence. Not on our part, but definitely on yours. You

Earth people simply won't rest until you rule us or we rule you. The situation is inevitable, given your level of civilization."

"I didn't need any office or fancy title to figure out that one," Johnny said. "Now look — "

"I'm not finished," Veerhe said. "Now, from a purely technological standpoint, you Terrans haven't got a chance. We could blow up anything you sent against us."

"So you haven't anything to worry about."

"Technology doesn't count for as much as psychology. You Terrans are advanced enough not to simply throw yourselves against us. There will be discussions, treaties, violations, more discussion, aggressions, explanations, encroachments, clashes and all of that. We can't act as if you don't exist, and we can't refuse to cooperate with you in a search for reasonable and evenhanded solutions. That would be impossible for us, just as it would be impossible for you simply to leave us alone. We are a straightforward, stable, reasonable, and trusting people. You are an aggressive, unbalanced race, and capable of amazing deviousness. You are unlikely to present us with clearcut and sufficient reasons for us to destroy you. Failing that, and all other factors remaining constant, you are sure to take us over, and we are sure to be psychologically unable to do anything about it. In your terms, it is what happens when an extreme Apollonian culture meets an extreme Dionysian culture."

"Well, hell," Johnny said. "That's a hell of a thing to lay on me. I feel sort of stupid offering you advice — but look, if you know all that, why not adapt yourselves to the situation? Make yourselves become what you have to become?"

"As you did?" Veerhe asked.

"Well, okay, I didn't adapt. But I'm not as smart as you Lorrans."

"Intelligence has nothing to do with it," the Chief Planner said. "One doesn't change one's culture by an act of will. Besides, suppose we could change ourselves? We would have to become like you. Frankly, we wouldn't like that."

"I don't blame you," Johnny said truthfully.

"And even if we did bring off this miracle and made ourselves more aggressive, we could never reach in a few years the level you have reached after tens of thousands of years of aggressive development. Despite our advantages in armament, we would probably lose if we tried to play your game by your rules."

Johnny blinked. He had been thinking along the same lines. The Lorians were simply too trusting, too gullible. It wouldn't be difficult to work up some kind of a peace parley, and then take over one of their ships by surprise. Maybe two or three ships. Then...

"I see that you've reached the same conclusion," Veerhe said.

"I'm afraid you're right," Johnny said. "The fact is, we want to win much harder than you do. When you get right down to it, you Lorians won't go all out. You're nice people and you play everything by the rules, even life-and-death games. But we Terrans aren't very nice, and we'll stop at nothing to win."

"That is our extrapolation," Veerhe said. "So we thought it would only be reasonable to save a lot of time and trouble and put you in charge of us now."

"How was that?"

"We want you to rule us."

"Me personally?"

"Yes. You personally."

"You gotta be kidding," Johnny said.

"There is nothing here to joke about," Veerhe said. "And we Lorians do not lie. I've told you my extrapolation of the situation. It is only reasonable that we should save ourselves a great deal of unnecessary pain and hardship by accepting the inevitable immediately. Will you rule us?"

"It's one hell of a nice offer," Bezique said. "I'm really not qualified...But, what the hell, no one else is, either. Sure, I'll take over this planet. And I'll do a good job for you people because I really do like you."

"Thank you," Veerhe said. "You will find us easy to manage, as long as your orders are within our psychological capabilities."

"Don't worry about that," Johnny said. "Everything's going to continue just as before. Frankly, I can't improve on this setup. I'm going to do a good job for your people, just as long as you cooperate."

"We will cooperate," Veerhe said. "But your own people may not prove so amenable. They may not accept the situation."

"That's the understatement of the century," Johnny said. "This'll give the governments of Earth the biggest psychic bellyache in recorded history. They'll do their damndest to pull me down and put in one of their own boys. But you Lorians will back me, right?"

"You know what we are like. We will not fight for you, since we will not fight for ourselves. We will obey whoever actually has the power."

"I guess I can't expect anything more," said Bezique. "But I guess I'm going to have some problems bringing this off. I guess I'll bring in a few buddies to help me, set up an organization, do some lobbying, play off one group against the other..."

Johnny paused. Veerhe waited. After a while Johnny said, "I'm leaving something out. I'm not being logical. There's more to this than I thought. I haven't gone all the way in my reasoning."

"I cannot help you," the Chief Planner said. "Frankly, I am out of my depth."

Johnny frowned and rubbed his eyes. He scratched his head. Then he said, "Yeah. Well, it's clear enough what I gotta do. You see it, don't you?"

"I suppose there are many promising avenues of application."

"There's only one," Johnny said. "Sooner or later, I gotta conquer Earth. Either that, or they're going to conquer me. Us, I mean. Can you see that?"

"It seems a highly probable hypothesis."

"It's God's own truth. Me or them. There's room for just one Number One."

The Planner didn't comment. Johnny said, "I never dreamed of anything like this. From spaceship driver to Emperor of an advanced alien planet in less than two weeks. And now I gotta take over Earth, and that's a weird feeling. Still, it'll be the best thing for them. We'll bring some civilization to those monkeys, teach them how things should really be done. Someday they'll thank us for it."

"Do you have any orders for me?" Veerhe asked.

"I'll want to review all the data about the Ancient Dynasty fleet. But first I think a coronation would be in order. No, first a referendum electing me Emperor, then a coronation. Can you arrange all that?"

"I shall begin at once," the Chief Planner said.

For Earth, the standard nightmare had finally taken place. An advanced alien civilization was about to impose its culture upon Earth. For Loris, the situation was different. The Lorians, previously defenseless, had suddenly acquired an aggressive alien general, and

soon would have a group of mercenaries to operate their spacefleet. All of which was not so good for Earth, but not bad at all for Loris.

It was inevitable, of course. For the Lorians were a really advanced and intelligent people. And what is the purpose of being really intelligent if not to have the substance of what you want without mistaking it for the shadow?

On the other hand, Von Heingletzt has calculated the odds against a successful alien conquest of Earth as $10^{13} - 74$. So we can all take comfort in that.

END CITY

The way it can happen is like this: You're leaning back in your first-class seat on Fat Cat Spacelines with a cigar in your face and a glass of champagne in your hand, going from Depredation City on Earth to Spoilsville Junction on Arcturus XII. Magda will be waiting for you just behind the customs barrier, and the party in your honor will be going full swing at the Ultima Hilton. And you realize that, after a lifetime of struggle you're finally rich, sexy, successful, and respected. Life is like a ball of chicken liver, rich and tasty and dripping with grease. You've worked a long dirty time to get where you are now, and you're ready at last to enjoy it.

Just at this moment the landing sign flashes on.

You say to the stewardess, "Tell me, pretty one, what is going on?"

"We're putting down at End City," she tells you.

"But that wasn't scheduled. Why are we landing there?"

She shrugs. "That's where the ship's computer took us, and now we have to land here."

"Now look," you say sternly, "I was assured by my very good friend J. Williams Nash, the President of this line, that there would be no unscheduled stops."

"End City terminates all previous assurances," she tells you. "Maybe you didn't want to come here, but you sure as hell have arrived."

You fasten your safety belt and think, just my stupid luck. Sweat your ass off all your life, lie, cheat, steal, and just when you're ready to have a little fun, up comes End City.

It's pretty easy to get into End City. All you have to do is show up. Park your spaceship in the junkyard. There's nothing to sign. Don't worry about a thing. Come around later and meet the boys.

The Quicksilver Kid swaggers up real cool and asks, "Hey, what do you guys do for kicks around here?"

Mort the Snort says, "We take drugs like Hope-98."

"What is the effect of Hope-98?" asks the Kid.

"It makes you think you got a future."

The Quicksilver Kid looks wistful. "Man, I gotta score me some of that stuff."

Meet Sweet Lucy, girl of a thousand bodies, all of them gross.

"I takes myself down to the Celestial Body Shop nearly every Monday, and each time I'm determined to git myself a real pretty body, you know the kind I mean, *pretty*. But each time it's like this compulsion comes over me and I pick a big fat saggy number just like I always had. If I could ever lick that weirdo compulsion I'd be in real good shape."

Dr. Bernstein's comment: "Her hangup is her salvation. Down chicks always run true to form. Kick her as you leave. She digs the attention."

Giardano had done a lot of traveling, but he never did get far: "It's simple truth to say that this galaxy is just like the inside of my head. The further you go, the less you see. Been to Acmena IV, looks just like Arizona. Sardis VI is a ringer for Quebec, and Omeone VI is a duplicate of Marie Byrd's Land."

"What does End City look like?"

"If I didn't know better," Giardano says, "I'd think I was back home in Hoboken."

In End City they have to import everything. They import cats and cockroaches, garbage bags and garbage, cops and crime statistics. They import spoiled milk and rotten vegetables, they import blue suede and orange taffeta, they import orange peels, instant coffee, Volkswagen parts, Champion spark plugs. They import dreams and nightmares. They import you and me.

"But what's it all for?"

"That's a stupid question. You might as well ask what reality is for."

"Well...what *is* reality for?"

"Look me up any time. I live at 000 Zero Street, at the intersection of Minus Boulevard, just across from Null Park."

"Is that address supposed to have a symbolic meaning?"

"No, man, it's just where I live."

Nobody can afford the necessities in End City. But luxuries are available for everyone. Ten thousand tons of Chincoteague oysters are distributed every week, free. But you can't cop cocktail sauce for love or money.

COLLOQUY IN LIMBO LANE:

"Good day, young man. Are you still caught up in the ways-means fallacy?"

"Guess I am, Professor."

"Thought as much. Good day, young man."

"Who was that?"

"That was the Professor. He always asks about the ways-means fallacy."

"What does it mean?"

"Don't know."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"Don't care."

Dr. Bernstein says: "Monism postulates that there's only one thing, dualism says there's two things. No matter which is true, you still haven't got much to work with."

"Hey!" says Johnny Cadenza. "Maybe that explains why everything around here tastes either like chili or chow mein."

TRANSACTIONS OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY OF END CITY:

"Hell is an infinitely delayed trip."

"Hell is who you really are."

"Hell is getting what you don't need."

"Hell is getting what you do need."

"Hell is repetition."

Look straight ahead: the blackness of the universe, of the gulf, of the end, of the big leap into nothingness. Behind you are all the places where you've been: last year's hopes, yesterday's trips, the old dreams. All used up now, all gone.

You are at the final stop. You sit down and try to figure out what to do.

Welcome to End City.

THE NEVER-ENDING WESTERN MOVIE

The name is Washburn: just plain Washburn to my friends, Mister Washburn to enemies and strangers. Saying that I've said everything, because you've seen me a thousand times, on the big screen in your neighborhood theater or on the little pay-TV screen in your living room, riding through Cholla cactus and short grass, my famous derby pulled down over my eyes, my famous Colt .44 with the 7 1/2-inch barrel strapped down to my right leg. But just now I'm riding in a big air conditioned Cadillac, sitting between my agent-manager Gordon Simms, and my wife, Consuela. We've turned off State Highway 101 and we're bouncing along a rutted dirt road which will end presently at the Wells Fargo Station that marks one of the entrances to The Set. Simms is talking rapidly and rubbing the back of my neck like I was a fighter about to enter the ring, which is more or less the situation. Consuela is quiet. Her English isn't too good yet. She's the prettiest little thing imaginable, my wife of less than two months, a former Miss Chile, a former actress in various Gaucho dramas filmed in Buenos Aires and Montevideo. This entire scene is supposed to be off-camera. It's the part they never show you: the return of the famous gunfighter, all the way from Bel Air in the jolly jittery year of 2031 to the Old West of the mid-1900s.

Simms is jabbering away about some investment he wants me to come in on, some new seabed mining operation, another of Simms's get-richer-quick schemes, because Simms is already a wealthy man, as who wouldn't be with a thirty-percent bite on my earnings throughout my ten biggest years as a star? Simms is my friend, too, but I can't think about investments now because we're coming to The Set.

Consuela, sitting on my right, shivers as the famous weather-beaten old station comes into view. She's never really understood *The Never-Ending Western Movie*. In South America they still make their movies in the old-fashioned way, everything staged, everything faked, and the guns fire only blanks. She can't understand why America's famous Movie has to be done for real when you could contrive all the effects and nobody would get killed. I've tried to explain it to her, but it sounds ridiculous in Spanish.

It's different for me this time, of course: I'm coming out of retirement to make a cameo appearance. I'm on a no-kill contract — famous gunman to do comedy bit with Old Jeff Mangles and Natchez Parker. There's no script, of course; there never is in *The Movie*. We'll improvise around any situation that comes up — we, the *commedia dell'arte* players of the Old West. Consuela doesn't understand any of this. She's heard about contracts to kill, but a no-kill contract is something new in her experience.

And now we've arrived. The car stops in front of a low, unpainted pinewood building. Everything on this side of it is 21st-century America in all its recycled and reprocessed glory. On the other side is the million-acre expanse of prairie, mountains and desert, with its thousands of concealed cameras and microphones, that is *The Set for The Never-Ending Movie*.

I'm in costume already — blue jeans, blue-and-white checked shirt, derby, rawhide jacket, and 3.2 pounds of revolver. A horse is waiting for me at the hitching post on the other side of the station, with all my gear tied aboard in a neat blanket roll. An assistant director checks me over and finds me in order: no wristwatch or other anachronisms for the cameras to find. "All right, Mr. Washburn," he says, "you can go through whenever you're ready."

Simms gives his main-event boy a final rub on the back. He's bouncing up and down on his toes, excited, envying me, wishing he were the one to be riding out into the desert, a tall, slow-moving man with mild manners and sudden death always near his right hand. But Simms is short and fat and nearly bald and he would never do, certainly not for a heroic gunman's role, so he lives it vicariously. I am Simms's manhood, and he and I have ridden the danger trail many times and our trusty .44 had cleared out all opposition, until we reigned supreme, the absolute best gunslinger in the West, the one who finally retired when all the opposition was dead or lying

low...Poor Simms, he always wanted us to play that last big scene, the final definitive walkdown on some dusty Main Street. He wanted us to go out high, wide and handsome, not for the money, we've got too much of that as it is, but just for the glory, retiring from *The Movie* in a blaze of gunfire at the top of our form. I wanted it that way myself, but the opposition got cautious, and Washburn spent a final ridiculous year in *The Movie*, riding around looking for something to do, six-shooter ready, but never finding anyone who wanted to shoot it out with him. And even this cameo appearance — for Simms it is a mockery of all that we have stood for, and I suppose it's that way for me, too. (It is difficult to know where I start and where Simms ends, difficult to separate what I want and what Simms wants, difficult to face this, the end of our great years in *The Movie*.)

Simms shakes my hand and grips me hard on the shoulder and says nothing in that manly Western style he's picked up through the years of associating with me, being me. Consuela hugs me, there are tears in her eyes, she kisses me, she tells me to come back to her soon. Ah, those incredible first months with a new wife! The splendor of it, before the dreary old reality sets in! Consuela is number four, I've ridden down a lot of trails in my time, most of them the same, and now the director checks me again for lipstick smears, nods okay, and I turn away from Consuela and Simms, throw them the little two-finger salute I'm famous for, and stride across the creaking floor of the Wells Fargo Office and out the other side, into the blazing sunshine and the world of *The Never-Ending Western Movie*.

From far away the camera picks up a lone rider, moving antlike between brilliantly striped canyon walls. We see him in successive shots against an unfolding panorama of desert scenery. Here he is in the evening, silhouetted against a flaming sky, derby cocked jauntily on the back of his head, cooking over a little fire. Now he is asleep, rolled in his blanket, as the embers of his fire fade to ash. Before dawn the rider is up again, making coffee, preparing for the day's ride. Sunrise finds him mounted and moving, shielding his eyes from the sun, leaning back long in the stirrups, letting his horse pick its own way over the rocky slopes.

I am also the audience watching me the actor, as well as the actor watching me the audience. It is the dream of childhood come true: to play a part and also watch ourselves play it. I know now that we

never stop acting, never stop watching ourselves act. It is merely an irony of fate that the heroic images I see coincide with what you, sitting in front of your little screen, also see.

Now the rider has climbed to a high saddleback between two mountains. It is cold up here, a high wind is blowing, the rider's coat collar is turned up and his derby is tied in place with a bright wool scarf. Looking over the man's shoulder, far below, we see a settlement, tiny and lost in the immensity of the landscape. We follow as the rider clucks to his tired horse and begins the journey down to the settlement.

The derbied rider is walking his horse through the settlement of Comanche. There is one street — Main Street — with its saloon, boarding house, livery stable, blacksmith's, general store, all as quaint and stark as a Civil War daguerreotype. The desert wind blows unceasingly through the town, and a fine dust is settled over everything.

The rider is recognized. Loungers in front of the general store say, "Hey, it's Washburn!"

I dismount stiffly in front of the livery stable — a tall, travel-stained man, gun belt worn low and strapped down, the cracked horn-faced gun butt standing out easy to reach, easy to see. I turn and rub my face — the famous, long, sorrowful face, the puckered scar along one cheekbone, the narrow unblinking gray eyes. It is the face of a tough, dangerous, unpredictable man; yet a sympathetic one. It is me watching you watching me.

I come out of the livery stable, and there to greet me is Sheriff Ben Watson, an old friend, hard tanned face and black handlebar mustache, tin star gleaming on his worsted vest.

"Heard you might be coming through," Watson says. "Heard you been to Califomee for a spell."

"Califomee" is our own special code word for retirement.

"That's so," I say. "How's everything around here?"

"So-so," Watson tells me. "I don't suppose you heard about Old Jeff Mangles?"

I wait. The sheriff says, "Happened just yesterday. Old Jeff got thrown, out on the desert. We figure his horse shied at a rattler — Christ knows I told him to sell that big skittery walleyed brute. But you know Old Jeff — "

"What happened to him?" I ask.

"Well, like I say, he got thrown and dragged. He was dead before Jimmy Conners found him."

Long silence. I push the derby to the back of my head. Finally I say, "Okay, Ben, what else do you want to tell me?"

The sheriff is ill at ease. He fidgets, shifting from one foot to the other. I wait. Jeff Mangles dead; that blows the scene I was hired to play. What other development is coming up?

Watson says, "You must be thirsty. What say we put down a beer — "

"Just tell me the news."

"Well... You ever hear of a cowpuncher from the Panhandle name of Little Joe Potter?"

I shake my head.

"He came drifting up this way a while ago, bringing with him quite a reputation as a fast gun. Didn't you hear about the shootout down at Twin Peaks?"

Now that he mentions it, I do remember hearing something about it. But I've been out to Califormee doing other things, and shoot-outs just didn't interest me much until right now.

"This Little Joe Potter," Watson goes on, "he went up against four X-Bar riders in a dispute over some woman. They say it was quite a fight. The result was that Little Joe blew them four riders all to hell, and he picked himself up quite a reputation thereby."

"So what?" I ask.

"Well, some time after that, Little Joe was in a poker game with some of the boys down Gila Bend way..." Watson stops, uncomfortable. "Washburn, maybe you better get the story from Charlie Gibbs, since he spoke to a man who was actually present at that game. Yeah, you better hear it from Charlie. See you later, Washburn."

The sheriff moves away, following The Movie dictum of keeping the talk-scenes short and letting other people have a piece of the action.

I walk to the saloon. There is someone following me, a kid, no more than eighteen or nineteen, a gangling snubnosed freckled kid in too-short overalls and cracked boots. He wears a gun. What does he want of me? What everyone else wants, I suppose.

I enter the saloon, my spurs clattering on the plank floor. Charlie Gibbs is drinking at the bar, a fat sloppy man all grin and crinkle, not wearing a gun because Charlie Gibbs is a comic character and therefore does not kill or get killed. Charlie is also our local Screen Actors' Guild representative.

I buy him a drink and ask him about Little Joe Potter's famous poker game.

"I heard about it from Texas Jim Claire. You remember Texas Jim, don't you, Washburn? Good old boy who works for the Donaldson outfit as a wrangler? Well, sir, Texas Jim was in this poker game over by way of Gila Bend. The action commenced to get hot. There was this one big jackpot at the end, and Doc Dailey bet a thousand dollars Mex on his hand. Little Joe was right fond of the cards he was holding, but he didn't have no more money to back hisself with. Doc said he'd take collateral, if Little Joe could think of any. Little Joe thought about it for a while, and then he said, 'How much would you give me for Mr. Washburn's derby?' There was a silence then, because nobody just walks up and takes away Mr. Washburn's derby, not without first killing the man underneath it. But on the other hand, Little Joe was not known as a braggart, and he'd handled hisself well during that shootout with the X-Bar riders. So Doc, he thought about it a while, then he said, 'Sure, Joe, I'll allow you a thousand for Washburn's derby, and I'd gladly pay another thousand for a ringside seat when you go to take it off him.' 'You can have that ringside seat for nothing,' says Little Joe, 'if I lose this hand, which I'm not fixing to do.' So the bet is accepted and they show down. Little Joe's four eights lose to Doc's four Jacks. Little Joe rises and stretches, and says, 'Well, Doc, looks like you're going to get your ringside seat after all.'"

Charlie finishes off his drink and looks at me with bright, malicious eyes. I nod, finish my own drink and go out back to the outhouse.

The outhouse is a designated off-camera area. We use it for talks which are necessary, but are out of our Western context. Charlie Gibbs comes out a few minutes later. He turns on the hidden air conditioning, takes a pack of cigarettes from behind a beam, lights up, sits down and makes himself comfortable. As SAG representative, Charlie spends a fair amount of time out here listening to gripes

and grievances. This is his office, and he's tried to make it pleasant for himself.

Charlie says, "I suppose you want to know what's going on?"

"Damned right I do," I tell him. "What is this crap about Joe Potter coming to take away my derby?"

"Don't get excited," Charlie says, "everything is in order. Potter is a new star on his way up. After Jeff Mangles got killed, it was natural to match up you and him. Potter went along with it. Your agent was approached yesterday and he renegotiated your contract. You're getting a hell of a bonus for this shootout appearance."

"Simms renegotiated my contract? Without asking me first?"

"You weren't available then. Simms said it would be fine with you. He gave a statement to the newspapers about how you and he had talked about this many times, and that it had always been your desire to leave The Movie big, at the top of your form, in one last shootout. He said he didn't have to discuss it with you because you and he had talked it over many times and you and he were closer than brothers. He said he was glad this chance had come up, and he knew you would be glad, too."

"Christ! That simpleminded Simms!"

"Was he setting you up?" Charlie asks.

"No, it's not like that at all. We did talk a lot about a final showdown. I did tell him that I'd like to end big — "

"But it was just talk?" Charlie suggests.

"Not exactly." But it's one thing to talk about a shootout when you're retired and safe in your house in Bel Air. It's another to suddenly find yourself involved in a fight without preparation. "Simms didn't set me up; but he did involve me in something that I'd want to make up my own mind about."

"So the situation is," Charlie says, "that you were a fool for shooting off your mouth about wanting a final match, and your agent was a fool for taking you at your word."

"That's the way it looks."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"I'll tell you," I say, "as long as I'm talking to my old buddy Charlie, and not to Gibbs the SAG representative."

"Sure," Charlie says.

"I'm going to waltz on out of here," I say. "I'm thirty-seven years old and I haven't practiced gunplay for a year. I've got a new wife — "

"You don't have to go into all that," Gibbs says. "Life is sweet, that says it all. As your friend, I approve. As your SAG representative, I can tell you that the Guild won't back you up if you break a valid contract made by your legally appointed representative. If The Company sues you, you're all alone on your lonesome."

"Better all alone than underground with company," I tell him. "How good is this Little Joe?"

"He's good. But not as good as you are, Washburn. You're the best I ever seen. You thinking about meeting him?"

"Nope. Just asking."

"Keep it that way," Charlie says. "As your friend, I advise you to get out and stay out. You've already taken everything that can be gotten out of The Movie: you're a hero, you're rich, and you've got a pretty young wife. You've won everything in sight. Now don't hang around and wait for someone to take it off you."

"I'm not fixing to," I tell him. But I find that my hand has come to rest on my gun butt.

I go back into the saloon. I sit alone at a table, a shot glass of whiskey in front of me, a thin black Mexican cigar between my teeth. I am thinking about the situation. Little Joe is riding up from the south. He'll probably figure to find me here in Comanche. But I don't figure to be here. Safest way would be for me to ride back the way I came, back to the Wells Fargo Station and out into the world again. But I'm not going to do it that way. I'm going out of The Set by way of Brimstone in the extreme northeastern corner, thus making a complete tour of The Territory. Let them figure that one out...

Suddenly a long shadow falls across the table, a figure has moved between me and the light, and without a thought I roll out of my chair, gun already drawn, hammer back, forefinger tightening on the trigger. A boy's frightened, high-pitched voice says, "Oh! Excuse me, Mr. Washburn!" It's that snubnosed freckle-faced kid I saw watching me earlier, now gaping at the end of my gun, scared, as he damned well should be having just startled me out of a year's growth.

I thumb down the hammer of my .44. I get up, holster the gun, dust myself off, pick up my chair and sit down on it. Curly the bartender brings me another drink. I say to the kid, "Kid, don't you

know better than to move up sudden on a man like that? I should have blown you to hell just on the off-chance."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Washburn," he says. "I'm new out here, I didn't realize...I just wanted to tell you how much I admire you."

He was new, all right; he looked fresh out of The Company's School of Western Skills, which we must all graduate from before we're even allowed on The Set. I had been just as raw as him during my first weeks in The Movie.

"Someday," he tells me, "I'm going to be like you. I thought maybe you could give me a few pointers. I got this old gun here — "

The kid draws, and once again I react without thinking, slap the gun out of his hand, chop him down with a fist to the ear.

"Goddamn you!" I shout, "haven't you got no sense at all? You just don't up and draw like that unless you're meaning to use it."

"I just wanted to show you my gun," he says, not getting up yet.

"If you want someone to look at your gun," I tell him, "take it out of your holster slow and easy, keeping your fingers outside the trigger guard. And first announce what you're going to do."

"Mr. Washburn," he says, "I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything," I tell him. "Just get out of here. You look like bad luck to me. Go show someone else your goddamned gun."

"Shall I show it to Joe Potter?" he asks, getting up and dusting himself off.

He looks at me. I haven't said a word. He gulps, he knows he's put his foot in it again.

I stand up slow. "Would you care to explain that remark?"

"I didn't mean nothing by it."

"You sure of that?"

"Real sure, Mr. Washburn. I'm sorry!"

"Get out of here," I say, and the kid scrams fast.

I go over to the bar. Curly has the whiskey bottle out, but I wave it away and he draws me a beer. "Curly," I say, "I know they can't help being young, but isn't there something they can do about being so stupid?"

"I reckon not, Mr. Washburn," Curly says.

We are silent for a few moments. Then Curly says, "Natchez Parker sent word he'd like to see you."

"All right," I tell him.

* * *

Dissolve to: a ranch on the edge of the desert. In the chuckhouse, the Chinese cook is sharpening his knives. Bud Farrell, one of the hands, is sitting on a crate peeling potatoes. He is singing as he works, his long horse face bent over the spuds. The cook, oblivious to him, looks out the window, says, "Rider comes."

Bud Farrell gets up, looks, scratches his hayseed head, looks again: "That's something more than just a *rider*, you heathen Chineese. That's *Mister Washburn*, sure as God made little green apples!"

Bud Farrell gets up, walks to the front of the main house, calls, "Hey, Mr. Parker! Mr. Washburn is riding up here!"

Washburn and Parker are sitting together at a small wooden table over steaming mugs of coffee in Natchez Parker's sitting room. Parker is a huge mustachioed man sitting in a straight-back wooden chair, an Indian blanket over his withered legs. He is paralyzed from the waist down because of an old bullet crease in the spine.

"Well, Washburn," says Parker, "I heard about you and Little Joe Potter, just like everyone else in the Territory. Ought to be one hell of a meeting. Wish I could see it."

I say, "I wouldn't mind seeing it myself."

"Where is it going to take place?"

"In hell, I guess."

Parker leans forward. "What does that mean?"

"It means that I'm not meeting Little Joe. I'm riding for Brimstone, and then straight on, away from Little Joe and the whole damned West."

Parker leans forward and vigorously rubs his shock of gray hair. His big face puckers together like he had bitten into a rotten apple.

"You're running?" he asks.

"That's it," I say.

The old man grimaces, hawks, spits on the floor. He says, "I never thought to hear you of all people say a thing like that. I never thought to see you go against the values you've always lived by."

"Natchez, those were never my values. They came ready-made with the role. Now I'm through with the role, and I'm turning in the values too."

The old man chewed that over for a while. Then he said, "What in hell is the matter with you? Got too much to live for all of a sudden? Or just gone yellow?"

"Call it what you like," I tell him. "I came by to tell you. I owe you that."

"Well, wasn't that nice of you?" says Parker. "You owed me something and it was on your way anyhow, so you figured the least you could do was come by and tell me you was running away from a jumped-up baby gunslinger with one fight under his belt."

"Get off my back."

"Tom," he says, "listen to me."

I look up. Parker is the only man in the Territory who ever calls me by my first name. He doesn't do it often.

"Now look," he says, "I am not one for fancy speeches. But you simply can't run away like this, Tom. Not on account of anything but yourself. You've got to live with yourself, no matter where you go."

"I'll manage that just fine," I tell him.

Parker shakes his head. "Damn it all, what do you think this thing is all about? They let us dress up in fancy clothes and strut our stuff like we owned the whole damned world. They pay us plenty just to be men. But there's a price for that. We gotta keep on being men. Not just when it's easy, like at the beginning. We gotta stay men right straight through to the end, no matter what the end is. We don't just act these parts, Tom; we live them, we stake our lives on them, we are these parts. Christ, anybody can dress up in a cowboy outfit and swagger down Main Street. But not everyone can wear a gun and use it."

I say, "That's a beautiful speech, Parker, and you're such a pro that you've blown this scene. Get back in character and let's get on with it."

"Goddamn you," Parker says, "I don't give a damn for the scene or The Movie or any of it. I'm talking to you straight now, Tom Washburn. We've been closer than kin ever since you came into the Territory, a frightened tanglefoot kid who made a place for himself on sheer guts. I'm not going to let you run away now."

"I'm finishing this coffee," I tell him, "and riding on."

Natchez suddenly twists in his chair, grabs a handful of my shirt and pulls my face close to his. In his other hand I see a knife.

"Get out your knife, Tom. I'd rather kill you myself than let you ride away a coward."

Parker's face is close to mine, glaring at me, the old man's breath sour in my face. I brace my left foot on the floor, plant my right

foot on the edge of Parker's chair and push hard. Parker's chair topples over and I see the look of shock on the old man's face as he falls to the floor. I draw my gun and take aim between his eyes.

"Christ, Tom," he says.

I thumb back the hammer. "You stupid old bastard," I say, "what do you think this is, some kind of game? You've gotten sorta heavy-handed and long-winded ever since that bullet creased your spine. You think there are special rules, and you know all about them. But there aren't any rules. You don't tell me what to do and I don't tell you. You're a crippled old man, but if you pick a fight with me I'm going to fight my own way, not yours, and I'm going to put you down any way I can."

I take up slack on the trigger. Old Parker's eyes bulge, his mouth starts trembling, he tries to control himself but he can't. He screams, not loud, but high-pitched, like a frightened girl.

I thumb down the hammer and put my gun away. "Okay," I say, "maybe now you can wake up and remember how it really is."

I lift him up and slide the chair under him. "Sorry it's gotta be this way, Natchez. I'm going now."

I stop at the door and look back. Parker is grinning at me. "Glad to see you're feeling better, Tom. I should have remembered that you got nerves. All of the good ones have nerves. But you'll be fine at the showdown."

"You old idiot, there's not going to be any showdown. I told you before, I'm riding out of here."

"Good luck, Tom. Give 'em hell!"

"Idiot!" I get out of there.

A horseman crosses a high ridge and lets his horse pick its own way down the other side to the desert floor. There is a soft hiss of wind, glitter of mica, sand gathered into long wavering windrows.

The noon sun beats down as the rider passes through gigantic rock formations carved by the wind into fantastic shapes. At evening, the rider dismounts and inspects his horse's hooves. He whistles tunelessly to himself, pours water from his canteen into his derby, waters his horse, puts the hat back on and drinks sparingly himself. He hobbles the horse and makes camp on the desert. He sits by a little fire and watches the swollen desert sun go down. He

is a tall, lean man, with a battered derby on his head and a horn-handled .44 strapped down on his right leg.

Brimstone: a desolate mining settlement on the northeastern edge of the Territory. Rising above the town is the natural rock formation of Devil's Highway — a broad, gently sloping rock bridge. The far end, out of sight from here, is firmly anchored just outside The Set, two hundred yards and 150 years away.

I come in on a limping horse. There aren't many people around, but I do spot one familiar face: it's that damned freckle-faced kid. He must have ridden pretty hard to get here before me. I pass him by without a word.

I sit my horse for a while and admire the Devil's Highway. Five minutes' ride to the other side and I'll be out of the West for good, finished with it all, the good times and the bad, the fear and the laughter, the long slow days and the dull, dangerous nights. In a few hours I'll be with Consuela, I'll be reading the newspapers and watching TV...

Now I'm going to put down one last shot of redeye and then sashay out of here.

I pull up my horse at the saloon. A few more people are on the street now, watching me. I walk into the saloon.

There is one man drinking alone at the bar. He's short and stocky, wearing a black leather vest and a Mountain Man's buffalo hat. He turns; he carries one unholstered gun high in his belt. I never saw him before, but I know who he is.

"Howdy, Mr. Washburn," he says.

"Howdy, Little Joe," I reply.

He holds the bottle out questioningly. I nod. He reaches behind the bar, finds another shot glass, fills it up for me. We sip quietly.

After a while I say, "Hope you didn't have too much trouble finding me."

"Not too much," Little Joe says. He's older than I had expected, nearly thirty. He's got a tough, craggy face, high cheekbones, a black handlebar mustache. He sips his drink, then says to me, very gently, "Mr. Washburn, I heard a rumor which I don't believe. The rumor said that you was leaving this Territory in sort of a hurry."

"That's right," I tell him.

"The rumor also said that you wasn't planning to stay around long enough to give me the time of day."

"That's also true, Little Joe. I didn't figure I had no time for you. But here you are anyhow."

"Indeed I am," Little Joe says. He rubs down the ends of his mustache and pulls hard at his nose. "Frankly, Mr. Washburn, I simply can't believe that you're not planning to waltz around with me. I know all about you, Mr. Washburn, and I just can't believe that."

"Better believe it, Joe," I say to him. "I'm finishing this drink, and then I'm walking out this door and getting on my horse and riding over Devil's Highway."

Little Joe tugs at his nose again, frowns, pushes back his hat. "I never thought to hear this."

"I never thought to say it."

"You're really not going to face me?"

I finish my drink and set the shot glass down on the bar. "Take care of yourself, Little Joe." I start toward the door.

Little Joe says, "There's just one last thing."

I turn. Little Joe is standing away from the bar, both hands visible. "I can't force you into a showdown, Mr. Washburn. But I did make a little bet concerning that derby of yours."

"So I heard."

"And so, although it pains me more than you can know, I'll have to have it."

I stand, facing him, not answering.

Little Joe says, "Look, Washburn, no sense you just standing there glaring at me. Give me the hat or make your play."

I take off the derby. I smooth it on my sleeve, then sail it to him. He picks it up, never taking his eyes from me. He says, "Well, I'll be."

"Take care of yourself, Little Joe." I walk out of the saloon.

A crowd has assembled opposite the saloon. They wait and watch, talking in hushed voices. The saloon doors swing and a tall thin bareheaded man comes through. He is beginning to bald. He carries a .44 strapped down on his right leg, and he looks like he knows how to use it. But the fact is, he hasn't used it.

Under the watchful eyes of the crowd, Washburn unties his horse, mounts it, and sets it at a walk toward the bridge.

The saloon doors swing again. A short, stocky hard-faced man comes through, holding a battered derby. He watches the horse-man ride away.

Washburn spurs his horse, which hesitates a moment, then mounts the stone bridge. It takes constant urging to keep the horse going, picking its way across the sloping pebble-clad surface, to the center. Here Washburn stops the horse, or allows it to stop. He sits at the highest point of the bridge's curve, astride the joint between two worlds, but looking at neither. He reaches up to tug at his hat's brim and is mildly surprised to find himself bareheaded. He scratches his forehead lazily, a man with all the time in the world. Then he turns his horse around and starts back down the bridge to Brimstone.

The crowd watches as Washburn rides toward them. They are motionless, silent. Then, realizing what is about to happen, they scatter for the shelter of wagons, duck down behind water troughs, crouch behind grain sacks.

Only Little Joe Potter remains in the dusty street. He watches while Washburn dismounts, shoos his horse out of the line of fire, walks slowly toward him.

Little Joe calls out, "Hey, Washburn! Come back for your hat?"

Washburn grins, shakes his head. "No, Little Joe, I came back because it's our dance."

They both laugh, it is all some ridiculous joke. Then, suddenly, both men draw. The heavy bark of their .44s crashes through the town. Smoke and dust obscure the fighters.

The smoke blows away. Both men are still standing. Little Joe's gun is pointed down. He twirls it, and watches it fall from his hand. Then he collapses.

Washburn holsters his gun, walks over to Little Joe, kneels, lifts his head out of the dirt.

"Goddamn," Little Joe says, "that was one short dance, huh, Washburn?"

"Too short," Washburn says. "Joe, I'm sorry..."

But Little Joe doesn't hear this. His eyes have gone blank and unfocused, his body is limp. Blood trickles out of two holes in his chest, blood stains the dust from the large exit wounds in his back.

Washburn gets to his feet, finds his derby in the dust, wipes it off, puts it on. He walks over to his horse. People are coming out

now, there is a buzz of conversation. Washburn sets one foot in the stirrup, begins to mount.

At that moment a wavering, high-pitched voice calls out, "Okay, Washburn, draw!"

Washburn's face contorts as he whirls, trying to get his gun hand clear, trying to spin out of the line of fire. Even in that cramped and impossible posture he manages to get the .44 drawn, spins to see the freckle-faced kid ten yards away with gun drawn and aimed, firing.

Sunlight explodes in Washburn's head, he hears his horse scream, he is falling through the dusty floors of the world, falling as the bullets thud into him with a sound like a butcher's cleaver swung flat against a side of beef. The world is coming apart, the picture-making machine is smashed, his eyes are a broken lens that reflect the sudden destruction of the world. A red light flashes a final warning and the world goes to black.

The viewer, audience and actor, looks for a while at the darkened screen, stirs in his easy chair, rubs his chin. He seems to be in some distress. Then, at last, he belches, and reaches out and turns off the screen.

WHAT IS LIFE?

Mortonson relates that while he was out strolling in the foothills of the Himalayas one day, a tremendous voice that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere said to him, "Hey, you."

"Me?" Mortonson asked.

"Yes, you," the voice boomed. "Can you tell me, what is life?"

Mortonson stood, frozen in midstride, pouring perspiration, aware that he was having a genuine mystical experience, and that a lot was going to depend on how he answered The Question.

"I'm going to need a moment or two for this one," he said.

"Don't take too long," said the voice, reverberating hugely from all sides.

Mortonson sat down on a rock and considered the situation. The god or demon who had asked the question surely knew that Mortonson — a mere mortal and not too fantastic a specimen at that — hadn't the faintest idea of what life was. So his answer should perhaps reveal his understanding of his own mortal limitations, but also show his awareness that it was somehow appropriate for the god or demon to ask this question of a potentially divine creature like Man, here represented by Mortonson with his stooped shoulders, sunburned nose, orange rucksack, and crumpled pack of Marlboros. On the other hand, maybe the implication of the question was that Mortonson himself really *did* know what life was and could spontaneously state in a few well-chosen words. But it was already a bit late for spontaneous wisdom.

"I'll be right with you," Mortonson said.

"Okay," said the tremendous voice, booming off the mountains and rolling through the valleys.

It was really a drag to be put on the line like this spiritually. And it wasn't fair. After all, Mortonson hadn't come to Nepal as a *pilgrim*, he was only there on a thirty-day excursion. He was simply a young American with a sunburned nose chainsmoking Marlboros on a hillside in Nepal where he had come through a combination of restlessness and an unexpected birthday gift of five hundred dollars from his parents. So what could you infer from that, context-wise? Raw American Encounters Immemorial Eastern Wisdom and Fails Miserably To Get With It. A bummer!

Nobody likes to be put on the spot like that. It's embarrassing and potentially ego-damaging to have this vast otherworldly voice come at you with what has to be a trick question. How do you handle it? Avoid the trap, expose the double-bind, reveal your knowledge of the Metagame by playing it in a spirit of frivolity! Tell the voice: *Life is a voice asking a man what life is!* And then roar with cosmic laughter.

But to bring that off you need to be sure that the voice understands the levels of your answer. What if it says, "Yeah, that's what's *happening*, but what is *life*?" And you're left standing there with ectoplasmic egg on your face as that cosmic laughter is directed at *you* — great gusty heroic laughter at your pomposity, your complacency, your arrogance at even attempting to answer the Unanswerable.

"How's it coming?" the voice asked.

"I'm still working on it," Mortonson said.

Obviously, this was one of those spiritual quickies, and Mortonson was still stalling around, and hadn't even gotten around yet to considering what in hell life was. Quickly he reviewed some possibilities: Life is a warm puppy. Life is asymmetry. Life is Chance. Life is Chaos shot through with Fatality (remember that one). Life is just a bowl of cherries. Life is birdcall and windsong (nice). Life is what you make it. Life is Cosmic Dance. Life is a Movie. Life is matter become curious (did Victor Hugo say that?). Life is whatever the hell you want to call it.

"This is really a tough one," Mortonson said.

"That's for sure," the voice said, rolling from peak to peak and filling the air with its presence.

One should always be prepared for this kind of spiritual emergency, Mortonson thought. Why didn't NYU have a course in

Normative Attitudes Toward the Unexpected? But college never prepared you for anything important, you just went along learning a little here and there, picking up on Chuang Tzu, Thoreau, Norman Brown, Pajneesh, the Shivapuri Baba, and the other Insiders who really knew the score. And all their stuff sounded absolutely right on! But when you closed the book, that was the end of it, and there you were scratching your nose and wishing that someone would invite you to a party where you'd meet a beautiful childlike young woman with straight long hair and upright pointy breasts and long slender legs, but now was no time to get into that because that damned voice was waiting for the answer, the Big Answer, but what in almighty hell was *life*?

"I've almost got it," he said.

What really bugged him was the knowledge that he had a lot to gain if he could only come up with the right answer. It was a really incredible chance for spiritual advancement, an opportunity to skip a few intermediate steps and get right up to Enlightenment, Moksha, Satori! A really together person could solve this and parlay the ensuing insight into guruhood, maybe even into Buddhodom! You could spend a lifetime going to Esalen or a Gurdjieff group and never get near anything like this! But what was life?

Mortonson ground out his cigarette and saw that it was his last. No more until he got back to his pension. Christ! He had to get on with this! Life is hesitation? Desire? Longing? Sorrow? Preparation? Fruition? Coming together? Moving apart?

Mortonson rubbed his forehead and said in a loud but somewhat shaky voice, "Life is conflagration!"

There was an uncanny silence. After what he judged was a proper discretionary wait, Mortonson asked, "Uh, was that right?"

"I'm trying it out," the noble and tremendous voice boomed. "Conflagration is too long. Blaze? Fire! Life is fire! That fits!"

"Fire is what I meant," Mortonson said.

"You really helped me out," the voice said, "I was stuck on that one. Now maybe you can help me with 78 across. I need to know the middle name of the inventor of the frictionless star drive. It's on the tip of my tongue but I can't quite get it. The third letter is D."

Mortonson had been prepared for some freaky revelations, but playing Cosmic Crosswords was not his idea of where anything was at, spiritually speaking. He just couldn't relate to it, even though it was definitely an Extraordinary Experience.

He relates that he thereupon turned and walked away from the voice and the higher mysteries and returned to his pension in Katmandu. Now he has gone back to his job as expediter in his father's gristle-processing plant in Skowhegan, and he takes his vacations in Majorca.

I SEE A MAN SITTING ON A CHAIR, AND THE CHAIR IS BITING HIS LEG

Written in Collaboration with Harlan Ellison

Behind him lay the gray Azores, behind the Gates of Hercules; the sky above, the goo below.

"Screwin' goo! Screwin' goo!" Pareti yelled at the fading afternoon sunlight. It came up garbled, around the stump of cigar, and it lacked the vigor Pareti usually brought to the curse, because it was nearly shift's end, and he was exhausted. The first time he had yelled it had been three years before, when he had signed up to work in the goo fields as a harvester. He had yelled it when he'd first seen the mucous gray plankton mutation spotting this area of the Atlantic. Like leprosy on the cool blue body of the sea.

"Screwin' goo," he murmured. It was ritual now. It kept him company in the punt. Just him, alone there: Joe Pareti and his dying voice. And the ghostly gray-white goo.

He caught the moving flash of gray out of the corner of his eye, light reflecting in the Eskimo-slit glasses. He wheeled the punt around expertly. The goo was extruding again. A grayish-pale tentacle rose above the ocean's surface; it looked like an elephant's trunk. Skimming smoothly toward it, Pareti unconsciously gauged his distance: five feet from it, right arm tensed, out comes the net — the strange net on its pole, that resembled nothing so much as the butterfly nets used by the Indians of Patzcuaro — and with a side-arm softball pitch of a motion he scooped it up, writhing.

The goo wriggled and twisted, flailed at the meshes, sucked toothlessly up the aluminum handle. Pareti estimated the chunk at five pounds, even as he brought it inboard and dumped it into the lazarette. It was heavy for so small a fragment.

As the goo fell toward it, the lazarette dilated and compressed air shut the lid down with a sucking sound on the tentacle. Then the iris closed over the lid.

The goo had touched him on the glove. Pareti decided it was too much trouble to disinfect immediately. He swiped absently at his thinning sun-bleached hair, falling over his eyes, and wheeled the punt around again.

He was about two miles from the TexasTower.

He was fifty miles out into the Atlantic.

He was off the coast of Hatteras, in Diamond Shoals.

He was at 35 degrees latitude, 75 degrees west longitude.

He was well into the goo fields.

He was exhausted. Shift's end.

Screw'n' goo.

He began working his way back.

The sea was flat, and a long, steady swell rolled back toward the TexasTower. There was no wind, and the sun shone hard and diamond as it had ever since the Third World War, brighter than it had ever shone before. It was almost perfect harvesting weather, at five hundred and thirty dollars a shift.

Off to his left a ten-square-yard film of goo lay like a delicate tracery of gray, almost invisible against the ocean. He altered course and expertly collected it. It offered no fight at all. Stretched too thin.

He continued toward the TexasTower, gathering goo as he skimmed. He rarely encountered the same shape twice. The largest chunk he collected was disguised as a cyprus stump. (*Stupid goo*, he thought, *who ever saw a cyprus stump growing fifty miles out?*) The smallest was a copy of a baby seal. Cadaverously gray and eyeless. Pareti gathered each piece quickly, without hesitation: he had an uncanny aptitude for recognizing goo in any of its shapes, and a flawless harvesting technique that was infinitely more refined and eloquent than the methods used by the Company-trained harvesters. He was the dancer with natural rhythm, the painter who had never taken a lesson, the instinctive tracker. It had been the impetus that had led him here to the goo fields when he had graduated Summa Cum from the Multiversity, rather than into industry or one of the cattle-prod think-factories. Everything he had learned, all the education he had gotten; of what use was it in a clogged choking jamcrowded world of twenty-seven billion overcrowded

people, all scrabbling for the most demeaning jobs? Anyone could get an education, a few less got their degrees, even less got their gold seals, and a handful — like Joe Pareti — came out the other end of the Multiversity slide-trough with a degree, a doctorate, a gold seal and the double-A rating. And *none* of it was worth his natural instinct for goo harvesting.

