THE COPY SHOP

EVELYN E. SMITH

DOUBLEDAY SCIENCE FICTION

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If aliens were to land in New York City, would anyone notice? *Could* anyone notice? Ted Bogard is convinced that even the most peculiar-looking alien could freely wander the streets of the Big Apple completely undetected amidst the stream of everyday "characters" currently in residence. He should know since Ted, himself, must frequently—albeit for very sound reasons—dress up as his own mother (among others). And an influx of aliens is certainly as logical an explanation as any for the latest rash of subway murders (even though Mrs. Gluck, Ted's nosy neighbor, is convinced that he is somehow linked to the crimes).

Explanations become clearer to Ted one night while watching television. Suddenly, Johnny Carson is unceremoniously pre-empted by a strange blue force. Speaking to Ted through his

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never-before-used personal computer, the force identifies itself as his father, and then proceeds to tell Ted exactly what these aliens are up to and what their future plans are to be. But now will Ted be able to convince anyone else (including the reporter he has fallen in love with) of the facts of alien life in New York? Or is the city already beyond salvation?

Witty and razor-sharp, THE COPY SHOP zeros in on modern urban chaos with stylish, tongue-in-cheek accuracy while providing food for thought about where mankind came from and where it's going.

Evelyn E. Smith has been writing science fiction stories for thirty years. She is the author of two previous novels, *Perfect Planet* and *The Unpopular Planet.* She lives in New York City.

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The Copy Shop

By Evelyn E. Smith

THE COPY SHOP
UNPOPULAR PLANET
THE PERFECT PLANET

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EVELYN E. SMITH

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All of the characters in this book
are fictitious, and any resemblance
to actual persons, living or dead,
is purely coincidental.

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To Beatrice Buckler

The Copy Shop

I

I have played with the idea that if an alien creature wished to lead an unobtrusive existence in some earthly community, he (she? it?) could do no better than to take up tenancy on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, always provided he-she-it could find an apartment. There, among joggers, muggers, bicyclists, beggars, shriekers and squeakers in tongues, peddlers, pushers, flashers, winos, whiners, mimes, madmen, and the rest of that urban universe, no particular notice would be taken of him unless he were a really unusual shade of green or blue; and, even then, so many odd little places are being admitted to the United Nations, that might be looked on, or not looked on, as unremarkable.

Actually, those individuals who live here or who frequent the neighborhood are almost all aliens. The true New Yorker, born and bred within the 320 square miles that make up the city, is a wary, low-profiled person, apt to get a bit freakish in old age, but essentially reserved, well-spoken, intelligent; above all, courteous, which the outlanders are not; considerate, which the outlanders are not; in touch with his own spirit, which the outlanders are not.

Not many of us are left in Manhattan, but I understand there are small colonies settled in the outer boroughs. Otherwise, we are a vanishing species. These others, the loud, rude barbarians whom the rest of the

country mistakenly regards as typical New Yorkers, are alien arrivistes, cast out from other states, countries, why not worlds?

So I have fantasized, without actually believing. But I have experienced them now, the real outworlders, and I have come to understand the chasm that lies between alien and alienation. However, I cannot tell anyone what I know. For one thing, I don't have the words. For another, nobody would believe me: I have too long cultivated an apparent eccentricity which does not inspire confidence.

You may well think that no cultivation is involved, that I am, in fact, as mad as the rest of them. Fair enough, I have my doubts about you, too. However, although it might be objectively possible that I myself only fancied that I saw such beings (*saw* being as near as I can come to the operative word), by now nearly everyone has heard of, and some have viewed, the results of their presence, even if they are still ignorant of the cause. So, unless you believe that television, newspapers, and radio are all combined in conspiracy, you'll have to agree that any delusion would have to be a collective one.

But the third reason I can't tell anyone what I have seen is purely selfish. Despite a lifetime of avoiding involvement, I am involved. I cannot afford to have attention called to me. And in a way I am glad, because I cannot really concern myself with a universal future as opposed to a personal and painful present.

However, now it is an earlier time, when I have not yet become aware of the aliens, when they are still

renewing awareness with themselves. I am walking up Broadway, en route from the post office at Sixty-eighth Street, the Ansonia Post Office, named after a hotel on Seventy-third Street. Once upon a time, Broadway used to be an Indian warpath. It still is. And now, on a sunny September afternoon, the savages are out in full force, arrayed for battle.