At the speed he harvested, he could earn more than a projects engineer.

After twelve hours of shift, out on the glare-frosted sea, even *that* satisfaction was dulled by exhaustion. He only wanted to hit the bunk in his stateroom. And sleep. And sleep. He threw the soggy cigar stump into the sea.

The structure loomed up before him. It was traditionally called a TexasTower, yet it bore no resemblance to the original offshore drilling rigs of pre-Third War America. It looked, instead, like an articulated coral reef or the skeleton of some inconceivable aluminum whale.

The TexasTower was a problem in definition. It could be moved, therefore it was a *ship*; it could be fastened irrevocably to the ocean bottom, therefore it was an *island*. Above the surface there was a cat's cradle network of pipes: feeder into which the goo was fed by the harvesters (as Pareti now fed his load, hooking the lazarette's collapsible tube nozzle onto the monel metal hardware of the TexasTower's feeder tube, feeling the tube pulse as the pneumatic suction was applied, sucking the goo out of the punt's storage bins), pipe racks to moor the punts, more pipes to support the radar mast.

There was a pair of cylindrical pipes that gaped open like howitzers. The entry ports. Below the waterline, like an iceberg, the TexasTower spread and extended itself, with collapsible sections that could be extended or folded away as depth and necessity demanded. Here in Diamond Shoals, several dozen of the lowest levels had been folded inoperative.

It was shapeless, ungainly, slow-moving, impossible to sink in a hurricane, more ponderous than a galleon. As a ship, it was unquestionably the worst design in nautical history; but as a factory, it was a marvel.

Pareti climbed out of the mooring complex, carrying his net-pole, and entered the nearest entry port. He went through the decontamination and storage locks, and was puffed inside the TexasTower

proper. Swinging down the winding aluminum staircase, he heard voices rising from below. It was Mercier, about to go on-shift, and Peggy Flinn, who had been on sick call for the last three days with her period. The two harvesters were arguing.

"They're processing it out at fifty-six dollars a ton," Peggy was saying, her voice rising. Apparently they had been at it for some time. They were discussing harvester bonuses.

"Before or *after* it fragments?" Mercier demanded.

"Now you know damn well that's *after*-frag weight," she snapped back. "Which means every ton we snag out here gets tanked through and comes up somewhere around forty or forty-one tons after radiation. *We're* getting bonus money on Tower weight, *not* frag weight!"

Pareti had heard it a million times before in his three years on the goo fields. The goo was sent back to the cracking and radiation plants when the bins were full. Subjected to the various patented techniques of the master processing companies the goo multiplied itself molecule for molecule, fragmented, grew, expanded, swelled, and yielded forty times its own original weight of goo. Which was then "killed" and reprocessed as the basic artificial foodstuff of a population diet long since a stranger to steaks and eggs and carrots and coffee. The Third War had been a terrible tragedy in that it had killed off enormous quantities of everything except people.

The goo was ground up, reprocessed, purified, vitamin-supplemented, colored, scented, accented, individually packaged under a host of brand names — VitaGram; Savor; Deelish; Gratifood; Sweetmeat; Quench-Caffe; Family Treatall — and marketed to twenty-seven billion open and waiting mouths. Merely add thrice-reprocessed water and serve.

The harvesters were literally keeping the world alive.

And even at five hundred and thirty dollars per shift, some of them felt they were being underpaid.

Pareti clanked down the last few steps and the two arguing harvesters looked up at him. "Hi, Joe," Mercier said. Peggy smiled.

"Long shift?" she asked archly.

"Long enough. I'm whacked out."

She stood a little straighter. "Completely?"

Pareti rubbed at his eyes. They felt grainy; he had been getting more dust in them than usual. "I thought it was that-time-of-the-month for you?"

"Aw gone," she grinned, spreading her hands like a little girl whose measles have vanished.

"Yeah, that'd be nice," Pareti accepted her service, "if you'll throw in a back rub."

"And I'll crack your spine."

Mercier chuckled and moved toward the staircase. "See you later," he said over his shoulder.

Pareti and Peggy Flinn went down through sections to his state-room. Living in an encapsulated environment for upwards of six months at a stretch, the harvesters had evolved their own social relationships. Women who were touchy about their sexual liaisons did not last long on the TexasTowers. There were seldom shore leaves for the harvesters — who referred to themselves as "the black gang" — and consequently all conveniences were provided by the company. Films, gourmet chefs, recreational sports, a fully stocked and constantly changing library...and the lady harvesters. It had begun with some of the women accepting "gratuities" from the men for sex, but that had had a deleterious effect on morale, so now their basic shift wages and bonuses were supplemented by off-shift sex pay. It was not uncommon for a reasonably good-looking and harvesting-adept woman to come back after an eight- or nine-month TexasTower stint with fifty thousand dollars in her credit account.

In the stateroom, they undressed.

"Jesus," Peggy commented, "what happened to all your hair?"

It had been several months since they had been together.

"I guess I'm going bald." Pareti shrugged it off. He wiped himself down completely with a disposable moist-cloth from the dispenser, and tossed it into the incinerator iris.

"*All over?*" she asked incredulously.

"Hey, Peg," Pareti said wearily. "I've been out for twelve hours. I'm whacked out, and I want to get some sleep. Now do you want to or don't you?"

She smiled at him. "You're cute, Joe."

"I'm a pudding, I am," he replied, and sank down on the comfortable bed. She came to him and they had sex.

Then he went to sleep.

Fifty years before, the Third World War had finally broken out. It had been preceded by thirty years of Cold War Phase II. Phase I

had ended in the 1970s, when it was obvious that War was inevitable. Phase II had been the defensive measures against overkill. They had sunk the subterranean cavern cities, the "canister cities" as the sub-urban planners called them. (They weren't called anything as unglamorous as that publicly. In the press releases they were glowingly named Jade City, DownTown, Golden Grotto, North and South Diamond, Onyxville, Sub-City, East Pyrites. And in the Smokies they sank the gigantic North American Continent antimissile complex, Ironwall, two miles down.)

The breeding had started long before Phase I. Malthus had been right. Under the impetus of fear, people multiplied as never before. And in canister cities like Lower Hong Kong, Labyrinth (under Boston) and New Cuernavaca the enclosed conformity of life left them few pleasures. So they multiplied. And again. And geometrically the progression filled the canister cities. They sent out tunnels and tubes and feelers, and the Earth filled up with the squalling, teeming, hungry inhabitants of the land of fear. Aboveground only the military and scientific elite chose to live, out of necessity.

Then came the War.

Bacteriologically, atomically, with laser and radiation it came.

It was bad enough on the North American continent: Los Angeles was slagged. Ironwall and half the Smokies were gone, the missile complex buried forever under mountains that were now soft, rolling hills. Oak Ridge went up in one bright flash. Louisville was reduced to rubble. Detroit and Birmingham no longer existed; in their places were smooth reflective surfaces, almost perfectly flat like mirrored wafers of oxidized chrome plate.

New York and Chicago had been better protected. They had lost their suburbs, but not their canister sub-cities. And the central cores of the metropolises remained. Battered, but still functioning.

It had been just as bad, even worse, on the other continents. But there had been time during the two Phases of the Cold War to develop serums, remedies, antidotes, therapeutics. People were saved by the millions.

Even so...one could not inject an ear of corn.

Nor could one inoculate every cat and dog and wild boar and antelope and llama and Kodiak bear. Nor could one seed the oceans and save the fish. Ecology went mad. Some species survived, others died out completely.

The Hunger Strikes and the Food Riots began.

And ended quickly. People too weak from hunger cannot fight. So the cannibal times came. And then the governments, terrified by what they had done to themselves and each other, banded together at last.

The United Nations had been rebuilt, and they had commissioned the Companies to solve the problems of artificial foodstuffs. But it was a slow process.

What they had only dimly realized was that the Westerly Winds, carrying all the radiation and residue of bacteriological lunacy, had swept across the North American continent, picking up their additional loads at the Smokies, Louisville, Detroit, New York, and had carried the polluted and deadly cargo across the Eastern Seaboard, across the Atlantic, to dissipate finally in the jetstream over Asia. But not before massive fallout off the Carolinas had combined with sunlight and rain to produce a strange mutation in the plankton-rich waters of Diamond Shoals.

Ten years after the end of the Third World War, the plankton had become something else. It was called goo by the fishermen of the Outer Banks.

Diamond Shoals had become a cauldron of creation.

The goo spread. It adapted. It metamorphosed. And there was panic. Deformed exoskeletal fish swam in the shallow waters; four new species of dog shark were found (one was a successful adaptation); a centipedal squid with a hundred arms flourished for several years, then unaccountably vanished.

The goo did not vanish.

Experiments followed, and miraculously, what had seemed to be an imminent and unstoppable menace to life on the seas, and probably on the planet as a whole...revealed itself as a miracle. It saved the world. The goo, when "killed," could be turned into artificial nourishment. It contained a wide spectrum of proteins, vitamins, amino acids, carbohydrates, and even necessary minimum amounts of trace elements. When dehydrated and packaged, it was economically rewarding. When combined with water it could be cooked, stewed, pan fried, boiled, baked, poached, sauteed, stuffed or used as a stuffing. It was as close to the perfect food as had ever been found. Its flavor altered endlessly, depending entirely on which patented processing system was used. It had many tastes, but no characteristic taste.

Alive, it functioned on a quasi-vegetative level. An unstable protoplasmic agglomeration, it was apparently unintelligent, though it had an undeniable urge toward form. It structured itself endlessly into rudimentary plant and animal shapes, none viable. It was as if the goo desired to *become* something.

(It was hoped in the research labs of the Companies that the goo never discovered *what* it wanted to become.)

"Killed," it was a tasty meal.

Harvesting factories — the TexasTowers — were erected by each of the Companies, and harvesters were trained. They drew the highest wages of any nontechnical occupation in the world. It was not due to the long hours, or the exhausting labor. The pay was, in fact, legally referred to as "high-hazard pay."

Joe Pareti had danced the educational pavane and had decided the tune was not nearly sprightly enough for him. He became a harvester. He never really understood why all the credits being deposited in his account were called high-hazard pay.

He was about to find out.

It was a song that ended in a scream. And then he woke up. The night's sleep had held no rest. Eleven hours on his back; eleven hours of helpless drudgery; and at last an escape, an absurd transition into exhausted wakefulness. For a moment he lay there, he couldn't move.

Then getting to his feet, he found himself fighting for balance. Sleep had not used him well.

Sleep had scoured his skin with emery paper.

Sleep had polished his fingers with diamond dust.

Sleep had abraded his scalp.

Sleep had sandblasted his eyes.

Oh dear God, he thought, feeling pain in every nerve ending. He stumbled to the toilet and hit the back of his neck a sharp, short blast with the needle-spray of the shower head. Then he went to the mirror, and automatically pulled his razor out of the charge niche. Then he looked at himself in the mirror, and stopped.

Sleep had: scoured his skin with emery paper, polished his fingers with diamond dust, abraded his scalp, sandblasted his eyes.

It was barely a colorful way of putting it. Almost literally, that was what had happened to him while he had slept.

He stared into the mirror, and recoiled from the sight. *If this is what sex with that damned Flinn does to a guy, I'm going celibate.*

He was totally bald.

The wispy hair he recalled brushing out of his face during the previous on-shift was gone. His head was smooth and pale as a fortune teller's crystal ball.

He had no eyelashes.

He had no eyebrows.

His chest was smooth as a woman's.

His pubis had been denuded.

His fingernails were almost translucent, as though the uppermost layers of dead horn had been removed.

He looked in the mirror again. He saw himself...more or less. Not very *much* less, actually: no more than a pound of him was gone. But it was a noticeable pound.

His hair.

Assorted warts, moles, scar tissue and calluses.

The protective hairs in his nostrils.

His kneecaps, elbows and heels were scoured pink.

Joe Pareti found that he was still holding the razor. He put it down. And stared at himself in horrified fascination for several timeless moments. He had a ghastly feeling he knew what had happened to him. *I'm in deep trouble*, he thought.

He went looking for the TexasTower's doctor. He was not in the sickbay. He found him in the pharmacology lab. The doctor took one look and preceded him back to sickbay. Where he confirmed Pareti's suspicions.

The doctor was a quiet, orderly man named Ball. Very tall, very thin, with an irreducible amount of professional ghoulishness. Normally he was inclined to gloom; but looking at the hairless Pareti he cheered perceptibly.

Pareti felt himself being dehumanized. He had followed Ball into the sickbay as a man; now he felt himself transformed into a specimen, a diseased culture to be peered at under a microscope.

"Hah, yes," the doctor said. "Interesting. Would you turn your head, please? Good...good...fine, now blink."

Pareti did as he was told. Ball jotted down notes, turned on the recording cameras, and hummed to himself as he arranged a tray of shining instruments.

"You've caught it, of course," Ball said, almost as an afterthought.

"Caught what?" Pareti demanded, hoping he'd get some other answer.

"Ashton's Disease. Goo infection, if you like, but we call it Ashton's, after the first case." Then he chuckled to himself: "I don't suppose you thought it was dermatitis?"

Pareti thought he heard eerie music, an organ, a harpsichord.

Ball went on. "Your case is atypical, just like all the others, so, really, that makes it typical. It has a rather ugly Latin name, as well, but Ashton's will do."

"Stuff all that," Pareti said angrily. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"Why do you think you get high-hazard, why do you think they keep me on-board? I'm no G.P., I'm a specialist. Of course I'm absolutely sure. You're only the sixth recorded case. *Lancet* and the *AMA Journal* will be interested. In fact, with the proper presentation *Scientific American* might care to publish an article."

"What can you do for me?" Pareti snapped.

"I can offer you a drink of excellent prewar Bourbon," Dr. Ball said. "Not a specific for your ailment, but good for the whole man, so to speak."

"Stop screwing around with me. I don't think it's a ha ha. Isn't there anything else? You're a specialist!"

Ball seemed to realize for the first time that his black humor was not being received with wild enthusiasm. "Mr. Pareti, medical science admits of no impossibility, not even the reversal of biological death. But that is a statement of theory. There are many things we could try. We could hospitalize you, stuff you with drugs, irradiate your skin, smear you with calamine lotion, even conduct experiments in homeopathy and acupuncture and moxibustion. But this would have no practical effect, except to make you very uncomfortable. In the present state of our knowledge, Ashton's is irreversible and, uh, terminal."

Pareti swallowed hard at the last word.

Oddly, Ball smiled and added, "You might as well relax and enjoy it."

Pareti moved a step toward him, angrily. "You're a morbid son of a bitch!"

"Please excuse my levity," the doctor said quickly. "I know I have a dumb sense of humor. I don't rejoice in your fate...really, I don't...I'm bored on this desolate Tower...I'm happy to have some real work. But I can see you don't know much about Ashton's...the disease may not be too difficult to live with."

"I thought you said it was terminal?"

"So I did. But then, *everything* is terminal, even health, even life itself. The question is how long, and in what manner."

Pareti slumped down into a Swedish-designed relaxer chair that converted — when the stirrups were elevated — into a dilation-and-curettage brace-framework for abortions. "I have a feeling you're going to lecture me," he said, with sudden exhaustion.

"Forgive me. It's so dull for me here."

"Go on, go on, for Christ's sake." Pareti wobbled his hand wearily.

"Well, the answer is ambiguous, but not unpromising," Ball said, settling with enthusiasm into his recitation. "I told you, I believe, that the most typical thing about the disease is its atypicality. Let us consider your illustrious predecessors.

"Case One died within a week of contracting the disease, apparently of a pneumonic complication..."

Pareti looked sick. "Swell," he said.

"Ah! But Case Two," Ball caroled. "Case Two was Ashton, after whom the Disease was named. *He* became voluble, almost echolalic. One day, before a considerable crowd, he levitated to a height of eighteen feet. He hung there without visible support, haranguing the crowd in a hermetic language of his own devising. Then he vanished, into thin air (but not too thin for him) and was never heard from again. Hence, Ashton's Disease. Case Three..."

"What happened to Ashton?" Pareti asked, a vapor of hysteria in his voice.

Ball spread his hands, without an answer.

Pareti looked away.

"Case Three found that he could live underwater, though not in the air. He spent two happy years in the coral reefs off Marathon, Florida."

"What happened to *him*?" Pareti asked.

"A pack of dolphins did him in. It was the first recorded instance of a dolphin attacking a man. We have often wondered what he said to them."

"And the others?"

"Case Four is currently living in the Ausable Chasm community. He operates a mushroom farm. He's become quite rich. We can't detect any effect of the disease beyond loss of hair and dead skin

(in that way, your cases are similar, but it may be just coincidence). He has a unique way with mushrooms, of course."

"That sounds good." Pareti brightened.

"Perhaps. But Case Five is unfortunate. A really amazing degeneration of the organs, accompanied by a simultaneous external growth of same. This left him with a definitely surrealistic look: heart hanging below his left armpit, intestines wrapped around his waist, that sort of thing. Then he began to develop a chitinous exoskeleton, antennae, scales, feathers — his body couldn't seem to decide what it was evolving into. It opted at last for earthwormdom, an anaerobic species, quite unusual. He was last seen burrowing into sandy loam near Point Judith. Sonar followed him for several months, all the way to central Pennsylvania."

Pareti shuddered. "Did he die then?"

Again, Ball spread his hands, no answer. "We don't know. He may be in a burrow, quiescent, parthenogenetic, hatching the eggs of an inconceivable new species. Or he may have evolved into the ultimate skeletal form...unliving, indestructible rock."

Pareti clasped his hairless hands, and shivered like a child. "Jesus," he murmured, "what a beautiful prospect. Something I can really look forward to."

"The form of your particular case *might* be pleasant," Ball ventured.

Pareti looked up at him with open malice. "Aren't you the smooth bastard, though! Sit out here in the water and laugh your ass off while the goo nibbles on some guy you never met before. What the hell do you do for amusement, roast cockroaches and listen to them scream?"

"Don't blame me, Mr. Pareti," the doctor said evenly. "*You* chose your line of work, not I. You were advised of the risks —"

"They said hardly anybody caught the goo disease, it was all in the small type on the contract," Pareti burst in.

"— but you *were* advised of the risks," Ball pressed on, "and you received hazard-bonus accordingly. You never complained during the three years that money was being poured into your account, you shouldn't bellyache now. It's rather unseemly. After all, you make approximately eight times my salary. That should buy you a lot of balm."

"Yeah, I made the bonuses," Pareti snarled, "and now I'm *really* earning it! The Company —"

"The Company," Ball said, with great care, "is absolutely free of responsibility. You should indeed have read all that tiny type. But you're correct: you *are* earning the bonuses now. In effect you were paid to expose yourself to a rare disease. You were gambling with the Company's money that you wouldn't contract Ashton's. You gambled, and unfortunately, seem to have lost."

"Not that I'm getting any," Pareti said archly, "but I'm not asking for your sympathy. I'm only asking for your professional advice, which you are paid — *overpaid*, in my estimation — to give. I want to know what I should do...and what I ought to expect."

Ball shrugged. "Expect the unexpected, of course. You're only the sixth, you know. There's been no clear-cut pattern established. The disease is as unstable as its progenitor...the goo. The only pattern — and I would hesitate even to suggest that it *was* a pattern — "

"Stop waltzing with me, damn it! Spit it out!"

Ball pursed his lips. He might have pressed Pareti as far as he cared to press him. "The pattern, then, would appear to be this: a radical change of relationship occurs between the victim and the external world. These can be *animate* transformations, like the growth of external organs and functional gills; or *inanimate* transformations, like the victim who levitated."

"What about the fourth case, the one who's still alive and normal?"

"He isn't exactly *normal*," the doctor said, frowning. "His relationship with his mushrooms is a kind of perverted love; reciprocated, I might add. Some researchers suspect that he has himself become a kind of intelligent mushroom."

Pareti bit his thumbnail. There was a wildness in his eyes. "Isn't there any cure, *anything*?"

Ball seemed to be looking at Pareti with thinly veiled disgust. "Whimpering won't do you any good. Perhaps nothing will. I understand Case Five tried to hold off the effects as long as he could, with will power, or concentration...something ludicrous like that."

"Did it work?"

"For a while, perhaps. No one could be sure. In any case, it was strictly conjecture after a point; the Disease finally took him over."

"*But it's possible?*"

Ball snorted. "Yes, Mr. Pareti, it's possible." He shook his head as if he could not believe the way Pareti was taking this. "Remember,

none of the cases was like any other. I don't know what joys you can look forward to, but whatever they are...they're bound to be unusual."

Pareti stood up. "I'll fight it off. It isn't going to take me over like the others."

Ball's expression was of disgust. "I doubt it, Pareti. I never met any of the others, but from what I've read of them, they were far stronger men than you seem to be."

"Why? Just because this has me shaken?"

"No, because you're a sniveler."

"You're the most compassionless mother I've ever met!"

"I cannot pretend grief that you've contracted Ashton's. You gambled, and you lost. Stop whimpering."

"You said that before, Dr. Ball."

"I say it again now!"

"Is that all from you?"

"That's all from me, to be sure," Dr. Ball said, snidely. "But it's not all for you, I'm equally sure."

"But you're sure that's all you have to tell me?"

Ball nodded, still wearing the insipid grin of the medical ghoul. He was wearing it as Pareti took two quick, short steps and jacked a fist into the doctor's stomach, just below the heart. Ball's eyes seemed to extrude almost as the goo extruded, and his face went three shades of gray toward matching his lab smock. Pareti held him up under the chin with his left hand and drove a short, straight right directly into the doctor's nose.

Ball flailed backward and hit the glass-fronted instrument case, breaking the glass with a crash. Ball settled to the floor, still conscious, but in awful pain. He stared up at Pareti as the harvester turned toward the door. Pareti turned back momentarily, smiling for the first time since he had entered the sickbay.

"That's a helluva bedside manner you've got there, Doc."

Then he left.

He was forced to leave the TexasTower within the hour, as the law proscribed. He received a final statement of the back pay due him for the nine-month shift he had been working. He also received a sizeable termination bonus. Though everyone knew Ashton's Disease was not contagious, when he passed Peggy Flinn on his way

to the exit lock, she looked at him sadly and said goodbye, but would not kiss him farewell. She looked sheepish. "Whore," Pareti murmured under his breath, but she heard him.

A Company lift had been sent for him. A big fifteen-passenger job with two stewardesses, a lounge, movie theater and pocket billiard accommodations. Before he was put on board, the Projects Superintendent, head man on the TexasTower, spoke to him at the lock.

"You aren't a Typhoid Mary, you can't give it to anyone. It's merely unlovely and unpredictable. That's what they tell me. Technically, there's no quarantine; you can go where you please. But realistically, you can appreciate that your presence in the surface cities wouldn't be welcome. Not that you'd be missing much...all the action is underground."

Pareti nodded silently. He was well over his shaken reactions of earlier. He was now determined to fight the Disease with the strength of his own will.

"Is that it?" he asked the Projects Super.

The man nodded, and extended his hand.

Pareti hesitated a moment, then shook it.

As Pareti was walking down the ramp to the lift, the Projects Super called after him. "Hey, Pareti?"

Joe turned back.

"Thanks for belting that bastard Ball. I've been itching to do it for six years." He grinned.

It was an embarrassed, brave little smile that Joe Pareti returned, as he said goodbye to who he was and what he was, and boarded the lift for the real world.

He had free passage to the destination of his choice. He chose East Pyrites. If he was going to make a new life for himself with the money he had saved in three years working the goo fields, at least he was going to do it after one king-sized shore leave. It had been nine months since he had been anywhere near excitement — you sure as hell couldn't call Peggy Flinn with her flat-chest excitement — and there was time for fun before the time to settle down.

One of the stewardesses, wearing an off-the-bosom jumper with a "kicki" skirt, paused beside his seat and smiled down at him. "Care for a drink?"

Pareti's thoughts were hardly of liquor. She was a high-breasted, long-legged item with light turquoise hair. But he knew she had been apprised of his ailment, and her reaction would be the same as Peggy Flinn's.

He smiled up at her, thinking of what he would like to do with her if she were amenable. She took his hand and led him back to one of the washrooms. She led him inside, bolted the door, and dropped her clothes. Pareti was so astonished he had to let her undress him. It was cramped and close in the tiny bathroom, but the stewardess was marvelously inventive, not to mention limber.

When she was done with him, her face flushed, her neck spotted with little purple love-bites, her eyes almost feverish, she mumbled something about being unable to resist him, gathered up her clothes without even putting them on and, with acute embarrassment, floundered out of the bathroom, leaving him standing there with his pants down around his shoes.

Pareti looked at himself in the mirror. Again. He seemed to be doing nothing but staring into mirrors today. What stared out at him was himself, bald Pareti. He had the suddenly pleasurable feeling that whatever manner the goo infection in his body was taking to evolve itself, it would probably make him irresistible to women. All at once he could not find it in his heart to think too unkindly of the goo.

He had happy dreams of what joys and delights were in store for him if the goo, for instance, built him as big as a horse, or if it heightened this already obvious attraction women had for him, or if it —

He caught himself.

Uh-uh. No thank you. That was just what had happened to the other five. They had been taken over by the goo. It had done what it had wanted with them. Well, he was going to fight it, battle it from invading him from the top of his bald head to the soles of his uncalled feet.

He got dressed.

No indeed not. He wasn't going to enjoy any more sex like he'd just had. (And it became obvious to him that whatever the goo had done to the attraction-waves of his personality, it had also served to heighten his perceptions in that area. It had been the best he'd ever had.)

He was going to grab a little fun in East Pyrites, and then buy himself a parcel of land topside, find the right woman, settle down, and buy himself a good position with one of the Companies.

He went back into the cabin of the lift. The other stewardess was on duty. She didn't say anything, but the one who had taken Pareti into the toilet did not show herself through the remainder of the flight, and her replacement kept staring at Joe as though she wanted to nibble him with tiny teeth.

East Pyrites, Nevada, was located eighty-seven miles south of the radioactive ghost town that had been called Las Vegas. It was also three miles below it. It was conservatively rated one of the marvels of the world. Its devotion to vice was obsessive, amounting to an almost puritanical drive to pleasure. In East Pyrites the phrase had been coined:

PLEASURE
IS A STERN DUTY
IMPOSED ON US
BY THE WORLD.

In East Pyrites, the fertility cults of antiquity had been revived in deadly seriousness. Pareti found this to be true as he stepped out of the dropshaft on the seventieth underlevel. A mass gangbang was in progress, in the middle of the intersection of Dude Avenue and Gold Dust Boulevard, between fifty male members of the Ishtar Boppers and ten lovely girls who had signed in blood their membership to the Swingers of Cybele.

He carefully avoided the embroglio. It looked like fun, but he wasn't going to aid and abet the goo in taking him over.

He hailed a taxi and stared at the scenery. The Temple of Strangers was served by the virgin daughters of the town's leading citizens; executions for impiety were held publicly in the Court of the Sun; Christianity was in disrepute: it wasn't any fun.

The old Nevadan custom of gambling was still observed, but had been elaborated, ramified, and extended. In East Pyrites, the saying, "You bet your life," had real and sinister meanings.

Many of the practices in East Pyrites were un-Constitutional; others were implausible; and some were downright inconceivable.

Pareti loved it at once.

He selected the Round-The-World Combination Hotel, close to the Hall of Perversions, just across the street from the verdant expanse of Torture Garden. In his room, he showered, changed, and tried to decide what to do first. Dinner in the Slaughterhouse, of course; then perhaps a little mild exercise in the cool darkness of the Mudbath Club. After that —

He suddenly became aware that he was not alone. Someone or something was in the room with him.

He looked around. There was apparently nothing wrong, except that he could have sworn he had put his jacket on a chair. Now it was on the bed, near him.

After a moment's hesitation he reached for the jacket. The garment slid away from him. "Try to catch me!" it said, in a coy, insipid voice. Pareti grabbed for it, but the jacket danced away from him.

Pareti stared at it. Wires? Magnets? A joke of the management of the Hotel? He knew instinctively that he would find no rational way in which the coat had moved and talked. He gritted his teeth and stalked it.

The jacket moved away, laughing, dipping like a bat. Pareti cornered it behind the room's massage unit, and managed to grab a sleeve. *I've got to have this goddamn thing sent out to be cleaned and burned*, he thought insanely.

It lay limp for a moment. Then it curled around and tickled the palm of his hand.

Pareti giggled involuntarily, then flung the garment away from him and hurried out of the room.

Descending by dropshaft to the street, he knew that had been the true onset of the Disease. It had altered the relationship between him and an article of clothing. An inanimate object. The goo was getting bolder.

What would it do next?

He was in a soft place called The Soft Place. It was a gambling hall whose innovation was an elaborate game called StickIt. The game was played by seating oneself before a long counter with a round polyethylene-lined hole in the facing panel, and inserting a certain portion of the anatomy therein. It was strictly a man's game, of course.

One placed one's bets on the flickering light-panels that covered the counter-top. These lights were changed in a random pattern by a computer program, and through the intricacies of the betting and odds, various things happened behind the facing panels, to whoever happened to be inserted in the playing-hole. Some of the things were very nice indeed. Some were not.

Ten seats down to his right, Pareti heard a man scream, high and shrill, like a woman. An attendant in white came with a sheet and a pneumatic stretcher, and took the bettor away. The man to Pareti's left was sitting forward, up tight against the panel, moaning with pleasure. His amber WINNER light was flashing.

A tall, elegant woman with inky hair came up beside Pareti's chair. "Honey, you shouldn't be wasting anything as nice as you here. Why don't we go downshaft to my brig and squam a little..."

Pareti panicked. He knew the goo was at work again. He withdrew from the panel just as the flickering lights went up LOSER in front of him, and the distinct sound of whirring razor blades came out of the playing-hole. He saw his bets sucked into the board, and he turned without looking at the woman, knowing she would be the most gorgeous creature he had ever seen. And he didn't need *that* aggravation on top of everything else.

He ran out of The Soft Place. The goo, and Ashton's Disease, were ruining his good time of hell-for-leather. But he was not, repeat, *not* going to let it get the better of him. Behind him, the woman was crying.

He was hurrying, but he didn't know where he was going. Fear encased him like a second self. The thing he ran from was within him, pulsing and growing within him, running with him, perhaps moving out ahead of him. But the empty ritual of flight calmed him, left him better able to think.

He sat down on a park bench beneath an obscenely shaped purple lamp post. The neon designs were gagging and suggestive. It was quiet here — except for the Muzak — he was in the world-famous Hangover Square. He could hear nothing except the Muzak — and the stifled moans of a tourist expiring in the bushes.

What could he do? He could resist, he could close out the effects of Ashton's Disease by concentration...

A newspaper fluttered across the street and plastered itself around his foot. Pareti tried to kick it away. It clung to his foot, and he heard it whisper, "Please, oh please do not spurn me."

"Get away from me!" Pareti screamed. He was suddenly terrified; he could see the newspaper crinkle as it tried to unsnap his shoe-buttons.

"I want to kiss your feet," the newspaper pleaded. "Is that so terrible? Is it wrong? Am I so ugly?"

"Let go!" Pareti shouted, tugging at the paper, which had formed into a pair of giant white lips.

A man walked past him, stopped, stared, and said, "Jim, that's the damndest bit I ever saw. You do that as a lounge act or just for kicks?"

"Voyeur!" the newspaper hissed, and fluttered away down the street.

"How do you control it?" the man asked. "Special controls in your pocket or something?"

Pareti shook his head numbly. He was so tired suddenly. He said, "You actually saw it kiss my foot?"

"I mean to tell you I saw it," the man said.

"I hoped that maybe I was only hallucinating," Pareti said. He got up from the bench and walked unsteadily away. He didn't hurry.

He was in no rush to meet the next manifestation of Ashton's Disease.

In a dim bar he drank six souses and had to be carried to the public Dry-Out on the corner. He cursed the attendants for reviving him. At least when he was bagged, he didn't have to compete with the world around him for possession of his sanity.

In the Taj Mahal he played girls, purposely aiming badly when he threw the dirks and the kris at the rapidly spinning bawds on the giant wheel. He clipped the ear off a blonde, planted one ineffectually between the legs of a brunette, and missed entirely with his other shots. It cost him seven hundred dollars. He yelled cheat and was bounced.

A head-changer approached him on Leopold Way, and offered the unspeakable delights of an illegal head-changing operation by a doctor who was "clean and very decent." He yelled for a cop, and the little ratfink scuttled away in the crowd.

A taxi driver suggested the Vale of Tears and though it sounded lousy, he gave the guy the go-ahead. When he entered the place — which was on the eighty-first level, a slum section of foul odors and wan street lights — he recognized it at once for what it was. A necro-joint. The smell of freshly stacked corpses rose up to gag him.

He only stayed an hour.

There were nautch joints, and blind pigs, and hallucinogen bars, and a great many hands touching him, touching him.

Finally, after a long time, he found himself back in the park, where the newspaper had come after him. He didn't know how he'd gotten there, but he had a tattoo of a naked seventy-year-old female dwarf on his chest.

He walked through the park, but found that he had picked an unpromising route. Dogwood barked at him and caressed his shoulders; Spanish Moss sang a fandango; an infatuated willow drenched him in tears. He broke into a run, trying to get away from the importunities of cherry trees, the artless Western prattle of sagebrush, the languors of poplar. Through him, his disease was acting on the environment. He was infecting the world he passed through; no, he wasn't contagious to humans, hell no, it was worse than that: he was a Typhoid Mary for the *inanimate world!* And the altered universe loved him, tried to win him. Godlike, an Unmoved Mover, unable to deal with his involuntary creations, he fought down panic and tried to escape from the passions of a suddenly writhing world.

He passed a roving gang of juvies, who offered to beat the crap out of him for a price, but he turned them down and stumbled on.

He came out onto De Sade Boulevard, but even here there was no relief. He could hear the little paving stones whispering about him:

"Say, he's *cute!* "

"Forget it, he'd never look at you."

"You vicious bitch!"

"I tell you he'll never look at you."

"Sure he will. Hey, Joe — "

"What did I tell you? He didn't even look at you!"

"But he's got to! Joe, Joe, it's me, over here — "

Pareti whirled and yelled, "As far as I'm concerned, one paving stone looks exactly like another paving stone. If you've seen one, you've seen 'em all."

That shut them up, by God! But what was this?

High overhead, the neon sign above cut-rate Sex City was beginning to flash furiously. The letters twisted and formed a new message:

I AM A NEON SIGN
AND I ADORE JOE PARETI!

A crowd had gathered to observe the phenomenon. "What the hell is a Joe Pareti?" one woman asked.

"A casualty of love," Pareti told her. "Speak the name softly, the next corpse you see may be your own."

"You're a twisto," the woman said.

"I fear not," Pareti said politely, a little madly. "Madness is my ambition, true. But I dare not hope to achieve it."

She stared at him as he opened the door and went into Sex City. But she didn't believe her eyes when the doorknob gave him a playful little pat on the ass.

"The way it works is this," the salesman said. "Fulfillment is no problem; the tough thing is desire, don't you dig? Desires *die* of fulfillment and gotta be replaced by new, *different* desires. A lotta people desire to have weirdo desires, but they can't make it on accounta having lived a lifetime on the straights. But us here at the Impulse Implantation Center can condition you to like anything you'd like to like."

He had hold of Pareti's sleeve with a tourisnag, a rubber-lined clamp on the end of a telescoping rod; it was used to snag tourists passing through the Odd Services Arcade, to drag them closer to specific facilities.

"Thanks, I'll think it over," Pareti said, trying without much success to get the tourisnag off his sleeve.

"Wait, hey, Jim, dig! We got a special bargain rate, a real cheapo, it's only on for the next hour! Suppose we fix you up with pedophilia, a really high-class desire which has not as yet been over-exploited? Or take bestiality...or take *both* for the special giveaway price — "

Pareti managed to pull the snag from his sleeve, and hurried on down the Arcade without looking back. He knew that one should

never get Impulse Implantation from boiler-shop operators. A friend of his had made that mistake while on leave from a Texas Tower, had been stuck with a passion for gravel, and had died after three admittedly enjoyable hours.

The Arcade was teeming, the screams and laughter of weekend freakoffs and smutters rising up toward the central dome of ever-changing light patterns, crapout kliegs, and grass-jets emitting their pleasant, ceaseless streams of thin blue marijuana smoke. He needed quiet; he needed aloneness.

He slid into a Spook Booth. Intercourse with ghosts was outlawed in some states, but most doctors agreed that it was not harmful if one made certain to wash off the ectoplasmic residue afterward with a thirty-percent alcohol solution. Of course, it was more risky for women (he saw a Douche & Bidet Rest Stop just across the Arcade concourse, and marveled momentarily at the thoroughness of the East Pyrites Better Business Bureau; they took care of every exigency).

He leaned back in the darkness, heard the beginning of a thin, eerie wail...

Then the Booth door was opened. A uniformed attendant asked, "Mr. Joseph Pareti?"

Pareti nodded. "What is it?"

"Sorry to disturb you, sir. A call for you." She handed him a telephone, caressed his thigh, and left, closing the door. Pareti held the phone and it buzzed. He put it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Hi there."

"Who is this?"

"This is your telephone, stupid. Who did you think it was?"

"I can't take all this! Stop talking!"

"It's not talking that's difficult," the telephone said. "The tough thing is finding something to say."

"Well, what do you want to say?"

"Nothing much. I just wanted you to know that somewhere, somehow, Bird lives."

"Bird? Bird who? What in hell are you talking about?"

There was no answer. The telephone had hung up.

He put the telephone down on the comfort ledge and sank back, hoping to God he could make it in peace and quiet. The phone buzzed again, almost immediately. He did not pick it up, and it went from buzz to ring. He put it to his ear again.

"Hello?"

"Hi there," a silky voice said.

"Who is *this*?"

"This is your telephone, Joe baby. I called before. I thought you might like this voice better."

"Why don't you leave me alone?" Joe almost sobbed.

"How can I, Joe?" the telephone asked. "I love you! Oh Joe, Joe, I've tried so hard to please you. But you're so moody, baby, I just don't understand. I was a really *pretty* dogwood, and you barely glanced at me! I became a newspaper, and you didn't even read what I *wrote* about you, you ungrateful thing!"

"You're my disease," Pareti said unsteadily. "Leave me alone!"

"Me? A *disease*?" the telephone asked, a hurt note in the silken voice. "Oh, Joe, darling, how can you call me that? How can you pretend indifference after all we've been to each other?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Pareti said.

"You do *too* know! You came to me every day, Joe, out on the warm sea. I was sort of young and silly then, I didn't understand. I tried to hide from you. But you lifted me up out of the water, you brought me close to you; you were patient and kind, and little by little I grew up. Sometimes I'd even try to wriggle up the pole handle to kiss your fingers..."

"Stop it!" Pareti felt his senses reeling, this was insanity, everything was becoming something else, the world and the Spook Booth were whirling around. "You've got it all wrong."

"I have not!" the telephone said indignantly. "You called me pet names, I was your screwin' goo! I'll admit, I had tried other men before you, Joe. But then, *you'd* been with women before we met, so we mustn't throw the past up to one another. But even with the other five I tried, I was never able to become what I wanted to be. Can you understand how frustrating that was for me, Joe? Can you? I had my whole life before me and I didn't know what to do with it. One's shape is one's career, you know, and I was confused, until I met you...Excuse me if I babble, darling, but this is the first chance we've had for a real talk."

Through the gibbering madness of it all, Pareti saw it now, and understood it. They had underestimated the goo. It had been a young organism, mute but not unintelligent, shaped by the powerful desires it possessed like every other living creature. To have *form*. It was evolving —

Into what?

"Joe, what do you think? What would you like me to become?"

"Could you turn into a girl?" Pareti asked timorously.

"I'm afraid not," the telephone said. "I tried that a few times; and I tried being a nice collie, too, and a horse. But I guess I did a pretty sloppy job, and anyhow, it felt all wrong. I mean, it's just not *me*. But name anything else!"

"No!" Pareti bellowed. For a moment, he had been going along with it. The lunacy was catching.

"I could become a rug under your feet, or if you wouldn't think it was too daring, I could become your underwear — "

"Goddamn it, I don't love you!" Pareti shrieked. "You're nothing but gray ugly goo! I hate your guts! You're a disease...why don't you go love something like yourself?"

"There's nothing like me except *me*," the telephone sobbed. "And besides, it's *you* I love."

"Well, I don't give a damn for you!"

"You're cruel!"

"You stink, you're ugly, I don't love you, I've *never* loved you!"

"Don't say that, Joe," the telephone warned.

"I'm saying it! I never loved you, *I only used you!* I don't want your love, your love nauseates me, do you understand?"

He waited for an answer, but there was suddenly only an ominous, surly silence on the telephone. Then he heard the dial tone. The telephone had hung up.

Now Pareti has returned to his hotel. He sits in his embroidered room, which has been cunningly constructed for the mechanical equivalents of love. Doubtless he is lovable; but he feels no love. That is obvious to the chair, to the bed, and to the flighty overhead lamp. Even the bureau, not normally observant, realizes that Pareti is loveless.

It is more than sad; it is annoying. It goes beyond mere annoyance; it is maddening. To love is a mandate, to be unloved is insupportable. Can it be true? Yes, it can; Joe Pareti does not love his loveless lover.

Joe Pareti is a man. He is the sixth man to spurn the loving lover's lovely love. Man does not love: can one argue the syllogism? Can frustrated passion be expected to defer judgment any longer?

Pareti looks up and sees the gilded mirror on the facing wall. He remembers that a mirror led Alice to Looking-Glass Land, and Orpheus to Perdition; that Cocteau called mirrors the gateways to hell.

He asks himself what a mirror is. He answers himself that a mirror is an eye waiting to be looked through.

He looks into the mirror and finds himself looking out of the mirror.

Joe Pareti has five new eyes. Two on the bedroom walls, one on the bedroom ceiling, one in the bathroom, one in the hall. He looks through his new eyes and sees new things.

There is the couch, sad lovelorn creature. Half visible is the standing lamp, its curved neck denoting fury. Over here is the closet door, stiff-backed, mute with rage.

Love is always a risk; but hate is a deadly peril.

Joe Pareti looks out through the mirrors, and he says to himself, I see a man sitting on a chair, and the chair is biting his leg.

IS *THAT* WHAT PEOPLE DO?

Eddie Quintero had bought the binoculars at Hammerman's Army & Navy Surplus of All Nations Warehouse Outlet ("Highest Quality Goods, Cash Only, All Sales Final"). He had long wanted to own a pair of really fine binoculars, because with them he hoped to see some things that he otherwise would never see. Specifically, he hoped to see girls undressing at the Chauvin Arms across the street from his furnished room.

But there was also another reason. Without really acknowledging it to himself, Quintero was looking for that moment of vision, of total attention, that comes when a bit of the world is suddenly framed and illuminated, permitting the magnified and extended eye to find novelty and drama in what had been the dull everyday world.

The moment of insight never lasts long. Soon you're caught up again in your habitual outlook. But the hope remains that something — a gadget, a book, a person — will change your life finally and definitively, lift you out of the unspeakable silent sadness of yourself, and permit you at last to behold the wonders which you always knew were there, just beyond your vision.

The binoculars were packed in a sturdy wooden box stenciled, "Section XXII, Marine Corps, Quantico, Virginia." Beneath that it read, "Restricted Issue." Just to be able to open a box like that was worth the \$15.99 that Quintero had paid.

Inside the box were slabs of styrofoam and bags of silica, and then, at last, the binoculars themselves. They were like nothing Quintero had ever seen before. The tubes were square rather than round, and there were various incomprehensible scales engraved on them. There was a tag on them which read, "Experimental. Not To Be Removed from the Testing Room."

Quintero hefted them. The binoculars were heavy, and he could hear something rattle inside. He removed the plastic protective cups and pointed the binoculars out the window.

He saw nothing. He shook the binoculars and heard the rattle again. But then the prism or mirror or whatever was loose must have fallen back into place, because suddenly he could see.

He was looking across the street at the mammoth of the Chauvin Arms. The view was exceptionally sharp and clear: he felt that he was standing about ten feet away from the exterior of the building. He scanned the nearest apartment windows quickly, but nothing was going on. It was a hot Saturday afternoon in July, and Quintero supposed that all the girls had gone to the beach.

He turned the focus knob, and he had the sensation that he was moving, a disembodied eye riding the front of a zoom lens, closer to the apartment wall, five feet away, then one foot away and he could see little flaws in the white concrete front and pit marks on the anodized aluminum window frames. He paused to admire this unusual view, and then turned the knob again very gently. The wall loomed huge in front of him, and then suddenly he had gone completely through it and was standing inside an apartment.

He was so startled that he put down the binoculars for a moment to orient himself.

When he looked through the glasses again, it was just as before: he seemed to be inside an apartment. He caught a glimpse of movement to one side, tried to locate it, and then the part rattled and the binoculars went dark.

He turned and twisted the binoculars, and the part rattled up and down, but he could see nothing. He put the binoculars on his dinette table, heard a soft clunking sound, and bent down to look again. Evidently the mirror or prism had fallen back into place, again, for he could see.

He decided to take no chances of jarring the part again. He left the glasses on the table, knelt down behind them and looked through the eyepieces.

He was looking into a dimly lighted apartment, curtains drawn and the lights on. There was an Indian sitting on the floor, or, more likely, a man dressed like an Indian. He was a skinny blond man with a feathered headband, beaded moccasins, fringed buckskin

pants, leather shirt and a rifle. He was holding the rifle in firing position, aiming at something in a corner of the room.

Near the Indian there was a fat woman in a pink slip sitting in an armchair and talking with great animation into a telephone.

Quintero could see that the Indian's rifle was a toy, about half the length of a real rifle.

The Indian continued to fire into the corner of the room, and the woman kept on talking into the telephone and laughing.

After a few moments the Indian stopped firing, turned to the woman and handed her his rifle. The woman put down the telephone, found another toy rifle propped against her chair and handed it to the Indian. Then she picked up his gun and began to reload it, one imaginary cartridge at a time.

The Indian continued firing with great speed and urgency. His face was tight and drawn, the face of a man who is single-handedly protecting his tribe's retreat into Canada.

Suddenly the Indian seemed to hear something. He looked over his shoulder. His face registered panic. He twisted around suddenly, swinging his rifle into position. The woman also looked, and her mouth opened wide in astonishment. Quintero tried to pick up what they were looking at, but the dinette table wobbled and the binoculars clicked and went blank.

Quintero stood up and paced up and down his room. He had had a glimpse of what people do when they're alone and unobserved. It was exciting, but confusing because he didn't know what it meant. Had the Indian been a lunatic, and the woman his keeper? Or were they more or less ordinary people playing some sort of harmless game? Or had he been watching a pathological killer in training; a sniper who in a week or a month or a year would buy a real rifle and shoot down real people until he himself was killed? And what happened there at the end? Had that been part of the charade, or had something else occurred, something incalculable?

There was no answer to these questions. All he could do was see what else the binoculars would show him.

He planned his next move with greater care. It was crucial that the binoculars be held steady. The dinette table was too wobbly to risk putting the binoculars there again. He decided to use the low coffee table instead.

The binoculars weren't working, however. He jiggled them around, and he could hear the loose part rattle. It was like one of those puzzles where you must put a little steel ball into a certain hole. But this time he had to work without seeing either the ball or the hole.

Half an hour later he had had no success, and he put the glasses down, smoked a cigarette, drank a beer, then jiggled them again. He heard the part fall solidly into place, and he lowered the glasses gently onto a chair.