I am my true self today, so I can afford to stroll, unafraid of being hailed by an acquaintance, perhaps too closely inspected. The scene is changing rapidly. Several stores have gone out of business; two of them were supermarkets. Several stores are opening; three are restaurants. Boutiques are opening, expanding, overlaying dry cleaners, shoe repairers, drugstores. . . . A number of the old hotels are being rebuilt. I wonder what has happened to the old people who used to live in them; have they all turned to particulates and disappeared into air that hasn't been thin for years?

Copy shops are springing up all over. They are almost always crowded. What in the name of all that's holy do these people copy all the time?

I pass the newsstand at the subway station. Headlines in English and Spanish. Once they used to be in English and German, Yiddish and Russian. The Yiddish and Russian and German papers are still there, if you look, pushed into the background, thinner in size, thinner in circulation, but still hanging in. The Washington *Post* has achieved almost equal ubiquity with the New York *Times*. Something strange has happened to the New York *Times*. There are a number of weekly papers, some of them representing very special interests, indeed.

Fatal airplane crash. Brutal rape. Shocking subway murder. Prices going up. The usual horror stories. I am a trifle out of touch, having spent the last couple of nights with Candace down in the Village, among the lush, seedy trappings of Mother's old "studio." No radio or television set there. Mother always said it interfered with the spirit voices.

I don't buy a paper, feeling the headlines have already told me more than I want to know. I am, of course, as you will have guessed, wrong.

I pass Zabar's and think about going in, even though it has changed, enlarged, taken on a festival atmosphere. It has expanded through the ceiling into a forest of kitchenware that I've seen glowing like a beacon in the darkness as I ride past in a bus. It is now a gourmet department store and one of the windows contains a poster challenging Macy's. In another window someone is making some kind of long snakelike food. The inside is crowded—as much with counters as customers—but I decide not to go in. I dislike crowds. And I dislike circuses.

Even though there has been no rain for days, the gutters are flooded, causing piles of garbage to collect at the openings to the sewer. I step carefully as I cross each corner. The antidog-litter law is not being rigorously observed, though it looks more as if buffaloes have left the traces I see. More accurately, bisons. Bisons are a New York animal. All of the bisons in the country hail originally from the Bronx.

Almost everybody is wearing blue jeans, even the ladies of the afternoon. They accost me, but only half-

heartedly. Some things are not to be done by day. Some things should never be done in blue jeans.

As I pause for a red light I notice a large pale blue van behind me, the kind of vehicle that the TV and film crews that appear so frequently in the neighborhood use, except that there is nothing on it to indicate any commercial affiliation. Yet it does not look like a private vehicle. The windshield seems to have been treated with some glare-minimizing substance, so that I cannot see the driver clearly. But there is something odd about him. Or her. Or it.

Down the block, workmen are excavating the foundations for what promises to be an enormous building. The noise is corrosive. Bright note: the sound of the drills and jackhammers almost drowns out the noise made by the adolescent anthropoids with their barely portable radios. It does overwhelm the determined man with the amplified spinet. Snatches of Bach rise now and then when the hammers and drills pause. At intervals the subway rumbles from its tunnel beneath Broadway and would shake the street, except that the street is already shaking. And, beyond all this, a constant humming—some kind of generator, perhaps.

The workmen and their machines have been here for over a year: first tearing down, now excavating, eventually building. Most of the time they seem to be resting, eating, drinking beer, sometimes all three. A sign on the fence, put up by the building-to-be's sponsor, the Hamid Foundation, informs anyone able to read (fewer and fewer these days) that the building is going to go a long way down, as well as a long way up. Several tiers of

parking garages and basements, subbasements, and sub-subbasements below, as well as a private subway entrance; stores, plus offices, plus condominiums, and a health club above. A "landscaped plaza" at ground level. The works.

There are complaints that the blasting is destroying the old buildings in the neighborhood. Every boom loosens a bit of stonework here, a gargoyle there. No one has been hurt as yet, so far as I know, and the company claims to be fully insured; but who knows how to restore a gargoyle these days? When I say nobody has been hurt, I refer to civilians. Rumor says there has been an unusually large number of accidents on the site.

This is the first such building to be erected so far north on the West Side, the largest to be built above the midtown area. "Stella Polaris," it will be called, a space-age allusion, I take it, to the naming of the celebrated Dakota. A boutique metaphor. The fence is decorated with whimsical designs in primary colors, to forestall graffiti. Incorporated in these designs are little windows through which the passerby can observe the activities below.