He was sweaty from the exertion, and he stripped to the waist, then bent down and peered into the eyepieces. He adjusted the focus knob with utmost gentleness, and his vision zoomed across the street and through the outer wall of the Chauvin Arms.

He was looking into a large formal sitting room decorated in white, blue, and gold. Two attractive young people were seated on a spindly couch, a man and a woman. Both were dressed in period costumes. The woman wore a billowing gown cut low over her small round breasts. Her hair was done up in a mass of ringlets. The man wore a long black coat, fawn-gray knee-pants, and sheer white stockings. His white shirt was embroidered with lace, and his hair was powdered.

The girl was laughing at something he had said. The man bent closer to her, then kissed her. She stiffened for a moment, then put her arms around his neck.

They broke their embrace abruptly, for three men had just entered the room. They were dressed entirely in black, wore black stocking-masks over their heads and carried swords. There was a fourth man behind them, but Quintero couldn't make him out.

The young man sprang to his feet and took a sword from the wall. He engaged the three men, circling around the couch while the girl sat frozen in terror.

A fourth man stepped into the circle of vision. He was tall and gaudily dressed. Jeweled rings flashed on his finger, and a diamond pendant hung from his neck. He wore a white wig. The girl gasped when she saw him.

The young man put one of his opponents out of action with a sword thrust to the shoulder, then leaped lightly over the couch to prevent another man from getting behind him. He held his two

opponents in play with apparent ease, and the fourth man watched for a moment, then took a dagger from beneath his waistcoat and threw it, and it hit the young man butt-first on the forehead.

The young man staggered back, and one of the masked men lunged. His blade caught the young man in the chest, bent, then straightened as it slid in between the ribs. The young man looked at it for a moment, then fell, blood welling over his white shirt.

The girl fainted. The fourth man said something, and one of the masked men lifted the girl, the other helped his wounded companion. They all exited, leaving the young man sprawled bleeding on the polished parquet floor.

Quintero turned the glasses to see if he could follow the others. The loose part clattered and the glasses went dark.

Quintero heated up a can of soup and looked at it thoughtfully, thinking about what he had seen. It must have been a rehearsal for a scene in a play...But the sword thrust had looked real, and the young man on the floor had looked badly hurt, perhaps dead.

Whatever it had been, he had been privileged to watch a private moment in the strangeness of people's lives. He had seen another of the unfathomable things that people do.

It gave him a giddy, godlike feeling, this knowledge that he could see things that no one else could see.

The only thing that sobered him was the extreme uncertainty of the future of his visions. The binoculars were broken, a vital part was loose, and all the marvels might stop for good at any moment.

He considered bringing the glasses somewhere to get them fixed. But he knew that he would probably succeed only in getting back a pair of ordinary binoculars, which would show him ordinary things very well, but he could not be expected to see through solid walls into strange and concealed matters.

He looked through the glasses again, saw nothing, and began to shake and manipulate them. He could hear the loose part rolling and tumbling around, but the lenses remained dark. He kept on manipulating them, eager to see the next wonder.

The part suddenly fell into place. Taking no chances this time, Quintero put the glasses down on his carpeted floor. He lay down beside them, put his head to one side, and tried to look through one eyepiece. But the angle was wrong and he could see nothing.

He started to lift the glasses gently, but the part moved a little and he put them down carefully. Light was still shining through the lenses, but no matter how he turned and twisted his head, he could not get lined up with the eyepiece.

He thought about it for a moment, and saw only one way out of his difficulty. He stood up, straddled the glasses, and bent down with his head upside down. Now he could see through the eyepieces, but he couldn't maintain the posture. He straightened up and did some more thinking.

He saw what he had to do. He took off his shoes, straddled the binoculars again and performed a headstand. He had to do this several times before his head was positioned correctly in front of the eyepieces. He propped his feet against the wall and managed to get into a stable position.

He was looking into a large office somewhere in the interior of the Chauvin Arms. It was a modern expensively furnished office, windowless, indirectly lighted.

There was only one man in the room — a large, well-dressed man in his fifties, seated behind a blond wood desk. He sat quite still, evidently lost in thought.

Quintero could make out every detail of the office, even the little mahogany plaque on the desk that read, "Office of the Director. The Buck Stops Here."

The Director got up and walked to a wall safe concealed behind a painting. He unlocked it, reached in and took out a metal container somewhat larger than a shoebox. He carried this to his desk, took a key out of his pocket and unlocked it.

He opened the box and removed an object wrapped in a silky red cloth. He removed the cloth and set the object on his desk. Quintero saw that it was a statue of a monkey, carved in what looked like dark volcanic rock.

It was a strange-looking monkey, however, because it had four arms and six legs.

Then the Director unlocked a drawer in his desk, took out a long stick, placed it in the monkey's lap and lit it with a cigarette lighter.

Oily black coils of smoke arose, and the Director began to dance around the monkey. His mouth was moving, and Quintero guessed that he was singing or chanting.

He kept this up for about five minutes, and then the smoke began to coalesce and take on form. Soon it had shaped itself into

a replica of the monkey, but magnified to the size of a man, an evil-looking thing made of smoke and enchantment.

The smoke-demon (as Quintero named it) held a package in one of his four hands. He handed this to the Director, who took it, bowed deeply and hurried over to his desk. He ripped open the package, and a pile of papers spilled over his desk. Quintero could see bundles of currency, and piles of engraved papers that looked like stock certificates.

The Director tore himself away from the papers, bowed low once again to the smoke-demon and spoke to it. The mouth of the smoky figure moved, and the Director answered him. They seemed to be having an argument.

Then the Director shrugged, bowed again, went to his intercom and pressed a button.

An attractive young woman came into the room with a steno pad and pencil. She saw the smoke-demon and her mouth widened into a scream. She ran to the door but was unable to open it.

She turned and saw the smoke-demon flowing to her, engulfing her.

During all this the Director was counting his piles of currency, oblivious to what was going on. But he had to look up when a brilliant light poured from the head of the smoke-demon, and the four hairy arms pulled the feebly struggling woman close to his body...

At that moment Quintero's neck muscles could support him no longer. He fell and jostled the binoculars as he came down.

He could hear the loose part rattle around; and then it gave a hard click, as though it had settled into its final position.

Quintero picked himself up and massaged his neck with both hands. Had he been subject to an hallucination? Or had he seen something secret and magical that perhaps a few people knew about and used to maintain their financial positions — one more of the concealed and incredible things that people do?

He didn't know the answer, but he knew that he had to witness at least one more of those visions. He stood on his head again and looked through the binoculars.

Yes, he could see! He was looking into a dreary furnished room. Within that room he saw a thin, potbellied man in his thirties, stripped to the waist, standing on his head with his stockinged feet pressed

against the wall, looking upside down into a pair of binoculars that lay on the floor and were aimed at a wall.

It took him a moment to realize that the binoculars were showing him himself.

He sat down on the floor, suddenly frightened. For he realized that he was only another performer in humanity's great circus, and he had just done one of his acts, just like the others. But who was watching? Who was the real observer?

He turned the binoculars around, and looked through the object-lenses. He saw a pair of eyes, and he thought they were his own — until one of them slowly winked at him.

SILVERSMITH WISHES

The stranger lifted his glass. "May your conclusions always flow sweetly from your premises."

"I'll drink to that," said Nelson Silversmith.

Solemnly they both sipped Orange Julius. Outside the flotsam of 8th Street flowed eastward, to circulate with sluggish restlessness in the Sargasso of Washington Square. Silversmith munched his chili dog.

The stranger said, "I suppose you think I'm some kind of a nut." Silversmith shrugged. "I assume nothing."

"Well spoken," the stranger said. "My name is Terence Maginnis. Come have a drink with me."

"Don't mind if I do," Silversmith said.

Some twenty minutes later they were seated on torn red plastic benches in Joe Mangeri's Clam Bar and Beer Parlor, exchanging fragments of discursive philosophy as casual strangers meeting in New York's Greenwich Village on a slow mild October afternoon will do. Maginnis was a short compact red-faced man with emphatic gestures and a fuzzy Harris tweed suit. Silversmith was a lanky thirty-two-year-old with a mournful face and long tapering fingers.

"So look," Maginnis said abruptly, "enough small talk. I have a proposition to put to you."

"So put," Silversmith said, with aplomb. Not for nothing had he been brought up in the bewildering social complexities of Bayonne, New Jersey.

"It is this," Maginnis said. "I am a front man for a certain organization which must remain nameless. We have a free introductory

offer. We give you, absolutely free and without obligation, three requests. You may ask for any three things, and I will get them for you if it is within my power."

"And what do I do in return?" Silversmith asked.

"Nothing whatsoever. You just sit back and take."

"Three requests," Silversmith said thoughtfully. "Do you mean three wishes?"

"Yes, you could call it that."

"A person who grants wishes is a fairy."

"I am not a fairy," Maginnis said firmly.

"But you do grant wishes?"

"Yes. I am a normal person who grants wishes."

"And I," Silversmith said, "am a normal person who makes wishes. So, for my first wish, I would like a really good hi-fi with quad speakers, tape deck, and all the rest."

"You are a cool one," Maginnis said.

"Did you expect me to portray astonishment?"

"I expected dubiety, anxiety, resistance. People generally look with suspicion on a proposition like mine."

"The only thing I learned at NYU," Silversmith said, "was the willing suspension of disbelief. Don't you get many takers?"

"You're my first in a long time. People simply don't believe it can be on the level."

"Incredulity is not an appropriate attitude in this age of Heisenbergian physics. Ever since I read in *Scientific American* that a positron is nothing more than an electron traveling backwards in time, I have had no difficulty believing anything at all."

"I must remember to put that into my sales pitch," Maginnis said. "Now give me your address. You'll be hearing from me."

Three days later Maginnis came to Silversmith's fifth-floor walkup on Perry Street. He was lugging a large packing case and perspiring freely. His tweed suit smelled like an overworked camel.

"What a day!" he said. "I've been all over Long Island City looking for just the right rig. Where shall I put it?"

"Right there is fine," Silversmith said. "What about the tape deck?"

"I'm bringing it this afternoon. Have you thought about your second wish yet?"

"A Ferrari. A red one."

"To hear is to obey," Maginnis said. "Doesn't all this strike you as rather fantastic?"

"Phenomenology takes these matters into account," Silversmith said. "Or, as the Buddhists say, 'The world is of a suchness.' Can you get me a recent model?"

"I think I can put my hands on a new one," Maginnis said. "With supercharger and genuine walnut dashboard."

"Now you're beginning to astonish me," Silversmith said. "But where'll I park it?"

"That's your problem," Maginnis said. "Catch you later."

Silversmith waved absentmindedly and began to open the packing case.

Next Maginnis found him a spacious rent-controlled triplex on Patchen Place for \$102.78 a month including utilities. With it, Maginnis gave Silversmith five bonus wishes.

"You can really do that?" Silversmith asked. "You won't get into trouble with your company?"

"Don't worry about that. You know, you're a really good wisher. Your tastes are rich but not outrageous; challenging, but not incredible. Some people really abuse the privilege — demand palaces and slaves and harems filled with Miss America runner-ups."

"I suppose that sort of thing is out of the question," Silversmith remarked casually.

"No, I can come up with it. But it just makes trouble for the wisher. You give some slob a replica of the Czar's summer palace on a ten-acre site in Rhinebeck, New York, and the next thing you know the tax people are buzzing around him like a holocaust of locusts. The guy usually has difficulty explaining how he managed to save up for this palace on the \$125 a week he earns as a junior comtrometer operator, so the IRS makes its own assumptions."

"Which are?"

"That he's a top Mafia buttonman who knows where Judge Crater is buried."

"They can't prove anything, though."

"Maybe not. But who wants to spend the rest of his life starring in FBI home movies?"

"Not a pleasing prospect for a lover of privacy," Silversmith said, and revised certain of his plans.

* * *

"You've been a good customer," Maginnis said, two weeks later. "Today you get a bonus, and it's absolutely free. You get a forty-foot Chris-Craft, fully equipped. Where do you want it?"

"Just moor it at the dock of my Nassau place," Silversmith said. "Oh, and thanks."

"Another free gift," Maginnis said, three days after that. "Ten additional wishes, no strings attached."

"That makes eighteen unused wishes to date," Silversmith said. "Maybe you should give some to another deserving customer."

"Don't be silly," Maginnis said. "We're very pleased with you."

Silversmith fingered his brocade scarf and said, "There is a catch, isn't there?"

It was one month and fourteen wishes later. Silversmith and Maginnis were seated in lawn chairs on the broad lawn of Silversmith's estate at Juan-les-Pins on the French Riviera. A string quartet was playing softly in the background. Silversmith was sipping a Negroni. Maginnis, looking more harried than usual, was gulping a whiskey and soda.

"Well, you could call it a catch," Maginnis admitted. "But it's not what you think."

"What is it?"

"You know that I can't tell you that."

"Do I maybe end up losing my soul to you and going to hell?"

Maginnis burst into rude laughter. "That," he said, "is just about the last thing you have to worry about. Excuse me now. I've got an appointment in Damascus to see about that Arabian stallion you wanted. You get five more bonus wishes this week, by the way."

Two months later, after dismissing the dancing girls, Silversmith lay alone in his emperor-sized bed in his eighteen-room apartment on the Pincio in Rome and thought sour thoughts. He had twenty-seven wishes coming to him and he couldn't think of a thing to wish for. And furthermore, he was not happy.

Silversmith sighed and reached for the glass that was always on his night table filled with seltzer flown in from Grossinger's. The glass was empty.

"Ten servants and they can't keep a lousy glass filled," he muttered. He got out of bed, walked across the room and pushed the servant's button. Then he got back in bed. It took three minutes and thirty-eight seconds by his Rolex Oyster, whose case was carved out of a single block of amber, for the butler's second assistant to hurry into the room.

Silversmith pointed at the glass. The assistant butler's eyes bugged out and his jaw fell. "Empty!" he cried. "But I specifically told the maid's assistant —"

"To hell with the excuses," Silversmith said. "Some people are going to have to get on the ball around here or some heads are going to roll."

"Yes *sir!*" said the butler's second assistant. He hurried to the built-in wall refrigerator beside Silversmith's bed, opened it and took out a bottle of seltzer. He put the bottle on a tray, took out a snowy linen towel, folded it once lengthwise and hung it over his arm. He selected a chilled glass from the refrigerator, examined it for cleanliness, substituted another glass and wiped the rim with his towel.

"Get on with it, get *on* with it," Silversmith said ominously.

The butler's second assistant quickly wrapped the towel around the seltzer bottle, and squirted seltzer into the glass so exquisitely that he didn't spill a drop. He replaced the bottle in the refrigerator and handed the glass to Silversmith. Total elapsed time, twelve minutes, forty-three seconds.

Silversmith lay in bed sipping seltzer and thinking deep brooding thoughts about the impossibility of happiness and the elusiveness of satisfaction. Despite having the world's luxuries spread before him — or because of it — he was bored and had been for weeks. It seemed damned unfair to him, to be able to get anything you wanted, but to be unable to enjoy what you could get.

When you came right down to it, life was a disappointment, and the best it had to offer was never quite good enough. The roast duck was never as crisp as advertised, and the water in the swimming pool was always a shade too warm or too cold.

How elusive was the quest for quality! For ten dollars you could buy a pretty fair steak; for a hundred dollars you could get a really good Porterhouse; and for a thousand dollars you could buy a kilo of Kobe beef that had been massaged by the hands of consecrated virgins, together with a genius chef to prepare it. And it would be

very good indeed. But not a thousand dollars good. The more you paid, the less progress you made toward that quintessence of beef that the angels eat when God throws his yearly banquet for the staff.

Or consider women. Silversmith had possessed some of the most intoxicating creatures that the planet could offer, both singly and in ensemble. But even this had turned out to be nothing worth writing a memoir about. His appetite had palled too quickly in the steady flood of piquantly costumed flesh that Maginnis had provided, and the electric touch of unknown female flesh had turned abrasive — the sandpaper of too many personalities (each one clutching her press clippings) against Silversmith's increasingly reluctant hide.

He had run through the equivalent of several seraglios, and the individuals who comprised them were as dim in his memory now as the individual ice cream cones of his youth. He vaguely remembered a Miss Universe winner with the odor of the judge's cigar still clinging to her crisp chestnut hair; and there had been the gum-chewing scuba instructress from Sea Isle, Georgia, in her exciting black rubber wet suit, blowing an inopportune pink sugary bubble at the moment of moments. But the rest of them had passed from his recollection in a comic strip of sweaty thighs and jiggling boobs, painted smiles, fake pouts, and stagey languors; and through it all the steady heaving rhythm of the world's oldest gymnastic exercise.

The best of them had been his matched set of three Cambodian temple dancers — brown and bright-eyed creatures, all flashing eyes and floating black hair, sinuous frail limbs and small, hard breasts like persimmons. Not even they had diverted him for long. He had kept them around to play bridge with evenings, however.

He took another sip of seltzer and found that his glass was empty. Grumpily he got out of bed and crossed the room to the servant's bell. His finger poised over it —

And just at that moment enlightenment came to him like a million-watt light bulb flashing in his head.

And he knew what he had to do.

It took Maginnis ten days to find Silversmith in a broken-down hotel on 10th Avenue and 41st Street in New York. Maginnis knocked once and walked in. It was a dingy room with tin-covered walls painted a poisonous green. The smell of hundreds of applications of insecticide mingled with the odor of thousands of generations of

cockroaches. Silversmith was sitting on an iron cot covered with an olive blanket. He was doing a crossword puzzle. He gave Maginnis a cheerful nod.

"All right," Maginnis said, "if you're through slumming, I've got a load of stuff for you — wishes 43 and 44, plus as much of 45 as I could put together. Which of your houses do you want it delivered to?"

"I don't want it," Silversmith said.

"You don't, huh?"

"No, I don't."

Maginnis lit a cigar. He puffed thoughtfully for a while, then said, "Is this Silversmith I see before me, the famous ascetic, the well-known stoic, the Taoist philosopher, the living Buddha? Non-attachment to worldly goods, that's the new number, right, Silversmith? Believe me, baby, you'll never bring it off. You're going through a typical rich man's freakout, which will last a few weeks or months, like they all do. But then comes the day when the brown rice tastes extra-nasty, and the burlap shirt scratches your eczema worse than usual. This is followed by some fast rationalizing, and the next thing you know you're having Eggs Benedict at Sardi's and telling your friends what a valuable experience it was."

"You're probably right," Silversmith said.

"So why make me hang around all that time? You just took in too much fat city too quick, and you've got congestion of the synapses. You need a rest. Let me recommend a very nice exclusive resort I know on the south slope of Kilimanjaro — "

"No," Silversmith said.

"Maybe something more spiritual? I know this guru — "

"No."

"You are beginning to exasperate me," Maginnis said. "In fact, you're getting me sore. Silversmith, *what do you want?*"

"I want to be happy," Silversmith said. "But I realize now that I can't be happy by owning things."

"So you're sticking to poverty?"

"No. I also can't be happy by not owning things."

"Well," Maginnis said, "that seems to cover the field."

"I think there is a third alternative," Silversmith said. "But I don't know what you're going to think of it."

"Yeah? What is it?"

"I want to join your team," Silversmith said.

Maginnis sat down on the bed. "You want to join us?"

"Whoever you are," Silversmith said, "I want to be a part of it."

"What made you decide that?" Maginnis asked.

"I happened to notice that you were happier than I was. I don't know what your racket is, Maginnis, and I have certain reservations about the organization I think you work for. But I really do want in."

"Are you willing to give up all your remaining wishes and everything else, just for that?"

"Whatever it takes," Silversmith said. "Just let me in."

"Okay," Maginnis said, "you're in."

"I really am? That's great. Whose life do we mess up next?"

"Oh, we're not *that* organization at all," Maginnis said, grinning. "People sometimes do confuse the two of us, though I can't imagine why. But be that as it may: you have just endowed us with all your worldly goods, Silversmith, and you have done so without expectation of reward, out of a simple desire to serve. We appreciate the gesture. Silversmith, welcome to heaven."

A rosy cloud formed around them, and through it Silversmith could see a vast silver gate inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

"Hey!" he said, "you got me here on a deception! You tricked me, Maginnis, or whoever you are!"

"The other organization has been doing that sort of thing for so long," Maginnis said, "we thought we really should give it a try."

The pearly gates opened. Silversmith could see that a Chinese banquet had been set out, and there were girls, and some of the guests seemed to be smoking dope.

"Not that I'm complaining," Silversmith said.

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE BROMIDE

THE DESPERATE CHASE

This time it looked like the end for Arkady Varadin, formerly a magician, now a much-wanted criminal. Cool and resourceful in the face of danger, cunning and ruthless, dangerous as a puff adder, master of illusion and fanciful escapes, the thin-faced Varadin had overstepped himself this time.

After a spectacular escape from the Denning maximum-security penitentiary, any other man would have stayed out of sight. Not Varadin. Single-handed, he had held up a bank in the small town of Croesus, Maine. Escaping, he had shot and killed two guards who were foolish enough to reach for their guns. He had stolen a car and made off.

But then his luck turned. The FBI had been waiting for something like this. Within an hour they were on Varadin's trail. Even then the master criminal might have escaped; but his stolen car ran out of gas.

Varadin abandoned the car and went into the mountains. Five FBI agents were close behind. At long range, Varadin plugged two of them with six shots from his revolver. He had no more ammunition. There were still three agents coming up the mountain, and a local guide was with them.

A bad break! Varadin hurried on. All he had now was \$75,000 of bank money, and his escape kit. He tried to throw off his pursuers, leading them up mountains and doubling back through valleys.

But the Maine guide could not be deceived in his native woods. Inexorably the gap closed between the hunters and the hunted.

At last Varadin found himself on a dirt road. He followed it and came to a granite quarry. Beyond the quarry, cliffs tilted steeply into the boulder-strewn sea. To climb down was possible; but the FBI agents would pick him off before he reached the bottom.

He looked around. The quarry was strewn with gray granite boulders of all sizes and shapes. Varadin's luck, his fantastic luck, was still with him. It was time for his final illusion.

He opened his escape kit and took out an industrial plastic that he had modified for his own use. His quick fingers constructed a framework of branches, lashing them together with his shoelaces. Over this he spread the plastic, rubbing dirt and granite dust into it. When he was done, he stepped back and surveyed his work.

Yes, it looked like any other large boulder, except for a hole in one side.

Varadin stepped in through this hole and, with his remaining plastic, sealed all but a tiny breathing hole. His concealment was complete. Now, with fatalistic calm, he waited to see if the trick would work.

In minutes the FBI men and the guide reached the quarry. They searched it thoroughly, then ran to the edge and looked over. At last they sat down on a large gray boulder.

"He must have jumped," said the guide.

"I don't believe it," said the chief agent. "You don't know Varadin."

"Well, he ain't here," said the guide. "And he couldn't have doubled back on us."

The chief agent scowled and tried to think. He put a cigarette in his mouth and scratched a match on the boulder. The match wouldn't light.

"That's funny," he said. "Either I've got wet matches or you've got soft boulders."

The guide shrugged his shoulders.

The agent was about to say something else when an old panel truck with ten men in the back drove into the quarry.

"Catch him yet?" the driver asked.

"Nope," the agent said. "I guess he must have gone over the edge."

"Good riddance," the truck driver said. "In that case, if you gents don't mind — "

The FBI agent shrugged his shoulders.

"Okay, I guess we can write him off." He stood up, and the guide and the other agents followed him out of the quarry.

"All right, boys," the driver said. "Let's go to work."

The men scrambled out of the truck, which was marked EAST-ERN MAINE GRAVEL CORPORATION.

"Ted," the driver said, "you might as well plant your first charges under that big boulder the G-man was sitting on."

THE DISGUISED AGENT

James Hadley, the famous Secret Service agent, was caught. On his way to the Istanbul airport, his enemies had pursued him into a cul-de-sac near the Golden Horn. They had dragged him into a long black limousine driven by an oily, scarfaced Greek. Car and chauffeur waited outside while Hadley's captors took him upstairs to a disreputable room in Istanbul's Armenian sector, not far from the Rue Chaffre.

It was the worst spot the famous agent had ever been in. He was strapped to a heavy chair. Standing in front of him was Anton Lupescu, the sadistic head of the Rumanian secret police and implacable foe of Western forces. On either side of Lupescu stood Chang, Lupescu's impassive manservant, and Madam Oui, the cold, beautiful Eurasian.

"Pig of an American," sneered Lupescu, "will you tell us where you have hidden the plans for America's new high-orbiting submolecular three-stage fusion-conversion unit?"

Hadley merely smiled beneath his gag.

"My friend," Lupescu said softly, "there is pain that no man can bear. Why not save yourself the annoyance?"

Hadley's gray eyes were amused. He did not answer.

"Bring the torture instruments," Lupescu said, sneering. "We will make the capitalist dog speak."

Chang and Madam Oui left the room. Quickly Lupescu unstrapped Hadley.

"We must hurry, old man," Lupescu said. "They'll be back in a shake."

"I don't understand," Hadley said. "You are — "

"British Agent 432 at your service," Lupescu said, bowing, a twinkle in his eyes. "Couldn't reveal myself with Chang and Madam Oui mucking about. Now get those plans back to Washington, old fellow. Here's a gun. You might need it."

Hadley took the heavy, silenced automatic, snapped off the safety, and shot Lupescu through the heart.

"Your loyalty to the People's Government," Hadley said in perfect Russian, "has long been suspect. Now we know. The Kremlin will be amused."

Hadley stepped over the corpse and opened the door. Standing in front of him was Chang.

"Dog!" Chang snarled, lifting a heavy, silenced automatic.

"Wait!" Hadley cried. "You don't understand — "

Chang fired once. Hadley slumped to the floor.

Quickly Chang stripped off his oriental disguise, revealing himself as the true Anton Lupescu. Madam Oui came back into the room and gasped.

"Do not be alarmed, little one," Lupescu said. "The impostor who called himself Hadley was actually Chang, a Chinese spy."

"But who was the other Lupescu?" Madam Oui asked.

"Obviously," Lupescu said, "he was the true James Hadley. Now where could those plans be?"

A careful search revealed a wart on the right arm of the corpse of the man who had claimed to be James Hadley. The wart was artificial. Under it were the precious microfilm plans.

"The Kremlin will reward us," Lupescu said. "Now we — "

He stopped. Madam Oui had picked up a heavy, silenced automatic. "Dog!" she hissed, and shot Lupescu through the heart.

Swiftly Madam Oui stripped off her disguise, revealing beneath it the person of the true James Hadley, American secret agent.

Hadley hurried down to the street. The black limousine was still waiting, and the scarfaced Greek had drawn a gun.

"Well?" the Greek asked.

"I have them," said Hadley. "You did your work well, Chang."

"Nothing to it," said the chauffeur, stripping off his disguise and revealing the face of the wily Chinese Nationalist detective. "We had better hurry to the airport, eh, old boy?"

"Quite," said James Hadley.

The powerful black car sped into the darkness. In a corner of the car, something moved and clutched Hadley's arm.

It was the true *Madam Oui*.

"Oh, Jimmy," she said, "is it all over, at last?"

"It's all over. We've won," Hadley said, holding the beautiful Eurasian girl tightly to him.

THE LOCKED ROOM

Sir Trevor Mellanby, the eccentric old British scientist, kept a small laboratory on a corner of his Kent estate. He entered his lab on the morning of June 17. When three days passed and the aged peer did not emerge, his family grew anxious. Finding the doors and windows of the laboratory locked, they summoned the police.

The police broke down the heavy oak door. Inside they found Sir Trevor sprawled lifeless across the concrete floor. The famous scientist's throat had been savagely ripped out. The murder weapon, a three-pronged garden claw, was lying nearby. Also, an expensive Bokhara rug had been stolen. Yet all doors and windows were securely barred from the inside.

It was an impossible murder, an impossible theft. Yet there it was. Under the circumstances, Chief Inspector Morton was called. He came at once, bringing his friend Dr. Crutch, the famous amateur criminologist.

"Hang it all, Crutch," Inspector Morton said, several hours later. "I confess the thing has me stumped."

"It does seem rather a facer," Crutch said, peering nearsightedly at the rows of empty cages, the bare concrete floor, and the cabinet full of gleaming scalpels.

"Curse it all," the inspector said, "I've tested every inch of wall, floor, and ceiling for secret passages. Solid, absolutely solid."

"You're certain of that?" Dr. Crutch asked, a look of surprise on his jolly face.

"Absolutely. But I don't see —"

"It becomes quite obvious," Dr. Crutch said. "Tell me, have you counted the lights in the lab?"

"Of course. Six."

"Correct. Now if you count the light switches, you will find seven."

"But I don't see — "

"Isn't it obvious?" Crutch asked. "When have you ever heard of absolutely solid walls? Let's try those switches!"

One by one they turned the switches. When they turned the last, there was an ominous grinding sound. The roof of the laboratory began to rise, lifted on massive steel screws.

"Great Scott!" cried Inspector Morton.

"Exactly," said Dr. Crutch. "One of Sir Trevor's little eccentricities. He liked his ventilation."

"So the murderer killed him, crawled out between roof and wall, then closed a switch on the outside — "

"Not at all," Dr. Crutch said. "Those screws haven't been used in months. Furthermore, the maximum opening between wall and ceiling is less than seven inches. No, Morton, the murderer was far more diabolical than that."

"I'll be cursed if I can see it," Morton said.

"Ask yourself," Crutch said, "why the murderer should use a weapon as clumsy as a garden claw instead of the deadly scalpels right here to hand!"

"Blast it all," Morton said, "I don't know why."

"There is a reason," Crutch said grimly. "Do you know anything of the nature of Sir Trevor's research?"

"All England knows that," Morton said. "He was working on a method to increase animal intelligence. Do you mean — "

"Precisely," Crutch said. "Sir Trevor's method worked, but he had no chance to give it to the world. Have you noticed how empty these cages are? Mice were in them, Morton! His own mice killed him, then fled down the drains."

"I — I can't believe it," Morton said, stunned. "Why did they use the claw?"

"Think, man!" cried Crutch. They wanted to conceal their crime. They didn't want all England on a mouse hunt! So they used the claw to rip out Sir Trevor's throat — after he was dead."

"Why?"

"To disguise the marks of their teeth," Crutch said quietly.

"Hmm. But wait!" Morton said. "It's an ingenious theory, Crutch, but it doesn't explain the theft of the rug!"

"The missing rug is my final clue," Dr. Crutch said. "A microscopic examination will show that the rug was chewed to bits and carried down the drains piece by piece."

"What on earth for?"

"Solely," said Dr. Crutch, "to conceal the bloody footprints of a thousand tiny feet."

"What can we do?" Morton said, after a pause.

"Nothing!" Crutch said savagely. "Personally, I propose to go home and purchase several dozen cats. I suggest that you do likewise."

FIVE MINUTES EARLY

Suddenly, John Greer found that he was at the entrance to heaven. Before him stretched the white and azure cloudlands of the hereafter, and in the far distance he could see a fabulous city gleaming gold under an eternal sun. Standing in front of him was the tall, benign presence of the Recording Angel. Strangely, Greer felt no sense of shock. He had always believed that heaven was for everyone, not just the members of one religion or sect. Despite this, he had been tortured all his life by doubts. Now he could only smile at his lack of faith in the divine scheme.

"Welcome to heaven," the Recording Angel said, and opened a great brassbound ledger. Squinting through thick bifocals, the angel ran his finger down the dense rows of names. He found Greer's entry and hesitated, his wingtips fluttering momentarily in agitation.

"Is something wrong?" Greer asked.

"I'm afraid so," the Recording Angel said. "It seems that the Angel of Death came for you before your appointed time. He *has* been badly overworked of late, but it's still inexcusable. Luckily, it's quite a minor error."

"Taking me away before my time?" Greer said. "I don't consider that minor."

"But you see, it's only a matter of five minutes. Nothing to concern yourself over. Shall we just overlook the discrepancy and send you on to the Eternal City?"

The Recording Angel was right, no doubt. What difference could five more minutes on Earth make to him? Yet Greer felt they might be important, even though he couldn't say why.

"I'd like those five minutes," Greer said.

The Recording Angel looked at him with compassion. "You have the right, of course. But I would advise against it. Do you remember how you died?"

Greer thought, then shook his head. "How?" he asked.

"I am not allowed to say. But death is never pleasant. You're here now. Why not stay with us?"

That was only reasonable. But Greer was nagged by a sense of something unfinished. "If it's allowed," he said, "I really would like to have those last minutes."

"Go, then," said the angel, "and I will wait for you here."

And suddenly Greer was back on Earth. He was in a cylindrical metal room lit by dim, flickering lights. The air was stale and smelled of steam and machine oil. The steel walls were heaving and creaking, and water was pouring through the seams.

Then Greer remembered where he was. He was a gunnery officer aboard the U.S. submarine *Invictus*. There had been a sonar failure; they had just rammed an underwater cliff that should have been a mile away, and now were dropping helplessly through the black water. Already the *Invictus* was far below her maximum depth. It could only be a matter of minutes before the rapidly mounting pressure collapsed the ship's hull. Greer knew it would happen in exactly five minutes.

There was no panic on the ship. The seamen braced themselves against the bulging walls, waiting, frightened, but in tight control of themselves. The technicians stayed at their posts, steadily reading the instruments that told them they had no chance at all. Greer knew that the Recording Angel had wanted to spare him this, the bitter end of life, the brief sharp agony of death in the icy dark.

And yet Greer was glad to be here, though he didn't expect the Recording Angel to understand. How could a creature of heaven know the feelings of a man of Earth? After all, most men died in fear and ignorance, expecting at worst the tortures of hell, at best the nothingness of oblivion. Greer knew what lay ahead, knew that the Recording Angel awaited him at the entrance to heaven. Therefore he was able to spend his final minutes making a proper and dignified exit from the Earth. As the submarine's walls collapsed, he was remembering a sunset over Key West, a quick dramatic summer storm on the Chesapeake, the slow circle of a hawk soaring above the Everglades. Although heaven lay ahead, now only

seconds away, Greer was thinking of the beauties of the Earth, remembering as many of them as he could, like a man packing provisions for a long journey into a strange land.

MISS MOUSE AND THE FOURTH DIMENSION

I first met Charles Foster at the Claerston Award dinner at Leadbeater's Hall in the Strand. It was my second night in London. I had come to England with the hope of signing some new authors for my list. I am Max Seidel, publisher of Manjusri Books. We are a small esoteric publishing company operating out of Linwood, New Jersey — just me and Miss Thompson, my assistant. My books sell well to the small but faithful portion of the population interested in spiritualism, out-of-body experiences, Atlantis, flying saucers, and New Age technology. Charles Foster was one of the men I had come to meet.

Pam Devore, our British sales representative, pointed Foster out to me. I saw a tall, good-looking man in his middle thirties, with a great mane of reddish blond hair, talking animatedly with two dowager types. Sitting beside him, listening intently, was a small woman in her late twenties with neat, plain features and fine chestnut hair.

"Is that his wife?" I asked.

Pam laughed. "Goodness, no! Charles is too fond of women to actually marry one. That's Miss Mouse."

"Is Mouse an English name?"

"It's just Charles's nickname for her. Actually, she's not very mouselike at all. Marmoset might be more like it, or even wolverine. She's Mimi Royce, a society photographer. She's quite well off — the Royce textile mills in Lancashire, you know — and she adores Charles, poor thing."

"He does seem to be an attractive man," I said.

"I suppose so," Pam said, "if you like the type." She glanced at me to see how I was taking that, then laughed when she saw my expression.

"Yes, I *am* rather prejudiced," she confessed. "Charles used to be rather interested in me until he found his own true love."

"Who was —?"

"Himself, of course. Come, let me introduce you."

Foster knew about Manjusri Books and was interested in publishing with us. He thought we might be a good showcase for his talents, especially since Paracelsus Press had done so poorly with his last, *JOURNEY THROUGH THE EYE OF THE TIGER*. There was something open and boyish about Foster. He spoke in a high, clear English voice that conjured up in me a vision of punting on the Thames on a misty autumn day.

Charles was the sort of esoteric writer who goes out and has adventures and then writes them up in a portentous style. His search was for — well, what shall I call it? The Beyond? The Occult? The Interface? After twenty years in this business I still don't know how to describe, in one simple phrase, the sort of book I publish. Charles Foster's last book had dealt with three months he had spent with a Baluchistani Dervish in the desert of Kush under incredibly austere conditions. What had he gotten out of it? A direct though fleeting knowledge of the indivisible oneness of things, a sense of the mystery and the grandeur of existence...in short, the usual thing. And he had gotten a book out of it; and that, too, is the usual thing.

We set up a lunch for the next day. I rented a car and drove to Charles's house in Oxfordshire. It was a beautiful old thatch-roofed building set in the middle of five acres of rolling countryside. It was called Sepoy Cottage, despite the fact that it had five bedrooms and three parlors. It didn't actually belong to Charles, as he told me immediately. It belonged to Mimi Royce.

"But she lets me use it whenever I like," he said. "Mouse is such a dear." He smiled like a well-bred child talking about his favorite aunt. "She's so interested in one's little adventures, one's trips along the interface between reality and the ineffable...Insists on typing up my manuscripts just for the pleasure it gives her to read them first."

"That *is* lucky," I said, "typing rates being what they are these days."

Just then Mimi came in with tea. Foster regarded her with bland indifference. Either he was unaware of her obvious adoration of him, or he chose not to acknowledge it. Mimi, for her part, did not seem to mind. I assumed that I was seeing a display of the British National Style in affairs of the heart subdued, muffled, unobtrusive. She went away after serving us, and Charles and I talked auras and ley-lines for a while, then got down to the topic of real interest to us both — his next book.

"It's going to be a bit unusual," he told me, leaning back and templing his fingers.

"Another spiritual adventure?" I asked. "What will it be about?"

"Guess!" he said.

"Let's see. Are you by any chance going to Machu Picchu to check out the recent reports of spaceship landings?"

He shook his head. "Elton Travis is already covering it for Mystic Revelations Press. No, my next adventure will take place right here in Sepoy Cottage."

"Have you discovered a ghost or poltergeist here?"

"Nothing so mundane."

"Then I really have no idea," I told him.

"What I propose," Foster said, "is to create an opening into the unknown right here in Sepoy Cottage, and to journey through it into the unimaginable. And then, of course, to write up what I've found there."

"Indeed," I said.

"Are you familiar with Von Helmholtz's work?"

"Was he the one who read tarot cards for Frederick the Great?"

"No, that was Manfred Von Helmholtz. I am referring to Wilhelm, a famous mathematician and scientist in the nineteenth century. He maintained that it was theoretically possible to *see* directly into the fourth dimension."

I turned the concept over in my mind. It didn't do much for me.

"This 'fourth dimension' to which he refers," Foster went on, "is synonymous with the spiritual or ethereal realm of the mystics. The name of the place changes with the times, but the region itself is unchanging."

I nodded. Despite myself, I am a believer. That's what brought me into this line of work. But I also know that illusion and self-deception are the rule in these matters rather than the exception.

"But this spirit realm, or fourth dimension," Foster went on, "is also our everyday reality. Spirits surround us. They move through that strange realm which Von Helmholtz called the fourth dimension. Normally they can't be seen."

It sounded to me as if Foster was extemporizing the first chapter of his book. Still, I didn't interrupt. "Our eyes are blinded by everyday reality. But there are techniques by means of which we can train ourselves to see what *else* is there. Do you know about Hinton's cubes? Hinton is mentioned by Martin Gardner in MATHEMATICAL CARNIVAL. Charles Howard Hinton was an eccentric American mathematician who, around 1910, came up with a scheme for learning how to visualize a tesseract, also called a hypercube or four-dimensional square. His technique involved colored cubes that fit together to form a single master cube. Hinton felt that one could learn to see the separate colored cubes in the mind and then, mentally, to manipulate and rotate them, fold them into and out of the greater cube shape, and to do this faster and faster until at last a gestalt forms and the hypercube springs forth miraculously in your mind."

He paused. "Hinton said that it was a hell of a lot of work. And later investigators, according to Gardner, have warned of psychic dangers even in attempting something like this."

"It sounds like it could drive you crazy," I said.

"Some of those investigators *did* wig," he admitted cheerfully. "But that might have been from frustration. Hinton's procedure demands an inhuman power of concentration. Only a master of yoga could be expected to possess that."

"Such as yourself?"

"My dear fellow, I can barely remember what I've just read in the newspaper. Luckily, concentration is not the only path into the unknown. Fascination can more easily lead us to the mystic path. Hinton's principle is sound, but it needs to be combined with Aquarian Age technology to make it work. That is what I have done."

He led me into the next room. There, on a low table, was what I took at first to be a piece of modernistic sculpture. It had a base of cast iron. A central shaft came up through its middle, and on top of the shaft was a sphere about the size of a human head. Radiating in all directions from the sphere were lucite rods. At the end of

each rod was a cube. The whole contraption looked like a cubist porcupine with blocks stuck to the end of its spines.

Then I saw that the blocks had images or signs painted on their faces. There were Sanskrit, Hebrew, and Arabic letters, Freemason and Egyptian symbols, Chinese ideograms, and other figures from many different lores. Now it looked like a bristling phalanx of mysticism, marching forth to do battle against common sense. And even though I'm in the business, it made me shudder.

"He didn't know it, of course," Foster said, "but what Hinton stumbled upon was the mandala principle. His cubes were the arts; put them all together in your mind and you create the Eternal, the Unchanging, the Solid Mandala, or four-dimensional space, depending upon which terminology you prefer. Hinton's cubes were a three-dimensional exploded view of an ethereal object. This object refuses to come together in our everyday reality. It is the unicorn that flees from the view of man — "

" — but lays its head in the lap of a virgin," I finished for him.

He shrugged it off. "Never mind the figures of speech, old boy. Mouse will unscramble my metaphors when she types up the manuscript. The point is, I can use Hinton's brilliant discovery of the exploded mandala whose closure produces the ineffable object of endless fascination. I can journey down the endless spiral into the unknown. This is how the trip begins."

He pushed a switch on the base of the contraption. The sphere began to revolve, the lucite arms turned, and the cubes on the ends of those arms turned too, creating an effect both hypnotic and disturbing. I was glad when Foster turned it off.

"My Mandala Machine!" he cried triumphantly. "What do you think?"

"I think you could get your head into a lot of trouble with that device," I told him.

"No, no," he said irritably. "I mean, what do you think of it as the subject for a book?"

No matter what else he was, Foster was a genuine writer. A genuine writer is a person who will descend voluntarily into the flaming pits of hell, as long as he's allowed to record his impressions and send them back to Earth for publication. I thought about the book that would most likely result from Foster's project. I estimated its audience at about one hundred fifty people, including friends and

relatives. Nevertheless, I heard myself saying, "I'll buy it." That's how I manage to stay a small and unsuccessful publisher, despite being so smart.

I returned to London shortly after that. Next day I drove to Glastonbury to spend a few days with Claude Upshank, owner of the Great White Brotherhood Press. We have been good friends, Claude and I, ever since we met ten years ago at a flying-saucer convention in Barcelona.

"I don't like it," Claude said, when I told him about Foster's project. "The mandala principle is potentially dangerous. You can really get into trouble when you start setting up autonomous feedback loops in your brain like that."

Claude had studied acupuncture and Rolfing at the Hardrada Institute in Malibu, so I figured he knew what he was talking about. Nevertheless, I thought that Charles had a lot of savvy in these matters and could take care of himself.

When I telephoned Foster two days later, he told me that the project was going very well. He had added several refinements to the Mandala Machine: "Sound effects, for one. I'm using a special tape of Tibetan horns and gongs. The overtones, sufficiently amplified, can send you into instant trance." And he had also bought a strobe light to flash into his eyes at six to ten beats a second: "The epileptic rate, you know. It's ideal for loosening up your head." He claimed that all of this deepened his state of trance and increased the clarity of the revolving cubes. "I'm very near to success now, you know."

I thought he sounded tired and close to hysteria. I begged him to take a rest.

"Nonsense," he said. "Show must go on, eh?"

A day later, Foster reported that he was right on the brink of the final breakthrough. His voice wavered, and I could hear him panting and wheezing between words. "I'll admit it's been more difficult than I had expected. But now I'm being assisted by a certain substance that I had the foresight to bring with me. I am not supposed to mention it over the telephone in view of the law of the land and the ever-present possibility of snoops on the line, so I'll just remind you of Arthur Machen's *NOVEL OF THE WHITE POWDER* and

let you work out the rest for yourself. Call me tomorrow. The fourth dimension is finally coming together."

The next day Mimi answered the telephone and said that Foster was refusing to take any calls. She reported him as saying that he was right on the verge of success and could not be interrupted. He asked his friends to be patient with him during this difficult period.

The next day it was the same, Mimi answering, Foster refusing to speak to us. That night I conferred with Claude and Pam.

We were in Pam's smart Chelsea apartment. We sat together in the bay window, drinking tea and watching the traffic pour down the King's Road into Sloane Square. Claude asked, "Does Foster have any family?"

"None in England," Pam said. "His mother and brother are on holiday in Bali."

"Any close friends?"

"Mouse, of course," Pam said.

We looked at each other. An odd presentiment had come to us simultaneously, a feeling that something was terribly wrong.

"But this is ridiculous," I said. "Mimi absolutely adores him, and she's a very competent woman. What could there be to worry about?"

"Let's call once more," Claude said.

We tried, and were told that Mimi's telephone was out of order. We decided to go to Sepoy Cottage at once.

Claude drove us out in his old Morgan. Mimi met us at the door. She looked thoroughly exhausted, yet there was a serenity about her that I found just a little uncanny.

"I'm so glad you've come," she said, leading us inside. "You have no idea how frightening it's all been. Charles came close to losing his mind in these last days."

"But why didn't you tell us?" I demanded.

"Charles implored me not to. He told me — and I believed him — that he and I had to see this thing through together. He thought it would be dangerous to his sanity to bring in anyone else at this point."

Claude made a noise that sounded like a snort. "Well, what happened?"

"It all went very well at first," Mimi said. "Charles began to spend increasingly longer periods in front of the machine, and he came to

enjoy the experience. Soon I could get him away only to eat, and grudgingly at that. Then he gave up food altogether. After a while he no longer needed the machine. He could see the cubes and their faces in his head, could move them around at any speed he wanted, bring them together or spread them apart. The final creation, however, the coming together of the hypercube, was still eluding him. He went back to the machine, running it now at its highest speed."

Mimi sighed. "Of course, he pushed himself too hard. This time, when he turned off the machine, the mandala continued to grow and mutate in his head. Each cube had taken on hallucinatory solidity. He said the symbols gave off a hellish light that hurt his eyes. He couldn't stop those cubes from flashing through his mind. He felt that he was being suffocated in a mass of alien signs. He grew agitated, swinging quickly between elation and despair. It was during one of his elated swings that he ripped out the telephone."

"You should have sent for us!" Claude said.

"There was simply no time. Charles knew what was happening to him. He said we had to set up a counter-conditioning program immediately. It involved changing the symbols on the cube faces. The idea was to break up the obsessive image-trains through the altered sequence. I set it up, but it didn't seem to work for Charles. He was fading away before my eyes, occasionally rousing himself to murmur, 'The horror, the horror...'"

"Bloody hell!" Claude exploded. "And then?"

"I felt that I had to act immediately. Charles's system of counter-conditioning had failed. I decided that he needed a different sort of symbol to look at — something simple and direct, something reassuring —"

Just then Charles came slowly down the stairs. He had lost a lot of weight since I saw him last, and his face was haggard. He looked thin, happy, and not quite sane.