I should have had a sentimental attachment to the site, because I'd been born there, but I am not a sentimental man—at least, I try not to be. At that time Mother and Aunt Magda had their "studio" in a basement apartment in an old tenement, a few blocks away from where we lived, my father, Mother told me, having refused to let them pursue their profession in our apartment, even though technically it was theirs not his.

"This was a really nice part of town once," I remember Mother saying, "but that building"—referring to the tenement—"was always terrible. Roaches as big as rats and rats as big as . . . God knows what. Every time there was a little rain, the subbasement got flooded, sometimes even when there was no rain. There was always a dank smell, mold and mildew over everything, but it had such an *aura*. . . ." Her eyes developed that unfocussed look she got when she was about to call on her spirit guide, the Indian Sowocatuk. I'd always hated him.

"Not quite the most healthful place for a pregnant woman," I observed. I was ten at this moment in time and precocious.

"We didn't know about such things then," she lied. "Besides, it was cheap. And you turned out all right, didn't you?"

Did I? I had been born prematurely after Mother fell down the steps of the subbasement. She couldn't—or wouldn't—explain what she'd been doing there. "Maybe I was in a trance," she suggested when pressed.

Yet something must have happened, because neither she nor Magda ever went back. I don't know whether Father let them conduct their professional activities in the apartment now, because, by the time I became aware, he was gone. Mother and Aunt Magda had to take over his business, so they didn't have time to conduct their own, except for an occasional weekend or evening session—just as well, because the neighbors didn't like it. Although the Brooklyn brownstone had been acquired by then, the Village studio didn't come until later, and it wasn't until much later that I learned

about it, when circumstances forced Mother to tell me. Bit by bit, circumstances forced her to divulge scraps of information until at the end I had, as I thought, learned everything.

The tenement had been condemned soon after my birth, torn down a few years after the war ended, so I don't remember it. I dimly remember the empty lot and then the tearing down of a ramshackle tenement next door that must have been twin to my birthplace. I clearly remember the taxpayer—a one-story building designed to bring in enough income to pay taxes on the land until its owners found it profitable to build something more elaborate—that went up when I was twelve or thirteen. A supermarket occupied it for a time, but the meat always seemed to be spoiled and the fruit rancid; and, after lingering longer than anyone expected, it went out of business. An outlet store that specialized in odd job lots hovered in a tentative way on the premises for a while, dwindling away until there were no more ballpointed pens misprinted with the names of obscure firms in faraway places, no more slightly-damaged small leather goods of indeterminate function, no more spare parts for items that hadn't been manufactured in years, if ever. . . .

After that the building stood empty for decades. It was set on fire a few times, but never burned down. The windows were tinned up, but the tin got wrenched off and there were more fires. Derelicts, junkies, people said, even ghosts—except that in New York people don't worry about ghosts. Ghosts make better neighbors than most.

Something should be done about it, people said, and

now something was being done. The taxpayer and all the old tenements that flanked it had been torn down until the whole block lay bare in preparation for the building of the Stella. There had been marches, protests, chanting, activists claiming that any new housing built in the neighborhood should be for the poor people, the released mental patients, the ex-offenders. But the fiery spirit of the sixties had been sapped by creeping boutiquification. The activists had been deactivated. Rents would go up even higher and the quality of life sink even lower. It would have been time to leave . . . if only I could leave.

The house in which I live is an old one, pre-World War II, a one-time luxury building, still serviced by a doorman (doormen, actually, because there are several, all looking as if they had been cloned from the same seedy prototype). It has one of those monumental exteriors and Egyptoid lobbies that are always being ascribed, for the most part erroneously, to the unfortunate Stanford White. The doorman is holding court in front of the entrance with a group of cronies, all chattering in semi-Spanish. He does not look up as I go by; he will not look up again until the weeks before Christmas, when he will sometimes smile.

A group of neighbors clusters agitatedly about the mailboxes. They are all female and, except for Mrs. Mortadella, who is in her thirties and not a regular, range in age from the late forties to what looks like the early hundreds. The median is well over sixty. Because of rent control, they are doing their damnedest not to die. Most of them look as if they would be good for years

yet. Younger people live in the house, of course, most of them outlanders, but they will be at their jobs or looking for work or sunning their young in Riverside Park. That's rare, though; most of the heterosexual couples who live here seem to be putting off parenthood. At the rents they have to pay now, they probably can't afford children. But, then, if they had wanted to raise young, they would hardly have come here. New York today is not a place in which to raise children. Perhaps it never was.