"I was just napping," he said. "I've got rather a lot of sleep to catch up on. Did Mouse tell you how she saved what little is left of my sanity?" He put his arm around her shoulders. "She's marvelous, isn't she? And to think that I only realized yesterday that I loved her. We're getting married next week, and you're all invited."

Mimi said, "I thought we were flying down to Monte Carlo and getting married in the city hall."

"Why, so we are." Charles looked bewildered for a moment. He touched his head with the unconscious pathos of the wounded soldier in the movie who hasn't yet realized that half his head is blown away. "The old think-piece hasn't quite recovered yet from the beating I gave it with those wretched cubes. If Mimi hadn't been here, I don't know what would have happened to me."

They beamed at us, the instant happy couple produced by Hinton's devilish cubes. The transformation of Charles's feelings toward Mimi — from fond indifference to blind infatuation — struck me as bizarre and dreamlike. They were Svengali and Trilby with the sexes reversed, a case of witchcraft rather than of love's magic.

"It's going to be all right now, Charles," Mimi said.

"Yes, love, I know it is." Charles smiled, but the animation had gone out of his face. He lifted his hand to his head again, and his knees began to sag. Mimi, her arm around his waist, half supported and half dragged him to the stairs.

"I'll just get him up to bed," she said.

Claude, Pam, and I stood in the middle of the room, looking at each other. Then, with a single accord, we turned and went into the parlor where the Mandala Machine was kept.

We approached it with awe, for it was a modern version of ancient witchcraft. I could imagine Charles sitting in front of the thing, its arms revolving, the cubes turning and flashing, setting up a single ineradicable image in his mind. The ancient Hebrew, Chinese, and Egyptian letters were gone. All the faces of all the cubes now bore a single symbol — direct and reassuring, just as Mimi had said, but hardly simple. There were twenty cubes, with six faces to a cube, and pasted to each surface was a photograph of Mimi Royce.

THE HELPING HAND

Travis had been fired from his job that morning. Boring and low-paying though it had been, it had given him something to live for. Now he had nothing at all, and in his hand he held the means of cutting short a futile and humiliating existence. The bottle contained pellis annabula, a quick, sure, and painless poison. He had stolen it from his former employer, Carlyle Industrial Chemicals. PA was a catalyst used to fix hydrocarbons. Travis was going to fix himself with it, once and for all.

His few remaining friends thought Travis was a neurotic attention-seeker because of his previous suicide attempts. Well, he would show them this time, and they'd be sorry. Perhaps even his wife would shed a tear or two.

The thought of his wife steeled Travis's resolution. Leota's love had changed into an indifferent tolerance, and finally into hate — the sharp, domineering, acidic sort against which he was helpless. And the damnable thing was that he still loved her.

Do it now, he thought. He closed his eyes and raised the bottle.

Before he could drink, the bottle was knocked out of his hand. He heard Leota's sharp voice: "What do you think you're doing?"

"It should be obvious," Travis said.

She studied his face with interest. Leota was a large, hard-faced woman with a gift for never-ending beastliness. But now her face had softened.

"You were really going to do it this time, weren't you?"

"I'm still going to," Travis said. "Tomorrow or next week will do as well."

"I never believed you had it in you," she said. "Some of our friends thought you had guts, but I never did. Well, I guess I've really put you through hell all these years. But *someone* had to run things."

"You stopped caring for me a long time ago," Travis said. "Why did you stop me now?"

Leota didn't answer immediately. Could she be having a change of heart? Travis had never seen her like this before.

"I've misjudged you," she said at last. "I always figured you were bluffing, just to annoy me. Remember when you threatened to jump from the window? You leaned out — like this."

Leota leaned from the window, her body poised over the street twenty stories below. "Don't do that!" Travis said sharply.

She moved back in, smiling. "That's funny, coming from you. Don't tell me you still care?"

"I could," Travis said. "I know I could — if only you and I —"

"Perhaps," Leota said, and Travis felt a flash of hope, though he barely dared acknowledge it. Women were so strange! There she was, smiling. She put her hands firmly on his shoulders, saying, "I *couldn't* let you kill yourself. You have no idea how strongly I feel about you."

Travis found it impossible to answer. He was moved. His wife's strong, caring hands on his shoulders had moved him inexpressibly — straight through the open window.

As his fingers missed the sill and he fell toward the street, Travis heard his wife calling, "I feel enough, darling, to want this done *my* way."

THE LAST DAYS OF (PARALLEL?) EARTH

When the end of the world was announced, Rachel and I decided not to break up after all. "What would be the sense?" she asked me. "We will have no time to form other relationships." I nodded, but I was not convinced. I was worried about what would happen if the world did not end, if the great event were delayed, postponed, held over indefinitely. There might have been a miscalculation concerning the effect of the Z-field, the scientists might have been wrong about the meaning of the Saperstein Conjunction, and there we would be, Rachel and I, with our eternal complaints, and our children with their eternal complaints, bound together by apocalyptic conjunction stronger than our marriage vows, for eternity or until Armageddon, whichever came first. I put this to Rachel in what I hoped was a nice way, and she said to me, "Don't worry, if the world does not end on schedule as predicted by eminent scientists, you will return to your dismal furnished apartment and I will stay here with the children and my lover."

That was reassuring, and of course, I didn't want to spend the end of the world by myself in the dismal furnished apartment I shared with the Japanese girl and her English boyfriend and no television. There would be nothing to do there but listen to the Japanese girl talk to her friends on the telephone and eat in the Chinese restaurant, which had promised to stay open throughout the end of the world or as long as physically possible, since the owner did not believe in making changes hastily.

Rachel said, "I don't want to face anything like this straight," so she brought out her entire stash, the Thai sticks, the speckled brown cocaine, the acid in the form of tiny red stars, the gnarled mushrooms

from God knows where, the red Lebanese and the green Moroccan, yes, and the last few treasured Quaaludes, and a few Mogadon for good measure. She said, "Let's pool our mind-blowing resources and go out before we come down."

Other people had made their own preparations. The airlines were running end-of-the-world specials to Ultima Thule, Valparaiso, Kuala Lumpur: kinky trips for demising people. The networks were making a lot of the event, of course. Some of our favorite programs were cut, replaced by End of the World Specials. We tuned into "The Last Talkathon" on CBS: "Well, it sure looks like the kite is going up at last. I have a guest here, Professor Mandrax from UCLA, who is going to explain to us just how the big snuff is going to come about."

Whatever channel you turned to, there were physicists, mathematicians, biologists, chemists, linguistic philosophers, and commentators to try to explain what they were explaining. Professor Johnson, the eminent cosmologist, said, "Well, of course, it's not exactly a cosmological event, except metaphorically, in its effect upon us. We humans, in our parochial way, consider these things to be very important. But I can assure you that in the scale of magnitude I work on, this event is of no significance, is banal, in fact; our little O-type sun entering the Z-field just at the time of the Saperstein Conjunction, with the ensuing disarrangement of local conditions. I am imprecise on purpose, of course, since Indeterminacy renders exactitude a nineteenth-century hangup. But Professor Weaver of the Philosophy Department might have more to say about that."

"Well, yes," Professor Weaver said, "'end of the world' is a somewhat loose expression. What we are faced with is a viewpoint problem. We could say that, from some other point of observation, if such exists, this ending is the end of nothing at all. Just one moment of pain, my dear, and then eternal life, to quote the poet."

On another channel we heard that the army was issuing turkey dinners to all our servicemen in Germany. There had been some talk of flying them home, but we decided to keep them in position in case it was not the end of the world after all, but instead some devious communistic scheme of the sort we know the Russians are capable of, with their twisted sense of humor and their implacable will to give everyone a hard time. And we heard that the Chinese hadn't even announced the fact, or so-called fact, to their

population at large, except obliquely, in the form of posters no larger than postage stamps, signed by "A Concerned Neighbor from Neighborhood C."

And Rachel couldn't understand why Edward, her lover, insisted upon staying in his room and working on his novel. "It's not apropos any longer," she told him. "There's not going to be anyone around to publish it or read it."

"What has that got to do with it?" Edward asked, and winked at me.

I understood perfectly, was in fact working like a berserker to finish my own account of the last day, yes, and with great pleasure, for the end of the world presents a writer with the greatest deadline of them all, the ultimate deadline: twelve o'clock midnight tonight and that's all she wrote, folks. What a challenge! I knew that artists all over the world were responding to it, that an end-of-the-world *oeuvre* was being created that might be of interest to historians in a world parallel to our own in which this catastrophe did not take place.

"Well, yes," Professor Carpenter said, "the concept of parallel universes is, I would say, licit but unprovable, at least in the time we have left. I myself would consider it a wish-fulfillment fantasy, though my good friend Professor Mung, the eminent psychologist, is more competent to speak of that than I."

Rachel made her famous turkey dinner that night, with the stuffing and the cranberry sauce and the sweet-potato pie with meringue topping, and she even made her special Chinese spareribs as an extra treat, even though the Chinese refused to believe in the event except in postage-stamp-size posters of oriental foreboding. And everyone in the world began smoking cigarettes again, except for the irreducible few who did not believe in the end of the world and were therefore still scared of lung cancer. And people on their deathbeds struggled to stay alive a little longer, just a little longer, so that when I go, the whole damn thing goes. And some doctors stayed on call, declaring it their ludicrous duty, while others compulsively played golf and tennis and tried to forget about improving their strokes.

The turkey with four drumsticks and eight wings. Lewd displays on television: since all is over, all is allowed. The compulsive answering of business letters: Dear Joe, take your contract and stick it up your giggie the show is over and I can finally tell you what a crap artist you are, but if there is any mistake about the End I want

you to know that this letter is meant as a joke which I'm sure that you as the very special person you are can appreciate.

All of us were caught between the irreconcilable demands of abandonment and caution. What if we are not to die? Even belief in the end of the world required an act of faith on the part of dishwashers as well as university professors.

And that last night of creation I gave up cigarettes forever. An absurdity. What difference did it make? I did it because Rachel had always told me that absurdities made a difference, and I had always known that, so I threw away my pack of Marlboros and listened while Professor Mung said, "Wish fulfillment, or its obverse, death-wish fulfillment, cannot licitly be generalized into an objective correlative, to use Eliot's term. But if we take Jung into our synthesis, and consider this ending as an archetype, not to say *Weltanschauung*, our understanding increases as our *tiempo para gastarlo* disappears into the black hole of the past which contains all our hopes and endeavors."

The final hour came at last. I carved the turkey and Edward came out of his room long enough to take a plateful of breast and ask for my comments on his final rewrite of his last chapter, and I said, "It still needs work," and Rachel said, "That's cruel," and Edward said, "Yes, I thought it needed something myself," and went back to his room. Outside, the streets were deserted except for the unfortunate few who couldn't get to a television set, and we did up most of the remaining drugs and switched wildly between channels. I had brought my typewriter into the kitchen and I was getting it all down, and Rachel talked of the holidays we should have taken, and I thought about the women I should have loved, and at five to twelve Edward came out of his room again and showed me the rewritten last chapter, and I said, "You've got it this time," and he said, "I thought so, is there any more coke left?" And we did up the rest of the drugs and Rachel said to me, "For Chrissakes, can't you stop typing?" And I said, "I have to get it all down," and she hugged me, and Edward hugged me, and the three of us hugged the children, whom we had allowed to stay up late because it was the end of the world, and I said, "Rachel, I'm sorry about everything," and she said, "I'm sorry too," and Edward said, "I don't think I did anything wrong, but I'm sorry too." "Sorry about what?" the children asked, but before we had a chance to tell them, before we could even decide what we were sorry about...

THE FUTURE LOST

Leonard Nisher was found in front of the Plaza Hotel in a state of agitation so extreme that it took the efforts of three policemen and a passing tourist from Biloxi, Mississippi, to subdue him. Taken to St. Clare's Hospital, he had to be put into a wet pack — a wet sheet wound around the patient's arms and upper body. This immobilized him long enough for an intern to get a shot of Valium into him.

The injection had taken effect by the time Dr. Miles saw him. Miles told two husky aides, one of them a former guard for the Detroit Lions, and a psychiatric nurse named Norma to wait outside. The patient wasn't going to assault anyone just now. He was throttled way back, riding the crest of a Valium wave where there's nothing to hassle and even a wet pack can have its friendly aspects.

"Well, Mr. Nisher, how do you feel now?" Miles asked.

"I'm fine, doc," Nisher said. "Sorry I caused that trouble when I came out of the space-time anomaly and landed in front of the Plaza."

"It could affect anyone that way," Miles said reassuringly.

"I guess it sounds pretty crazy," Nisher said. "There's no way I can prove it, but I have just been into the future and back again."

"Is the future nice?" Miles asked.

"The future," Nisher said, "is a pussycat. And what happened to me there — well, you're not going to believe it."

The patient, a medium-sized white male of about thirty-five, wearing an off-white wet pack and a broad smile, proceeded to tell the following story.

Yesterday he had left his job at Hanratty & Smirch, Accountants, at the usual time and gone to his apartment on East Twenty-fifth

Street. He was just putting the key in the lock when he heard something behind him. Nisher immediately thought *mugger*, and whirled around in the cockroach posture that was the basic defense mode in the Taiwanese karate he was studying. There was no one there. Instead there was a sort of red, shimmering mist. It floated toward Nisher and surrounded him. Nisher heard weird noises and saw flashing lights before he blacked out.

When he regained consciousness, someone was saying to him, "Don't worry, it's all right." Nisher opened his eyes and saw that he was no longer on Twenty-fifth Street. He was sitting on a bench in a beautiful little park with trees and ponds and promenades and strangely shaped statues and tame deer, and there were people strolling around, wearing what looked like Grecian tunics. Sitting beside him on the bench was a kindly, white-haired old man dressed like Charlton Heston playing Moses.

"What is this?" Nisher asked. "What's happened?"

"Tell me," the old man said, "did you happen to run into a reddish cloud recently? Aha! I thought so! That was a local space-time anomaly, and it has carried you away from your own time and into the future."

"The future?" Nisher said. "The future what?"

"Just the future," the old man said. "We're about four hundred years ahead of you, give or take a few years."

"You're putting me on," Nisher said. He asked the old man in various ways where he *really* was, and the old man replied that he really was in the future, and it was not only true, it wasn't even unusual, though of course it wasn't the sort of thing that happens every day. At last Nisher had to accept it.

"Well, okay," he said. "What sort of future is this?"

"A very nice one," the old man assured him.

"No alien creatures have taken us over?"

"Certainly not."

"Has lack of fossil fuels reduced our standard of living to a bare subsistence level?"

"We solved the energy crisis a few hundred years ago when we discovered an inexpensive way of converting sand into shale."

"What are your major problems?"

"We don't seem to have any."

"So this is Utopia?"

The old man smiled. "You must judge for yourself. Perhaps you would like to look around during your brief stay here."

"Why brief?"

"These space-time anomalies are self-regulating," the old man said. "The universe won't tolerate for long your being *here* when you ought to be *there*. But it usually takes a little while for the universe to catch up. Shall we go for a stroll? My name is Ogun."

They left the park and walked down a pleasant, tree-lined boulevard. The buildings were strange to Nisher's eye and seemed to contain too many strange angles and discordant colors. They were set back from the street and bordered with well-kept green lawns. It looked to Nisher like a really nice future. Nothing exotic, but nice. And there were people walking around in their Grecian tunics, and they all looked happy and well fed. It was like a Sunday in Central Park.

Then Nisher noticed one couple who had gone beyond the talking stage. They had taken their clothes off. They were, to use a twentieth-century expression, making it.

No one seemed to think this was unusual. Ogun didn't comment on it; so Nisher didn't say anything, either. But he couldn't help noticing, as they walked along, that other people were making it, too. Quite a few people. After passing the seventh couple so engaged, Nisher asked Ogun whether this was some sexual holiday or whether they had stumbled onto a fornicator's convention.

"It's nothing special," Ogun said.

"But why don't these people do it in their homes or in hotel rooms?"

"Probably because most of them happened to meet here in the street."

That shook Nisher. "Do you mean that these couples never knew each other before?"

"Apparently not," Ogun said. "If they had, I suppose they would have arranged for a more comfortable place in which to make love."

Nisher just stood there and stared. He knew it was rude, but he couldn't help it. Nobody seemed to mind. He observed how people looked at each other as they walked along, and every once in a while somebody would smile at someone, and someone else would smile back, and they would sort of hesitate for a moment, and then...

Nisher tried to ask about twenty questions at the same time. Ogun interrupted. "Let me try to explain, since you have so little time among us. You come from an age of sexual repression and rebelliousness. To you this must appear a spectacle of unbridled license. For us it is no more than a normal expression of affection and solidarity."

"So you've solved the problem of sex!" Nisher said.

"More or less by accident," Ogun told him. "We were really trying to abolish war before it obliterated us. But to get rid of war, we had to change the psychological base upon which it rests. Repressed sexuality was found to be the greatest single factor. Once this was recognized and the information widely disseminated, a universal plebiscite was held. It was agreed that human sexual mores were to be modified and reprogrammed for the good of the entire human race. Biological engineering and special clinics — all on a voluntary basis, of course — took care of that. Divorced from aggression and possessiveness, sex today is a mixture of aesthetics and sociability."

Nisher was about to ask Ogun how that affected marriage and the family when he noticed that Ogun was smiling at an attractive blonde and edging over in her direction. "Hey, Ogun!" Nisher said. "Don't leave me now!"

The old man looked surprised. "My dear fellow, I wasn't going to exclude you. Quite the contrary, I want to *include* you. We all do."

Nisher saw that a lot of people had stopped. They were looking at him, smiling.

"Now wait a minute," he said, automatically taking up the cockroach posture.

But by then a woman had hold of his leg, and another was snuggling up under his armpit, and somebody else was pinching his fingers. Nisher got a little hysterical and shouted at Ogun, "Why are they doing this?"

"It is a spontaneous demonstration of our great pleasure at the novelty and poignancy of your presence. It happens whenever a man from the past appears among us. We feel so sorry for him and what he has to go back to, we want to share with him, share all the love we have. And so this happens."

Nisher felt as though he were in the middle of a Cinemascope mob scene set in ancient Rome, or maybe Babylon. The street was crowded with people as far as the eye could see, and they were all making it with one another and on top of one another and around and under and over and in between. But what really got to Nisher was the feeling that the crowd gave off. It went completely beyond sex. It felt like a pure ocean of love, compassion, and understanding. He saw Ogun's face receding in a wave of bodies and called out, "How far does this thing go?"

"Visitors from the past always send out big vibrations," Ogun shouted back. "This will probably go all the way."

All the way? Nisher couldn't figure out what he was talking about. Then he got it and said, almost reverently, "Do you mean — planet-wide?"

Ogun grinned, then he was gone. Nisher saw the way it had to be — this group of people loving one another and pulling more and more people into it as the vibes got stronger and stronger until everybody in the world was in on it. To Nisher this was definitely Utopia. He knew he had to figure out some way of bringing this message back to his own time, some way to convince people. Then he looked up and saw that he was on Central Park South, in front of the Plaza.

"I suppose the transition was just too much for you?" Miles asked.

Nisher smiled. His eyelids were drooping. The Valium rush was passing, and he was coming down fast.

"I guess I just freaked out," Nisher said. "I thought I could explain it to everyone. I thought I could just grab people and make them give up their hangups, that I could show them how their bodies were shaped for love. But I went at it too hysterically, of course; I scared them. And then the cops grabbed me."

"How do you feel now?" Miles asked.

"I'm tired and disappointed, and I've come back to my senses, if that's what you want to call it. Maybe it was all an hallucination. That doesn't matter. What counts is that I'm back and in my own day and age, when we still have wars and energy crises and sexual hangups, and nothing I can do will change that."

"You seem to have made a very rapid adjustment," Miles said.

"Hell, yes. No one ever accused Leonard Nisher of being a slow adjuster."

"You sound good to me," Miles said. "But I would like you to stay here for a few days. This is not a punishment, you understand. It is genuinely meant as an assistance to you."

"Okay, doc," Nisher said drowsily. "How long must I stay?"

"Perhaps no more than a day or two. I'll release you as soon as I'm satisfied with your condition."

"Fair enough," Nisher mumbled. And then he fell asleep. Miles told the orderlies to stand by, and alerted the psychiatric nurse. Then he went to his nearby apartment to get some rest.

Nisher's story haunted Miles as he broiled a steak for his lunch. It couldn't be true, of course. But suppose, just suppose, it had actually happened. What if the future had achieved a state of polymorphous-perverse sexuality? There was, after all, a fair amount of evidence that space-time anomalies did exist.

Abruptly he decided to visit his patient again. He left his apartment and went back to the hospital, hurrying now, impelled by a strange sense of urgency.

There was no one at the reception desk on Wing Two. The policeman normally stationed in the corridor was missing. Miles ran down the hall. Leonard's door was open, and Miles peered in.

Someone had folded Leonard's cot and leaned it against the wall. That left just enough room on the floor for two aides (one a former guard for the Detroit Lions), a psychiatric nurse named Norma, two student nurses, a policeman, and a middle-aged woman from Denver who had been visiting a relative.

"Where is Leonard?" cried Miles.

"That guy musta hypnotized me," the policeman said, struggling into his trousers.

"He preached a message of love," said the woman from Denver, wrapping herself in Leonard's wet pack.

"Where is he?" Miles shouted.

White curtains flapped at the open window. Miles stared out into the darkness. Nisher had escaped. His mind inflamed by his brief vision of the future, he was sure to be preaching his message of love up and down the country. *He could be anywhere*, Miles thought. *How on earth can I find him? How can I join him?*

THE SWAMP

Ed Scott took one look at the boy's terrified white face and knew something serious was wrong. "What is it, Tommy?" he asked.

"It's Paul Barlow," the boy said. "We were all playing in the east swamp — and — and — and he's sinking, sir!"

Scott knew he had no time to waste. Just last year, two men had been lost in the treacherous patches of the east swamp. The area was fenced now, and children had been warned. But they played there anyhow. Scott took a long coil of rope from his garage and set off at a run.

In ten minutes he was deep within the swamp. He saw six boys standing on a grassy fringe of firm land. Twenty feet beyond them, in the middle of a smooth, yellowish gray expanse, was Paul Barlow. The boy was waist-deep in the gluey quicksand, and sinking. His arms flailed, and the quicksand crept toward his chest. It looked as though the boy had tried to cross this patch on a dare. Ed Scott uncoiled his rope and wondered what made kids act with such blind, murderous stupidity.

He threw the rope, and the children watched breathlessly as it soared accurately into Paul's hands. But the child — with quicksand up to the middle of his chest — didn't have the strength to hold on.

With only seconds left, Scott tied an end of the rope to a stump, took a firm grip, and waded out after the screaming boy. The sand trembled and gave under his feet. Scott wondered if he'd have the strength to haul himself and the boy out. But the first problem was to reach Paul in time.

Scott came to within five feet of the boy, who was buried now to the neck. Keeping a firm grip on the rope, Scott waded forward another foot, sank to his waist, gritted his teeth, and reached for the boy — and felt the rope go slack! He twisted, trying to keep himself up as the swamp sucked him down — covering his chest and neck, filling his screaming mouth, and at last concealing the top of his head...

On the wooded fringe, one of the boys closed the pocket knife with which he had cut the rope. Out in the swamp, little Paul Barlow stood up cautiously, supported by the wooden platform that he and the other boys had sunk at the swamp's edge and carefully tested. Watching his footing, Paul backed out of the sand, circled around the danger spot, and joined the others.

"Very good, Paul," said Tommy. "You have succeeded in luring an adult to his death, and thereby become a full member of the Destroyers' Club."

"Thank you, Mr. President," Paul said, and the other children cheered.

"But just one thing," Tommy said. "In the future, please watch the overacting. All that screaming *was* a bit heavy, you know."

"I'll watch it, Mr. President," Paul said. By then it was evening. Paul and the other boys hurried home for supper. Paul's mother commented on how good his color was; she approved of his playing with his friends in the open air. But, as with all boys, his poor clothes were a muddy mess — and his hands were dirty.

THE LIFE OF ANYBODY

Last night, as I lay on the couch watching *The Late Show*, a camera and sound crew came to my apartment to film a segment of a TV series called *The Life of Anybody*. I can't say I was completely surprised, although I had not anticipated this. I knew the rules; I went on with my life exactly as if they were not there. After a few minutes, the camera and recording crew seemed to fade into the wallpaper. They are specially trained for that.

My TV was on, of course; I usually have it on. I could almost hear the groans of the critics: "Another goddamned segment of a guy watching the tube. Doesn't anybody in this country do anything but watch the tube?" That upset me, but there was nothing I could do about it. That's the way it goes.

So the cameras whizzed along, and I lay on the couch like a dummy and watched two cowboys play the macho game. After a while my wife came out of the bathroom, looked at the crew, and groaned, "Oh, Christ, not *tonight*." She was wearing my CCNY sweatshirt on top, nothing on the bottom. She'd just washed her hair and she had a towel tied around her head. She had no makeup on. She looked like hell. Of all nights, they had to pick this one. She was probably imagining the reviews: "The wife in last night's turgid farce..."

I could see that she wanted badly to do something — to inject a little humor into our segment, to make it into a domestic farce. But she didn't. She knew as well as I did that anyone caught acting, fabricating, exaggerating, diminishing, or otherwise distorting his life, would be instantly cut off the air. She didn't want that. A bad appearance was better than no appearance at all. She sat down on

a chair and picked up her crocheting hook. I picked up my magazine. Our movie went on.

You can't believe it when it happens to you. Even though you watch the show every evening and see it happen, you can't believe it's happening to you. I mean, it's suddenly *you* there, lying on the couch doing your nothing number, and there they are, filming it and implying that the segment represents *you*.

I prayed for something to happen. Air raid — sneak Commie attack — us a typical American family caught in the onrush of great events. Or a burglar breaks in, only he's not just a burglar, he's something else, and a whole fascinating sequence begins. Or a beautiful woman knocks at the door, claiming that only I can help her. Hell, I would have settled for a phone call.

But nothing happened. I actually started to get interested in that movie on TV, and I put down my magazine and actually watched it. I thought they might be interested in that.

The next day my wife and I waited hopefully, even though we knew we had bombed out. Still, you can never tell. Sometimes the public wants to see more of a person's life. Sometimes a face strikes their fancy and you get signed for a series. I didn't really expect that anyone would want to see a series about my wife and me, but you can never tell. Stranger things have happened.

Nowadays my wife and I spend our evenings in very interesting ways. Our sexual escapades are the talk of the neighborhood, my crazy cousin Zoe has come to stay with us, and regularly an undead thing crawls upstairs from the cellar.

Practically speaking, you never get another chance. But you can never tell. If they do decide to do a follow-up segment, we're ready.

GOODBYE FOREVER TO MR. PAIN

Joseph Elroy was nicely settled back in his armchair on this Sunday morning in the near future, trying to remember the name of his favorite football team, which he was going to watch later on the TV while reading the bankruptcy notices in the Sunday *Times* and thinking uncomfortable thoughts.

It was a normal sort of day: the sky outside was colored its usual blah beige, which went well with the blah browns with which Mrs. Elroy, now grinding her teeth in the kitchen, had decorated the place during one of her many shortlived bursts of enthusiasm. Their child, Elixir, was upstairs pursuing her latest discovery — she was three years old and had just gotten into vomiting.

And Elroy had a tune going in his head. “Amapola” was spinning just now, and it would continue until another song segued into it, one song after another, all day, all night, forever. This music came from Elroy’s internal Muzak system, which came on whenever inattentiveness became necessary for survival.

So Elroy was in a certain state. Maybe you’ve been there yourself: the kid cries and the wife nags and you drift through your days and nights, well laid back, listening to the secret Muzak in your head. And you know that you’ll never crack through the hazy plastic shield that separates you from the world, and the gray mists of depression and boredom settle in for a nice long visit. And the only thing that prevents you from opting for a snuffout is your Life-Force, which says to you, “Wake up, dummy, it’s *you* this is happening to — yes, you, strangling there in your swimming pool of lime-flavored Jell-O with a silly grin on your love-starved face as you smoke another

Marlboro and watch the iniquities of the world float by in three-quarter time."

Given that situation, you'd take any chance that came along to pull out of it, wouldn't you? Joseph Elroy's chance came that very afternoon.

The telephone rang. Elroy picked it up. A voice at the other end asked, "Who is this, please?"

"This is Joseph Elroy," Elroy replied.

"Mr. Elroy, do you happen to have a *tune* or *song* going through your head at this moment?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"What is the name of the song?"

"I've been humming 'Amapola' to myself for the last couple of hours."

"What was that name again, Mr. Elroy?"

"'Amapola.' But what — "

"That's it! That's the one!"

"Huh?"

"Mr. Elroy, now I can reveal to you what this is all about. I am Marv Duffle, and I'm calling you from '*The Shot of a Lifetime Show*' and you have named *the very tune* going through the head of our genial guest for tonight, Mr. Phil Suggers! That means that you and your family, Mr. Elroy, have won this month's big synchronicity prize, The Shot of a Lifetime! Mr. Elroy, do you know what that means?"

"I know!" Elroy shouted joyously. "I watch the show so I know, I know! Elva, stop freaking out in there, we've won the big one, we've won, we've won, we've won!"

What this meant in practical terms was that the following day a group of technicians in one-piece orange jumpsuits came and installed what looked like a modified computer console in the Elroys' living room, and Marv Duffle himself handed them the all-important Directory and explained how all of the best avenues for personal growth and change and self-realization had been collated and tied directly into this computer. Many of these services had formerly been available only to the rich, talented, and successful, who really didn't need them. But now the Elroys could avail themselves of them, and do it all via patented superfast high-absorption learning modalities

developed at Stanford and incorporated into the equipment. In brief, their lives were theirs to shape and mold as they desired, free, and in the privacy of their home.

Elroy was a serious-minded man, as we all are at heart, and so the first thing he did was to search through the Directory, which listed all available services from all the participating companies, until he found Vocationeers, the famous talent-testing firm of Mill Valley, California. They were able to process Elroy by telephone and get the results back to him in fifteen minutes. It seemed that Elroy had the perfect combination of intelligence, manual dexterity, and psychological set to become a topflight micropaleontologist. That position happened to be open at the nearby Museum of Natural History, and Elroy learned all he needed to know about the work with the help of the Bluchner-Wagner School for High-Speed Specialized Learning. So Elroy was able to begin a promising career only two weeks after he had heard of it for the first time.

Elva Elroy, or Elf, as she called herself in wistful moments, wasn't sure what she wanted to do. She looked through the Directory until she found Mandragore, Inc., makers of Norml-Hi twenty-four-hour timed-release mood-enhancement spansules. She had them sent over at once with the Ames Rapid Dope Delivery Service — "Your High Is Our Cry." Feeling better than she had in ages, Elva was able to face the problem of dinner. After careful consideration, she called Fancy Freakout Food Merchandisers — "Let Us Administer to the Hungry Child in Your Head."

For their little daughter, Elixir, there was BabyTeasers, a crack service that cajoled the spoiled scions of oil sheiks, now available to the Elroys on 'round-the-clock standby basis to get the kid out of her temper. Elixir was delighted. New big soft toys to order around! What could be so bad?

That left the Elroys with world enough and time in which to discover each other. They went first with Omni-Pleasure Family Consultants, who, on television in Houston the previous month, had revitalized a marriage that had been pronounced terminal. One counseling session brought the Elroys a deep and abiding love for each other whenever they looked deep into each other's eyes and concentrated. This gave them the necessary maturity to take the Five-Day Breakthrough with the Total Sex Response people of Lansing, Michigan — which, too, was a success in terms of new highs reached

and plateaus maintained. Yet a certain anxiety crept into Elroy's performance and he felt the need to avail himself of Broadway Joe's Romantic Sex Service — "Illicit meetings with beautiful sexy broads of a refinement guaranteed not to gross you out."

"Oh, yeah?" said Elva when she heard about that, and instantly fulfilled a longstanding desire by calling Rough Traders Sex Service. She had been attracted by their ad in the Directory: "Dig, you want it rough, raw, real, and sweaty, but you also want that it shouldn't be a turnoff. Right? Right. Call our number, baby, 'cause we got your number."

They both got a little freaked out from it all, and cooled out with Dreamboat Launchers of Fire Island and their famous motto: "Meditate the Easy Way, with Dope."

The Elroys were really getting it all together now, but things kept intruding. Elixir was freaking out again, and at the worst possible time, for Elroy was soon to be profiled by *New York* magazine, and Elva was about to begin a two-week prima ballerina course with a job already assured her at the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. They held a family conference and came across an ad in the Directory for a service called Childmenders.

"What does it say?" Elva asked.

Elroy read: "Is your child losing out on the best of life because he/she possesses an unruly personality? Do you feel frustrated by the problem of giving him/her love without getting swallowed up? Is it all getting a bit much? Then why not take advantage of Childmenders! We will cart away your child and return him/her loving, obedient, docile, and easily satisfied — and we will do this without screwing up one bit of his/her individuality, initiative, and aggressiveness, so help us God."

"They sound like they give a damn," Elva said.

"Funny you should say that," Elroy said. "Right down here at the bottom of their ad, it says, 'Believe us — we give a damn!'"

"That clinches it," Elva said. "Call them!"

Elixir was carted away, and the Elroys celebrated their newfound freedom by calling up Instant Real Friends and throwing a party with the help of Perry and Penny, the Party People.

Onward the Elroys plunged, along the rocky trail of self-transcendence. Unfortunately this involved a clash of interests. Mr. Elroy

was pursuing Higher Matters through Mindpower. Elva still sought consummation in the veritable flesh. They fought about which item in the Directory they should opt for next. Since they had both taken the Supreme Communication Foundation's Quickie Course in Inexorable Persuasiveness, they were both terrific arguers. But they got on each other's nerves because they were both terrible listeners.

Their relationship fell apart. Stubbornly, neither of them would go to Relationship Repairers. In fact, Elva defiantly joined Negatherapeutics, whose intriguing slogan was "Hate Your Way to Happiness." Elroy pulled himself together and explored his feelings with the revolutionary new Cellular Self-Image Technique and understood at last where he was at: he detested his wife and wanted her dead. It was as simple as that!

Elroy swung into action. He pounced on the Directory and located the Spouse Alteration Service of Saugerties, New York. They came and took Elva away and Elroy finally had time to get into himself.

First he learned how to achieve instantaneous ecstasy at will. This ability had formerly been an exclusive possession of a few Eastern religious organizations, which, until recently, had been the only ones with the telephone number of the service that provided it. Bliss was a lot of fun, but Elroy had to come out of it when Childmenders called to say that his child was irreparable. What did he want them to do with her? Elroy told them to put her back together as well as they could and store her until further notice.

It was at this time, through the assistance of Psychoboosters, Inc., that he was able to raise his intelligence to two levels above genius, a fact that was duly noted in the updated edition of his autobiography, which was being serialized in *The New York Times*.

The Spouse Alteration Service called and said that Elva was the old unalterable model and could not be adjusted without grave danger to the mechanism. Elroy told them to store her with his irreparable kid.

At last, triumphantly alone, Elroy could return to the joyous work of saying goodbye forever to Mr. Pain. He had it all pretty much together by now, of course, and was experiencing many religious visions of great power and intensity. But something unsatisfactory still remained, though he couldn't put his finger on it.

He looked through the Directory, but found no answer. It looked as if he was going to have to tough this one through on his own. But then, providentially, the front door opened and in walked a small, dark, smiling man with a turban and all-knowing eyes and an aura of incredible power. This was the Mystery Guru, who seeks you out when the time is right and tells you what you need to know — if you are a subscriber to the Directory.

"It's the ego," the Mystery Guru said, and left.

Vast waves of comprehension flooded over Elroy. The ego! Of course! Why hadn't *he* thought of that? Obviously his ego was the final thing anchoring him to the gummy clay of everyday reality. His ego! His very own ego was holding him back, forever yammering its selfish demands at him, completely disregarding his welfare!

Elroy opened the Directory. There, all by itself on the last page, he found the Lefkowitz Ego Removers of Flushing, New York.

Beneath their ad was this: "Warning. The Surgeon-General Has Determined that Ego Removal May Be Injurious to Your Health."

Joseph Elroy hesitated, considered, weighed factors. He was momentarily perplexed. But then the Mystery Guru popped into the room again and said, "It's a seven-to-five shot at the Big Spiritual Money, and besides, what have you got to lose?" He exited, a master of timing.

Elroy punched out the big combination on the console.

Not long afterward there was a knock at the door. Elroy opened it to the Lefkowitz Ego Removal Squad.

They left. Then there was only the console, winking and leering and glittering at itself. And then even that was gone and there was nothing whatever in the room except a disembodied voice humming "Amapola."

THE SHAGGY AVERAGE AMERICAN MAN STORY

Dear Joey:

You ask me in your letter what can a man do when all of a sudden, through no fault of his own, he finds that there is a bad rap hanging over him which he cannot shake off.

You did right in asking me, as your spiritual advisor and guide, to help you in this matter.

I can sympathize with your feelings, dear friend. Being known far and wide as a double-faced, two-tongued, short-count ripoff artist fit only for the company of cretinous Albanians is indeed an upsetting situation, and I can well understand how it has cut into your business as well as your self-esteem and is threatening to wipe you out entirely. But that is no reason to do a kamikaze into Mount Shasta with your hang glider, as you threaten in your letter. Joey, no situation is entirely unworkable. People have gone through worse bad-rapping than that, and come up smelling like roses.

For your edification I cite the recent experience of my good friend George Blaxter.

I don't think you ever met George. You were in Goa the year he was in Ibiza, and then you were with that Subud group in Bali when George was with his guru in Isfahan. Suffice it to say that George was in London during the events I am about to relate, trying to sell a novel he had just written, and living with Big Karen, who, you may remember, was Larry Shark's old lady when Larry was playing pedal guitar with Brain Damage at the San Remo Festival.

Anyhow, George was living low and quiet in a bed-sitter in Fulham when one day a stranger came to his door and introduced

himself as a reporter from the Paris *Herald Tribune* and asked him what his reaction was to the big news.

George hadn't heard any big news recently, except for the Celtics losing to the Knicks in the NBA playoffs, and he said so.

"Somebody should have contacted you about this," the reporter said. "In that case, I don't suppose you know that the Emberson Study Group in Annapolis, Maryland, has recently finished its monumental study updating the averageness concept to fit the present and still-changing demographic and ethnomorphic aspects of our great nation."

"No one told me about it," George said.

"Sloppy, very sloppy," the reporter said. "Well, incidental to the Study, the Emberson Group was asked if they could come up with some actual person who would fit and embody the new parameters of American averageness. The reporters wanted somebody who could be called Mr. Average American Man. You know how reporters are."

"But what has this got to do with me?"

"It's really remiss of them not to have notified you," the reporter said. "They fed the question into their computer and turned it loose on their sampling lists, and the computer came up with you."

"With me?" George said.

"Yes. They really should have notified you."

"I'm supposed to be the Average American Man!"

"That's what the computer said."

"But that's crazy," George said. "How can I be the Average American Man? I'm only five foot eight and my name is Blaxter spelled with an 'l', and I'm of Armenian and Latvian ancestry and I was born in Ship's Bottom, New Jersey. What's *that* average of, for Chrissakes? They better recheck their results. What they're looking for is some Iowa farmboy with blond hair and a Mercury and 2.4 children."

"That's the old, outdated stereotype," the reporter said. "America today is composed of racial and ethnic minorities whose sheer ubiquity precludes the possibility of choosing an Anglo-Saxon model. The average man of today has to be unique to be average, if you see what I mean."

"Well...what am I supposed to do now?" George asked.

The reporter shrugged. "I suppose you just go on doing whatever average things you were doing before this happened."

There was a dearth of interesting news in London at that time, as usual, so the BBC sent a team down to interview George. CBS picked it up for a thirty-second human-interest spot, and George became a celebrity overnight.

There were immediate repercussions.

George's novel had been tentatively accepted by the venerable British publishing firm of Gratis & Spye. His editor, Derek Polsonby-Jigger, had been putting George through a few final rewrites and additions and polishes and deletions, saying, "It's just about right, but there's still something that bothers me and we owe it to ourselves to get it in absolutely top form, don't we?"

A week after the BBC special, George got his book back with a polite note of rejection.

George went down to St. Martin's Lane and saw Polsonby. Polsonby was polite but firm. "There is simply no market over here for books written by average Americans."

"But you liked my book! You were going to publish it!"

"There was always something about it that bothered me," Polsonby said. "Now I know what that something is."

"Yeah?"

"Your book lacks uniqueness. It's just an average American novel. What else could the average American man write? That's what the critics would say. Sorry, Blaxter."

When George got home, he found Big Karen packing.

"Sorry, George," she told him, "but I'm afraid it's all over between us. My friends are laughing at me. I've been trying for years to prove that I'm unique and special, and then look what happens to me — I hook up with the average American man."

"But that's *my* problem, not yours!"

"Look, George, the average American man has got to have an average American wife, otherwise he's not average, right?"

"I never thought about it," George said. "Hell, I don't know."

"It makes sense, baby. As long as I'm with you, I'll just be the average man's average woman. That's hard to bear, George, for a creative-thinking female person who is unique and special and has been the old lady of Larry Shark when he was with Brain Damage during the year they got a gold platter for their top-of-the-charts single, 'All Those Noses.' But it's more than just that. I have to do it for the children."

"Karen, what are you talking about? We don't have any children."

"Not yet. But when we did, they'd just be average kids. I don't think I could bear that. What mother could? I'm going to go away, change my name, and start all over. Good luck, George."

After that, George's life began to fall apart with considerable speed and dexterity. He began to get a little wiggy; he thought people were laughing at him behind his back, and of course it didn't help his paranoia any to find out that they actually were. He took to wearing long black overcoats and sunglasses and dodging in and out of doorways and sitting in cafés with a newspaper in front of his average face.

Finally he fled England, leaving behind him the sneers of his onetime friends. He was bad-rapped but good. And he couldn't even take refuge in any of the places he knew: Goa, Ibiza, Malibu, Poona, Anacapri, Ios, or Marrakesh. He had erstwhile friends in all those places who would laugh at him behind his back.

In his desperation he exiled himself to the most unhip and unlikely place he could think of: Nice, France.

There he quickly became an average bum.

Now stick with me, Joey, while we transition to several months later. It is February in Nice. A cold wind is whipping down off the Alps, and the palm trees along the Boulevard des Anglais look like they're ready to pack up their fronds and go back to Africa.

George is lying on an unmade bed in his hotel, Les Grandes Meules. It is a suicide-class hotel. It looks like warehouse storage space in Mongolia, only not so cheerful.

There is a knock on the door. George opens it. A beautiful young woman comes in and asks him if he is the famous George Blaxter, Average American Man. George says that he is, and braces himself for the latest insult that a cruel and unthinking world is about to lay on him.

"I'm Jackie," she says. "I'm from New York, but I'm vacationing in Paris."

"Huh," George says.

"I took off a few days to look you up," she says. "I heard you were here."

"Well, what can I do for you? Another interview? Further adventure of the Average Man?"

"No, nothing like that...I was afraid this might get a little uptight. Have you got a drink?"

George was so deep into confusion and self-hatred in those days that he was drinking absinthe even though he hated the stuff. He poured Jackie a drink.

"Okay," she said, "I might as well get down to business."

"Let's hear it," George said grimly.

"George," she said, "did you know that in Paris there is a platinum bar exactly one meter long?"

George just stared at her.

"That platinum meter," she said, "is the standard for all the other meters in the world. If you want to find out if your meter is the right length, you take it to Paris and measure it against their meter. I'm simplifying, but do you see what I mean?"

"No," Blaxter said.

"That platinum meter in Paris was arrived at by international agreement. Everyone compared meters and averaged them out. The average of all those meters became the standard meter. Are you getting it now?"

"You want to hire me to steal this meter?"

She shook her head impatiently. "Look, George, we're both grown-up adult persons and we can speak about sex without embarrassment, can't we?"

George sat up straight. For the first time his eyes began tracking.

"The fact is," Jackie said. "I've been having a pretty lousy time of it in my relationships over the past few years, and my analyst, Dr. Decathlon, tells me it's because of my innate masochism, which converts everything I do into drek. That's *his* opinion. Personally, I think I've just been running a bad streak. But I don't really know, and it's important for me to find out. If I'm sick in the head, I ought to stay in treatment so that someday I'll be able to enjoy myself in bed. But if he's wrong, I'm wasting my time and a hell of a lot of money."

"I think I'm starting to get it," George said.

"The problem is, how is a girl to know whether her bad trips are her own fault or the result of the hangups of the guys she's been going with? There's no standard of comparison, no sexual unit, no way to experience truly average American sexual performance, no

platinum meter against which to compare all of the other meters in the world."

It broke over George then, like a wave of sunlight and understanding. "I," he said, "am the standard of American male sexual averageness."

"Baby, you're a unique platinum bar exactly one meter in length and there's nothing else like you in the whole world. Come here, my fool, and show me what the average sexual experience is really like."

Well, word got around, because girls tell these things to other girls. And many women heard about it, and of those who heard about it, enough were interested in checking it out that George soon found his time fully and pleasurably occupied beyond his wildest dreams. They came to him in unending streams, Americans at first, but then many nationalities, having heard of him via the underground interglobal feminine sex-information linkup. He got uncertain Spaniards, dubious Danes, insecure Sudanese, womankind from all over, drawn to him like moths to a flame or like motes of dust in water swirling down a drain in a clockwise direction in the northern hemisphere. And it was all good, at worst, and indescribable at best.

Blaxter is independently wealthy now, thanks to the gifts pressed on him by grateful female admirers of all nations, types, shapes, and colors. He lives in a fantastic villa high above Cap Ferrat, given by a grateful French government in recognition of his special talents and great importance as a tourist attraction. He leads a life of luxury and independence, and refuses to cooperate with researchers who want to study him and write books with titles like *THE AVERAGENESS CONCEPT IN MODERN AMERICAN SEXUALITY*. Blaxter doesn't need them. They would only cramp his style.

He leads his life. And he tells me that late at night, when the last smiling face has departed, he sits back in his enormous easy chair, pours himself a fine burgandy, and considers the paradox: his so-called averageness has made him the front-runner of most, if not all, American males in several of life's most important and fun areas. Being average has blessed his life with uncountable advantages. He is a platinum bar sitting happily in its glass case, and he would never go back to being simply unique, like the rest of the human race.

This is the bliss that averageness has brought him: The curse that he could not shake off is now the gift that he can never lose.

Touching, isn't it?

So you see, Joey, what I'm trying to tell you is that apparent liabilities can be converted into solid assets. How this rule can apply in your own particular case should be obvious. In case it isn't, feel free to write to me again, enclosing the usual payment for use of my head, and I will be glad to tell you how being known far and wide as a lousy ripoff shortchange goniff (and a lousy lay, in case you hadn't heard) can be worked to your considerable advantage.

Yours in Peace,
Andy the Answer Man

SHOOTOUT IN THE TOY SHOP

The meeting took place in the taproom of the Beaux Arts Club of Camden, New Jersey. It was the sort of uptight saloon that Baxter usually avoided — Tiffany lampshades, tables of dark polished wood, discreet lighting. His potential customer, Mr. Arnold Conabee, was in a booth waiting for him. Conabee was a soft-faced, fragile-looking man, and Baxter took care to shake his hand gently. After squeezing his bulk into the red leatherette booth, Baxter asked for a vodka martini, very dry, because that was the sort of thing people ordered in a joint like this. Conabee crossed him up by asking for a margarita straight up.

It was Baxter's first job in nearly a month, and he was determined not to blow it. His breath was kissing sweet, and he had powdered his heavy jowls with talcum powder. His glen plaid suit was freshly pressed and concealed his gut pretty well, and his black police shoes gleamed. Looking good, baby. But he had forgotten to clean his fingernails, and now he saw that they were black-rimmed. He wanted to keep his hands in his lap, but then he couldn't smoke.

Conabee wasn't interested in his hands, however. Conabee had a problem, and that was why he had arranged this meeting with Baxter, a private detective who listed himself in the Yellow Pages as the Acme Investigative Service.

"Somebody is stealing from me," Conabee was saying, "but I don't know who."

"Just fill me in on the details," Baxter said. His voice was the best part of him, a deep, manly drawl, exactly the right voice for a private investigator.

"My shop is over at the South Camden Mall," Conabee said. "Conabee's Toys for Children of All Ages. I'm beginning to acquire an international reputation."

"Right," Baxter said, though he had never heard of Conabee's scam.

"The trouble started two weeks ago," Conabee said. "I had just completed an experimental doll, the most advanced of its kind in the world. The prototype utilized a new optical switching circuit and a synthetic protein memory with a thousand times the order of density previously achieved. It was stolen on the first night of its display. Various pieces of equipment and a quantity of precious metals were also taken. Since then, there have been thefts almost every night."

"No chance of a break-in?"

"The locks are never tampered with. And the thief always seems to know when we have anything worth stealing."

Baxter grunted and Conabee said, "It seems to be an inside job. But I can't believe it. I have only four employees. The most recent has been with me six years. I trust them all implicitly."

"Then you gotta be hooking the stuff yourself," Baxter said, winking, "because *somebody's* sure carting it off."

Conabee stiffened and looked at Baxter oddly, then laughed. "I almost wish it were me," he said. "My employees are all my friends."

"Hell," Baxter said, "anybody'll rip off the boss if he thinks he can get away with it."

Conabee looked at him oddly again, and Baxter realized that he wasn't talking genteelly enough and that a sure seventy-five dollars was about to vanish. He forced himself to be cool and to say, in his deep, competent, no-nonsense voice, "I could hide myself in your shop tonight, Mr. Conabee. You could be rid of this annoyance once and for all."

"Yes," Conabee said, "it *has* been annoying. It's not so much the loss of income as..." He let the thought trail away. "Today we got in a shipment of gold filigree from Germany worth eight hundred dollars. I've brought an extra key."

Baxter took a bus downtown to Courthouse Square. He had about three hours before he was to stake himself out in Conabee's shop. He'd been tempted to ask for an advance, but had decided against it. It didn't pay to look hungry, and this job could be a fresh start for him.

Down the street he saw Stretch Jones holding up a lamppost on Fountain and Clinton. Stretch was a tall, skinny black man wearing a sharply cut white linen suit, white moccasins, and a tan Stetson. Stretch said, "Hey, baby."

"Hi," Baxter said sourly.

"You got that bread for my man?"

"I told Dinny I'd have it Monday."

"He told me I should remind you, 'cause he don't want you should forget."

"I'll have it Monday," Baxter said, and walked on. It was a lousy hundred dollars that he owed Dinny Welles, Stretch's boss. Baxter resented being braced for it, especially by an insolent black bastard in an ice-cream suit. But there wasn't anything he could do about it.

At the Clinton Cut-Rate Liquor Store he ordered a bottle of Haig & Haig Pinch to celebrate his new job, and Terry Turner, the clerk, had the nerve to say, "Uh, Charlie, I can't do this no more."

"What in hell are you talking about?" Baxter demanded.

"It ain't me," Turner said. "You know I just work here. It's Mrs. Chednik. She said not to give you any more credit."

"Take it out of this," Baxter said, coming across with his last twenty.

Turner rang up the sale, then said, "But your tab — "

"I'll settle it direct with Mrs. Chednik, and you can tell her I said so."

"Well, all right, Charlie," Turner said, giving him the change. "But you're going to get into a lot of trouble."

They looked at each other. Baxter knew that Turner was part owner of the Clinton and that he and Mrs. Chednik had decided to cut him off until he paid up. And Turner knew that he knew this. The bastard!

The next stop was the furnished efficiency he called home over on River Road Extension. Baxter walked up the stairs to the twilight gloom of his living room. A small black-and-white television glowed faintly in a corner. Betsy was in the bedroom, packing. Her eye had swollen badly.

"And just where do you think you're going?" Baxter demanded.

"I'm going to stay with my brother."

"Forget it," Baxter said, "it was only an argument." She went on packing.

"You're staying right here," Baxter told her. Her pushed her out of the way and looked through her suitcase. He came up with his onyx cufflinks, his tie clasp with the gold nugget, his Series E savings bonds, and damned if she hadn't also tucked away his Smith & Wesson .38.

"Now you're really going to get it," he told her.

She looked at him levelly. "Charlie, I warn you, never touch me again if you know what's good for you."

Baxter took a step toward her, bulky and imposing in his newly pressed suit. But suddenly he remembered that her brother Amos worked in the DA's office. Would Betsy blow the whistle on him? He really couldn't risk finding out, even though she was bugging him beyond human endurance.

Just then the doorbell rang sharply, three times — McGorty's ring — and Baxter had ten dollars with McGorty on today's number. He opened the door, but it wasn't McGorty, it was a tiny Chinese woman pitching some religious pamphlet. She wouldn't shut up and go away, not even when he told her nice; she just kept at him, and Baxter was suddenly filled with the desire to kick her downstairs, along with her knapsack of tracts.

And then Betsy slipped past him. She had managed to get the suitcase closed, and it all happened so fast that Baxter couldn't do a thing. He finally got rid of the Chinese lady and poured himself a tumblerful of whiskey. Then he remembered the bonds and looked around, but that damned Betsy had whipped everything away, including his goldnugget tie clasp. His Smith & Wesson was still on the bed, under a fold of blanket, so he put it into his suit pocket and poured another drink.

He ate the knockwurst special at the Shamrock, had a quick beer and a shot at the White Rose, and got to the South Camden Shopping Mall just before closing. He sat in a luncheonette, had a coffee, and watched Conabee and his employees leave at seven-thirty. He sat for another half hour, then let himself into the shop.

It was dark inside, and Baxter stood very still, getting the feel of the place. He could hear a lot of clocks going at different rates, and there was a high-pitched sound like crickets, and other sounds he

couldn't identify. He listened for a while, then took out his pocket flashlight and looked around.

His light picked out curious details; a scale-model Spad biplane with ten-foot wings, hanging from the ceiling and tilted as if to attack; a fat plastic beetle almost underfoot; a model Centurion tank nearly five feet long. He was standing in the dark in the midst of motionless toys, and beyond them he could make out the dim shapes of large dolls, stuffed animals, and, to one side, a silent jungle made of delicate, shiny metal.

It was an uncanny sort of place, but Baxter was not easily intimidated. He got ready for a long night. He found a pile of cushions, laid them out, found an ashtray, took off his overcoat, and lay down. Then he sat up and took a cellophane-wrapped ham sandwich, slightly squashed, from one pocket, a can of beer from the other. He got a cigarette going, lay back, and chewed, drank, and smoked against a background of sounds too faint to be identified. One of the many clocks struck the hour, then the others chimed in, and they kept going for a long time.

He sat up with a start. He realized that he had dozed off. Everything seemed exactly the same. Nobody could have unlocked the door and slipped in past him, yet there seemed to be more light.

A dim spotlight had come on, and he could hear spooky organ music, but faintly, faintly, as though from very far away. Baxter rubbed his nose and stood up. Something moved beside his left shoulder, and he turned his flashlight on it. It was a life-size puppet of Long John Silver. Baxter laughed uncertainly.

More lights came on, and a spotlight picked out a group of three big dolls sitting at a table in a corner of the room. The papa doll was smoking a pipe and letting out clouds of real smoke, the mama doll was crocheting a shawl, and the baby doll was crawling on the floor and gurgling.

Then a group of doll people danced out in front of him. There were little shoemakers and tiny ballerinas and a miniature lion that roared and shook its mane. The metal jungle came to life, and great mechanical orchids opened and closed. There was a squirrel with blinking golden eyes; it cracked and ate silver walnuts. The organ music swelled up loud and sweet. Fluffy white doves settled on Baxter's shoulders, and a bright-eyed fawn licked at his fingers. The

toys danced around him, and for a moment Baxter found himself in the splendid lost world of childhood.

Suddenly he heard a woman's laughter.

"Who's there?" he called out.

She stepped forward, followed by a silvery spotlight. She was Dorothy of Oz, she was Snow White, she was Gretel, she was Helen of Troy, she was Rapunzel; she was exquisitely formed, almost five feet tall, with crisp blond curls clustered around an elfin face. Her slight figure was set off by a frilly white shift tied around the waist with a red ribbon.

"You're that missing doll!" Baxter exclaimed.

"So you know about me," she said. "I would have liked a little more time, so that I could have gotten all the toys performing. But it doesn't matter."

Baxter, mouth agape, couldn't answer. She said, "The night Conabee assembled me, I found that I had the gift of life. I was more than a mere automaton — I lived, I thought, I desired. But I was not complete. So I hid in the ventilator shaft and stole materials in order to become as I am now, and to build this wonderland for my creator. Do you think he will be proud of me?"

"You're beautiful," Baxter said at last.

"But do you think Mr. Conabee will like me?"

"Forget about Conabee," Baxter said.

"What do you mean?"

"It's crazy," Baxter said, "but I can't live without you. We'll get away from here, work it out somehow. I'll make you happy, babe, I swear it!"

"Never," she said. "Conabee created me and I belong to him."

"You're coming with me," Baxter said.

He seized her hand and she pulled away from him. He yanked her toward him and her hand came off in his grip. Baxter gaped at it, then threw it from him. "Goddamn you!" he screamed. "Come here!"

She ran from him. He took out his .38 and followed. The organ music began to wander erratically, and the lights were flickering. He saw her run behind a set of great alphabet blocks. He hurried after her — and then the toys attacked.

The tank rumbled into action. It came at him slow and heavy. Baxter put two slugs into it, tumbling it across the room. He caught

a glimpse of the Spad diving toward him, and he shot it in midair, squashing it against the wall like a giant moth. A squad of little mechanical soldiers discharged their cork bullets at him, and he kicked them out of the way. Long John Silver lunged at him, and his cutlass caught Baxter under the ribcage. But it was only a rubber sword; Baxter pushed the pirate aside and had her cornered behind the Punch and Judy.

She said, "Please don't hurt me."

He said, "Come with me!"

She shook her head and tried to dodge him. He grabbed her as she went past, catching her by the blond curls. She fell, and he felt her head twist in his hands, twist around in a full, impossible circle, so that her body was turned away from him while her pretty blue eyes still stared into his face.

"Never!" she said.

In a spasm of rage and revulsion, Baxter yanked at her head. It came off in his hands. In the neck stump he could see bits of glass winking in a gray matrix.

The mama and papa and baby dolls stopped in mid-motion. Long John Silver collapsed. The broken doll's blue eyes blinked three times; then she died.

The rest of the toys stopped. The organ faded, the spotlights went out, and the last jungle flower clinked to the floor. In the darkness, a weeping fat man knelt beside a busted doll and wondered what he was going to tell Conabee in the morning.

THE UNIVERSAL KARMIC CLEARING HOUSE

Harry Zimmerman was an advertising copywriter for Batten & Finch in New York. One day when he got home from work, he found a plain white envelope in the middle of the small desk in his living room where it had no business being. He hadn't brought it in from the mailbox and no one else, not even the super, had keys to all the locks on his apartment door. There was no way the envelope could have gotten there. So how had it gotten there? Zimmerman finally decided he must have brought it in with yesterday's mail and forgotten to open it. He didn't really believe that, but sometimes an inadequate explanation feels better than none at all.

Inside the envelope was a rectangle of shiny plastic. Written on it were the words, KARMIC BANK VISITOR'S PASS. GOOD FOR ONE HOUR. There was a square printed in one corner of the rectangle.

Musing, Zimmerman picked up a pencil and checked the square. Suddenly he wasn't in New York anymore.

With no sense of transition Harry Zimmerman found himself in front of an old-fashioned gray stone office building. It stood all by itself in the middle of a wide green lawn. It had huge bronze gates, and they were open. Above them, chiseled into the granite, were the words: KARMIC BANK & CLEARINGHOUSE.

Zimmerman waited, expecting that someone would come along and tell him what to do. But no one came. At last he walked inside.

There were rows and rows of desks. Men were examining piles of documents, making entries into ledger books, and then piling the documents into wire baskets at the sides of the desks. Messengers took away the examined documents and brought in new ones.

Zimmerman walked over to one of the desks. As he approached, a document slipped from the pile and sailed to the floor.

He picked it up and looked at it. It was made of a shimmery transparent substance and showed a richly colored three-dimensional image of a landscape with figures. As he moved the document, the view changed. He saw a city street, and then a boat on a river, and then a lake with hazy blue mountains behind it. Other images slid past: elephants moving across a wide dusty plain, people talking to each other at a traffic intersection, a deserted beach with dusty palm trees.

"Careful!" the clerk said, and snatched the document out of his hand.

"I wasn't going to hurt it," Zimmerman said.

"I wasn't worried about the document," the clerk said. "I was worried about you. Turn one of those things the wrong way and it can pull you into its construct. Then we'd have a lot of trouble getting you back."

The clerk seemed friendly enough. He was a rather fussy-looking middle-aged man, balding in front, dressed in a pearl-gray morning coat, sharply creased pinstriped trousers and gleaming black shoes.

"What are those things?" Zimmerman asked, indicating the shiny documents.

"I see you're new to this reality construct. They're X2D invoices — sort of instant cosmic balance sheets. Each of them records a planet's karmic status at a given moment. After deducting the bad karma, we convert the good karma into Intraversal Luck units at the going rate of exchange, and deposit the ILUs in their account, to draw upon as required. It's basically the same as banking anywhere, except that we deal in ILUs instead of money."

"Are you telling me," said Zimmerman, "that people can draw out good luck when they need it?"

"That's it," the clerk said. "Except that we don't have individual accounts. We're strictly planetary."

"Do all planets with intelligent life have accounts here?"

"Oh, yes," the clerk told him. "As soon as they develop abstract thought or better, we open an account for them. Then they can draw on it when things have gotten out of hand. Like when disease is raging, or wars are flaring up for no good reason, or there are

unaccountable droughts and famines. All planets have these runs. But with enough units of luck you can usually ride them out. Don't ask me the actual mechanics. I'm a banker, not an engineer. And with a little luck, I won't even be a banker much longer."

"You're getting out of banking?"

"Out of this entire construct," the clerk said. "The Karmic Clearinghouse level is really very limited. There's just this one building stuck in the middle of a lawn which is perched in the middle of a small nothingness. We do get additional hardship pay for working here, but personally I've had enough."

"Where will you go?"

"There are many reality constructs to choose among. I've picked quite a nice one from the catalog. What with my pension and my ILU account I expect to have a good time for quite a long time. The individual ILU account is one of the best things about working for the Universal Technocrat. I must also admit that the cafeteria isn't bad, and we do get the latest movies."

A bell sounded within Zimmerman's pocket, startling him. He took out the Visitor's Pass. It was flashing and ringing. The clerk pressed it on a corner and made it stop.

"That means your time is almost up," the clerk said. "It's been a pleasure talking with you, sir. We don't get many visitors out this way. Our reality construct hasn't even got a hotel."

"Just a minute," Zimmerman said. "What about Earth's account?"

"It's here in the bank, along with everyone else's. No one has ever come around to collect it."

"Well, I'm here now," Harry said. "And I'm Earth's authorized representative. Otherwise I wouldn't be here. Right?"

The clerk nodded. He didn't look happy.

"I want to draw out some of Earth's luck. For the whole planet, I mean, not just for myself. I don't know if you've checked us out lately but we've got a lot of problems. Every year we seem to get more war, pollution, famine, floods, typhoons, unexplained plane crashes, that sort of thing. Some of us are getting a little nervous. We could really use that luck now."

"I knew someone from Earth would come along one of these days," the clerk muttered. "I've been dreading this."

"What's the matter? You said our account is here."

"It is. But there's nothing in it."

"But how could that be?" Zimmerman demanded.

The clerk shrugged. "You know how banks operate. We have to show a profit."

"What does that have to do with Earth's luck?"

"We loaned it out so it could earn some interest."

"You loaned out our luck?"

The clerk nodded. "To Associated Civilizations of the Lesser Magellanic Clouds. A first-class risk."

"Well," Zimmerman said, "you'd better call it in now."

"That's the part I hate to tell you. Despite their very good credit rating, The Associated Civilizations of the L.M.C. recently vanished into a black hole. It's the sort of spacetime anomaly that could happen to anyone."

"That's tough for them," Zimmerman said. "But what about Earth's luck?"

"There's no way we can recover it. It's down there below the event-horizon with the rest of Associated Civilizations' assets."

"You lost our luck!"

"Don't worry, your planet is bound to accumulate more. I'm sorry but there's nothing I can do about it."

The clerk's sad smile and balding head began to dissolve. Everything was shimmering and fading out and Zimmerman knew that he was on his way back to New York. He didn't feel so good about it. Here he was, the first human to get to another level of reality — the Columbus of the Galaxy — and the only thing he had to tell the folks back home was that Earth's luck had gone down a black hole, sorry about that.

As the bearer of cosmic bad tidings his name would be cursed for generations. People would say, "Here comes a Zimmerman," to indicate the bearer of supercolossal bad news on a big scale.

It wasn't fair. He couldn't stand the enormity of that rap hanging around his neck throughout eternity. There had to be something he could do to change it.

But what?

That moment, half in and half out of the fadeout, was decision time for Harry Zimmerman, the sticking-point, the time when Necessity, ordinarily without bias in anyone's favor, suddenly becomes the Mother of Invention.

And so it was that suddenly Zimmerman had the answer.

"Wait!" he cried to the clerk. "We gotta talk!"

"Look, I already said I'm sorry."

"Forget about that," Harry said, "I've got business to discuss with you."

The clerk made a gesture with his hand. The construct stopped fading. "What business?"

"A loan."

"A luck loan?"

"Of course. A big one. To tide us over until things straighten out."

"My dear sir," the clerk said, "why didn't you say so in the first place? Loaning luck is our business. Come with me."

Harry followed the clerk back into the bank.

Like Columbus bringing back the gold and pearls of Hispaniola to Ferdinand and Isabella, so Harry Zimmerman, our envoy involuntary, returned to the Karmic Clearinghouse and negotiated the luck loan that we Earth people so desperately needed. And that is the true story behind our present-day peace and prosperity here in the easy-going 21st century. The interest *has* turned out to be a little steep, of course: the Karmic Bank is not in this for their health. And Harry had to put up the planet for collateral. If we don't find a way to pay back that loan soon, there's only one thing we can do. We'll have to hide out in a Chapter 13 Black Hole like the Associated Civilizations of the LMC did. It's a desperate measure, but anything's better than losing the planet.

SARKANGER

Richard Gregor and Frank Arnold sat in the offices of the AAA Ace Interplanetary Decontamination Corporation filling in the long slow time between customers. Gregor, tall, thin, and lachrymose, was playing a complicated game of solitaire. Arnold, short and plump, with thinning canary yellow hair and china blue eyes, was watching an old Fred Astaire movie on a small TV.

Then, miracle of miracles, a customer walked in.

He was a Sarkanger, a weasel-headed alien from Sarkan II. He was dressed in a white lounge suit and carried an expensive briefcase.

"I have a planet that needs exterminating," the Sarkanger said.

"You've come to the right place," Arnold said. "What seems to be the matter?"

"It's the Meegs," the Sarkanger told him. "We tolerated them as long as they stayed in their burrows. But now they are attacking our saunicus and something must be done."

"What are these Meegs?" Gregor asked.

"They are small, ugly creatures of low intelligence with long claws and matted fur."

"And what is saunicus?"

"The saunicus is a leafy green vegetable not unlike your terrestrial cabbage. It is the sole diet of the Sarkangers."

"And now the Meegs are eating your vegetables?"

"Not eating them. Mutilating them. Wantonly destroying them."

"For what reason?"

"Who can understand why a Meeg does anything?"

"True enough," Arnold said, laughing. "Yes sir, that's certainly true! Well, sir, I think we can help you. There's really only one problem."

Gregor gave his partner a look of alarm.

"The question is," Arnold said, "whether we can fit you into our schedule."

He opened his appointment book. The pages were crowded with names and dates which Arnold had written in hoping for just such a chance as this.

"That's a bit of luck," he said. "We have an open slot this weekend. All we need do is arrange the fee and be on our way. I have our standard contract form right here."

"I have brought my own," the Sarkanger said, taking a document from his briefcase and giving it to Arnold. "You will notice that a very substantial fee is already filled in."

"Why yes," Arnold said, signing with a flourish, "I did notice that."

Gregor studied the paper. "You've also doubled the penalty clause in case of failure to complete our work."

"That's why I made the fee so substantial," the Sarkanger said. "We need results now, before the end of the planting season."

Gregor didn't like it. But his partner gave him a hard look compounded of unpaid bills and overdue bank loans. With reluctance Gregor scribbled his signature.

Four days later their ship popped out of subspace in the vicinity of the red dwarf star Sarkan. A few hours later they had landed on Sarkan II, home of the Sarkangers and their pests, the Meegs.

There was no one to greet them at Sarkan's largest city, Sulkers. The entire population had gone to the satellite Ulvis Minor for a vacation, at considerable expense despite mass bookings, to wait in gaily colored cabanas until their planet was cleansed.

The partners toured Sulkers and were unimpressed by the mud wall architecture. They set up their base camp outside of the city, on the edge of a saunicus field. Just as the Sarkanger had told them, many of the cabbages had been rended, ripped, slashed, filleted, and generally messed about.

They would begin exterminating in the morning. Arnold had discovered that Meegs were susceptible to papayin, an enzyme of the papaya plant. Exposed to concentrations as low as twenty parts

in a million, Meegs went into a coma from which they could be revived only by the immediate application of cold compresses. It was not a bad way to go when you consider the many less pleasant ways the galaxy has for killing people. They had brought a sufficient supply of canned, fresh, frozen, and desiccated papayas to wipe out several planetfuls of Meegs.

They set up tents and deck chairs, built a campfire, and watched Sarkan's red dwarf sun sink into a sculptured frieze of sunset clouds.

They had just finished a dinner of reconstituted chili and beans when they heard a rustling sound in the bushes nearby. A small creature stepped out cautiously. It was about the size and shape of a cat, with thick orange-brown fur.

Gregor said to Arnold, "Do you think that might be a Meeg?"

The creature said, "Of course I am a Meeg. And you gentlemen are the AAA Ace Decontamination Service?"

"That is correct," Gregor said.

"Wonderful! Then you've come about the Sarkangers!"

"Not exactly," Arnold said.

"You mean you didn't get our letter? I knew we should have sent it spacemail special delivery.... But why are you here?"

"This is a little embarrassing," Gregor said. "We didn't know you Meegs spoke English."

"Not all of us do," the Meeg said. "But I happen to be a graduate of your Cornell University."

"Look," Gregor said, "the fact is, a Sarkanger came to our office a few days ago and paid us to rid his planet of vermin."

"Vermin?" the Meeg said. "What was he referring to?"

"You," Arnold said.

"Me? Us? Vermin? A Sarkanger called us that? I know we've had our disagreements, but that's carrying matters a bit too far. And he paid you to kill us? And you took his money?"

"Frankly," Arnold said, "we had expected Meegs to be more — rudimentary. More verminlike, if you know what I mean."

"But this is preposterous!" the Meeg cried. "*They* are the vermin! We are civilized!"

"I'm not so sure about that," Gregor said. "What about the way you tear apart saunicus?"

"You should not comment ignorantly on the religious practices of an alien people."

"What's religious about rending cabbage?" Arnold demanded.

"It's not the act itself," the Meeg explained. "It's the meaning attached to it. Ever since Meeg Gh'tan, known as the Great Feline, discovered supreme enlightenment in the simple act of shredding cabbage, we his followers reenact the rite every year."

"But you tear apart the Sarkangers' cabbages," Gregor pointed out. "Why not tear apart your own?"

"The Sarkangers refuse to let us cultivate the saunicus because of some silly religion they have. Of course we'd prefer to tear apart our own cabbages. Wouldn't anyone?"

"The Sarkangers didn't mention that," Arnold said.

"Puts matters in a different light, doesn't it?"

"It doesn't change the fact that we have a contract with the Sarkangers."

"A contract for murder!"

"I understand how you feel," Arnold said, "and I do sympathize. But you see, if we don't fulfill our contract, it will mean bankruptcy for us. That's a kind of death, too, you know."

"Suppose," the Meeg said, "we Meegs were to offer you a new contract?"

"We have a prior agreement with the Sarkangers," Gregor said. "It wouldn't be legal."

"It would be perfectly legal in any Meeg court," the Meeg said. "A basic principle of Meeg jurisprudence is that no contract with a Sarkanger is binding."

"My partner and I will have to think about it," Arnold said. "It's a difficult position."

"I appreciate that," the Meeg said. "I'll give you a change to think it over. Just remember that the Sarkangers deserve to be exterminated and that you'll make a handsome profit as well as earning the undying gratitude of a race of intelligent and not, I think, unlikable cats."

After the Meeg had left, Gregor said, "Let's just get out of here. This is not a very nice business."

"We can't just up and leave," Arnold said. "Non-fulfillment of contract is a serious matter. We're going to have to exterminate one race or the other."

"I won't do it," Gregor said.

"You don't seem to understand our extremely precarious legal position," Arnold told him. "The courts will crucify us if we don't wipe out the Meegs as we promised. But if we exterminate the Sarkangers we could at least claim an honest mistake."

"It's morally complicated," Gregor said. "I don't like problems like that."

"It gets even more complicated," a voice said behind them.

Arnold jumped as though touched by an electric wire. Gregor went into a state of frozen immobility.

"I'm over here," the voice said.

They looked around. There was nobody there. Only a large saunicus cabbage on the ground all by itself at the edge of their camp. Somehow this saunicus looked more intelligent than most of the ones they had seen. But could it have spoken?

"Yes, yes," said the saunicus. "I spoke to you. Telepathically, of course, since vegetables — in whose family I am proud to consider myself a member — have no organs of articulation."

"But vegetables can't telepathize," Arnold said. "They have no brains or other organs to telepathize with. Excuse me, I don't mean to be offensive."

"We don't need organs," the saunicus said. "Don't you know that all matter with a sufficiently complex degree of organization possesses intelligence? Communication is the inevitable concomitant of intelligence. Only the higher vegetables such as myself can telepathize. Saunicus intelligence is being studied at your Harvard University. We have even applied for observer status at your United Planets. Under the circumstances, I think we should have a say in this matter of who gets exterminated."

"True, it's only fair," Gregor said. "After all, it's you the Meegs and the Sarkangers are fighting over."

"To be more precise," the saunicus said, "they are fighting over which race will have the exclusive right to rend, tear, and mutilate us. Or do I state the case unfairly?"

"No, that seems to sum it up," Gregor said. "Which one do you vote for?"

"As you might expect, I am in favor of neither. Both those races are contemptible vermin. I vote for an entirely different solution."

"I was afraid of that," Arnold said. "What did you have in mind?"

"Simple enough. Sign a contract with me to rid my planet of both Meegs and Sarkangers."

"Oh, no," Gregor said.

"We are, after all, much the earliest inhabitants of this planet. We arrived not long after the lichens, before animal life had even developed. We are peaceful, indigenous, and threatened by barbarous newcomers. It seems to me that your moral duty is clear."

Arnold sighed. "Morality is all very well. But there are practical considerations, too."

"I am aware of that," the saunicus said. "Aside from your satisfaction for doing a good job, we would be prepared to sign a contract and pay you double what the others have offered."

"Look," Arnold said, "it's difficult for me to believe that a vegetable has a bank account."

"Intelligence, no matter what form it comes in, can always get money. Working through our holding company, Saunicus Entertainment Modalities, we publish books and tapes and compile data bases on a variety of subjects. We impart our knowledge telepathically to Terran authors whom we hire at a flat rate per page. Our gardening section is especially profitable: only a vegetable can be a true expert on growing plants. I think you will find our Dun & Bradstreet rating more than adequate."

The saunicus went to a distant part of the field to give the partners a chance to talk it over. When he was fifty yards away — outside of telepathic range — Arnold said, "I didn't much like that cabbage. He seemed too smart for his own good, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, it was like he was trying to prove something," Gregor said. "But the Meeg — didn't you sense something untrustworthy about him?"

Arnold nodded. "And the Sarkanger who began all this — he seemed like a thoroughly unscrupulous character."

Gregor said, "It's difficult to decide which race to exterminate on such short acquaintance. I wish we knew them a little better."

"Let's just exterminate somebody, anybody," Arnold said, "and get finished with this job. But which?"

"We'll flip a coin. Then no one can accuse us of being prejudiced."

"But there are three parties to choose from."

"So we draw straws. I just don't know what else to do."

Just at that moment a tremendous clap of thunder came rolling off the nearby mountains. The sky, previously a light azure, now

turned dark and ominous. Massive, quick-moving cumulus bubbled and frothed across the horizon. From the vast vault of the heavens there came a tremendous voice:

"I can stand for this no longer!"

"Oh my God," Gregor said, "we've offended somebody!"

"To whom are we speaking?" Arnold said, looking up at the sky.

"I am the voice of this planet which you know as Sarkan."

"I never knew planets could talk," Gregor mumbled under his breath. But the being or whoever it was picked it up at once.

"In general," the voice said, "we planets do not bother communicating with the tiny creatures who crawl across our surfaces. We are content with our own thoughts, and with the company of our own kind. The occasional comet brings us news of distant places, and that's enough for us. We try to ignore the nonsense that goes on on our surfaces. But sometimes it gets to be too much. These murderous Sarkangers, Meegs, and saunicus which inhabit me are simply too vile to be tolerated any longer. I am about to take an appropriate and long overdue action."

"What are you going to do?" Arnold asked.

"I shall flood myself to a mean depth of ten meters, thus disposing of Sarkangers, Meegs, *and* saunicus. A few innocent species will also suffer, but what the hell, that's the way it goes. You two have one hour to get out of here. After that, I can't be held responsible for your safety."

The partners packed up quickly and returned to their spaceship.

"Thanks for the warning," Gregor said just before they took off.

"It's not out of any fondness for you," the planet replied. "As far as I'm concerned you're vermin just like the others. But you're vermin from another planet. If word ever got out that I wiped you out, others of your species would come with their atom bombs and laser cannons and destroy me as a rogue planet. So get out of here while I'm still in a good mood."

Several hours later, in orbit above Sarkan, Arnold and Gregor watched scenes of fantastic destruction take place before their eyes.

When it was over, Gregor set a course for home.

"I suppose," he said to Arnold, "that this is the end of AAA Ace. We've forfeited our contract. The Sarkanger's lawyers will nail us."

Arnold looked up. He had been studying the contract. "No," he said, "Oddly enough, I think we're in the clear. Read that last paragraph."

Gregor read it and scratched his head. "I see what you mean. But do you think it'll hold up in court?"

"Sure it will. Floods are always considered Acts of God. And if we don't tell and the planet doesn't tell, who's ever going to know different?"

AT THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS

So respect the child within you because he knows the truth: he was kidnapped and put into an aging body and given unpleasant work and a lot of stupid rules to follow. From time to time, the child wakes up in the grownup's body and finds there's no one left on the baseball field and he can't even find his ball and glove, that the little river beside which he used to read poetry and eat licorice lozenges has been swallowed up by the utilitarianism of a world which permits a stream to exist only if it proves useful to pollute. What a strange world, when each tree, each flower, each blade of grass, each bee and swallow has to earn a living, and even the lilies of the field must have a care for tomorrow. The oversight that Christ noticed: "They reap not, neither do they sow..." has now been corrected. In this new world, everything reaps and sows and commits a double blasphemy by ascribing it all to the grace of God. The swallows have failed to fulfill their quota of mosquitoes; they will be punished. The squirrel's granary is full of acorns, but he has neglected to pay his income tax.

There was great consternation in the world, for the hand of man had reached out, had discovered a way to communicate with all living things, had discovered at last a way of being understood and of understanding. And what did they choose to say? That our labor is required in their scheme of things. No longer are we to go our way and they theirs; now we are to work for them. "It's not just for ourselves," the humans said. "Don't think we don't recognize how unseemly this must seem, trying to tax the previously untaxable. But these are troubled times. Due to various forms of bad luck and (we admit it) mismanagement by our predecessors, to whom we bear no

resemblance and from whom we repudiate all relationship, it is necessary now for everyone to work. Not just the human beings and their allies, the horses and dogs. All of us must make an effort to repair the damage, so that we will still have a planet to live on. This being the case, please spare me the lilies of the field routine. At least they can collect moisture for our water replenishment scheme. And the birds can bring us twigs and bits of sod from the few wooded areas left, so that we can start our reforestation. We haven't made contact with the bacteria yet, but it's only a matter of time. I'm sure they will do their part, because they are by all accounts sober-minded and serious people."

Graylag, the great gray goose of the northern latitudes, had been late in getting the news. He and his flock usually went further north than anybody else, to the regions where the low summer sun flashed off bright waters pierced with dark wooded islands. The sooty terns arrived soon after, and they brought the news.

"Listen, geese, it's finally happened! The humans have held discussions with us!"

Graylag was less than enthusiastic about this news. In fact, this was just what he had been dreading.

"What did they say?" he asked.

"Just 'happy to see you,' that sort of thing. They really seemed rather nice."

"Sure, humans always seem nice at first," Graylag said. "But then they do something unthinkable and unspeakable. Which of us would hang up humanskins on our walls, mount the stuffed head of a hunter on the wall of a cave, or paint pictures of deer bringing a wounded hunstman to bay? They go too far, humans, they presume too much."

"Maybe it's different for them now," the sooty tern said. "They've been through a lot recently."

"Haven't we all!" Graylag sniffed.

The tern flew on. The terns were nesting this year near Lake Baikal, where the big human rocket station had been. New grass and seeds were growing nicely in the cracks of the lava shield that resulted when the installation melted down under nuclear attack.

There had been disturbances all over Earth. The terns had suffered sad losses, as had all the other species they knew. Only

some of the underwater species had profited — sharks and moray eels were doing nicely — but at least they had the good taste not to rub it in. They knew they were perverse to be able to benefit by what came near to causing the end of all life on the Earth.

Later in the season, a flight of ptarmigan came through to the north and exchanged information with Graylag.

"How is it going between you and the humans?" Graylag asked.

"Well, frankly, not so good."

"Eating you, are they?" said Graylag.

"Oh, no, they're being very good about that," the ptarmigan said. "Downright silly about it, in fact. They seem to think that just because you can converse intelligently with a fellow means you shouldn't eat him. Which makes no sense at all. Wolves and bears talk as well as anyone, and it never occurs to them to give up meat in favor of salads. We eat what we must and we all get along somehow, isn't that right?"

"Of course," said Graylag. "But what seems to be the trouble, then?"

"Well, you're not going to believe this, Graylag."

"About humans? Try me!"

"Very well. They want us to work for them."

"You? The ptarmigans?"

"Among others."

"Who else?"

"Everybody. All the animals and all the birds."

"You're right, I don't believe it."

"Nevertheless, it's true."

"Work for them? What do you mean? You're not exactly of a size to carry a pick and shovel or scrub dishes — the two jobs humans seem to have the most need to fill."

"I don't know exactly what they mean," the ptarmigan said. "I got out before they could make me do it, whatever it is."

"How could they make you?"

The ptarmigan said, "Oh gray goose, you don't know much about men! You may know the high empty skies, but you don't know men. Don't you know that whereas birds can fly and fish can swim and turtles can crawl, men can talk? It is talk that is the excellence of a man, and he can convince you to do anything he wants, if he talks at you long enough."

"Convince you to work for them?"

"Yes, and pay taxes, too."

"But this is madness! One of their own holy men promised us exemption from all that. He said, they reap not, neither do they sow. We have our own things to do. We live in the æsthetic dimension. We are not utilitarian."

The ptarmigan looked discomfited and said, "You should have been there. You'd have to hear them talk."

"And then become a beast of burden! Never, ptarmigan!"

Sometime later, a conference was held among several species of large predatory birds. This was the first time eagle, hawk, and owl shared the same branches. The meeting was held in a wooded valley in northern Oregon, one of the few areas in the northwest that had escaped direct nuclear effects. A man was there, too.

"It's easy enough to blame this mess on us," the man said. "But we're just creatures like the rest of you, and we did only what seemed best. If you were in our situation, do you think you would have done any better? It's too easy an answer to say that man is bad, kick him out and the rest of us will live in peace. Men have always been saying that to each other. But it should be obvious that there's no way everything can stay as it was. Things have to change."

The animals objected, "You men are not natural. There can be no cooperation between you and the rest of us."

"Not natural?" the man said. "Perhaps this mess around us, this shrinking down of the habitable earth, this cutting back of the proliferation of species, was not an accident or an evil. The lightning that starts the forest fire isn't evil. Perhaps we humans are nature's way of producing atomic explosions without dragging stellar cataclysms into it."

"Perhaps," the animals said. "But what's the point? The damage was been done. What do you want from us now?"

"The Earth is in pretty sorry shape," the man said. "And there may be worse to come. We all have to work now, to restore soil, water, vegetation, to give ourselves a chance. This is the only task left to us now, all of us."

"But what has that to do with us?" the animals asked.

"Frankly, you birds and animals have had it easy for long enough. It must have been nice for you, the millions of years without responsibility. Well, the fun's over now. All of us have work to do."

A pileated woodpecker raised his rakish head and said, "Why must we animals do it all? What about the plants? They just sit around and grow. Is that equitable?"

"We have already contacted the plants," the man said. "They are prepared to do their duty. We have discussions going on with some of the larger bacteria, too. This time we're all in it together."

Animals and birds are essentially simple-minded and of romantic natures. They cannot resist the fine words of a man, because those words act on them like the finest food, sex, and slumber combined. Even animals dream of the perfect world of future.

The tern grasped a twig in his claw. He said to Graylag, "Do you think men can be trusted?"

"Certainly not," Graylag said. "But what does that matter?" He grasped a bit of bark. "It's all changed now, but whether for the better or the worse I don't know. All I do know is this: it is probably going to be interesting." Grasping the bit of bark, he flew over to add it to the pile.

LOVE SONG FROM THE STARS

Lollia was a small, pine-clad cone of rock in the eastern Ægean. It was uninhabited, a difficult place to get to, but not quite impossible. Kinkaid rented an aluminum boat with outboard in Chios, packed in his camping equipment and, with a fair wind and a flat sea, got there in six hours, arriving just before sunset.

Kinkaid was tall and thin, with snubby features and fair, freckled skin, blotchy now in the fierce Greek summer sun. He wore a wrinkled white suit and canvas boat shoes. He was thirty-two years old. His hair was blondish-red, curly, and he was going bald on top. He was a member of an almost vanished species, the independently wealthy amateur archaeologist. He had heard of Lollia on Mykonos. A fisherman told him that the island was still visited from time to time by the old gods, and that people with any prudence stayed away. That was all Kinkaid needed to want to go there at once. He was in need of a respite from Mykonos' café amusements.

And there was always the chance he'd find antiquities. Many discoveries have been made in the open, or under an inch or two of soil. Not in the well-known places, Mycenæ, Tiryns, Delphi, which scientists and tourists have been studying for hundreds of years. It was the less likely sites that yielded the lucky finds nowadays, places on the edge of a great culture. Like Lollia, perhaps.

And even if he didn't find anything, it would be fun to camp out for a night or two before flying on to meet his friends in Venice for the film festival. And there was always the chance he'd find something no one else had ever come across.

As for the fisherman's talk of the old gods, he didn't know whether to put that down to Greek love of exaggeration or Greek superstition.

Kinkaid arrived at Lollia just before sunset, when the sky of the Aegean darkens swiftly through the shades of violet into a deepening transparent blue. A light breeze ruffled the waters and the air was lucid. It was a day fit for the gods.

Kinkaid circled the little island looking for the best place to land. He found a spit of land just off the northern point. He pulled his boat ashore through light surf and tied it to a tree. Then he climbed up the rugged cliff, through luxuriant underbrush scented with rosemary and thyme.

At the summit there was a small plateau. On it he found the remains of an old shrine. The altar stones were weathered and tumbled around, but he could make out the fine carving.

There was a cave nearby, slanting down into the hillside. Kinkaid walked toward it, then stopped. A human figure had appeared in the cave mouth. A girl. She was young, very pretty, red haired, dressed in a simple linen dress. She had been watching him.

"Where did you come from?" Kinkaid asked.

"The spaceship dropped me off," she told him. Although her English was flawless, she had a faint foreign accent which he could not place, but which he found charming. And he liked her sense of humor.

He couldn't imagine how she had gotten there. Not in a spaceship, of course; that was a joke. But how *had* she come? There had been no sign of another boat. She was unlikely to have swum the seventy miles from Chios. Could she have been dropped off by helicopter? Possible but unlikely. She looked as though she was ready for a lawn party. There wasn't a mark of dirt on her, and her makeup was fresh. Whereas Kinkaid was aware that he looked sweaty and rumpled, like a man who has just finished a difficult technical rock climb.

"I don't want to seem inquisitive," Kinkaid said, "but would you mind telling me how you got here, really?"

"I told you. The spaceship dropped me off."

"Spaceship?"

"Yes. I am not a human. I am an Andar. The ship will return for me tonight."

"Well, that's really something," Kinkaid said, humoring her. "Did you come a long way?"

"Oh, I suppose it must be hundreds of millions of miles to our planet of Andar. We have ways of getting around the speed of light, of course."

"Sure, that figures," Kinkaid said. Either the girl was carrying a joke a long way or she was a loony. The latter, most likely. Her story was so ridiculous he wanted to laugh. But she was so heart-breakingly beautiful he knew he'd break down and cry if he didn't get her.

He decided to play along. "What's your name? Why did you come here?" he asked.

"You can call me Alia. This is one of the planets the Andar decided to look into, after the Disappearance forced us to leave our home planet and go out into space. But I'm not supposed to talk about the Disappearance."

She was crazy all right, but Kinkaid was so charmed by her that he didn't care.

"You wouldn't happen to be one of the old gods, would you?" he asked.

"Oh, no, I'm not one of the Olympians," she told him. "But there were stories about them in the old days, when my people visited this planet."

Kinkaid didn't care what she said or where she was from. He wanted her. He'd never made it with an extraterrestrial. It would be an important first for him. Aliens as pretty as this didn't come along every day. And who knows, maybe she *was* from another planet. It was okay with him.

Whatever she was and however she got here, she was a beautiful woman. Suddenly he wanted her desperately.

And she seemed to feel something for him, too. He considered the shy yet provocative way she kept on glancing at him, then looking away. There was a glow of color in her cheeks. Perhaps unconsciously, she moved closer to him as they talked.

He decided it was time for action. Masterful Kinkaid took her in his arms.

At first she responded to his embrace, then pushed him away.

"You are very attractive," she said. "I'm surprised at the strength of my feelings toward you. But love between us is impossible. I am not of your race or planet. I am of the Andar."

The alien thing again. "Do you mean that you are not a woman in the sense we would mean on Earth?" Kinkaid asked.

"No, it isn't that. It's a matter of psychology. We women of the Andar do not love lightly. For us, the act of mating means marriage and a lifetime commitment. We do not divorce. And we *do* intend to have children."

Kinkaid smiled at that. He had heard it before, from the Catholic girls he used to date back in Short Hills, New Jersey. He knew how to handle the situation.

"I really do love you," he said. For the moment, at least, it was true.

"I have — certain feelings toward you, too," she admitted. "But you can't imagine what is involved when you love an Andar woman."

"Tell me about it," Kinkaid said, slipping an arm around her waist and drawing her to him.

"I cannot," she said. "It is our sacred mystery. We are not allowed to reveal it to men. Perhaps you should leave me now, while there's still time."

Kinkaid knew it was good advice: there was something spooky about her and the way she had appeared on the island. He really ought to leave. But he couldn't. As far as women were concerned he was a danger junkie, and this lady represented an all-time high in female challenges. He was no painter or writer. His amateur archaeology would never gain him any recognition. The one thing he could leave behind was his record of sexual conquests. Let them carve it on his tombstone: Kinkaid had the best, and he took it where he found it.

He kissed her, a kiss that went on and on, a kiss that continued as they dissolved to the ground in a montage of floating clothing and the bright flash of flesh. The ecstasy he experienced as they came together went right off the scale of his ability to express it. So intense was the feeling that he barely noticed the six sharp punctures, three on either side, neatly spaced between his ribs.

It was only later, lying back, spent and contented, that he looked at the six small, clean puncture wounds in his skin. He sat up and looked at Alia. She was naked, impossibly lovely, her dark red hair a shimmering cloud around her heart-shaped face. She did have one unusual feature which he had not noticed in the passion of love-making. There were six small erectile structures, three on each side

of her rib cage, each armed with a slender hollow fang. He thought of certain female insects on the Earth who bite off the heads of their mates during the act of love. He still didn't really believe she was an extraterrestrial. But he didn't disbelieve it quite as strongly as before. He thought of different species of insect on the Earth which resemble other species — grasshoppers that look like dry twigs, beetles that imitate wasps. Is that it? Was she about to take off her body?

He said, "It was terrific, baby, even if it is going to cost me my life."

She stared at him. "What are you saying?" she cried. "Do you actually think I would kill you? Impossible! I am an Andar female, you are my mate for life, and life for us lasts a very long time."

"Then what did you do to me?" Kinkaid asked.

"I've simply injected the children into you," Alia said. "They're going to be so lovely, darling. I hope they have your coloring."

Kinkaid couldn't quite grasp it at first. "Are you sure you haven't poisoned me?" he asked. "I feel very strange."

"That's just the hibernation serum. I injected it along with the babies. You'll sleep now, my sweet, here in this nice dry cave, and our children will grow safely between your ribs. In a year I'll come back and take them out of you and put them into their cocoons and take them home to Andar. That's the next stage of their development."

"And what about me?" Kinkaid asked, fighting the desire to sleep that had come powerfully over him.

"You'll be fine," Alia said. "Hibernation is perfectly safe, and I'll be back in plenty of time for the birth. Then you'll need to rest for a while. Perhaps a week. I'll be here to take care of you. And then we can make love again."

"And then?"

"Then it'll be hibernation time again, my sweet, until the next year."

Kinkaid wanted to tell her that this wasn't how he'd planned to spend his life — an hour of love, a year of sleep, then giving birth and starting all over again. He wanted to tell her that, all things considered, he'd prefer that she bite his head off. But he couldn't talk, could barely stay awake. And Alia was getting ready to leave.

"You're really cute," he managed to tell her. "But I wish you'd stayed on Andar and married your hometown sweetheart."

"I would have, darling," she said, "but something went wrong back home. The men must have been spying on our sacred mysteries. Suddenly we couldn't find them anymore. That's what we call the Great Disappearance. They went away, all of them, completely off the planet."

"It figures they'd catch on sooner or later," Kinkaid said.

"It was very wrong of them," Alia said. "I know that childbearing makes great demands on men, but it can't be helped, the race must go on. And we Andar women can be relied upon to keep it going, no matter what lengths we must go to. I *did* give you a sporting chance to get away. Goodbye, my darling, until next year."

DIVINE INTERVENTION

There is a planet called Atalla. On this planet there is a stupendous mountain. It is called Sanito. Civilizations flourish in the temperate regions at the mountain's base. The mountain, its upper half sheathed in eternal ice, is the dominant feature of all the lands thereabouts. Avalanches continually rain down its sides. Where it is not steep, it is sheer; where it is not sheer, it is precipitous.