The rent-stabilized tenants pay more than twice as much rent as those under rent control, and they resent it. They also know that, with their life-styles, they are unlikely to live as long as these tough old birds, and they resent that, too.

A few old men live in the house, but most of them continue to go out to work, or the semblance of work, every day. Perhaps that is why the old women have a much higher survival rate.

Mr. Zapolya, from the third floor, is, I believe, retired; from what, I cannot say. As far back as I remember, he has never gone out to work. However, he doesn't hang around the lobby. The lobby is for women. Man's place is in the basement, where Igor, the superintendent (last name unpronounceable), a compatriot of his, along with some other middle-aged and old men, all refugees from some Mittel-European country that no longer exists, meet to play cards and—my mother used to say—plot. It's almost impossible to get Igor to do anything in the afternoon, when they meet. On the other hand, that's the only time you can find him. Other

times he, as is the custom of superintendents, disappears entirely.

The ladies are discussing the airplane crash, no, the horrible subway murder. Why they should be quite so upset baffles me. People are always being thrown off subway platforms, pushed under trains, stabbed on staircases, set on fire in change booths; that's the implied risk sold with every subway token.

Because I want my mail, I cannot slip past. I am forced to greet them, get drawn into the maelstrom. "Have you heard of the terrible thing that happened, Mr. Bogard?" Mrs. Rensselaer, the grande dame from 7B, asks.

I say yes I have heard and move past Mrs. Minkus and Mrs. Gluck to unlock my mailbox. I am especially wary of Mrs. Gluck. She is one of a tribe of trolls—diminutive, red-haired, nearly identical creatures who have always lived down the hall and who have been at odds with my family ever since I can remember. There are small trolls who grow into full-sized trolls (none over five feet high, not even the males) and either marry other trolls and leave, or bring in new trolls and produce a generation of trollets. The old trolls grow older; their sandy locks turn to frost and eventually they fade away and are replaced by new ones, but the rancor continues. They didn't like my father (hearsay); they don't like my mother; most of all, they don't like me. I don't know how they felt about Aunt Magda. I was never sure how I felt about her myself; she was always so dim.

The trolls used to complain about the spirit rappings and make snide remarks about the number of uncles that came and went after father had gone; and, now

that the rappings have stopped and the uncles have gone, and the airline stewardesses and then the trendies have moved into the building with a life-style that would make Mother's resemble Queen Victoria's (and we don't really know all there is to know about Her late Majesty, do we?), they are scared of the silence next door, for I am a very quiet man. They suspect me of engaging in dark practices and of encouraging the pigeons, who need no encouragement. They feel sure that somehow I am deliberately causing leaks in the pipes and cracks in the walls and stealing their electricity (it's Igor, I suspect, who's doing that). In my turn I am sure that they search my garbage before the porters get around to picking it up, a matter of days sometimes, and talk about me behind my back in an unkindly manner. That's what living in New York does to you; it turns you paranoid.

Being New Yorkers, we keep up the pretense of civilized association. It is a canard to say that New Yorkers do not greet one another when they meet; it is only the outlanders who, away from their native habitats, feel free to indulge in such churlishness. However, I would not want to run the risk of nudging her as I reach for my letter box. She might cry out. . . .

"Rape?" Mrs. Trehearne asks eagerly. "Was she raped?"

There are avid echoes. Trust that to be the first thing that comes to their minds. Murder is good but rape is better.

From Mrs. Minkus: "They say she was so mangled, they couldn't tell." Mrs. Minkus is accepted as an authority on matters of this kind, because, I understand,

one of those pudgy pigtailed granddaughters of hers who were always screeching and throwing up in the elevator grew up and got a job on a newspaper, a logical progression.

"That's why it took so long to identify her," Mrs. Minkus explains from the heights of her inside source. "Mr. Weinstein wasn't even told about it until this morning. He thought she was just spending the night with her sister in Forest Hills. . . ."

They chitter on. At last they have attracted my full attention. It is one thing to hear of a horrible subway murder; another to hear that one of your neighbors has been horribly murdered in the subway.