No man has ever climbed this mountain. It is deemed unclimbable. Even its foothills are a formidable challenge. Nevertheless, legend has it that once long ago a holy man, elevated to a state of godhood through his many years of one-pointed concentration, rose, through his own self-created power, to the ultimate heights of the unscalable mountain.

The god, who had been known locally as Shelmo before his ascension, carved a cave for himself out of the solid rock of Sanito's summit. He made himself a pallet of ice, and a meditation cushion of lichen. These were more than sufficient for a deity who could generate his own internal heat.

Shelmo had decided to spend some æons here on the top of Sanito practicing his one-pointed concentration. Although it had been good enough to win him godhood, he wasn't really satisfied with it. He thought he could still refine it some.

Centuries passed. Civilizations rose and fell, and Shelmo paid no attention to them: it takes a lot of time to get one-pointed. Shelmo knew that it was perhaps a little selfish of him, devoting all his time to this, since gods were, after all, supposed to look after the humans in their vicinity. But Shelmo figured that the gods made their own

rules. Besides, there was plenty of time to become an ethical deity after he had solved the one-pointed concentration problem.

For a god who wants to get away from it all, Mount Sanito was an ideal place. Windstorms and avalanches filled the air continually, producing a monotonous roaring background. The whipping clouds of white and gray were excellent meditation objects. So high up was Shelmo's cave that even the prayers of the people rarely reached him. Battered by hailstorms, choked by snowfalls, the prayers became mere dolorous sounds, plaintive and without moral significance.

However, even a god can't be spared all hassles all of the time. It may take a while, but the world finally gets through.

One day, Shelmo was surprised to find that a human being had made his way up the unscalable mountain and into his cave. (Shelmo wasn't really surprised, of course; gods are never surprised. But he hadn't expected it.)

The human fell on his knees and began to recite a lengthy prayer.

"Yes, thank you very much," Shelmo said, interrupting him. "But how did you get up here? The mountain is supposed to be impassable except to gods. You wouldn't be a god disguised as a human, by any chance?"

"No," the human said. "I am a human being. My name is Dan. I was able to ascend to this height partially due to my own virtue and piety, and partially by the combined prayer-power of the people below, who worship you."

"I see," Shelmo said. "Won't you have a seat? There's a block of ice over there. I suppose you *can* regulate your own body heat?"

"Of course, Lord," Dan said. "It's one of the easier steps on the path to spirituality."

"Yes, quite so," Shelmo said. "Now, what brings you here?"

Dan sat down upon the block of ice and arranged his robes. "Oh Lord, your people pray to you for divine assistance. Without your help we will be overwhelmed and perish from the face of the Earth."

"Well, what's gone wrong?" Shelmo asked. "It had better be important. I don't like being disturbed for trifles."

"It's the steel crabs," Dan said. "The self-programming mechanical vampire bats are also a great problem. And of course, there are the copper scorpions with explosive tails, but mainly it's the crabs. They're machines, but they've learned how to reproduce themselves.

For each crab factory we destroy, ten more spring up. The crabs infest our homes, our streets, even our places of worship. They're killers, and we're losing the battle against them."

"There was nothing like that when I was on Earth," Shelmo said. "Where did they come from?"

"Well," Dan said, "as perhaps you know, the various countries are at peace now. But in the recent past several were in a state of belligerency. The steel crabs were one of the weapons invented."

"And they launched them at some other country?"

"Oh, no, Lord, nothing like that," Dan said. "It was an accident. The steel crabs escaped. They spread, first over the country where they were invented, then over the whole world. The crabs multiplied faster than we could wipe them out. It was all a silly accident, but now we perish, Lord, unless you step in and do something."

Despite his self-imposed isolation, Shelmo did feel he owed these people — *his* people, as they said — something.

"If I handle this," he said to Dan, "can you humans take care of yourselves after that and leave me alone?"

"I'm sure of it," Dan said. "We humans believe in ruling ourselves. We want to create our own destiny. We believe in the separation of church and state. It's just that this crab thing has gotten out of hand."

Shelmo looked into the crab thing there and then, using his omniscience. Yes, it *was* a mess down there.

He could have simply made all the crabs disappear by a miracle — gods can do that — but the Council on Ethics for Deities didn't approve of direct intervention. That sort of thing tended to make people superstitious. So Shelmo created a bacterium — nobody knows where *they* come from, anyhow — which attacked the microcircuits, not only of the steel crabs, but also of the copper scorpions and mechanical vampire bats. By clever genetic manipulation, Shelmo was able to cause the bacteria to destroy only what it was supposed to destroy and then destroy itself.

When the job was done, Shelmo cut short Dan's hosannas and praisesgivings. "I don't mind doing it once," he said. "After all, I was a human once myself. But now I'd really like a little peace and quiet so I can get on with my one-pointed concentration."

Dan made his way down the mountain back to the lands of men, and Shelmo settled down to some good, solid meditating.

Years came and went. But to Shelmo it seemed like no time at all before Dan was in his cave once again.

"Back so soon?" Shelmo asked. "What's the matter? Didn't I get all the crabs?"

"Oh, yes, Lord," Dan said.

"Then what's the matter?"

"Well, we did manage to live in peace for quite some time. But then there were troubles again."

"Troubles? You fought each other?"

"No, we managed to avoid that. But we had a serious accident. There were many huge concrete lakes, where obsolete radioactive and chemical weapons were stored. Informed opinion said that they would be all right. But then something within those lakes began to change, to mutate, to become alive and malevolent."

"So you created living things," Shelmo said. "Accidentally, but still, you did. It takes a god to handle that sort of thing properly. I suppose it went badly?"

Dan nodded. "The living, semi-liquid substance in the lakes oozed out, feeding on everything it encountered, spreading over the countryside. It sent out spores and infected people in all countries. It is slowly covering the world, and we have no way of stopping it. Unless you help us, O Lord, we are doomed."

Shelmo said, "You humans keep on making silly mistakes. Don't you learn from what's already happened?"

"I think we've learned our lesson this time," Dan said. "At last there is a world-wide consciousness about these matters. If we are not destroyed by our past mistakes, if you can help us, I think we can go ahead now and build a better world."

Shelmo inspected the situation through his omniscience. The chemical creature really was an ugly sight — orange and black blotches against the blue and green of the Earth.

There were many ways for a god to handle this situation. Shelmo caused the chemical creature to be sensitive to a lack of nobelium, an unstable radioactive isotope of the actinide series. Then, by a miracle, Shelmo extracted all the nobelium from the Earth. (He was not without a sense of humor. And he planned to replace it later.)

The chemical creature died. Dan said, "Thank you, Lord." It was difficult to find an adequate means of thanking a being who had just saved his race from destruction for the second time.

Dan returned to his people. Shelmo settled down again to his meditation.

It felt as though he had barely begun, when, lo and behold, Dan was standing in front of him again.

"Weren't you just here?" said Shelmo.

"That was fifty years ago," Dan said.

"But that's hardly any time at all!"

"Yes, Lord," Dan said. "And I do beg forgiveness for this intrusion. I come, not for myself, but for the people — your people, Lord, they are helpless and suffering."

"What happened this time? Did another of your inventions get out of hand?"

Dan shook his head. "This time it's the Paratids. I know you don't bother to keep up on local politics, so permit me to fill you in. The Paratids are one of the major political parties in my country. They stand for liberty, equality, and a fair deal for everyone irrespective of race, gender, or religion. Or so we thought. When they came to power, however, we found that they had deceived us and were, in fact, unprincipled, authoritarian, fanatical, cynical — "

"I get the idea," Shelmo said. "But why did you let such people come to power?"

"They deceived us with their propaganda. Perhaps they believed their own lies. I don't know whether they are guilty of cynicism or fanaticism, or a mixture of the two. But I do know that they have canceled all future elections and declared themselves to be the perpetual guardians of the coming utopia. Although they make up less than a third of the population, they have instituted a reign of terror."

"Why don't you fight back?" Shelmo asked.

"Because they have all the weapons. Their soldiers march up and down our streets. Terrible stories are told about their secret torture chambers. They've taken thousands of prisoners. All culture is banned except approved treatments on patriotic themes. We are helpless in their hands. Only you, O Lord, can save us."

Shelmo mused for a while. "I suppose there is a precedent for a god meddling in political affairs?"

"Oh, yes, Lord, there are many accounts of it in the ancient annals of our major religions."

"Do these annals tell us anything about a God's procedure in these cases?"

"He struck down the unrighteous."

"And how was it determined which were the righteous?"

Dan thought for a while. "Sometimes a prophet of the people would take the complaint direct to God, as I am doing."

"That doesn't strike me as equitable," Shelmo said. "Not without hearing arguments for the other side."

"You could discover the truth of the matter through your omniscience."

"No," Shelmo said. "Omniscience is only good for facts, not for matters of opinion."

"Then you could do whatever you think is best," Dan said.

"All right," Shelmo said. "But remember, you asked me."

"What better thing could I ask for than the judgment of the Lord?"

"Just so you remember," Shelmo said. His body stiffened. His eyes narrowed with inner concentration. Unseen energies hummed in the air, causing Dan's hair to stand on end. Suddenly, the cave was bathed in a lurid red light which slowly faded as though controlled by the devil's rheostat. And then the cave returned to normal.

"Finished," Shelmo said.

Dan heard a cry arise from the Earth, a cry of sorrow and rage, a cry of anger and grief so strong that it could reach Shelmo's cave when prayers hadn't been able to.

"What did you do?" Dan asked.

"A straightforward solution. I vanished the Paratids."

"Vanished them? What does that mean?"

"You might call it killing," Shelmo said. "I call it vanishing. It comes to much the same thing in that they are no longer around to cause you difficulties. Your problems are solved."

It took Dan a moment to take it in. With growing horror he realized that Shelmo had disposed of almost a third of the planet's population.

"You shouldn't have killed them," he said. "Most of them were not bad men. They were just mindless followers."

"They followed the wrong leader this time," Shelmo said.

"Some members of my own family were Paratids."

"My condolences. But now, at least, your enemies are gone. There should be no obstacles now to your building an equitable society. But if there is, feel free to call on me again. Be sure to tell that to the people."

"I will proclaim it to the nations," Dan said.

"That's the idea. Tell them that I'm available to them now. My judgments are swift. I will be glad to help those who can't help themselves. In my own way, of course."

Dan bowed deeply and departed. Shelmo made himself a glass of tea, the first he had permitted himself in centuries. He hummed a few bars of a song he had known when he was a human. Then he used his omniscience to peek into the future of the Earth. He scanned 150 years ahead. He noted that the humans still hadn't reached utopia. But they were doing all right. Or at least no worse than was to be expected.

One thing was certain; nobody was praying to him for intervention.

He turned off his omniscience and settled down on his ice cushion for a really long spell of one-pointed meditation. He was determined to get it right this time.

THE DESTRUCTION OF ATLANTIS

Countless centuries ago, before the beginning of Egypt, before the continents had taken on their present shapes, before the oceans and mountains had settled into their present positions, there was a land and a civilization which has left no record. It has all been lost beneath the shift and upheaval of mountain ranges, beneath new ocean beds which once were fertile plains and may be again. The only knowledge we have of this land is a nearly universal memory of something which came before anything we have documented. It has been called Atlantis, but that is only a name for a civilization that we know once existed yet vanished without a trace.

In Atlantis one fine day succeeded another with a regularity that would be called monotonous only by the ungrateful. Indeed, the climate of Atlantis and of all the lands that adjoined it was much of present-day Miami. It was hot, steamy, enervating. All year around, Atlantis lived in a tropical dream, and this continued without change for many centuries.

A great king ruled Atlantis. His domain was cut through by many rivers, some small, others great. Interconnecting them were canals and waterways, their levels maintained by locks to which water was hoisted by means of great paddlewheels driven by slaves. The kingdom was vast, and all of it was connected by a network of waterways, lakes, canals, and channels.

Only the King's navy and his merchant marine were allowed on the royal waters. Villagers were permitted, on payment of a fee, to fish from the banks. Swimming was allowed, or rather, paddling, since swimming itself was a monopoly of the royal commandos.

Beyond the outermost river stretched a vast desert, reaching to the limits of terra incognita. Strange, nameless tribes came out of

the desert from time to time, sometimes in great armed hordes. But always they were turned back by the water barriers, for he who ruled the waterways and rivers ruled Atlantis. This was an axiom as old as time itself, a law of nature against which there was no recourse.

So the King was not too alarmed when he heard that new horde of barbarians was moving down from the north. They came from beyond the back of the world, from misty and fabled Hyperborea.

The King sent out his scouts and spies. He was relieved to hear that, as usual, the barbarians had no ships or rafts, and no materials with which to cross the rivers that shielded Atlantis.

Wide waters had always protected Atlantis from barbarian incursions. Even if the barbarians built boats of reed, or employed inflatable leather bladders — typical barbarian expedients — they were not to be feared. The King's navy was vigilant, and included swift canoes, deadly triremes, ponderous beaked galleys — all armed and armored, and filled with the King's superb marines.

So the King awaited this latest invasion with equanimity. But just to be on the safe side, he consulted the royal scientists.

The Chief Scientist reported, "Sire, we have examined all the factors. On the basis of centuries of observation of barbarians, their fighting techniques, their resources, matched scientifically against our own resources, I can tell you that, barring the completely unforeseen, we have absolutely nothing to worry about."

The King nodded. But something in the soothing formula disturbed him. He said, "This completely unforeseen that you are barring — what is that?"

"That, Sire, is the element of the unpredictable."

"But since you know all the factors," the King said, "why must you make an exception for the unpredictable, when your job is to predict everything of relevance to this situation?"

"That is the heart of scientific method, my Lord, in itself a recent discovery of ours of which we are very proud. To say that we know *everything* would be the superstitious stuff of the priests. By admitting the possibility of something *unforeseen*, we remain rigorous in our methodology."

"What are the chances of this unforeseen occurring?" the King asked.

"So close to zero," said the Chief Scientist, "that we are still awaiting the invention of a number small enough to express it."

With this the King had to be content. It was not certainty, but as near to it as a man or even a monarch could get, life being what it was.

The King drew up his forces on the inner bank of the great river encircling Atlantis. Deep and broad, slow moving, brown and steely-gray, the river had sheltered the kingdom from time out of mind. On the far bank they could see their foe — shaggy barbarians clad in furs, which must have been extremely uncomfortable in the sweltering climate. Scouts reported that the barbarians were chanting and praying to their uncouth and outlandish deities, and making no attempt to build water craft.

The barbarian position seemed hopeless. Already food was reported to be running low in their camp. There were many of them, and they were heavily armed, but they could not cross. The King, his army well rested and provisioned, its morale high, awaited the inevitable outcome.

But that very day a change took place, although it seemed a minor one. The skies, hitherto a uniform blue, began to cloud over, although it still lacked some months of the rainy season. The King again consulted his scientists.

"Unseasonable rains," his Chief Scientist told him, "are unusual, but not unprecedented."

"It also grows colder," the King said.

"We have noted that, and we recommend the issuing of cotton jackets to the troops."

Later in the day, particles of white began to fall from the sky. The King was much alarmed by this.

"It is unusual," the Chief Scientist said. "But not unprecedented. The last time this white substance fell, according to our records, was some seven hundred years ago. The stuff dissolves too fast for us to give it much more than a cursory examination. It seems to be fragments of clouds, torn apart by the high winds of the upper air."

The army didn't like it, of course. Armies don't like unusual sights and unexpected omens. But they stuck it out, and took heart at the sight of the barbarians across the river, huddling around inadequate campfires in their drenched furs.

But it became colder still, and, as night came on, colder than men's memories of how cold it could be. Double-woven cotton cloaks and mantles were issued to the troops. And still the cold increased. And once again the king consulted his scientists.

"It is true that we have never seen cold like this," the Chief Scientist said. "But it makes no difference. It will bother the barbarians more than it will us. Have the men apply extra wax to their bowstrings, because one of the recorded properties of cold is to make flaxen bowstrings brittle."

This was done, and the guard units along the riverbank were increased, and everyone passed a miserable night.

In the morning, the King was awakened by cries of alarm. Hurrying to the riverbank, the King beheld that the water had been transformed as though by an act of magic. No longer did the brown-gray waters move and lap. They had been changed overnight into a different substance. This substance was white in some spots, transparent in others. But strangest of all, it gave the appearance of being perfectly solid.

"My Gods!" cried the King. "Some demon has bewitched the river!"

"Not at all, Lord," the Chief Scientist replied. "My assistants have been keeping close watch on the river all night, as befits followers of the scientific method. I can say with certainty that, in response to the unprecedented cold, the water has congealed — though that may not be quite the right term. In any event, the water has changed into a solid substance. We have long known the theoretical possibility of this — it is what we call transformation — but this is the first time we've had experimental corroboration."

"Then it's not witchcraft?" the King asked.

"Certainly not. We have just discovered a new natural law. Water, it seems, responds to extremes of cold by turning into a solid."

The forces of the barbarians were moving onto the glittering white surface, cautiously at first, then with increasing confidence when they discovered it bore their weight. The King's ships, frozen fast, stood in the river like isolated forts, easily bypassed. The barbarians flowed around them, a mighty horde of armed men. And the King, watching them cross the river in their myriads, and seeing his soldiers run, knew that all was lost.

Turning to his chief scientist, the King said, "You have deceived me! You said you could predict everything! And now look at what has happened!"

"My Lord," the Chief Scientist said, "I regret this as much as you do. But you must not blame science for what has so unexpectedly

taken place. There is a word in science, my Lord, to describe what has taken place here."

"And what is that?"

"This sort of thing is generally referred to as an *anomaly*. An anomaly is something perfectly natural which could not have been predicted on the basis of what has gone before."

"You never told me about anomalies," the King said.

"Why should I burden you with the unknowable, O King, when so much of the knowable is available to us?"

By now the barbarians were drawing near. The King and his scientists turned to their horses in order to take flight.

"It is the end of the world," the King said sadly, mounting.

"Not at all, sire," the Chief Scientist said, also mounting. "It is a sad thing to lose a kingdom. But it may be of some comfort to you to know that you have reigned during the beginning of something new and unprecedented in the history of Atlantis."

"And what is that?" asked the King.

"That white substance," the scientist said, "we are now tentatively naming 'ice.' And unless I miss my guess, we have witnessed the beginning of Earth's very first Ice Age."

"Small comfort," said the King, and galloped off in search of a new kingdom and better weather.

THE EYE OF REALITY

Legend tells of a nameless planet located on the edge of our island universe. On that planet there is a single tree. Wedged in its topmost branch is a large diamond, put there by a long-vanished race. Looking into the stone, a man may see all that is or was or may be. The tree is called the Tree of Life, and the diamond is called the Eye of Reality.

Three men set out to find this tree. After much danger and difficulty, they came to the place where it grew. Each in turn climbed to the top of the tree and looked through the gem. Then they compared their impressions.

The first man, an author of considerable reputation, said, "I saw innumerable actions, some grand and some petty. I knew then that I had found the keyhole of the universe, which Borges calls the Aleph."

The second man, a renowned scientist, said, "I saw the curvature of space, the death of a photon, and the birth of a star. I realized that I was looking into a superhologram, self-created and self-creating, whose entirety is our universe."

"Understanding is sensuous," said the third man, an artist. He showed them the sketches he had just made, of women, and leopards, violins and deserts, mountains and spheres.

"Like you," he said, "I saw pretty much what I always see."

THERE WILL BE NO WAR AFTER THIS ONE

Earth is now well known for her peaceful ways. She is a model of good behavior, though she is an extremely impoverished civilization. She has eschewed war forever.

But some people do not realize that it was not always so. There was a time, and not too long ago, when Earth was dominated by some of the worst military badasses to be found anywhere. The armed forces, which held power in the last days before The Great Awakening, were almost unbelievably inept in their policies.

It was at this time that Earth, achieving single rule at last under General Gatt and his marshals, entered interstellar civilization, and, a few short years later, went through the famous incident with the Galactic Effectuator that led them to put war behind them forever. Here is the true story of that encounter.

At dawn on September 18, 2331, General Vargas' Second Route Army came out of the mists around Redlands, California, and pinned down Wiedermayer's loyalist troops on the San Francisco Peninsula. Wiedermayer, last of the old democratic regime generals, the appointee of the discredited Congress of the United States, had been hoping to get his troops to safety by ship, perhaps to Hawaii. He did not know at that time that the Islands had fallen to military rule. Not that it mattered; the expected transports never arrived. Realizing that further resistance was futile, Wiedermayer surrendered. With him fell the last military force on the planet which had supported civilian rule. For the first time in its history, Earth was utterly and entirely in the hands of the war lords.

Vargas accepted Wiedermayer's surrender and sent a messenger to the Supreme Commander, General Gatt, at his North Texas

headquarters. Outside his tent, the men of Vargas' army were camped in pup tents across two grassy fields. The quartermasters were already getting ready the feasts with which Vargas marked his victories.

Vargas was a man somewhat shorter than medium height, thick-set, with black curly hair on a big round skull. He had a well-trimmed black mustache, and heavy black eyebrows that met in a bar above his nose. He sat on a campstool. A stubby black cigar smoldered on a corner of the field table beside him. Following long-established practice, Vargas was calming himself by polishing his boots. They were genuine ostrich, priceless now that the last of those great birds had died.

Sitting on the cot across the tent from him was his common-law wife, Lupe. She was red-headed, loud-mouthed, with strong features, a strident voice, and an indomitable spirit. They had been fighting these wars together for most of their adult lives. Vargas had risen from the lowly rank of Camp Follower's Assistant to General in command of Supreme General Gatt's Western Forces. He and Lupe had campaigned in many parts of the world. The Second Route Army was highly mobile, able to pack up its weapons one day in Italy and appear the next day in California or Cambodia or wherever needed.

Now at last Vargas and his lady had a chance to relax. The troops were spread out on the big plain near Los Gatos. Their campfires sent thin wavering streamers of gray smoke into the blue sky. Many of Wiedermayer's surrendered troops had joined the victors. The campaign was over. Maybe all the battles were won; for as far as Vargas could remember, they seemed to have run out of opponents.

It was a good moment. Vargas and Lupe toasted each other with California champagne, and then pushed their gear off the folding double bed in preparation for more earnest celebrating. It was just then that the messenger arrived, tired and dusty from many hours in the helicopter, with a telegram from General Gatt.

Gatt's telegram read, *The last opposition to our New Order has collapsed in North America. Final resistance in Russia and Asia has ended. At last, the world is under single unified command! Loyal General and Dear Friend, you must come to me at once. All the generals are coming here to help me celebrate our total victory over all those who opposed us. We will be voting on our next procedures and course of action. I very much want for you to be here for that.*

Also I tell you in strictest confidence, there has been a surprising new development. I cannot even talk about it over the telegram. I want to discuss it with you. This is of greatest importance! Come immediately! I need you!

When the messenger left, Vargas turned to Lupe. "What could be so important that he can't even entrust it to a telegram? Why can't he give me a hint?"

"I don't know," Lupe said. "But it worries me that he wants you to come to him."

"Woman, what are you talking about? It is a compliment!"

"Maybe it is, but maybe he simply wants you in where he can keep an eye on you. You command one of the last of the independent armies. If he has control of you, he has everything."

"You forget," Vargas said, "he has everything anyway. He has personal command of five times as many men as I do. Besides, John Gatt is my friend. We went to school together in East Los Angeles."

"Oh, I know all that," Lupe said. "But sometimes friendship doesn't last long when it's a question of who's going to have the supreme power."

Vargas said, "I have no ambitions for any more power than I got."

"But does Gatt know that?"

"He knows it," Vargas said, and he sounded sure, but not absolutely sure.

"But maybe he doesn't believe it," Lupe said. "After all, power changes a man. You've seen how it's changed some of the other generals."

"Yes, I know. The Russian and Vietnamese independents. But they can't hold out against Gatt. This time the world is going to be under a single command. John Gatt is going to be the first supreme ruler of Earth."

"Is he worthy of that?" Lupe asked.

"It doesn't matter," Vargas said, annoyed. "It's an idea whose time has come. Life has been too crazy with everybody fighting everybody else. One supreme military commander for all Earth is going to work a lot better for everyone."

"Well," Lupe said, "I hope so. So are we going?"

Vargas thought about it. Despite the brave front he had shown to Lupe, he was not without his doubts. Who could tell what Gatt might do? It would not be the first time a victorious general made

sure of his position by executing his field generals under pretext of throwing a party. Still, what was the alternative? The men of the Second Route Army were personally loyal to Vargas, but in a showdown battle, Gatt and his five-fold superiority in men and material would have to prevail.

And Vargas had no desire for the supreme command. He was a good field general. But he was not cut out for supreme command and had no desire for it. Gatt ought to know that about him. He had said it often enough.

"I will go see Gatt."

"And me?" Lupe asked.

"You'll be safe here with my troops."

"Don't be ridiculous," Lupe said. "Where you go, I go. That's what a Camp Follower does."

Vargas had been fighting in Italy before Gatt ordered him to airlift his army to California for the showdown with Wiedermayer, so he hadn't much idea of the level of destruction of America. His flight by Air Force jet from San Francisco to Ground Zero, Texas, showed him plenty of burned-out cities and displaced populations.

But Ground Zero itself looked all right. It was a new city which Gatt had created. In the center of it was a big sports palace, larger than the Coliseum or the Astrodome or any of those old-world sports palaces. Here warrior-athletes and cheerleaders from all over the world could assemble for the sports rituals of the military.

Vargas had never seen so many generals (and generals' ladies) in his life. All of General Gatt's field commanders were there, men who had been fighting the good fight for military privilege all over the world. Everybody was in a good mood, as may be imagined.

Vargas and Lupe checked into the big convention hotel which had been especially built for this occasion. They went immediately up to their hotel room.

"Eh," Lupe said, looking around at the classy furnishings of their suite, "this is ver' nice, ver' nice."

Actually she could speak perfectly good English, but in order to be accepted among the other Camp Followers who hadn't been raised with her advantages, she had decided that she had to speak with a heavy accent of some sort.

Lupe and Vargas had had to carry up their own luggage to the room since the hotel was so new that the bellboys didn't have security clearances yet.

General Vargas was still dressed for combat. He wore the sweat-stained black khaki uniform of the 30th Chaco campaign, his most famous victory, and with it the lion insignia of a Perpetual Commander in the Eternal Corps.

He set down the suitcases and dropped into a chair with a *moue* of annoyance: he was a fighting general, not a luggage-carrying general. Lupe was standing nearby gaping at the furniture. She was dressed in her best pink satin whore's gown. She had a naughty square crimson mouth, a sexy cat's face, snaky black hair, and legs that never stop coming above a torso that would not let go. Yet despite her beauty she was a woman as tough in her own way as the general, albeit with skinnier legs.

Vargas was heavyset, unshaven, with a heavy slouchy face and a small scrubby beard that was coming in piebald. He had given up shaving because he didn't think it looked sufficiently tough.

Lupe said to him, "Hey, Xaxi (her own pet name for him), what we do now?"

Vargas snarled at her, "Why you talk in Russian accent? Shut up, you don't know nothing. Later we go to meeting room and vote."

"Vote?" Lupe said. "Who's going to vote?"

"All the generals, dummy."

"I don't get it," Lupe said. "We're fascists; we don't need no stinkin' votes."

"It's lucky for you that I love you," Vargas said, "because sometimes you're so stupid I could kill you. Listen to me, my baby vulture, even fascists have to vote sometime, in order to arrive fairly at the decision to keep the vote away from everyone else."

"Ah," Lupe said. "But I thought that part was understood."

"Of course it's understood," Vargas said. "But we can only count on it for sure after there's been a vote among ourselves agreeing that that's how things are going to be. Otherwise we might lose everything we've worked for. The vote is necessary to secure our beloved revisionist counterrevolution."

"I guess that's true," Lupe said, scratching her haunch, then, remembering her manners, quickly scratching Vargas' haunch. She went to the refrigerator and got herself a drink of tequila, champagne, and beer, her favorite mixture.

"Is that all this vote's about?" she asked Vargas.

Vargas was sitting in the living room with his spurred heels up on the coffee table. The coffee table scratched nicely. Vargas knew

that they probably put in new coffee tables for each new group of generals who came through. But he enjoyed scratching it anyway. He was a simple man.

"We got also other things we got to vote about," he told her.

"Do I have to vote too?" Lupe said.

"Naah," Vargas said. "You're a woman. Recently we voted to disenfranchise you."

"Good," Lupe said, "voting is a bore."

Just then there was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" Vargas called out.

The door opened and a tall goofy-looking guy, with droopy lips and narrow little eyes, wearing a gray business suit came in. "You Vargas?" he said.

"Yeah," Vargas said. "And try knocking before you come in next time or I break your back."

"This is business," the guy said. "I've brought you a bribe."

"Oh, why didn't you say so?" Vargas asked. "Sit down, have a drink."

The goofy-looking guy took a thick envelope out of an inside jacket pocket and handed it to Vargas. Vargas looked into the envelope. It was stuffed with a thousand eagle double simoleon bills.

"Hell," Vargas said, "you can barge in any old time. What is this for, or shouldn't I ask?"

"I told you; it's a bribe," the guy said.

"I know it's a bribe," Vargas said. "But you haven't told me what, specifically, I'm being bribed for."

"I thought you knew. Later, when the voting starts, we want you to vote yes on Proposition One."

"You got it. But what *is* Proposition One?"

"That civilians should henceforth be barred from the vote until such time as the military high command decides they are reliable."

"Sounds good to me," Vargas said.

After the guy left, Vargas turned to Lupe, grinning. He was very happy about the bribe, even though he would have voted yes on Proposition One anyhow. But bribes were traditional in elections — he knew that from the history books, to say nothing of the oral tradition. Vargas would have felt unliked and neglected if General Gatt had not thought him worth the bother to bribe.

He wanted to explain this to Lupe but she was a little dense, tending not to understand the niceties. But what the hell, she looked great in her pink satin whore's nightgown.

"Come in, old boy, come in!" That was Gatt's voice, booming out into the anteroom. Vargas had just arrived and given his name to the prune-faced clerk in the ill-fitting Battle Rangers uniform, clerical division.

It was gratifying to Vargas that Gatt asked for him so soon after his arrival. He would not have liked to cool his heels out in the waiting room, even though he would have been in good company. General Lin was there, having just secured China and Japan for Gatt's All-Earth Defensive League. General Leopold was there, plump and ridiculous in his complicated uniform copied from some South American general's fantasy. He had completed the conquest of South America as far south as Patagonia. Below that, who cares? Generalissimo Ritan Dagalaigon was present, the grim-faced Extremaduran whose Armada de Gran Destructividad had secured all of Europe west of the Urals. These were famous men whose names would live in history. Yet he, Vargas, was ushered into Gatt's private office before all the rest of them.

John Odoacer Gatt was tall with flashing eyes and a charismatic manner. He showed Vargas to a seat and poured him a drink and laid out two lines for him without even asking. Gatt was known as an imperious entertainer.

"We've won the war, buddy," Gatt said to Vargas. "The whole thing. All of it. Everything. It's the first time in the history of mankind that the entire human race has been under a single command. It is an unprecedented opportunity."

Vargas blinked. "For what?"

"Well," Gatt said, "for one thing, we are finally in a position to bring peace and prosperity to the human race."

"Wonderful ideals, sir."

"Actually," Gatt said, "I'm not so sure how we can turn a profit on this."

"Why do you say that, *mi general*?"

"It has been a long and costly war. Most countries' economies are wrecked. It will be a long time before things can be put straight.

Many people will go hungry, maybe even starve. It'll be difficult even for the military to turn a buck."

"But we knew all this," Vargas said. "We discussed this in detail during the war. Of course there will be a difficult period of recovery. How could it be otherwise? It may take a hundred years, or even longer. But we are humans, and under the stable rule of the military we will recover and bring universal prosperity to all."

"That, of course, is our dream," Gatt said. "But suppose we could speed it up? Suppose we could go directly to the next stage? Suppose we could move directly from this, our victory, to prosperity for everyone on Earth? Wouldn't that be splendid, Getulio?"

"Of course, of course," Vargas said. John Odoacer Gatt was getting him a little nervous. He didn't know what this was leading up to. "But how could this be possible?"

"Let's talk more about it after the vote tomorrow," Gatt said.

The delegates' voting room was a large and circular chamber equipped with comfortable chairs and a cluster of overhead lighting. In the center was a circular stage that revolved slowly so that those in the center would by turns be facing all the delegates. On the platform was the steering committee for the first provisional and temporary world military government.

The generals, Vargas included, voted in a brisk and unanimous manner to disenfranchise all civilians outside of those few approved ones already assembled at the delegate hall. The civilians were stripped of the vote, *habeas corpus*, the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, and all other liberal encumbrances until such time as they could be relied upon to vote in a prescribed manner. This was a very important measure because the military had found out long ago that civilians were inherently untrustworthy and even traitorous.

Next the generals faced the serious question of disarmament, or, as they called it, unemployment. Disarmament meant there would be hard times ahead because war on Earth was finished as a business since everybody was now under a unified command and there was no one to fight. None of the generals liked the idea of giving up war entirely, however, and General Gatt said there might be a way around that and promised there would be an announcement about that later.

The conference ended with a good cheer and boisterous camaraderie among the various military satraps. Vargas very much enjoyed

the reception afterwards, where Lupe made a big hit in her blue, yellow and red ball gown.

After the reception, General Gatt took Vargas aside and asked to meet him tomorrow morning at eight hundred hours sharp at the Ground Zero Motor Pool.

"I have a proposition to put to you," Gatt said. "I think you will find it of interest."

Vargas, accompanied by Lupe, was at the Ground Zero Motor Pool at the appointed hour. That morning he was wearing his sash of Commander in the Legion of Death, and also his campaign medals from the sacking of New York. He'd come a long way from when he was a mere bandit's apprentice.

Soon they were speeding out of the city into the flat desert countryside. It was a time of blooming, and there were many little wild flowers carpeting the desert floor with delicate colors.

"This is really nice," Vargas said.

"It used to belong to some Indian tribe," the driver said. "I can never remember which one. They're all gone now to Indianola."

"What's that?"

"Indianola is the new industrial suburb in Mississippi where we're relocating all the Indians in America."

"They used to be all scattered around the country, didn't they?" Vargas said.

"They sure did," the driver said. "But it was sloppy that way."

"Seems a pity, though," Vargas said. "Indians have been in the country a long time, haven't they?"

"They were always griping anyhow," the driver said. "Don't worry, they'll get used to our way of doing things."

The secret installation was in a tangle of hills some thirty miles west of Ground Zero. General Gatt came out of his temporary headquarters to greet Vargas. There was a pretty young woman with him. Gatt had thoughtfully brought along his mistress, a young lady named Lola Montez — not the original one, a relative, these names tend to run in the family — who immediately put her arm in Lupe's and took her away for cigarettes, dope, coffee, bourbon, and gossip. Generals' mistresses are good entertainers and it's traditional for the military to be hospitable.

Once the two generals were alone, they could settle down to business. First some small talk about how the armed forces security

groups were successfully doing away with anyone who felt that things should be handled in a different way. Most of these malcontents were quiet now. It was amazing what the Central Committee had been able to do in the way of cleaning things up.

"It's a beginning," General Gatt said. "These ideas of social perfectability have been around as long as there has been a military. But this is the first time we've had all the soldiers on our side."

General Vargas asked, "What are you going to do about local groups who want to do their own thing or worship their own gods — that sort of stuff?"

"If they really want freedom, they can join the military," Gatt said. "Our fighting men enjoy perfect freedom of religion."

"And if they don't want to join the military?"

"We tell them to shut up and go away," Gatt said. "And if they don't, we shoot them. It saves a lot of arguing, and helps us avoid all the cost of keeping prisons and guards."

General Gatt explained that one of the great advantages of universal peace was that world government could finally afford to put some money into worthwhile projects.

"Oh," Vargas said, "you mean like feeding the poor and stuff like that?"

"I don't mean that at all," Gatt said. "That's been tried and it hasn't worked."

"You're right," Vargas said. "They just keep on coming back for more. But what sort of worthwhile project do you mean?"

"Come with me and I'll show you," Gatt said.

They left General Gatt's office and went to the command car. The driver was a short, thickset, Mongolian-looking fellow with long bandit mustaches, wearing a heavy woollen vest in spite of the oppressive heat. The driver saluted smartly and opened the door for the generals. They got into the command car and drove for twenty minutes, stopping at a huge hangerlike building all by itself on the desert. Guards let them through a concertina of barbed wire to a small side door that led inside.

The building was really huge. From the inside it looked even larger. Gazing up toward the ceiling, Vargas noticed several birds fluttering overhead. But amusing as this spectacle was, what he saw next took his breath away, leaving him gasping in amazement.

He said to Gatt, "Is this real, John, or some optical illusion you're projecting?"

General Gatt smiled in his mysterious way that seemed easy but was not. "It's real enough, Getulio, old boy. Look again."

Vargas looked. What he saw, towering many stories above him, was a spaceship. Lupe had shown him enough drawings and diagrams in newspapers like *The Brazilian Enquirer* and others of that ilk for him to know what it was. It was unmistakably a spaceship, colored a whale gray and with tiny portholes and a dorsal fin.

"It's amazing, sir," Vargas said, "just amazing."

"Bet you never knew we had this," Gatt said.

"I had no idea," Vargas assured him.

"Of course not," Gatt said. "This has been kept a secret from everybody except the ruling council. But you're a part of that ruling council now, Getulio old boy, because I'm appointing you a freely elected member of it as of today."

"I don't get it," Vargas said. "Why me?"

"Come inside the ship," Gatt said. "Let me show you a little more."

There was a motorized ramp that led up into the interior of the ship. Gatt took Vargas' arm and led him up.

Vargas felt at home almost immediately. The interior of the ship looked exactly like what he had seen on old *Star Trek* reruns. There were large rooms filled with panels of instruments. There were indirect lighting panels of rectangular shape. There were technicians who wore pastel jumpsuits with high collars. There were avocado green wall-to-wall carpets. It was just what Vargas would have expected if he'd thought about it. He expected to see Spock come out of a passageway at any moment.

"No, we don't have Spock here," Gatt said in answer to Vargas' unspoken question. "But we've got a lot more important stuff than some pointy-eared alien. Let me give you a little quiz, Vargas, just for fun. What is the first thing a warrior thinks about when he looks over his new battleship?"

Vargas had to give that some serious thought. He wished Lupe were here with him. Although she was stupid and only a woman, she was very good at supplying, through some mysterious feminine intuition, answers which Vargas had on the tip of his tongue but couldn't quite come up with.

Fortunately for him, this time the answer came unbidden. "Guns!" he said.

"You got it!" Gatt said. "Come with me and let me show you the guns on this sucker."

Gatt led him to a small car of the sort used to drive the long distances between points in a ship. Vargas tried to remember if they'd had a car like that on *Star Trek*. He thought not. He thought this ship was larger than the Enterprise. He liked that. He was not afraid of big things.

The little car hummed down the long, evenly lit passageway deep in the interior of the ship. General Gatt was reeling off statistics as they went, explaining how many battalions of men in Darth Vader helmets could be fitted into the attack bays, how many tons of rations in the forms of beef jerky and bourbon could be stored in a thousand hundredweights of standard mess kits, and other important details. Soon they reached the area of the ship's primary armament. Vargas looked admiringly at the large projector tubes, the paralysis wavelength radio, the vibratory beamer, which could shake apart a fair-sized asteroid. His fingers itched to get on the controls of the tractor and pressor beams. But General Gatt told him he would have to be patient for a little while longer. There was nothing around to shoot at. And besides, the main armament wasn't quite all hooked up yet.

Vargas was loud in his praise of the work done by the scientists of the military. But Gatt had to set him straight on that.

"We have a lot of good boys, to be sure," Gatt said. "Some of them quite clever. Especially the ones we drafted. This spaceship, however, was not of their doing."

"Whose is it then, sir, if I may enquire?" said Vargas.

"It was the work of a special group of civilian scientists, what they call a consortium. Which simply means a whole bunch of them. It was a joint European-American-Asian effort. And a damned selfish one."

"Why do you say that, sir?"

"Because they were building this ship to get away from us."

"I can hardly believe that, sir," Vargas said.

"It's almost unthinkable, isn't it? They were scared for their puny lives, of course, afraid that they'd all be killed. As it turned out, quite

a few of them *did* get killed. I don't know what made them think any respectable military establishment would let them escape from the planet with a valuable spaceship."

"What happened to the scientists, sir?"

"Oh, we drafted them. Put them to work. Their ship was very good but it lacked a few things. Guns, for one. These people had actually thought they could go into outer space without high-powered weaponry. And another problem was that the ships weren't fast enough. We have learned that space is quite a bit larger than some of our previous estimates at the Military College; therefore, we need really fast ships if we're ever to get anywhere."

"Fast ships and strong guns," Vargas mused. "That's just what I would have asked for myself. Did you have any trouble getting those things, general?"

"A little at first," Gatt said. "The scientists kept on saying it was impossible and other downbeat and subversive talk like that. But I handled it. Gave them a deadline, started having executions when our goals weren't met. You'd be amazed how quickly they picked up the pace."

Vargas nodded, having used similar methods himself in his day.

"It's a beautiful ship," Vargas said. "Is it the only one?"

"What you're looking at here," Gatt said, "is the flagship of the fleet."

"You mean there are more ships?" Vargas asked.

"Indeed there are. Or will be soon. We've got the entire world-wide shipbuilding and automobile industries working on them. We need lots of ships, Getulio."

"Yessir," Vargas said. The trouble was, he couldn't think of anything to use ships for, now that everything was conquered. But he didn't want to come out and say that. He could see there was a little smile on General Gatt's face, so he guessed that he was about to be told something he hadn't known before, but which he would find of considerable interest. He waited for a while, and then decided that Gatt wanted him to ask, so he said, "Now, about all these ships, sir..."

"Yesss?" said Gatt.

"We need these," Vargas hazarded, "for security — "

Gatt nodded.

"— and to take care of our enemies."

"Perfectly correct," Gatt said.

"The only thing that perplexes me," Vargas said, "is, who exactly *are* our enemies? I mean, sir that I was under the impression that we don't really *have* any of them left on Earth. Or are there some enemies I haven't heard about?"

"Oh, we don't have any enemies left on *Earth*," Gatt said. "They have gone the way of the buffalo, the cow, the Airedale, and other extinct species. What we have now, General Vargas, is the God-given opportunity to go forth into space, our Earth troops unified for the first time in history, ready and willing to take on anything that comes along."

"Anything! In space!" Vargas said, amazed at the size of the idea.

"Yes! Today Earth, tomorrow the Milky Way, or at least one hell of a good-sized hunk of it."

"But can we just do that? Take what we want?"

"Why not? If there's anything out there, it's just aliens."

"It's a wonderful dream, sir. I hope I may be permitted to do my bit for the cause."

Gatt grinned and punched Vargas on the arm.

"I've got a pretty good bit for you, Getulio. How would you like to be my first Marshal of Space, with command of this ship and orders to go forth and check out some new planets for Earth?"

"Me? Sir, you do me too much honor."

"Nonsense, Getulio. You're the best fighting general I've got. And you're the only one I trust. Need I say more?"

Gatt made the announcement to the other generals. First he showed them the spaceship. Then he told them he was going into space on a fact-finding mission, with good old Vargas along to actually run the ship. He and Vargas would take a lot of fighting men along, just in case they ran into anything interesting. Gatt was sure there were new worlds to explore out there, and these new worlds, in the manner of new worlds since the beginning of recorded history, were going to bring in millions.

The generals were enthusiastic about the expansion of Earth military power and the promise of a good return on the military business.

Working night and day, the ship was soon provisioned. Not long after that, the armament was all bolted into place. When they tried

it out it worked perfectly, all except for one missile which unaccountably got out of control and took out Kansas City. A letter of regret to the survivors and a posthumous medal for all concerned soon put *that* to rights, however. Shortly afterwards, ten thousand heavily armed shock troops with full equipment marched aboard. It was time for Earth to make its debut in space.

The ship went through its trial runs in the solar system without a problem. Once past Neptune, Vargas told the engineers to open her up. Space was big; there was no time to dawdle. The ship ran up to speed without a tremor.

Lastly, the hyperspace jump control worked perfectly. They popped out of the wormhole into an area rich with star systems, many of which had nice-looking planets.

Time passed. Not too much of it, but enough so you know you've really gone somewhere.

Soon after this passage of time, the communications officer reported a tremble of movement on the indicator of the Intelligence Detector. This recent invention was a long-range beam which worked on something the scientists called Neuronal Semi-Phase Amplification, or NSPA. The Military-Scientific Junta in charge of technology felt that a detector like this would be useful for finding a race that might be worth talking to.

"Where's the signal coming from?"

"One of them planets out there, sir," the communications officer said, gesturing vaguely at the vast display of stars visible through the ship's transparent shield.

"Well, let's go there," Vargas said.

"Have to find what star it belongs to first," the communications officer said. "I'll get right on it."

Vargas notified Gatt, who, from the luxury of his suite which was supplied with everything a fighting man could want — women, guns, food, booze, dope — told him to carry on.

Vargas gave the orders to carry on at best speed.

The big spaceship drilled onward through the vacuum of space.

DeepDoze technology let the soldiers pass their time in unconsciousness while the ship ate up the parsecs. The special barbarian

shock troops were stacked in hammocks eight or ten high. The sound of ten thousand men snoring was enormous but not unexpected. One man from each squad was detailed to stay awake to brush flies off the sleepers.

More time passed, and quite a few light years sped by, when a flash of green light from the instrumentation readout telltale told the duty officer that they were nearing the source of the signal.

He got up and went to the captain's quarters in the quickest way, by express elevator and pneumo tube.

Vargas was in deep sleep when a hand tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

"Hmmm?"

"Planet ahead, sir."

"Call me for the next one."

"I think you'd better check this out, sir,"

Vargas got out of bed grumpily and followed the man down to the Communications Area.

"Something is coming through," the operator of the Intelligence Scanner said.

General Vargas looked over his shoulder. "What've you got there, son?"

"I think it's an intelligent bleep," the operator said.

General Vargas blinked several times, but the concept did not come clear. He glared at the operator, sucking his lips angrily until the operator hastily said, "What I'm saying, sir, is that our forward-scanning intelligence-seeking beam has picked up a trace. This may be nothing, of course, but it's possible that our pattern-matching program has found an intelligent pattern which, of course, argues the presence of intelligent life."

"You mean," Vargas said, "that we are about to discover our first intelligent race out in the galaxy?"

"That is probably the case, sir."

"Great," Vargas said, and announced to his crew and soldiers that they should wake up and stand by.

The planet from which the signal had come was a pretty place with an oxygen atmosphere and plenty of water and trees and

sunshine. If you wanted some nice-looking real estate, this planet could be a good investment, except that it was a long commute back to Earth. But this was not at all what Vargas and his men had been looking for. The various drone probes sent out from Earth in the last century had already found plenty of real estate. Robot mining in the asteroids had already dropped the price of minerals to unprecedented lows. Even gold was now commonly referred to as yellow tooth-filling material. What the Earthmen wanted was people to conquer, not just another real estate subdivision in deep space.

The Earth ship went into orbit around the planet. General Vargas ordered down an investigation team, backed up by a battle group, it in turn backed up by the might of the ship, to find the intelligent creatures on this planet, which in the planetary catalog was called Mazzi 32410A.

A quick aerial survey showed no cities, no towns, not even a hamlet. More detailed aerial surveys failed to show the presence of pastoral hunters or primitive farmers. Not even barefooted fruit gatherers could be found. Yet still the intelligence probe on the ship continued to produce its monotonous beep, sure and unmistakable sign that intelligent life was lurking somewhere around. Vargas put Colonel John Vanderlash in charge of the landing party.

Colonel John Vanderlash brought along a portable version of the intelligence detector, for it seemed possible that the inhabitants of this planet had concealed themselves in underground cities.

The portable intelligence beam projector was mounted on an eight-wheeled vehicle capable of going almost anywhere. A signal was soon picked up. Vanderlash, a small man with big shoulders and a pockmarked face, directed his driver to follow it. The crew of the eight-wheeler stood to their guns, since intelligent beings were known to be dangerous. They were ready to retaliate at the first sign of hostile intent, or even sooner.

They followed the beam signal into an enormous cave. As they moved deeper into it, the signal grew stronger, until it approximated Intelligence Level 5.3, the equivalent of a man thinking about doing the *New York Times* crossword puzzle. The driver of the foremost assault vehicle shifted to a lower gear. The vehicle crept forward slowly, Colonel Vanderlash standing in the prow. He figured the

intelligent beings had to be around here somewhere, probably just around the corner...

Then the operator announced that the signal was fading.

"Stop!" Vanderlash said. "We've lost them! Back up!"

The vehicle backed. The signal came back to strength.

"Stop here!" Vanderlash said, and the eight-wheeler skidded to a stop. They were in the middle of the signal's field of maximum strength.

The men stared around them, fingers on triggers, breaths bated.

"Doesn't anyone see anything?" Vanderlash asked.

There was a low mutter of denial among the men. One of them said, "Ain't nothin' here but them moths, sir."

"Moths?" Vanderlash said. "*Moths?* Where!"

"Right ahead of us, sir," the driver said.

Vanderlash looked at the moths dancing in the vehicle's yellow headlight beam. There were a lot of them. They darted and flashed and turned and cavorted and twirled and sashayed and dodged and danced and fluttered and crepusculated and do-so-dood.

There was a pattern in their movements. As Vanderlash watched, a thought came to him.

"Point the intelligence beam at them," he said.

"At the *moths*, sir?" the intelligence beam operator asked incredulously.

"You heard me, trooper. Do what you're told."

The operator did as he was told. The dial on the intelligence machine immediately swung to 7.9, the equivalent of a man trying to remember what a binomial equation was.

"Either some wise guy aliens are playing tricks on us," Vanderlash said, "or...or..."

He turned to his second in command, Major Lash LaRue, who was in the habit of filling in his superior officer's thoughts for him when Colonel Vanderlash didn't have time to think them himself.

"Or," Major LaRue said, "the moths on this planet have developed a group intelligence."

It took the Communications Team less than a week to crack the communications code which the moth entity employed. They would have solved it quicker if any of them had thought to compare the moths' dot and dash pattern with that of Morse Code.

"Are you trying to tell me," Vargas said, "that these alien moths are communicating by Morse Code?"

"I'm afraid so, sir," the communications officer said. "But it's not my fault, sir. Furthermore, these moths are acting like a single entity."

"What did the moth entity say to you?"

"It said, 'Take your leader to me.'"

Vargas nodded. That made sense. Aliens were always saying things like that.

"What did you tell it?" Vargas asked.

"I said we'd get back to him."

"You did good," Vargas said. "General Gatt will want to hear about this."

"Hot damn," Gatt said. "Moths, huh? Not exactly what we were looking for, but definitely a beginning. Let's get down there and talk with this — you couldn't call him a guy, could you?"

Down in the cave, Gatt and Vargas were able to communicate with the moth entity with the assistance of the Chief Signalman. It was an eerie moment. The Earthmen's great battle lanterns cast lurid shadows across the rocky floor. In the cave opening, flickering in a ghostly fashion, the moths spun and fluttered, darted and dived, all cooperating to produce Morse signals.

"Hello," Gatt said. "We're from Earth."

"Yes, I know," the Moth entity said.

"How'd you know that?"

"The other creature told me."

"What other creature?"

"I believe he is referring to me," a voice said from deep in the cave.

It startled the Earthmen. Every gun trained on the cave entrance. The soldiers watched, some breathing shallowly and others with bated breath. And then, through the swirling mists and the multi-colored brilliance of the searchlights, a figure like that of a small, oddly shaped man stepped into the light.

The alien was small and skinny and entirely bald. His ears were pointed and he had small antennæ growing out of his forehead. Everybody knew at once that he was an alien. If there was any doubt of that, it was soon expunged when he opened his mouth. For out

of that rosebud-like orifice came words in recognizably colloquial English, the very best kind.

Gatt directed the Telegrapher to ask, "First of all, Alien, how come you speak our language?"

The alien replied, "We have long been in contact with your race, for we are those you refer to as Flying Saucer people. When we first established a presence on your world of Earth a foolish clerical error led us to believe that Morse was your universal language. By the time we discovered our error, Morse was firmly established in our language schools."

"Oh. That accounts for it, then," Gatt said. "It would have been too much of a coincidence for you people to have developed the English language on your own."

"I quite agree," the alien replied.

"At least we have the language problem out of the way," Gatt said. "We can't go on referring to you as 'The Alien.' What shall we call you?"

"My people are called Magellanics in your language," the Alien said. "And we all have the same last name. So you could either call me Magellanic, which is also the name of my planet, or Hurtevurt, which is my first name."

"Hurtevurt Magellanic," Gatt said. "Quite a mouthful. I suppose there's an explanation for why you're called 'Magellanic.' I mean we have a word like that in our own language."

"We borrowed the word from your language," Hurtevurt said. "We like the sound of it better than our previous name for the planet, Hzuüutz-kril."

"Ah. Makes sense. Now, is this planet your home world? If so, where's everybody else?"

"It is not my home world," Hurtevurt said. "This is a world populated solely by intelligent moths. It is far from my home world."

"Whatcha doing here? Exploring or something?"

"No, General. I was sent here as a Watcher by the members of my underground. I was watching for your great ship."

"How'd you know we'd be coming?"

"We didn't. We just sent out Watchers in case somebody *does* come along. You see, my people, the Magellanics, are in a whole lot of trouble.":

Gatt turned to Vargas and remarked, "You know, it isn't enough we are the first Earthmen in history to contact aliens, these have to be aliens with problems, yet."

"I don't think that possibility was ever forecast," Vargas said.

"Well," Gatt said, "we may as well hear this creature's problems in comfort. This cave is decidedly chilly, and I don't believe we brought along any refreshment." He turned to the alien, and, speaking through his Telegrapher, said, "How about coming aboard my ship and we'll talk it over? I presume you breathe oxygen and drink liquids and all that."

"I have long missed your excellent intoxicants," Hurtevurt said. "Yes, lead the way, my leader."

"This is starting out well," Gatt remarked to Vargas as they started back to the ship.

When he was comfortable, with a glass of Irish whiskey in his hand, and a Slim Jim to munch on, Hurtevurt said, "Long have we of Planet Magellanic lived as free entities. But now our planet has been conquered by a cruel foe whose customs are not ours."

"Somebody took over your planet, did they?" Gatt remarked. "Tell us about it."

Hurtevurt struck an orator's pose and declaimed, "Dank they were and glaucous-eyed, the ugly and bad-smelling Greems who attacked us from a far star-system. They came down in spider-shaped ships, and red ruin followed in their wake. Not content with murder, rapine, and pillage, they humiliated us by making us worship a giant ragwort."

"That's really low," Vargas said.

"All in all it's intolerable. We'd much rather you Earthians took us over."

Hurtevurt made an odd smacking sound. Gatt turned to Vargas. "What was that?"

"It sounded to me like a wet kiss," Vargas said.

"That's disgusting," Vargas said, "but it shows a good spirit. Want us to take over your planet, huh?"

"Yes," the Alien sang, "we want to be ruled by you, nobody else will do, bo bo padoo. Do you like it? It is a song we sing to keep up our courage in the dark times ahead. You must rescue us. Let me show you pictures of the Greems."

The pictures, made by a process similar to Polaroid, showed creatures who seemed to be a cross between a spider, a crab, and a wolverine.

"Hell," Gatt said, "anyone would want to be rescued from something like that. Tough fighters, are they?"

"Not at all," Hurtevurt assured him. "I can assure you that with your brave fighting men and superior weaponry, you will have no trouble defeating them and taking over my planet. It will be easy, for you see, the enemy has withdrawn all of their forces except a local garrison. Once you take them over, the place is yours. And you will find Magellanic is a very good planet, filled with good-looking women who admire military Earthmen, to say nothing of gold and precious things. This, gentlemen, is a planet worth having."

Gatt said, "Sounds pretty good, huh, Vargas?"

"And we would like to formally invest you, General Gatt, with the hereditary kingship of our planet."

"Do you hear that?" Gatt said to Vargas. "They want to make me king! But forget about the kingship thing. What's really important is the fact that we can take over this whole planet for the profit of Earth. And it'll be one of the easiest wars on record. And what better way of meeting new peoples than by conquering them, eh?"

"You know something?" Vargas said. "You've really got something there."

To the Alien, Gatt said, "Okay, son, you've got a deal."

"That is wonderful," the Alien said.

Just then a small dot of light appeared in a corner of the room. It grew, and then it expanded.

"Well, rats," said Hurtevurt. "Just what I needed."

"What is it?"

"It's the Galactic Effectuator."

"Who's that?" Gatt asked.

"One of the busybodies from Galactic Central come to tell us how to run our lives."

"You didn't mention anything about Galactic Central."

"I can't tell you the entire history of the galaxy in an hour, can I? Galactic Central is a group of very ancient civilizations at the core of this galaxy, just as the name implies. The Centerians, as they are called, try to maintain the status quo throughout the galaxy. They

want to keep things as they used to be. If they had their way, they'd go back to the Golden Age before the Big Bang, when things were really quiet."

"They wouldn't let us help you take back your planet?"

Hurtevurt shook his head. "The Galactic Arbitrators never okay any change. If they see what you're up to, they'll nix it."

"Are they powerful enough to do that?"

"Baby, you'd better believe it," Hurtevurt said.

"So the war's off."

"Not necessarily." Hurtevurt took an object from the pouch attached to his waist and opened it. It was a long pole wound with fine wire. He handed it to Vargas.

"Wave that at him before he has a chance to deliver his message. He'll go away and report to his superiors. Galactic Central will figure there was a mistake, since no one would dare zap a Galactic Effectuator. They will send another Effectuator."

"So they do send another Effectuator. Am I supposed to zap that one, too?"

"No. You're allowed only one mistake by Galactic Central. After that, they crush you."

"How does zapping the first one help us?"

"It gives us time. In the time between the first and second Effectuators, you'll be able to occupy our planet and establish your rule. When the second Effectuator comes and learns the situation, he'll confirm you in power."

"Why would the second Effectuator do that when the first one wouldn't?"

"I told you, it's because Galactic Central tries to preserve any political situation its Effectuators discover. It's *change* that Galactic Central is opposed to, not any particular instance of it. Trust me, I know about these things. When he comes in, just wave the rod at him."

"We don't want to kill anyone," Gatt said. "Unnecessarily, that is."

"Don't worry," Hurtevurt said. "You can't kill an Effectuator."

And then the Galactic Effectuator appeared before them. He was very tall and seemed to be made entirely of metal. That, and his flat, tinny voice, confirmed Vargas' suspicion that the Effectuator was a robot.

"Greetings," said the Effectuator. "I have come from Galactic Central to bring a message..."

Gatt gave Vargas a meaningful look.

"Therefore," said the Effectuator, "know all men by these presents —"

"Now?" Vargas asked in a whisper.

"Yes, now," Gatt said.

Vargas waved the pole. The Galactic Effectuator looked startled, then vanished.

"Where did he go?" Vargas asked the Alien.

"Into a holding space," the Alien said. "He'll reassemble himself there, then report back to Galactic Central."

"You're sure he's not hurt?"

"I told you, you can't hurt an Effectuator because he's a robot. In fact, only robots are permitted to be Galactic Effectuators."

"Why is that?"

"To ensure that they won't defend themselves if attacked by barbarians such as yourself."

"Well, whatever," Gatt said. "Let's get on with business. Where's this planet of yours we're going to conquer? Excuse me, I mean liberate."

"Take me to your computer," Hurtevurt said. "I will program him to take us there."

The Earthship, with its sleeping troopers and its card-playing officers, hurtled on through space. Several time periods passed without event. Vargas wanted to know why it was taking so long. Hurtevurt rechecked his calculations and told him they were almost there. Vargas went to report this to Supreme Commander Gatt. While he was reporting, the Intelligence Meter sounded off. The planet Magellanic lay dead ahead.

"Go get 'em, tiger," Gatt said to Vargas.

"But I don't know how," Vargas said. "An entire planet..."

"You remember how we used to sack cities, don't you?"

Vargas grinned and nodded. How could he forget.

"Just go to Magellanic and do the same thing. It's just the scale that changes."

There was really no way of finding out in advance how much armament the alien occupiers of Magellanic might put up against

them. Vargas decided to try a bold yet conservative tactic. He'd just go in and take over the joint. What the hell, it had worked for the Hittites.

The great ship from Earth roared down through the atmosphere. Hurtevurt pointed out the leading city on the planet, the one from which all power emanated. That made it convenient. Vargas sent out five thousand shock troops armed with horrifying and instantaneous weapons. The remaining five thousand were kept in reserve. As it turned out, they weren't needed.

General Vargas wrote home soon after the successful conquest of Magellanic:

Dear Lupe, I promised to tell you about the invasion. It went very well. So well, in fact, that at first we suspected some sort of treachery. We airdropped a first force of a thousand picked men, armed to the teeth, into the big square in the middle of the main city here, which is called Megalopolis. Our boys landed during a folk dancing festival and there was quite a bit of confusion, as you can imagine, since the population thought our boys were demonstrating war dances. We cleared that up soon enough.

The remaining four thousand troopers of the first wave came down just outside the city, since there was no room to pack them into the town square. The lads marched into Megalopolis in good order, and they got an enthusiastic greeting from the citizens, who seemed delighted to see them.

The Magellanics took in the situation quickly, and had flowers and paper streamers handy to give our boys a proper welcome. There were no unfortunate incidents, aside from several local women getting trampled in their eagerness to show our boys a nice welcome.

Magellanic is a very nice planet, prosperous, and with a nice climate except at the poles where we don't go. We have seen no signs of the alien invaders that Hurtevurt told us about. Either they are holed up in the hills, or they all left when our ship approached.

Now it is a week later. We have been very busy and I am writing hastily so this letter can go out with the first load of booty which we're sending to Earth.

Our Art Squads have done a fine job of combing the planet. As we promised the men, the first haul is theirs.

Frankly, the stuff doesn't look like much. But we've collected whatever we can find in the way of furniture, postage stamps, gold, silver, and precious stones, and that sort of thing.

It's too bad that we have to ship it all back to Earth at government expense and sell it for the troops. But that's what we promised and otherwise they might mutiny.

We're also sending back some of the local food surpluses. I just hope there's a market for cranko nuts and pubble fruit back on Earth. Personally, I can do without it.

I forgot to mention, we are sending back to Earth our first draft of Magellanic workers. We had no trouble collecting them. A lot of people on this planet have volunteered to do stoop labor in the fields and unskilled crap work in the factories for starvation wages. This is useful because nobody on Earth wants to do that stuff anymore.

I'll write again soon. Much love, my baby vulture.

Six months later, Vargas received the following message from General Gatt, now on Earth fulfilling his duties as Supreme Leader and Total Commander:

Getulio, I'm dashing this off in great haste. We need a total change in policy and we need it fast. My accountants have just brought me the news that our occupation is costing us more than it is bringing in by a factor of ten. I don't know how this happened. I always thought one made a profit out of winning a war. You know I've lived by the motto, "To the victor goes the spoils."

But it isn't working that way here. The art treasures we brought back have brought in very little on Earth's art market. In fact, leading art critics have declared that the Magellanics are in a pre-artistic stage of their development! We can't sell their music, either, and their furniture is both uncomfortable to sit in, ugly to look at, and tends to break easily.

And as if that isn't bad enough, now we have all these Magellanics on Earth doing cheap labor. How can cheap labor not be cost-efficient? My experts tell me we're putting millions of Earth citizens out of work, and using up all our tax revenue because the first thing a Magellanic does when he gets here is go on the dole until he finds a really good job.

That's the trouble, you see. They're not content to stay in the cheap labor market. They learn fast and now some of them are in key

positions in government, health, industry. I wanted to pass a law to keep them out of the good jobs, but my own advisers told me that was prejudiced and nobody would stand for it.

So listen, Getulio, stop at once from sending any more of them to Earth. Be prepared to take back all the ones I can round up and ship back to you. Prepare an announcement saying that the forces of Earth have succeeded in their goal of freeing the Magellanics from the cruel conquerors who had been pressing their faces into the dirt and now they're on their own.

As soon as you can, sooner if possible, I want you to pull all our troops out, cancel the war, end the occupation, and get yourself and your men home as fast as you can.

I forgot to mention, these Magellanics are unbelievably fertile. The ones here on Earth need only about three months from impregnation to birth. They have a whole lot of triplets and quintuplets, too. Getulio, we have to get rid of these moochers fast, before they take over our planet and eat us out of house and home.

Close up and come home. We'll think of something new.

When Vargas told the news to Captain Arnold Stone, his Chief Accountant, he asked for an accounting to show how much profit they had been showing during their stay on Magellanic.

"Profit?" Stone said with a short, sardonic laugh. "We've been running at a loss ever since we got here."

"But what about the taxes we imposed?"

"Imposing is one thing, collecting is another. They never seem to have any money."

"What about the Magellanic workers on Earth? Don't they send back some of their wages?"

Stone shook his head. "They invest every cent of it in Earth tax-free municipal bonds. They claim it's an ancient custom of theirs."

"I never liked them from the start," Vargas said. "I always knew they'd be trouble."

"You got that right," Stone said.

"All right, get someone in Communications to prepare an announcement for the population here. Tell them that we've done what we came here to do, that is, free them from the cruel hand of whoever it was who was oppressing them. Now we're going away and they can do their own thing and lots of luck."

"That's a lot," Stone said. "I'd better get the boys in intelligence to help with the wording."

"Do that," Vargas said. "And tell somebody to get the ships ready for immediate departure."

That was the idea. But it didn't work out that way.

That afternoon, as Vargas sat in his office playing mumbly peg with his favorite Philippine bolo knife and dreaming of being back with Lupe, there was a flash of brilliance in the middle of the floor. Vargas didn't hesitate a moment when he saw it. He dived under the desk to avoid what he assumed was an assassination attempt.

It was sort of nice, under the desk, even though it was not a particularly sturdy desk, Magellanic furniture-building being what it was. Still, it gave Vargas a feeling of protection, and time to unholster his ivory-handled laser blaster.

A voice said, "If you try to use that on me, you are going to be very sorry."

Vargas peered out and saw, standing in the middle of his office, the characteristic metal skin and flashing eyes of the Galactic Effectuator.

"Oh, it's you," Vargas said, getting out from under the table with as much dignity as circumstances allowed. He reholstered his firearm, took his seat at his desk again, and said, "Sorry about that, Galactic Effectuator. I thought it might be an assassination team. Can't be too careful, you know. Now, what can I do for you?"

"The first thing," the Galactic Effectuator said, "is not to try zapping me again. We let you get away with it once. Try again and the Galactic Forces will nuke you back to the Stone Age. If you think I'm kidding, take a look out the window."

Vargas looked. The sky was dark with ships. They were big ships, as you'd expect of a Galactic Force.

"I want to apologize for zapping you earlier," Vargas said. "I was acting on bad advice. I'm glad you've come. You're just in time to hear me declare the end of Earth's occupation. Maybe you'd like to watch us get out of here and go home."

"I know that is what you are planning," the Effectuator said. "I'm here to tell you it's not going to be quite as easy as that."

"Why not?"

"Galactic policy is to keep the status quo, whatever it is. We were unable to prevent you from declaring war on Magellanic. That

is the one mistake you're allowed. You've got this place, now you have to keep it."

"Believe me," Vargas said, "this sort of thing will never happen again. Can't we just apologize and forget it?"

"No," said the Effectuator. "You can't get out of it as easily as that. War was your idea, not ours. Now you're stuck with it."

"But the war's over!"

"According to Galactic Rules, the war is only over when those you attacked say it's over. And I can assure you, the Magellanics are very satisfied with things as they are."

"I'm starting to get the feeling," Vargas said, "that these Magellanics tricked us. That Hurtevurt and his story! It reminds me of something to do with a bird. But I can't quite remember what."

"Permit me to refresh your memory," the Effectuator said. "I have made a study of birdlife throughout the galaxy, so I know there is a bird called the cuckoo on your planet. It lays its egg in other birds' nests and they take care of it. That is what the Magellanics have done to you Earth folks."

"What in hell are you talking about?" Vargas said, his voice blustery but shaky.

"They get you to take over their planet. They get you to take their surplus workforce to your own world. Once there, you can't get rid of them. But that's what you get for trying to practice charity without taking thought for the consequences."

"Charity, hell! We were doing war!"

"In the Galactic view," the Effectuator said, "war is a form of charity."

"How do you figure?"

"We believe that war entails a number of selfless and exemplary actions. First there's the duty of rapine, which we define as the willingness to transfer large quantities of your planet's best sperm to a civilization that badly needs it. Your troops have done well that way. Next there's the duty of pillage, which is the act of cleansing the artistic life of a conquered people by carting away vast quantities of their inferior art treasures in order to unblock their creative self-expression and allow them to produce newer, better works. Finally we have the duty of education and self-improvement, which you have performed by taking in large numbers of Magellanic's surplus and idle population to your own planet, where you support

them until they are smart enough to put your own people out of work."

Vargas thought for a while, then shrugged and said, "You got it right, Galactic Effectuator. But how do we end it?"

"That's always the difficult part," the Effectuator said. "Maybe, with some luck, you can find some other planet that'll be crazy enough to take over both your planet *and* Magellanic. That's the only way you're going to get off the hook."

That is how, upon entering Galactic Civilization, Earth gave up war forever. And that is why there are Earthmen on all the civilized planets of the galaxy. They can be found on the street corners of dusty alien cities. They speak all languages. They sidle up to you and say, "Listen, Mister, would you like to take over a planet with no trouble at all?"

Naturally, no one pays them the slightest attention. Even the newer civilizations have learned that war costs too much and charity begins at home.

WORMWORLD

Dear Robert,

I can't tell you how thrilled I am that you and I have been able to establish telepathic contact across the vastness of space. I still can hardly believe that I am in communication with an alien creature. Not that it is entirely unexpected. Many of the intelligent worms of my world believe that other worlds exist with intelligent worms living in them. Most of us also admit the possibility (some say probability) that there are intelligent races out there that are not worms at all, not even vermiform, but really quite different. Many of us have been working toward telepathic contact with these hypothetical other-worlders.

From your description of yourself (which I didn't completely understand) you seem to possess a high degree of bilateral symmetry. So do we. Some of our best theoreticians have long predicted Necessary Degrees of Symmetry as a precondition for intelligent life. I must question a rather astounding statement you made in your recent communication. You told me that you are a nonworm intelligent creature from another solid world who makes neither wormhole nor nonwormhole, but instead moves around *on the outside* of your world, in contact with its *surface*!

At least, I *think* that's what you were saying!

Now, the idea that you are a nonworm intelligence communicating to me from another world is easy enough for me to grasp. But that you live on the outer *surface* of your world, rather than inside, where one would normally expect even a nonworm alien intelligence to live...

Is that really where you live? On the surface?

Please clarify! It's really important for me to get this straight, for reasons I'll explain in my next communication. Just now I have to sign off rather hurriedly and do some urgent tunnel-redirecting. Hope to hear from you soon.

Good to hear from you again. If I understand you correctly, you assert that you are a solid, three-dimensional creature, like me, but living on the *outside* of your world. And you also assert (or rather, I infer from your statements) that you know not only the shape of your world, but also its volume, radius, surface dimensions, and so forth.

Frankly, that's hard to believe.

Is that what you meant?

Are you really a creature from some distant planet, or another worm somewhere playing tricks on me?

Talking with you has given me difficulties. The other worms know I'm sending out a powerful vibration aimed and tightly focused out into space. A lot of worms do that. But I keep on tracking a single area (your world), and that leads other worms to ask if I've gotten obsessive or just what the hell I think I'm doing.

Making up believable tales about why I've locked my beam onto a single distant source is easier than telling worms that I'm in contact with a being who lives on the surface of a sphere.

But to hell with the difficulties. As far as I'm concerned this is fascinating stuff. It is extremely interesting to hear tales of wonder from different far-off places, and perhaps it doesn't really matter if those places really exist, or maybe somehow, somewhere, somewhere, everything that can be imagined has to exist.

I have to sign off now. I promised Jill that I'd do parallel wormholes with her on a hexagonal grid that she thought up all by herself. Artistically speaking, I suppose it isn't much, but it gives me great pleasure to do figures with her. We've made a lot of good parallel wormhole designs together in the last few hundred units, that gal and I.

Do you have mates in your world, Robert? Do you suffer the unending conflict between self-preservation and consummation?

Listen, Robert, philosophy interests me, as it seems to do you. You tell me that you discuss these matters just for the fun of it, not because you're a professional at it. It's the same with me. I'm an

artist, and I don't know what I'm talking about half of the time, and I'm glad that it's the same for you, as you told me. I didn't really want to contact some giant godlike intellect Out There; I think I just wanted to find a friend, someone to tell the story of my life to, someone the story of whose life I want to hear.

What I'm trying to get at is this Robert, that I want to exchange knowledge with you, but I'm not an expert on anything except the art that I do. I gather it's the same for you. Then good for us! Professional worm philosophers and scientists usually assume that one of them is going to make contact with their intellectual counterpart when contact is finally established between inhabitants of different worlds. Isn't it nice that it's happened to a couple of experimental pattern-makers like us?

Robert, are you a funny looking creature living in accord with weird and special laws of nature? Or am I? Or are we both?

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Hi. It's me again.

Well, I made an attempt at communicating with one of my fellow-worms about you not long ago. I didn't figure I'd have much luck at it (and how right I was!) but I had to try. Maybe it was silly of me, but I must tell you that worms are very preoccupied with that sort of thing, perhaps because of the physically isolated lives we lead.

On the other hand, worms, despite their passion for science and metaphysics, and their pressing need for the findings of both, tend to be skeptical about anything they haven't thought up themselves or actually experienced, except for the lunatic fringe that will believe anything.

I didn't want to start a cult on the one hand, or get laughed at on the other, or be put down for crazy on the third hand, or considered possessed by an evil worm-spirit on the fourth hand. (Exactly how many hands do you have, Robert? I figure four, one for each of your locomotive extensions from your central body mass. Have I guessed right? Worms have no hands, but the concept of handedness is part of our ancient lore.)

I decided to make a trail run in the form of a hypothesis. It just so happened a few units ago that I chanced to be running a pattern contiguous to the pattern of my friend, Klaus. Klaus and I have shared numerous pattern-contiguities, more so in the old days than

now. Back then we had great resonance and once even paralleled the same figure (a dodecahedron, if memory serves) for seven linked variations until — frankly — I got bored and decided that I had to go faster and more elegantly, and left Klaus behind and went on to pursue my career in art. Klaus took to paralleling the philosophical wormhole patterns and has made a fair reputation for himself.

After some small talk about rotational matters, I said to him, "Klaus, I've been playing around with a funny notion recently. I'd like your opinion on it."

"Let's hear it," he said.

When I say "we talked" I don't mean to imply, of course, that we met face to face. That would mean instant annihilation, as I pointed out in an earlier communication, and would make our talk rather final! By "talk" I refer to the communications that pass between worms when they are in contiguous corridors with a space between them of no more than Sigma, this being our symbol for the varying range of distances and conditions within which communication is possible. These communications are effected by the hammering motions a worm makes with his head, tapping out the code of language and simultaneously leaving a written record of that talk on the wall of the corridor. Aside from natural cataclysms, like tunnels falling in, every conversation any worm has ever had with any other worm is recorded somewhere in Wormworld on the walls of the tunnels.

This being the case, it is evident to me that we worms mean something quite different when we say we talked to a fellow worm than what you humans would mean. I thought I should clear up that point. Now to return to my conversation with Klaus.

"Suppose there exist solid intelligent creatures like us, who live on other worlds Out There — "

"In other worlds, you mean," Klaus said.

"No, that's just the point. I've been thinking: what is there to prevent the existence of solid intelligent creatures like us, living *on* the outer surface of a world, rather than in it."

"Let me consider the immediate implications," Klaus said. "These hypothetical intelligent creatures living *on* their world would, I presume have direct experiential contact with the surface of that world, and so would be able to establish fixed coordinates and thus *know* the shape of their world."

"Let's just say, for argument's sake, it's spherical," I said.

"The actual shape is unimportant. What is important *on* this hypothetical world of yours is that its shape, whatever it is, can be known, and therefore all directional and topological facts about that world can also be known."

"That seems to follow," I said. "And I postulate a further condition..."

"My dear fellow," Klaus said, "don't bother to go on. I must tell you that further speculation along this line is fruitless, since it piles fanciful hypothesis upon even more fanciful hypothesis. Aren't you aware that the organum of worm science and mathematics, of which I think I may claim some slight knowledge, has never been able to establish the absolute existence of a surface to our own world? That's why we refer to it as the *veritable* surface."

"That doesn't mean a surface couldn't exist somewhere else," I told him.

"Of course not. Anything is possible, including the existence somewhere of worms who live by consuming their own tails. Possible, but so improbable as to be beneath consideration. If we are to have a reasonable discussion, even on a hypothetical point, it must be based upon the laws of nature as we know them, not as we would like to imagine them."

"I think you're taking much too high and holy a tone," I told him. "Why, dammit, worm, we *always* assume that our world has a surface, even though we don't know where it is, except at the moment of breakthrough/cancellation when it doesn't do us much good."

"The transformation which takes place at the veritable surface, which we refer to as breakthrough/cancellation, or β , is most decidedly *not* proof of the existence of an actual surface to our world. We do assume in our everyday life that our world has a surface. It's a necessary psychological construct (though an artificial one, I must insist) for setting direction of wormhole. But philosophers don't believe in the existence of a veritable surface anymore."

"That's news to me," I said. "What do they believe, then?"

"The current trend is to consider that our world has a pseudo-surface, sometimes called an imaginary surface. It is a useful concept, because mathematically the pseudo-surface has to exist, whether a veritable surface exists or not. So it's useful for certain mathematical functions."

"I don't see the difference between your pseudo-surface and your veritable surface," I said. "Aren't you just calling the same thing by a classier name?"

"Not at all. The term pseudo-surface is used to express indeterminacy."

"The hell you say," I said.

"You see, dear boy, surface is pseudo-surface, or P/S, and is indeterminate because you cannot investigate it experimentally, since investigation involves cancellation of the investigator when the undetectable pseudo-surface is broken through. If you see what I mean."

There was quite a lot of pomposity to Klaus's vibrations when he communicated that. He calls himself a Transcendental Pragmatist. I think he's just clever at twisting concepts. Sometimes I think that when Klaus pontificates on one of his subjects of knowledge, there is literally *nothing* there to understand. It's just a lot of old wormhole, to use a term of ours for something that has form but no substance.

Still, Klaus is a recognized philosophical thinker, and if he couldn't at least take my proposition as a postulate from which to extrapolate — well, I probably wouldn't do any better with anyone else, except the people who will believe anything, whom I'm not interested in reaching.

"You're just being obstinate because you don't want to consider my conception," I told him. "Surface is a necessary conception. For Godworm's sake, worm, we spend our lives digging wormholes and you're trying to tell me they're imaginary!"

"Have you ever *seen* the surface of a wormhole?" Klaus vibrated coolly.

"Well, not from the outside, of course not. It's impossible for a worm to encounter wormhole without cancellation. Everybody knows that! But a worm damned well knows that he's laying down wormhole, and the wormhole he lays down has surface."

"That, of course, is the common-sense 'worm's in his wormhole; all's well with the world' view," Klaus went on in his infuriating manner. "We can assume what we please, but as long as the evidence is circumstantial rather than experiential, the thing in question cannot be ascertained with certainty. I will admit that some circumstantial evidence is very strong — as the philosopher said

when he came up with a bump against the crystalline face that his theory said didn't even exist."

I gave him a very short burst of appreciation-vibration: it was an old joke and I had heard it many times before.

Klaus went on, "Let's leave absolute truth to itself for a moment and postulate that the indeterminate pseudo-surface exists somewhere as a veritable surface. You want me to imagine that there are objects of known dimensions in the Universe? Very well, that's not too difficult. But you also want me to imagine solid, three dimensional creatures like us living on this surface."

"That's the construct."

"Well," Klaus said mildly (but with ill-concealed ironic vibrational overtones), "they would have to be very strange creatures indeed, then. Your creatures living *on the surface* would be in the position of worms exposed to wormhole breakthrough, not just for an instant, which is long enough to cancel any of us, but *continually!*"

"Why don't we just invent a special law that says he can do just that?" I suggested.

"To what purpose?" Klaus asked. "Conjecture can be entertaining as well as instructive, but why should we create a baseless fantasy that goes against all our experience of how the world really works? This surface creature that you want to hypothesize, my dear boy, could only exist in accord with laws that (since no necessity exists to even consider them) can only be considered capricious, frivolous, and unlikely in the extreme to actually exist anywhere or anywhen."

I vibrated a shrug. "Okay, Klaus, forget it."

He vibrated donnish self-approval. "My boy, a solid creature living on the surface of a spherical world of known dimensions would be a very strange creature indeed, as would be his world and the laws that govern it!"

I managed to get away from him at last — left him there vibrating softly to himself as he absent-mindedly fell into a rotating spiral mono-axial tessellation which was said to be the figure most favored by the great Aristotle, the worm who codified most of our knowledge.

So that shows what you can expect from my more enlightened colleagues. I think I'll keep these communications just to myself, though maybe I'll tell Jill. Jill is my mate, by the way. Actually, she's

my *intended* mate, and I hers, since we haven't consummated yet — otherwise I'd be cancelled and I couldn't very well be communicating all this to you, right?

Ever since your last telepathic communication, Robert, I have been unable to stop thinking about you. I keep on visualizing you (or trying to) crawling merrily around your "enormous oblate spheroid of tediously regular shape," as you put it, with its established shape and dimensions. And how I have marveled at the tantalizing glimpses I have had of your strange world — a place where intelligent creatures not only move along the surface of a sphere of known dimensions — as if that weren't enough! — but also, marvel of marvels, making physical contact with each other without mutual cancellation/death!

Can I be right about this? It seemed to be the only reasonable interpretation of your regret at our incapacity ever to have a "face to face meeting," as is customary between friends on your world.

Robert, you couldn't know that we worms speak of a face-to-face meeting only when we are speaking about the mating/procreating/dying situation. I'm sure you didn't want *that* with me! (But correct me if I've misjudged your sexual/death imagination.)

I think you meant friendly, non-stressful, non-sexual communication together in a contiguous space! A space where we could even touch, if we wanted to, without mutual and instantaneous cancellation/death.

If my supposition is right, then that sort of thing is normal, to say nothing of possible, for you humans.

And if that's really the case, I can only say, wow. Frankly, your claims about yourself and your world are going to seem preposterous to the other worms (though I believe you!). Still, I'm going to feel around and try to find some way of communicating these things you are telling me to someone.

We worms exist in an intermediate zone between the core and the surface. New matter is created and old matter is destroyed, and, in between, in the stable zone, we worms live in a finite volume, which can never fluctuate as long as the interface holds. Our world creates matter and we consume it, and there's only so much of the matter for us to eat/burrow through, and more is made only at a

certain fixed rate, and so our population is self-limiting, reducing as it over-consumes, expanding as it underconsumes.

Life does have a tendency to maintain itself in strange situations, doesn't it, Robert?

It's getting pretty crowded around here these days. It looks like a big dieoff is coming up. There's hardly room to swing a figure 8, much less anything complicated.

One of our more radical thinkers has claimed that there is actually only *one worm* in the world, dreaming dreams to itself, traveling around making wormholes, traveling so fast that it meets itself at other location time/points, canceling itself out and coming to life again, immortal within the term of continual death and rebirth, flickering in and out of existence, and dreaming everything else, our civilization, our culture, our laws, our very existence. This Primordial Worm succeeds in deceiving himself into believing that there are many, and then, when that belief is his secure possession, he struggles to deceive himself that there is only one.

Safety in Wormworld lies toward the Core, and the lower regions are densely wormholed accordingly. As you descend, you encounter a maze of wormholes, growing impenetrable at last. But one can move down, in, with luck and skill avoiding entrapment areas, find a way into the Core Heart, the inner region where creation is continuous and the entire region unwormholed. For even if a few other worms have penetrated to the Core Heart, so rapid is material replacement at the Core that their wormholes would be swallowed up quickly behind them. With their wormholes filling in so quickly behind them, they would have no history of the sort we inscribe on the walls of our long-lasting wormholes. Unaffected by memory, they would live in a sort of Eden.

"But even if we found this opening," I told Jill, "we still can't know if it leads to the Core or to death in an entrapment area."

"I realize that," Jill said. "Frankly, I'd rather run with the pack and live out my life like the other worms. But I've fallen in love with you for some reason that escapes me at the moment. If you want to live isolated from the rest, I'll go with you, and maybe we'll find the Core, but even if we don't we'll at least have a chance at a reasonable life together."

"If you feel that way," I said, "then why not come with me to the Upper Regions?"

"Because it leads to death, and quickly, too, from what I hear. I love you and am willing to put up with your eccentricities. Looking for the Core *is* eccentric, but it is still behaviorally permissible. But going to the Upper Regions is just plain suicidal. I love you very much, my dear, but — forgive me — not to the point of making a suicide pact with you."

There is evidence that ancient wormhole areas are being filled in, perhaps by the spontaneous creation of matter.

It's hard to be sure — there is conflicting evidence on the subject — but there is some evidence to show that ancient wormholes in some areas are being *filled in by solid matter*. Whole networks of prehistoric wormholes indicated on reliable though old and crudely made maps have apparently been filled in, which would indicate a process of continuous creation in our world.

The skeptics say that all that shows is that the old maps are wrong. Personally, I have a hunch that it is true. But the cynic in me feels that we worms probably use up the world faster than it can renew itself.

By the way, thanks for your further description of ideal matehood in your world. How lucky you are to be able to get into physical contact with your loved one and *not* get canceled, but rather go on to greater and richer understandings together. I can't imagine it, actually. It seems too good to be true.

I'm glad you clarified the concept of "war" for me. I see it now (correctly, I hope) as numerous solid bodies coming into direct and violent contact with each other, but not canceling each other out, as with us, but rather, violently repelling each other by thrusting and pushing movements. Physical contact does sound extremely interesting, though it's difficult for a worm to get the sense of it. But then, I suppose you can never really know what tunneling is.

For us, morality consists in not spiraling around and ahead of the tunneling of another worm. It's a pretty foul trip: You've surrounded him with spirals spaced at a critical distance, see, so what he encounters is in effect a tunnel around and ahead of the tunnel he is digging. He is surrounded by an impenetrable lattice work that

forces him to follow predetermined directions. Then the aggressor worm can close off the head of the wormhole by crisscrossing in front of it.

The heart of Wormworld morality: to spiral toward a converging worm or not to spiral.

The theory that Wormworld is not a single solid figure but instead one or more figures connected by one or more solid bridges, like linked dumbbells.

Some say that our world is not a single continuous solid figure, but rather a collection of solid bodies connected by cylindrical bridges. There is some evidence for this: some of our maps of dead areas show a dumbbell configuration, for example — two shapes, not necessarily spherical, of course, connected by a cylindrical section. The connection area is presumed interdicted, but empirical investigation is rare, since a mistake is catastrophic.

Still, enough of these dumbbell shapes turn up to make a worm think there's something to it. This theory is also compatible with the theory of continuous creation, the supposition being that our world is some sort of living matter that extends itself at various points from its (supposed) surface by a thread or filament, and then grows a new solid volume on the end of it.

You asked me how worms differentiate each other, whether we have individuality and how we show it, how we communicate, etc. I'm not a scientist, but I'll explain it as well as I can.

Every worm is born with a distinct and unique texture-pattern to his skin. And his skin is, of course, in continuous contact with the sides of his wormhole. The same basic figures, patterns, etc., occur over and over, but in ever-differing combinations, of greater or lesser æsthetic appeal. One worm can read another worm's skin-pattern at varying distances, depending on various factors.

Skin-pattern is the basic texture of individuality. It impresses itself on the sides of the wormhole as one progresses, and can be read by others, until, in time, it fades out.

This much is innate, inborn. Beyond that, we have the ability to make conscious textural patterns on our wormskin, and hence impress them on the sides of the wormhole in order to communicate with others, or (using more energy) to leave records whose duration depends on the size and the speed of the worm leaving it.

I believe I have already told you that velocity and direction are among our areas of free will. Size increases with speed, as does time and communication-strength. Linear speed is the factor for growth, or volume extension, as we call it.

The faster we tunnel the bigger we grow and the more time we have. And this has its psychological counterpart in the sense of well-being. But greater speed also brings the greater possibility of entrapment and cancellation. We have various mathematical techniques to help us plot out the Speed/Danger ratio under various circumstances. Frankly, these are of dubious practical worth and very difficult to understand, and your average worm just bores along on his hunches.

Personally, I detest science. But I, like all of us, am forced into the mysterious area of physics, metaphysics, and mathematics in order to solve the daily problems with which we are continually beset. Even our dreams and fantasies involve intuitional probes into areas where physical laws and special properties might be manipulated to our advantage. And sometimes I have nightmares of constriction.

Sometimes, on a good day, I think to myself that there is no established limit to the speed a worm could attain under ideal circumstances, since speed begets further speed, and at a logarithmic rate. The limiting factors are dead wormholes, other worms, and the unknowable Surface.

Fantasies of continually increasing speed and size are common among us. One of our oldest legends is of the Primordial Worm in the Original World. This world was entirely solid, of course. One version of the legend is that the Primordial Worm tried to reach maximum velocity (which is permitted only to Godworm, if He exists), and that the Primordial Worm grew so large and fast and long that he consumed the entire world, and worm and world canceled simultaneously. That was the end of the first Age of Worms. Then the Godworm made the world all over again, but this time with two worms in it.

Another version of the Creation Legend says the Godworm saved the world by creating a second worm of opposite sex, with whom the Primordial Worm had to share the world, mate, and procreate/die, thus giving birth to the present worm race.

Both versions of this particular legend agree that in the beginning there was nothing, and then came the solid world, then Primordial Worm, and then the Mother Worm. Other legends say that the first worm was the Mother Worm who mated with herself to give birth to our race.

In any event, the Second Age began (it is said) with two worms, and life was paradisaical because they had the entire world at their disposal, and lived long lives and designed brilliant patterns before they mated/canceled and initiated the process resulting in our present multiplicity.

However it came about, it must have been wonderful back in the old days when there were only a few worms and everyone had a chance to live a long life and express himself fully.

I am puzzled by your references to "gravity." No such force exists in our world, or if it does, we are not aware of it and it plays no important part in our lives. All directions in our world involve equal expenditure of energy. I don't understand why you make a differentiation between "up" and "down." Does it correspond to "in" and "out"? Does it have something to do with symmetry-hunger? For us it is meaningless.

We dream a time before exclusivity; a dream of innocence, of paradise, when worms coiled round and round each other in veritable contact, when there was no cancellation, only childlike sexuality and unlimited fulfillment; when all worms lived in the great worm tangle, procreated, died, were absorbed back into the tangle of life as nutrients, to blend with sunlight to give more life. That was the state of worm before the Fall.

I was very interested in your description of *water*, and it does correspond in some ways to what we call earth. We don't have anything like it, unless "water" is the medium through which we move. But this seems unlikely — from what you tell me, a worm-hole made in water would instantaneously be filled in again, which is not the case with us. Might some other "liquid" or "semi-liquid" have the requisite properties? I like the idea that the changes in our earth are due to changes in the viscosity of the medium through

which we pass. But I think it's just a nice idea. I'm pretty sure we're worms, not fish.

Possession can occur (or is said to occur) when one's short-term wormhole pattern coincides in sufficient degrees of similitude (the critical degree is unknown) with the wormhole pattern made by some worm now deceased. It would take a very large/fast worm to produce a pattern of sufficient power to continue for a distance after his death. Some evil worms have been said to possess this power, and their patterns are said to wait for someone to be ensnared by forming a similar pattern. The mystics say that the magical power of Resonance then takes place. The living worm's pattern, via a quantum/gestalt repatterning, becomes similar in all degrees to the dead worm's pattern. The living worm is forced to continue the dead worm's pattern; this our definition of possession, since a worm is defined by the patterns he creates. If a worm makes a pattern that is not his own — not self-willed, not self-directed — then he is not the same worm, he is the former worm. A worm so possessed is said to "ride the fixed pattern," usually to his quick destruction, since he is unable to use his intuition to guide him away from dangerous volumes.

I don't know if any of this is true, but it would account for the inexplicable behavior that takes over a worm from time to time.

There are said to be worm magicians among us who deliberately seek Similitude with the former pattern of some great former spirit-worm, some supreme magus. The belief is that, done consciously and with proper safeguards, the worm-spirit will not destroy the magician but rather confer on him the power to foresee the patterns of others. At cost of his soul, of course. On the other hand, the really zealous believers in God, sometimes called white magicians, try to attain Holy Resonant Similitude with the Great Pattern of the Godworm, for the sake of bliss or Infinite Velocity Communion, as it is technically called. But there are many doctrinal disputes among the Godworm worshippers and I myself take little note of all that, being an artist above all else, while still trying to keep up an intelligent worm's interest in the world around me.

We artists (for I know you are a kindred spirit, Robert) use the data that is presented to us, but without taking too much stock of it. Our true allegiance lies not with worldly or unworldly views, but

rather with some sort of formal elegance, which, for me, defines art as closely as I can do it. But either you understand these things intuitively or you don't. Do you understand?

What corresponds to vision in you is our ability to sense worm-holes, both individual and in patterns, as well as to sense and often identify other worms, and to sense certain irregularities or inconsistencies (technically called Anomalies) in the density and shape-structure of the world we move through. These Anomalies are sometimes of definite shape, size and thickness and sometimes are impenetrable. It is this fact that lends a possible credence to the otherwise discredited theory that we inhabit a crystalline world. This theory holds that the Anomalies we encounter from time to time are actually zones formed by sets of faces within our crystalline world. The zones may be considered points where intersections are all parallel, and hence impenetrable. I'm not too knowledgeable on all this, but I'm mentioning it in the hopes it'll interest you.

The primary objection to the crystalline world theory is that if it were so we should be able to find an orderly arrangement of zones and faces, and thus be able to deduce the shape of the world. Which of course we cannot do.

This objection is answered to the satisfaction of some by the Semi or Quasi Crystalline Worlders, who hold that our world has certain crystalline properties, but is not itself a pure crystal, and is not bound by the laws of Symmetry which define classic crystal growth and prediction. They say, some of them, that the world is a living world with certain crystalline properties.

I don't mean to sneer at the crystallographerworms; however, metaphysically, they may be suspect. But aesthetically, they provide the artist worm with fascinating figures to inscribe via wormhole. Worms at the comic book stage usually inscribe simple cubes, staying well outside the critical limits of cancellation where lines meet, of course, and even then frequently abandoning the figure before completion because they have grown bored or thought of something else to do.

And of course plenty of worms are not interested in crystalline inscription art and prefer to spend their lives making tight helical search-patterns of various degrees of tightness depending on their timidity: a right helical search-pattern is safer and allows its maker

to consume more "safe" (i.e. unwormholed) earth. But these tight search patterns are confining and life-limiting, because their extreme angularity holds down speed and therefore self-expression to a minimum, and so the makers of them tend to stay small and slow and lead a dull but safe life.

That sort of thing is not for me, however. Jill keeps on preaching the virtues of the helical way to me, but I am an artist worm and the fascinations of artistic wormhole inscription, the highest form of creation, call to me ceaselessly.

In fact, I made quite a name for myself recently for my composition of three linked tetragonal pyramids with single pyramids adorning all of the points except one, where I inscribed a tetrahedron for comic relief. I got quite a lot of criticism for that by the classicists, which pleased me since I am dedicated to asymmetry. Well, that's putting it too strongly; I believe in symmetry, of course, as every artist must, but I believe that the frozen perfection of symmetry must be marred deliberately by the mystery and truth of asymmetry. I suppose you'd call me a romantic. But there it is, my creed, and I'm not ashamed of it.

You may laugh at my concept of planned asymmetries, since the nature of the world and the incursions of other worms distort our creations anyhow. Some would even question whether my third tetragonal bipyramid deserved that name at all. Its shape was far from perfect. I had to do some quick maneuvering in a seventy percent filled area to finish it off. It's rather a distorted figure, but that's no reason to say that it looks like a wormturd, as one critic said, with extreme injustice.

Well, that's how it goes in the art game. At least I caused a stir, and showed that I can go beyond the simple-minded geometries which is the current artistic fad.

I promised to tell you something about what I do, and there it is. I've simplified it considerably, of course. There's a great deal more involved in figure-inscription than I've indicated. But perhaps I've said enough to give you an idea.

What do you do, Robert?

This week I'm doing repeated contact twinning of a pseudo-hexagonal shape that came to me in a dream. It's a pleasantly repetitious activity of a mildly pleasing æsthetic character, and gives

me plenty of long lines along which to build up speed so that I'll have the energy to communicate with you. By following a set contact twinning procedure I satisfy my form-need without having to actively invent a figure. I do this somewhat reluctantly, because I've got some big artistic projects in mind. Some of them would astonish you, I think. And Jill thinks I'm getting more than a little loony! But I restrain myself from entering these grand projects, in part for Jill's sake, in part out of cowardice (for I contemplate some hazardous patterns!). But most of all I desist from them so that I can give my attention/energy to these communications with you, Robert.

Your explanation of what you do with your life was a little unclear, but I gather that you are a maker of popular æsthetic configurations just as I am. When you say you get "paid" for your work, in my terms that means you get increased fame and enhanced sustenance in some form that you can use. If I understand correctly, you are a maker and seller of your own sort of wormhole structures. We're very much alike in certain ways. But this matter of "selling" is not at all obvious to me. I take it that your wormhole structures which you call stories are portable and can be isolated for specific distribution to your solid fellows. And they reward you in some way that I hope you will clarify for me in later communication.

I find it a strange idea, and I can't imagine what they could give you aside from fame. What could other creatures possibly have to do with your sustenance? I guess I've supposed that you live according to the way we worms feed ourselves. As I've explained, we make our wormholes, and thus create artistic patterns that can only be rewarded by fame, since nothing else could penetrate the isolation in which we worms must live. It's difficult for me to imagine getting sustenance from others rather than being annihilated by them. Please explain.

It was good to hear from you, Robert, although a lot of your message was garbled, or I just didn't understand parts of it. But I think I empathized with the important stuff. You tell me that you're having difficulties with the directing of your wormhole just now; you've got a lot of semi-threatening and sometimes ambiguous convergences to worry about as well, and that you've also got to make "a living" (please define in your next message!). And so it is

difficult for you to set up the necessary circumstances and summon the necessary energy and focus to communicate with me.

I quite understand, I sense your eagerness to continue our association, so I know you're not trying to put me off. Get in touch when you can. Your buddy Ron the Worm understands. I've got difficulties of my own, so my communications may get spotty from time to time also.

You tell me you haven't told any of your fellow humans about our communication, for reasons I understand perfectly. But you seem to have some idea of finding a form of acceptable disclosure for this experience via your artistic medium, your storytelling.

Go to it, pal. Our talks have given me some ideas, too.

The beauty of telepathic communication is the way the process automatically translates your meanings into symbols and terms comprehensible and familiar to the other. Thus, your name, which in actuality must be incomprehensible and unvibrational to me, comes through, via the navel of telepathy (and perhaps, who knows, divine grace) as a familiar name to me — Robert, the name of several of my friends, as a matter of fact.

I think of you, crawling around your enormous sphere whose shape you know — marvel of marvels!

It is quite otherwise with us. We live *within* our world rather than on the surface of it. We are worms. Or wormoids, since there are several races of worms.

Klaus surprised me by showing definite interest in my telepathic communication with you. "I don't like to give credence to something that I myself cannot verify," he said, "but this — let's call it *communication* that you have received — opens up some very interesting areas. Our scientists have long been aware of the possibility of other worlds with definite and measurable surfaces. We've had no real evidence for it up to now. And I'm not sure this constitutes evidence. But accepting the assumption for the moment, it opens some interesting conjectures."

"Does it prove that our world has a real surface?" I asked.

"No, dear boy. Quite the contrary. If your informant speaks true, then it proves that our world absolutely does *not* have a surface, and it proves this as a matter of verifiable knowledge rather than as an idealistic statement."

"Is that important?" I asked.

"Of course! Ideal concepts are mere logical constructs whose truth depends upon inner consistency, and whose main use is to keep the pragmatists upset and act as a sort of challenge to learn whether the ideal corresponds with what really is."

"I don't see why the fact that his world has a surface proves that our world doesn't."

"It's only an indirect proof, a conclusion to be derived from the cosmological evidence presented by your observer. Actually, I'm not absolutely sure what it proves. If anything. I must consult with some of my colleagues, several of whom are working along similar lines."

Artistry is my pursuit, perhaps the ultimate pursuit of all worms. But philosophy, and most especially metaphysics, is crucial to the direction of our day-to-day lives. I gather that it is the other way around with you. What a lucky creature you are! I had a rather frightening experience today and I'm still in uneasy self-oscillation over it. I almost got trapped in a ninety-nine percent annihilation volume.

Well, perhaps I exaggerate, but only slightly. It's hard for us worms to know much about degree of danger. With us, either you're all right or you're dead, canceled. The fear of cancellation-death haunts us all our lives, but it's difficult to really assess the threat. As far as I'm concerned, if I can sense three-quarter wormhole coverage around me, I get a little jumpy and start looking for more spacious volumes. Well, today I got into this area, it must have been at least eighty-two percent canceled, and to make it worse, it was surrounded by impenetrable faces.

Still, even eighty-two percent coverage isn't *absolutely* critical, as past statistical surveys have shown, and I was able to plot a direction for my wormhole that skirted a ninety-percent space at one point (that was hairy!) and then spiraled into a beautiful sixty percent volume for as far as the eye could see. (We don't actually see, of course, but we do have a sense similar to your long-distance binocular vision that permits us to survey territory ahead and around us and to form a three-dimensional impression of it, a sort of moving topological map in our heads which models its hollows and solid areas, and, of course, its crystalline faces if any are present.)

Do enclosed self-annihilation spaces occur on the surface where you live, Robert? Here we're always on the lookout for critical-width

bottlenecks, which permit entry through the bottleneck but no exit, since the exit wormhole would violate the critical distance separating it from the entry wormhole. Sometimes we call them bottlenecks, sometimes box canyons, depending on whether the volume is cylindrical or rectangular. There are various other kinds of traps which occur, and which one must be on guard against. The terrain through which we pass is changing constantly. If only it were constant! We are like those pioneers you told me about, traveling over the great plains in their land-schooners. Only we go through the land, not over it. Sometimes we encounter easy going on what are for us the great plains, other times we face mountains — tumbled and tangled crystalline faces which must be worked around, and sometimes there are hollow volumes that must be skirted, and at other times we find the equivalent of swamp — areas that are not hollow, but which are not sufficiently tenacious to permit us to push a wormhole through without the whole thing collapsing around us. Solid matter is what we usually talk about, but actually, that's a bit rare. Usually our surroundings are in a state of viscosity, and this viscosity exists in a range between tough, discrete, hard-packed particles on the one hand, so stable as to be considered eternal, and air (or, as we would say, space — because to us the chemical constituents of the gas that makes up hollow spaces is of no concern — the space itself is deadly to us —) and water, another peril, since it will support no wormhole, or rather, a wormhole will leave no trace in it. Since it is essential to know where you've just been in order to know where to go next — the importance of the baseline — a worm in water, try as he will to hew a straight line in hope of reaching shore, will all too often describe a circle, enclosing himself in a course too curved to permit sufficient speed to be built up to go on. And so he dies. It seems to be one of the things that our different species share, the ability to drown.

Please do tell me about your own self-annihilation spaces, Robert, if you have them. In answer to your previous question, no, we don't have wars or physical conflict of any sort, since we can only kill an enemy at cost of our own life. Some worms do from time to time get angry enough or crazy enough to do just that, but it's not a big problem as "war" seems to be with you. And thanks for explaining "anxiety" to me. Yes, it rules our lives just as it does yours.

Telepathic communication seems to carry with it a sense of the sincerity of the communicator, even though some concepts are necessarily unclear until referents (if they exist) can be found for them. So I know — intuitively, shall we say — that you are communicating your truth to me, no matter how mind-shattering and contrary to common sense the matters you are relating seem.

Robert, you are a very strange creature from my point of view, and you live under circumstances that I find incomprehensible. That is true. But I also know that spiritually we are just alike. And that is the more important truth. I believe that all intelligent beings everywhere are brothers reaching out to one another.

Well met, brother.

It's also nice that we both happen to specialize in the creation of aesthetic patterns. Maybe we'll get a chance to talk shop.

We are blind worms, if I understand your definition of vision correctly. We are born that way, but we are aware of our visual light-spectrum blindness because, in dreams, a worm can see the patterns that he blindly digs when he's awake. Perhaps worms once had sight. We do our sort of seeing through the vibrations we send and receive. And that's how we also talk to each other, of course. Our way of listening is a form of seeing, too, because during communication we form strong impressions of our respondent's mood, facial expression, attitude, etc. But we possess no specific organs of light-perception as you do, probably because there's nothing for us to see — just the face of the wormhole, and you can't really see that since you're contiguous to it.

Even though this is the case, and I am a blind worm and the offspring of unnumbered generations of blind worms, yet still I claim the ability to see things in much the same way you do, breathed in light and imbued with shape and texture and color. We believe that seeing is an innate and inalienable aspect of all sentient creatures, and that visual-light blindness or sightedness has very little to do with it. My friend Klaus would probably call seeing a transcendental function: we are blind but we see anyhow, and we don't know how it happens or even what we behold.

A worm's head terminates in a circular organ equipped with various cutting edges. This organ, in continual contact with the earth

it passes through, cuts, grinds, drills, hammers, carves, gnaws, a hole large enough for the worm to pass through. The matter it ingests passes through the worm's body and comes out as worm turd.

A worm's length increases with speed. This is known as "making a long tail." It is a term of respect, and is preferred to calling someone "a big quick worm" which contains a subtle insult difficult to translate.

Needless to say, worms fill their wormholes almost completely. Contact is maintained with the surface of the tunnel at all points. Problems of friction are overcome by the ability of worms to exude a substance which I suppose you would call slime but which we refer to as The Divine Lubricant.

A worm group traveling together can scan the area they are approaching, as they can the area they are in. Therefore some attempt at order can be made. This is necessary since a sufficient volume of space around and ahead of him is to a worm the vital requirement of life, food, shelter, occupation, and art, all rolled into one together with survival itself. In the past, many different political systems have been tried. Most of the time Wormworld is inclined toward anarchy, since a law can be physically enforced only by the death of the one who enforces it. But some social organization is needed, especially as the worm population has grown and the available space lessened. It's not like the ancient times that we hear about, when the world was virgin and untrammelled, and there weren't worms and wormholes everywhere.

From time to time, charismatic worms have sprung up who have gathered around them fanatics willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of law and order. The lives of the followers are used only sparingly, because morale even among fanatics diminishes as one after another of their numbers is killed. Usually the enforcer worms are only sent out in pursuit of crazed or possessed worms. They are the ones whose irrational figures are a threat to everyone, whose unpredictable movements impede the progress of the wormmass, and whose ecstatic behavior could sometimes be infectious, as for example in the so-called Years of the Retrograde Spiralers.

A collective mass of group lore and survival data exists, however, not all of it accurate. It is known as The Code. The Code is the basis for all ethical behavior among worms. But no one knows

exactly what The Code says, since no consensus has ever existed that would permit a codification agreed upon by all. But perhaps it's comforting to be inexact in these matters when you can't enforce The Code anyhow.

The total worm-population is forever advancing in a clockwise motion. The few worms who go against this movement are said to be retrograde worms. The environment of the worms can be described as a sphere within the greater sphere of our world. Somewhere above is the unknown and fatal Surface, somewhere below is the legendary and unknown Core. Between these limits the worm-populations move, spread out over a vast front, age-groups frequently traveling together. As for the Core itself, little is known, though much is conjectured. But I'll have more to say about the Core later.

The basic worm migration is unidirectional, clockwise, always progressing into new territory. But of course *really* new territory is never found, since all worms are in effect pursuing all other worms around the world. We're all trying to do the same thing, go faster, get bigger, that's success, but it carries its own danger: the faster/bigger a worm goes, the sooner/oftener he encounters wormhole barriers and traps as his speed takes him into the world faster than new matter can be created for him to wormhole through. It is this limit that keeps worms constantly expanding and contracting, changing speed and direction, doing an occasional helix just to get a little peace.

I think I may have given you a wrong impression of retrograde motion. When done in moderation it's not at all a bad thing. No worm, no matter how straightforward, can live a life that just goes straight ahead with no retrograde motion whatsoever. Well, maybe it is possible — we have records of highly moral worms from the classical period (old Cato comes to mind) who go straight ahead and devil take the hindmost, and when they die, they die without evasion and (as far as we know) without regret.

But most worms don't want to get ahead quite so directly — straight lines, even when practicable, tend to get boring. And retrogradism is essential in art, since no figure of complexity and elegance can be inscribed while moving only in a straight line.

The really great artists of our past ignored for the most part the inhibition against retrogradism, treated all directions as equal,

considered only the figure important, inscribed their figures and died when they had to.

Further on the subject of worm-dreams, I should tell you that they always involve the sense of *seeing something*, and what a worm typically sees in his dreams is designs and figures, some of which can be approximated in art, but most of which are shimmering visions of impossibly intricate wormhole designs which fade all too quickly upon awakening.

This is not our only dream, however. We also frequently dream the tunnel-dream — a dream of a long, curving cylindrical and segmented tunnel with intricate markings along its sides left by the texture of our individuality as we passed through it. This is the vision of the wormhole that we construct throughout our lives and flee from all our lives, and that we can never see except in a dream.

We also have nightmares of falling into foreordained death-patterns that we must follow to our destruction through an adjacent wormhole wall, or through the surface of the world itself into cancellation.

This is generally considered a very bad dream. But for the artist-worm, it holds the seeds of transformation.

Please excuse my prolixity. Frankly, there's nothing much I can do about it. Telepathy affords little opportunity of putting your thoughts into rational order. The thought/messages just all tumble out in a complicated, inconclusive, tantalizing, disorderly, and loquacious (Wormgod, yes! But you're as bad yourself, Robert!) flow of thinking/meaning/rethinking/hoping, etc.

I wish I could continue, but I'm going to have to cut back on speed for a while because I'm tunneling linked U turns through a slow area that just came up and consequently won't be able to project more signal until I'm out of it and able to get back to decent speed/strength.

But I'll be listening for your message, and I hope to hear from you soon. Tell me more about what it's like on the surface. Tell me more about the sky.

I understand, Robert, that you have a problem similar to mine: you can't present the data I send you to your people as factual, since

the scientific determinists among you will demand "verifiability," whereas our telepathic link seems to be unique and unduplicatable, at least as far as your "laws of evidence" go. I have the same problem: if another worm can't tune in on the telepathic vibrations you send me, then he has no evidence for all of this except my bare unsupported vibration.

If it were Klaus telling me this, I'd probably react as he has, asking myself why I should give credence to this fellow's baseless and unverifiable fantasy. Yes, and I'd pride myself on my intellectual rigor!

And that of course is just as it should be. As you say, some people will believe anything, if you just tell it to them with enough conviction. No proposition is too absurd to lack followers. I could get some worms to believe that Wormworld itself is no more than a figment of my imagination, and that the lives and very existence of my fellow worms depends entirely on how long I maintain an interest in them. (We've had a long history of worms calling themselves the Godworm, or one of His representatives. And maybe one or more of them were the real thing! But who can know?)

Thanks for your offer of assistance. I'm sure that some of your erudite friends could shed light on our situation in Wormworld from the point of view of your sciences. But why bother? You and I are artists. We know that everything flows, and that this communication is but a ripple in our separate lives.

And anyhow, the advancement of learning, knowledge, science, metaphysics, philosophy — just between ourselves, is all of that so very important? You yourself have told me that your science, considered on a personal level (and what other level is there to consider it from?) has done nothing despite its absurd achievements. You tell me that in your world, the products of science have served mainly to hamper, to destroy, your moment-by-moment sensory existence. You say that the food's getting worse every year, that your life-space is cramped by the existence of too many others, and that this is mainly attributable to the technologies derived from the science which makes it all possible.

Robert, I'm sure a good case could be made for the suppression of the advanced sciences and the obliteration of technology. And anyhow, humans and worms have been "discovering" and "proving" the existence of telepathy and intelligent alien races for untold years. So why should you and I bother doing it all over again for an

audience that has never since the beginning of time really believed in anything except what they can verify by their own senses? (Quite right, too.)

No, you have your work and I have mine, so don't worry about it, let's just enjoy these privileged moments and to wormhell with the Truth, whatever that may be. Just tell me whatever you remember of the travelers' tales of your theoreticians, and I'll tell you mine, and we'll have a few good laughs. Leave the others out of it, don't consult anyone, just tell me what you've picked up, tell me what the wise men of your world talk about, tell me what you think is really happening in the universe and what is a soul and what is art, even though you know that you don't really know even the little that is known; and I'll do the same.

The interference is getting worse, and your signal is noticeably weaker. Nevertheless, I think I managed to get most of your recent urgent communication. If it is true, it presents a view of our world which neither of us anticipated.

You tell me that it is commonly accepted among you, and verified as well, that there are many worlds, each grouped around a star, each star part of a collectivity of stars you call a galaxy. A galactic group of stars exists as an isolated area in the nothingness of the universal background. You further note that the galaxies themselves are grouped into universes (how did you people ever find out such things?) which are themselves part of a greater collectivity. Further, you note that each of these universes is in a state of expansion from a deduced original center, like wormholes expanding from the central Core of our world. This universal expansion can be verified, you tell me, beyond reasonable doubt.

You also went into a lot of stuff about continuous creation theory as contrasted with big bang theory (about both of which you modestly disclaimed any real knowledge) and proposed (not so modestly) your own synthesis.

You then make the following assumptions: the universe is expanding. The expansion is not, however, infinite: the bits and pieces of the universe don't keep on traveling away from the center forever. At some point, on the crest or cutting edge of the expanding universe, both matter and energy are destroyed — canceled — converted into nothingness, into background.

Meanwhile, matter is also being created continuously. Where is this matter being created, you ask. Is it spread out evenly over the whole volume of the universe, which volume, however, is continually expanding? You don't think so, though you're willing to listen to arguments.

Nor do you believe that matter is being created again at the center of the universe, in a never-ending cycle of creation and destruction. You object to that because it doesn't fit your theory, but also because it strikes you intuitively as too formal, too static, a view which excludes the quantum principle, excludes Indeterminacy, and utilizes the notion of discontinuity only nominally. You also object on aesthetic grounds, since the scheme lacks elegance in your view.

Okay, I'll go along with that.

You feel that something is expanding into nothing, yet you feel that an equipoise, however temporary, must exist between the two. You think that the shock-wave front itself, behind which is the exploding universe and in front of which is nothingness, is itself an interface, a recognizable zone, an area with its own peculiar stability. It is the area where creation and destruction are occurring simultaneously.

So. The universe is expanding. But into what? Into nothing? There is nothing to expand into. The universe simply expands, and exists at all points in dynamic relationship with nothing.

Every part of the universe is expanding simultaneously, rushing blindly into the nothing that confronts it.

But just as this nothingness has no beginning or end, so it is with somethingness. It is as all-pervasive as nothingness. You feel that, from one point of view, any location whatsoever could be considered the shock-front interface with nothingness, and that, in fact, it is only an illusion that the universe has depth in the sense of a three dimensional figure. The universe has no depth because every particle of something is confronted on all levels with nothingness.

Nevertheless, you point out, local configuration and regional peculiarity do exist, differentiation exists, asymmetry exists, uncertainty exists, and creation/destruction may itself be no more than an aspect of something beyond our conception.

From this viewpoint, the universe is indeed expanding, and some places are moving faster than others and some places are situated closer to the galactic center. Other locations are closer to the

leading edge of the universal expansion — the wave-front/point where the universe of something is literally expanding into the non-universe of nothing.

And then you dropped your bombshell. It is your belief, you said, based on the evidence I've given you, that our planet of Wormworld is poised in dynamic stability on the leading edge of the shockfront, with everything that constitutes *something* in front of it and everything that constitutes *nothing* behind it.

That's creepy, Robert. It's given me something to think about.

Given the stability of the above situation, you further theorize that a planet on the interface between somethingness and nothingness would have certain special properties. First, all directions *outward* would be into nothing, whereas all directions *inward* would be moving into something.

All right. But then you threw in the big one.

You theorize that our planet is imbedded in the interface between the expanding universe and the nothingness it is expanding into, half in and half out, half in one reality, half in another, half continually being destroyed, half continually being created.

Assuming that situation, our planet really can't be said to have a surface (making Klaus right, damn it!) since the surface is the interface between being and nothingness.

If what you think is true, then we have no surface, but we do have one hell of a cosmological combat zone. I guess I was being too smug too soon about us having no war. Our surface, according to this, is in a state of continuous explosion, leaving no solid-earth surface at the interface. Wormworld is a continually renewing explosion. Where we should have a surface, we have instead a vast number of wavefronts/points which are destroyed by the nothingness of the non-universe ahead of them but are renewed by the somethingness of the universe behind them.

You point out that this situation renders our situation unique, which is to say, paradoxical. Somehow we must imagine our planet engaged at all points with a destructive substance, nothingness. Since no point is free of the onslaught of nothingness, from whence comes renewal, the continual regeneration of Wormworld, and, perhaps, of the entire universe? From within. The within is everywhere, just like the without. The within is the point furthest from the destruction of the surface. Without a within a surface could not be maintained.

* * *

You maintain that worms are conditioned to seek outward, since life must express itself outwardly rather than inwardly. This is the direction in which sure death lies.

You think that the way to the unwormholed density of safety and beauty lies inward.

Not too far inward, you point out. Perhaps the very core of Wormworld is crystalline, and that matter expands from it and begins to undergo transformation into organic substance.

Still, an area should exist, you believe, if one could only find a route through all the ancient wormhole mazes, an area that is untouched, virgin territory. In our special situation, the search physically inward would correspond elsewhere to the search outward.

You've solved it for me, Robert! But perhaps not quite as you expected. The way out lies inward, you say, and as far as you and your world goes, you may be right. And I wish I could do it, travel inward, into the unwormed interior frontier, Beulah, the promised land.

And I'd like to get as close as I could to that ultimate crystalline perfection, into perfect symmetry, all points, all angles, faces aligned, in the cosmic explosion of the creation of the interior that goes on forever.

But that's not where I'm going. I'm going outward and upward to where I can inscribe the Great Figure. I know it's an absurd enterprise, and Jill points out that all I can hope to do is break through the surface and die. She may be right. But I believe a worm should do with his life the greatest deed he can imagine.

I don't claim to be a hero-worm. I don't expect to die. I believe that when I break through the surface, nothing is going to end. Nothingness itself will turn out to be just another partial truth, another illusion. As for me, I will be light, all light.

Here ended the communication of Ron the Worm.

ROBOTVENDOR REX

At thirteen hundred hours, Mordecai Gaston's front door scanner announced the arrival of Federal Mail Carrier 193CU (robot), temporarily replacing Fred Billings, out on sick leave. "Just put it through the slot," Gaston called from the bathroom. "Requires a signature," his scanner told him.

Gaston wrapped himself in a towel and went out. The robot postman was a large cylinder painted red, white, and blue and equipped with wheels and treads. It also had a lift control slaved to the Dade-Broward power grid so it could soar over traffic jams and open drawbridges. The robot extruded a piece of paper and a ballpoint pen. Gaston signed. The FMC robot said, "Thank you, sir." A panel opened in its side, and a large package slid out.

Gaston knew it was the miniflier that he had ordered last week from Personal Transports, Inc., of Coral Gables. He carried the package out to his terrace, removed the interlock, and activated the assembly-memory. The package unfolded, and the machine assembled itself. When it was done, Gaston had an openwork aluminum basket with a simple set of controls, a bright yellow battery box that also served as the pilot's seat, and a sealed power unit that slaved the flier to the Dade County power grid.

He got in and switched on. The power indicator light glowed a healthy red. Gaston touched the joystick lightly, and the little machine lifted into the air. Soon he was high above Fort Lauderdale, flying west over the Everglades. He could see the curve of Florida's long Atlantic beach on one side, the dark green of the Everglades on the other. Miami was a shimmering heat haze to the south. He was almost halfway across the great swamp when the

power indicator blinked three times and went out. The flier began to fall. Only then Gaston remembered the TV advisory he had heard last night: a brief power shutdown to allow Collier County to come into the grid.

He waited for the flier's microprocessor to switch automatically to battery. But the power indicator stayed off. Suddenly Gaston had a terrible suspicion why. He looked inside the battery box. No battery. Only a sticker pasted in the lid telling him where he could buy one.

He was falling toward a flat, monotonous green-gray world of mangrove, palmetto, and sawgrass. He had time to remember that he had also neglected to fasten his seat belt or wear a crash helmet. Then his flier hit the water, rose again, and slammed hard into a mangrove thicket. Gaston passed out.

It must have been only minutes later when he recovered consciousness. The water around the mangrove island was still frothed. The flier was wedged into the close-woven network of mangrove boughs. Their resiliency had saved his life.

That was the good news. The bad news was, he was lying inside the flier in a really uncomfortable position, and when he tried to get up, a flash of pain went through his left leg, and he almost passed out. The leg was twisted under him at a strange angle.

It was a really stupid accident. The Rescue Squad was going to ask some embarrassing questions when they came to get him...

But when would that be?

Nobody knew he was out here, unless the robot postman had seen him fly off. But robots were not permitted to talk about what they saw people do.

In an hour he was supposed to be playing tennis with his best friend, Marty Fenn. When he didn't show up, Marty would telephone his apartment.

Gaston's scanner would announce that he was out. That's all it would say.

Marty would keep on phoning. After a day or so he'd get really worried. He had an extra key; he'd probably check Gaston's apartment. He'd find the carton the flier came in. He'd figure Gaston had gone for a ride. But how could he tell in what direction? Gaston could be halfway across the United States by now, riding the grids all the way to California. There'd be no reason to start looking for him in the Everglades, no reason to assume he'd crashed.

It was early afternoon, and the swamp was very quiet. A long-legged wood stork passed overhead. A cat's-paw of wind ruffled the shallow surface of the swamp, and then it was gone. Something long and gray was floating toward him. Alligator? No, it was just a waterlogged tree trunk.

Gaston was sweating heavily in the humid air, but his tongue was dry, and his throat felt like sandpaper.

A hermit crab, carrying its conch shell home, came up from the water to look him over. Gaston waved violently at it, sending a shock of pain through his leg. The crab scuttled away a few feet, then stopped and regarded him steadily. It occurred to Gaston that the crabs might get him before the alligators got a chance.

Then he heard the small, thin sound of a motor. He grinned, ashamed of his own fears. The Rescue Squad probably had him on radar all the time. He should have realized that a person can't just vanish like that in this day and age.

The engine sound grew louder. The vehicle was skimming just above the surface of the water, coming straight toward him.

But it turned out that it wasn't the Rescue Squad. It was a scaled-down copy of an old-time chuck wagon. Its driver was a humanoid robot dressed in white jeans and an open-neck sports shirt.

"Howdy there, partner," Gaston said, faint from relief. "What are you selling?"

"I am a multipurpose roving vending machine," the robot said. "I work for Greater Miami Enterprises. Our motto is, 'Enterprise makes its sales in unusual places.' We find our customers in the backwoods, on mountaintops, and in the middle of swamps like this one. We're robotvendors, and my name is Rex. What would you like, sir? Cigarettes? Hot dog? Soft drink? Sorry, but we're not licensed to sell alcoholic beverages."

"I'm sure glad to see you, Rex," said Gaston. "I've had an accident."

"Thank you for sharing that with me, sir," said Rex. "Would you like a hot dog?"

"I don't need a hot dog," Gaston said. "I've got a broken leg. What I need is help."

"I hope you find it," the robot said. "Goodbye, sir, and good luck."

"Wait a minute!" Gaston said. "Where are you going?"

"I must get back to work, sir," the robotvendor said.

"Will you report my accident to the Rescue Squad?"

"I'm afraid I can't do that, sir. We are not permitted to report on the activities of humans."

"But I'm asking you to!"

"I must go by the Code. It's been nice talking to you, sir, but now I really must —"

"Wait!" Gaston cried, as the robotvender started to back away from him. "I want to buy something!"

The robotvender returned cautiously. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure! Give me a hot dog and a large lemon soda."

"I thought you had said that you didn't need a hot dog."

"I need one now! And the soda!"

Gaston greedily gulped down the soda and ordered another.

"That'll be eight dollars even," Rex said.

"I can't get at my wallet," Gaston said. "It's under me and I can't move."

"No need to disturb yourself, sir," Rex said. "I am programmed by the state to assist old people, cripples, and invalids who sometimes have similar problems." Before Gaston could protest, the robotvender had extruded a long, skinny tentacle, snaked out his wallet, taken the right change, and returned the wallet.

"Will there be anything else, sir?" the robot asked, backing his vending craft away from Gaston's island.

"If you don't help me," Gaston said, "I could die out here."

"No disrespect intended, sir," the robotvender said, "but death, for a robot, is not a particularly big deal. We call it being turned off. It's just one of those things. Eventually somebody comes along and turns you back on again. Or if no one does, you don't even know about it."

"It's different for people," Gaston said.

"I didn't know that, sir," the robot said. "What is it like for people?"

"Never mind. Don't go away! I'm going to buy something else!"

"I'm really spending too much time on these small orders," Rex said.

Gaston had a sudden idea. "Then this one ought to please you. I want your entire stock."

"An expensive decision, sir."

"My credit card has an unlimited rating. You better start writing up that order."

"I've already done it, sir," Rex said. He got Gaston's card out of the wallet, stamped it, returned it for signature. Gaston scrawled with the ballpoint pen.

"Where shall I put the goods?" the robotvendor asked.

"Just pile them anywhere, then get me the whole thing again."

"Everything?"

"The works. How long will it take you?"

"I'll have to return to the warehouse first. Then take care of my preorders. Then I'll get back here as quick as I can. It should take about three days, four at the most, assuming my owners don't reprogram me to do something else first."

"That long?" Gaston said sadly.

He had had a vision of the robotvendor shuttling back and forth between Gaston and the warehouse, maybe a dozen times a day, piling up all kinds of goods until somebody finally noticed and came out to see what was going on.

But three or four days, that was different.

"Forget the reorder," Gaston said. "And don't unload that stuff. What I want you to do is take it all to a friend of mine. It's a gift. His name is Marty Fenn."

The robot recorded Marty's address, then asked, "Did you want to include a message with your gift?"

"I thought you didn't take messages."

"A message included with a gift is not the same thing as a purposeful communication. Of course, the contents must be innocuous."

"Of course," Gaston said, his mind alight with the hope of a last-minute reprieve. "Just tell Marty that the miniflier disintegrated over the Everglades, just as we planned, but that I got only one broken leg rather than the two we had expected."

"Is that all, sir?"

"You could add that I'm planning on dying out here in the next couple of days, if that won't inconvenience him too much."

"I've got it. Now if it just passes the Ethics Committee, I'll send it along."

"What Ethics Committee?"

"It's an informal organization that we intelligent robots maintain to make sure that we're not tricked into carrying important or sensitive messages in spite of our protocols. Goodbye, sir, and the best of luck."

The robotvendor left. Gaston's leg was hurting badly. He wondered if his message would get past the Ethics Committee. And even if it did, would Marty, never the quickest of fellows, realize that it was a call for help, not just a joke? And if Marty did catch on, how long would it take him to verify that Gaston was indeed missing, alert the Rescue Squad, get some help to him? The more Gaston thought about it, the more pessimistic he became.

He tried to move a little, to ease the pain in his back. His leg kicked in with a burst of unexpected agony.

Gaston passed out.

When Gaston recovered consciousness he was in a bed in a hospital. He had an intravenous drip in his arm.

A doctor looked him over and asked whether he felt able to speak to someone. Gaston nodded.

The man who came to his bedside was tall, potbellied, and dressed in the brown uniform of a park ranger. "I'm Fletcher," he said. "You're a lucky man, Mr. Gaston. The crabs were just starting to get at you when we pulled you out. The alligators wouldn't have been far behind."

"How did you find me? Did Marty get the message?"

"No, Mr. Gaston," said a familiar voice.

Robotvendor Rex was there in his hospital room, standing at his bedside. "Our Ethics Committee wouldn't let me send on your message. They figured you might be trying to put one over on us. We can't allow the slightest hint of our helping humans, you know. They'd accuse us of taking sides and wipe us out."

"What did you do?"

"I studied the protocols. I saw that although robots aren't allowed to help humans even for their own good, there's no rule forbidding us from working *against* humans. That left me free to report your various crimes to the federal authorities."

"What crimes?"

"Littering a federal park with your smashed miniflier. Camping in a federal park without a license. And suspicion of intent to feed the animals, specifically the crabs and alligators."

"The charges will be dropped," Mr. Fletcher said, with a grin. "Next time make sure you have a battery."

There was a discreet knock at the door.

"I have to go now," Rex said. "That's my repair crew. They think

that I'm suffering from unprogrammed initiative. It's a serious condition that can lead straight to delusions of autonomy."

"What is that?" Gaston asked.

"It's a progressive disease that infects complex systems. The only cure is a complete shutdown and memory wipe."

"No!" Gaston cried. He jumped out of bed, trailing an intravenous drip. "You did it for me! I won't let them kill you!"

"Please don't upset yourself," Rex said, gently restraining him until the doctor could come over and help. "I see now that you humans really do get upset about dying. But for us robots, being turned off just means we get some shelf rest. Goodbye, Mr. Gaston, it's been nice knowing you."

Robotvender Rex went to the door. Two robots in black jumpsuits were waiting just outside. They put handcuffs on his skinny metal wrists and led him away.

MESSAGE FROM HELL

My dead brother-in-law Howard came to me in a dream and said, "Hi, Tom, long time no see; I've missed you, buddy, how you been?"

I trusted him no more dead than when he was alive. He had always been against Tracy and me. The first time we met, when Tracy brought me to her home and introduced me as the young man she had met in the writing program at NYU, her parents weren't exactly ecstatic about me, but Howard's reaction had been somewhat colder than frigid. He made it clear that he didn't want a down-at-heels writer marrying his one, his only, his beloved kid sister, Tracy.

But to Hell with that, right? Tracy and I got married and took a little apartment in Coconut Grove. I can't prove it, but I know it was Howard who tipped the cops that I was a big dope dealer masquerading as a bohemian. They came in with guns drawn and that wild who-do-I-shoot-first look in their eyes, expecting to find a laboratory in my closet or under my bed, where I turned paste into top grade cocaine. Ironical that they should expect this of me — a man who had flunked elementary science in college and whose idea of a chemical reaction was dropping an Alka-Seltzer into a glass of water.

They didn't find a thing, and the half ounce of mediocre weed under my socks finally was ruled inadmissible evidence. But it put a strain on our relationship all the same.

Lots of people marry without the approval of their family. Tracy and I did. We figured Howard would cool off after a while.

That year I sold my fifth short story and got my first novel contract, despite Howard spreading it around that I was a no-talent plagiarist and that Tracy wrote all my stuff for me.

Steady waves of hatred emanated from his stucco house in Coral Gables, permeating our little jungle apartment in the Grove. Things

weren't going so well for Tracy and me. I won't say it was his fault, but he sure didn't help.

She had a nervous breakdown, left me, went to Houston, lived with a girlfriend for a while, divorced me, and married somebody else. This was during the time I was finishing my second novel. I'm pretty sure Howard paid off somebody at the *Miami Herald* to give my book the worst review in the history of southern Florida.

So, in light of all this, perhaps you can understand why I didn't exactly mourn when, two years later, a rusted-out '73 Buick coupe driven by a drunk skindiving instructor from Marathon Shores screeched over the curb on Oceanside Boulevard like a bumper-toothed monster seeking its prey, and sieved Howard through the iron mesh fence at the foot of South Beach.

It was unworthy of me to feel so good about his getting killed, but I did. I couldn't have planned it better myself. I liked it so much I wished I'd thought of it first. I must also confess that attending Howard's funeral was the best day I had all year. I'm not proud of this, but there it is. I was miserable and I was glad he was dead and I wondered where he came off now stepping into my dream like this.

"Look, Howard," I said, "just what in the Hell are you doing in my dream, anyhow?"

"Funny you should mention Hell," Howard said, with that quick nervous laugh of his. "That's where I live these days."

"I could have figured that out for myself," I said.

"Come on, lighten up, Tom," Howard said, with a flash of irritation. "I'm not in Hell because I was bad. *Everybody's* here — everybody I've ever known, and most of the people I've ever heard of. I mean this is the place people go to after they die. Nobody even calls it Hell. I call it that because nobody ever smiles around here and I figure this has got to be the place. But it's not bad. There's a guy who runs things. He tells us to just call him Mr. Smith. But I figure he's the Devil. He doesn't seem to be a bad fellow and he's very cultured."

"I always figured the Devil would be a businessman," I said. "Or possibly a scientist."

"There you go with that cynicism, Tom," Howard said. "As a matter of fact, the Devil is an art critic and an expert on contemporary culture."

"Did he tell you that himself?"

"It's the only way I can explain how all the best jobs down here go to artists, writers, sculptors, musicians, painters, dancers...And they get the best housing, too, and the new cars."

I was interested. As I have mentioned, I'm a writer, not wildly successful, but not entirely unknown, either. My mother had always told me that my reward would come in Heaven, or wherever I happened to land. And here was proof of sorts.

"Tell me more," I said.

"A person's status down here depends entirely on how well known he was on Earth. The Supreme Court is run by Tolstoi, Melville, Nijinsky, Beethoven. Even a loser like me has been given the directorship of a large interlocking conglomerate and he gets paid whether he works or not."

"I really like the sound of this," I said. "Thanks for letting me know."

"Oh, it's fine for guys like you," Howard said, with some bitterness. "For the rest of us it's not so great."

My brother-in-law told me that he lived in a one-room semidetached house in a small suburb on the outskirts of Hell. His work — the only work available — was sorting gravel according to size and number of facets. All the unknowns did that.

"Doesn't sound too tough," I said.

"It's not. The real punishment is boredom. They did give me a television, but the reception is lousy and the only program I can get is *I Love Lucy* reruns. We also get to see a baseball game once a week, but it's always the same one, Phillies and Red Sox, Fenway Park, 1982. I could recite it for you play by play."

"Well, Howard," I said, "it's all pretty dreary, but there's nothing I can do about it. So take care of yourself and lots of luck in your new home."

"Wait!" Howard said. "Don't go wake up yet. I used up ten years' worth of cigarette rations to get into your dream. You could help me, Tom, and it would help you, too."

"What are you talking about, Howard?"

"You could write up this story for a magazine. They'd pay you for it. Just mention my name in the story. Even being mentioned by a published writer is worth something in Hell. I think it would give me enough status to get out of this suburb, take the next step,

move into a cottage in a place that looks like Cape May in the rain, and I'd get to sort semiprecious stones instead of gravel, and get two channels on the television with an NFL football game every Sunday as well as the baseball game. It's not much, but from where I'm sitting it looks like Heaven. Tom, say you'll do it!"

He looked at me imploringly. His time in Hell hadn't done much for his looks. He was drawn, haggard, strained, nervous, apathetic, anxious, and tired. I suppose that's how people on the lowest social rungs of Hell always look.

"All right, Howard, I'll do it. Now, please go back to Hell and have a good trip."

His face lighted up. "You'll do it? May Satan smile upon your reviews!" he cried. And then he was gone.

And so I sat down and wrote this story. My original intention was to use it to complete my revenge against Howard. You see, I have written this whole thing without using my brother-in-law's real name. As far as I'm concerned he can sort gravel in his semidetached house in Hell forever.

That was my first intention. But then I relented. It was a fine revenge, but I couldn't let myself take it. I think it's all right to pursue vengeance to the grave, but not beyond. And you may laugh at this, but it's also my conviction that we living have a duty to do whatever we can to help out the dead.

So this one's for you, Howard, whose real name is Paul W. Whitman, late of 2244 Seacactus Drive, Miami Beach, Florida. I forgive you for all the bad stuff about Tracy. Maybe she and I would have split up anyway, even without your help. May this mention get you safely to your hotel room and your football game once a week.

And if you happen to see my old high school buddies, Manny Klein, killed in Vietnam, 1969; Sam Taylor, heart attack, Manhattan, 1971; and Ed Moscowwitz, mugged in Morningside Heights, 1978, tell them I was asking after them and thus ensuring, I hope, their move to more pleasing surroundings.

DIAL-A-DEATH

You never think it can happen, do you? You're going along fine in the middle of your life. Time stretches endlessly ahead of you, and a serious matter such as dying will just have to wait because you haven't time now even to consider it.

And then it happens. The glitch in the system. The little pain in your head becomes piercing. Whammo, cerebral hemorrhage. The car, out of control, mounts the curb and carries you screaming through the plate glass window. The guy behind you on the subway platform gives a nervous little twitch and a push and there you are, dancing on air under the thunderous headlight of the Broadway-7th Avenue Express. I don't mean to be morbid, but these things happen. Then it's too late to think of Dial-a-Death.

Jack Stanton made page 3 of the Times when a furniture sling parted and a grand piano landed on him from ten stories up. Jack didn't have time to think about it, didn't even know what happened. There was a sudden rush of air blowing straight down, and then whammo — a fast, clean death, and not unmusical.

You may have thought the transition between living and death would be instantaneous, but you'd be wrong. Latest research shows that once the body realizes that it's outward bound on a one-way trip to whatever comes next, it goes into its own special time. A few seconds can elongate and stretch into the feeling of hours. That's the time when you really need Dial-a-Death.

Jack Stanton never felt a thing. One minute he was walking down 57th Street in Manhattan thinking about how he could raise ten million dollars for a merger (he was a lawyer specializing in corporate finances) when there was something like a puff of air above his head and he found himself somewhere else.

He was standing on a landscaped lawn near a big gracious old house, like his parents used to have when he was a kid. A party was going on inside. He could hear the music, and through the windows he could see people dancing. Somebody waved to him from the house. A pretty redhaired girl was beckoning to him.

He went in. It looked like a really good party. There were a lot of people there and they all seemed to be having fun. They were square dancing inside. Jack hadn't seen square dancing in twenty years. He joined in. Unexpectedly, he found that he was an expert at it. The crowd moved back to give him and his partner room. The girl he was dancing with was buxom and pretty and light on her feet. They were great together. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers! They finished with a flourish and went hand in hand upstairs.

The girl led him into one of the back rooms. There were coats stacked two feet high on the big double bed. They got up on top of them. The girl was so astonishingly pretty that it wouldn't have mattered if she'd been cold, indifferent, or even blew a pink chewing gum bubble at the moment of supreme ecstasy. With her looks she couldn't do anything wrong, not the first time, anyhow. And in fact she was amazingly responsive, tender, fiery, unfathomably and endlessly delicious. She was what you'd have to call a peak experience anyway you slice it.

Jack floated upward through the intensities of mounting excitement. His orgasm was tremendous, gargantuan, exemplary, incomparable, and he fell back on the bed exhausted, sated, pleased beyond telling, dropping into that delicious time when exhaustion steals over you like a gift from Psyche and there is nothing ahead but a sweet floating fall through endless layers of soft-scented sleep.

Maybe he did sleep for a while. When he opened his eyes the girl was gone. The party was gone, even the house had vanished. Now he was standing alone in a long corridor, facing a closed door, and he was stark mother naked.

A voice came from nowhere: "Jack — go through the door."

"Who is this?" Jack says. "Where am I?"

"Don't ask questions. Just go through the door. Everything will be all right."

Still drowsy and happy, Jack had an impulse to obey the voice. But he resisted. He had always been cantankerous, cross-grained, self-directed. He hadn't gotten to where he was by taking orders

from people. He was Jack Stanton. People did what *he* told them to do, not the other way around.

"Whoever you are," Jack said, "quit kidding around and come out here and tell me what's going on."

"Mr. Stanton, please —"

"Who are you? What is all this?"

"I am Doctor Gustaffson from the Institute. Do you remember now?"

Jack nodded slowly. It was coming back to him. "The guy with the new medical thing. What was it?"

"Dial-a-Death. The Institute for Harmonious Dying."

"I hired you?"

"That's right."

"To arrange my death?"

"To arrange your *dying*, Mr. Stanton, not your death. We had nothing to do with that grand piano falling on you. What a shame that was, cut off in your prime like that! On the part of myself and all the staff at Dial-a-Death I want to offer you our condolences. But we did all right by you, didn't we? When the time came, Dial-a-Death was right there. Our operators picked up your neural web within milliseconds of the piano pulping you. The computer implants worked just right. The girl was something, eh? With programming like that it's almost a pleasure to die, eh?"

"What are you talking about, dying? I'm in a hospital somewhere, right?"

"Mr. Stanton, be realistic. I hate to mention what must be a painful subject, but they could have put most of what they found of you in a gallon jar and still have room left for a wax seal. Face it, Mr. Stanton, the body's gone, you're dead."

Jack Stanton had a moment of sickening panic. Death! He had tried to make it nice for himself. Sure, he'd signed up for Dial-a-Death, and it had cost plenty. A man owes it to himself to try to make his dying nice. But that was for some time in the future. Dying had always been for later.

"What you have to do now," the doctor said, "is open that door in front of you and walk through."

"And what happens then?"

"We don't know. Nobody's ever come back. Our job is to try to keep you in a good frame of mind until you reach the door. After that, you're on your own."

"I'm not going anywhere," Jack said. "I'm staying right here."

"Mr. Stanton, I'm very much afraid that won't do."

"I'm not going through that door!"

"Well, it's up to you, Jack," the doctor said. "This is the limit of Dial-a-Death's service area."

Jack Stanton stood alone in the corridor. To hell with them, he wasn't going anywhere. He looked at the door. He was sort of curious to see what was on the other side. But that was probably what all dead people thought. They wanted to see what was on the other side of the door, and no one ever heard of them again.

To hell with that, Jack thought. I'm staying right here.

He waited. After a while the door opened all by itself. On the other side he could see another long corridor.

All right, now he knew what was on the other side. But he still didn't move. They'd have to drag him through that door kicking and screaming.

It didn't happen that way. The door waited for a while. When he still didn't move it came for him. There was nothing to struggle against, nothing to resist. Suddenly he was on the other side. And then the next thing began.

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