II

I knew the Weinsteins vaguely. Mr. Weinstein did something in Wall Street. Mrs. Weinstein's lifework seemed to be collecting aggressively for various charities. She was—had been—late fortyish, with a slight Mittel-European accent, like so many of the middle-aged-to-elderly people in the building, always smartly dressed in styles that had just gone out of fashion. Not at all the sort of person you would expect to be the victim of senseless tragedy, but then that was what made a tragedy senseless.

A redeployment of neighbors gave me the chance to open my mailbox. A lot of letters. The postman was improving. Over half were for me or members of my family. Two were for other people in the building. Two for people in other buildings on other blocks. One for somebody in Flushing, Queens. Some of my letters were bills. Too many, too obviously, were checks. I could feel the troll-wife's sharp eyes sliding over them. I laid the letters that weren't mine on the table under the mailboxes where the postman would eventually collect them, providing nobody stole them first. "I haven't seen your dear mother for a long time, Mr. Bogard," she purred.

"She's with my dear aunt in Florida," I told her, as I told her every time, adding, "They're both fine," before she or anybody could ask.

"Remarkable woman, your aunt," Mrs. Gluck observed. "She must be in her nineties by now."

"I don't see anything so remarkable," Mrs. Rensselaer said huffily. "It so happens she's three years younger than I am." Which was not, as a matter of fact, accurate. She turned to me. "When you write, don't tell them what happened to Mrs. Weinstein; it would only upset them." Clearly she expected me to dash off a long narrative letter right away. Or maybe something like this should be worth the expense of a phone call, especially if I waited until after nine, when the rates went down.

"Right at our own station, too," Mrs. Trehearne said. "I can tell you I'm not going to go down in that subway again for a good long time."

They were genuinely fearful, genuinely regretful, yet, at the same time, enjoying themselves. A neighbor horribly mangled in the subway (especially a younger neighbor, especially your own subway station), interesting break in the routine of retirement. For a while they wouldn't venture on the subways themselves; then they'd start riding again. The occasional subway murder seemed as natural to them as the occasional death in childbirth had been to their mothers and grandmothers.

Myself, I never rode the subways now, hadn't for years, less out of fear than fastidiousness. I had never liked them, even in the old days when they were comparatively clean, comparatively safe. I hated journeying underground through those labyrinths, never knowing what kind of world I might emerge into at the end of the ride. At night I still had dreams of being lost

in a maze of tunnels full of trains and shops and restaurants and banks, and with no way out. For some reason, in those nightmares I always either started out or wound up beneath Bloomingdale's.

"Exactly what time did it happen?" the troll-wife asked.

"About midnight, so far as they can tell," a new voice said. A girl, a young woman, had joined the group. Since the others seemed to accept her, I assumed she was a new tenant. I wondered who had died.

"Was she really so horribly mangled?" Mrs. Rensselaer asked. "The papers—the media—exaggerate so."

"They're merely trying to make the news interesting to the public. I heard that parts of her were—well, it almost looked as if somebody, or something, had started to . . . eat her, and been frightened off." The girl's voice was as composed as if she were giving them a recipe.

There were assorted gasps and little, pleasurable screams.

"Probably a train coming," the troll-wife said. "Those trains make so much noise they'd scare anybody. But whyever was Mrs. Weinstein coming home so late in the middle of the week?"

Mrs. Cohen had this information. "She was taking a course at the New School. Either 'The Search for Personal Identity' or 'Creative Woodworking'; I forget which one she finally decided on."

"Do classes run so late?" Mrs. Trehearne asked, and Mrs. Cohen said, "Well, afterward you go out with the class for coffee and a schmooze. That's the best part of the course."

The girl said something in a low voice to her hand. For a moment I took her to be another ex-mental patient; then I saw the tiny tape recorder. Our eyes met. She grinned at me. She was a pretty girl, trim and fresh-looking, the very antithesis of Candace, although I supposed they must have been about the same age—early to middle twenties.

Mrs. Cohen broke into tears. "And she'd just lost fifteen pounds, too. All that money for diet pills and doctors—such a waste!"

While the other ladies joined her in commiseration, I turned right, to the recess where the elevator was situated, well out of sight of the front door—a perfect blind spot for illegal activity. A mirror had been installed on the wall facing the elevator door, angled so that the doorman could keep an eye on it, in the remote event that he happened to look that way. Somebody had covered it over with graffiti of a simplistic and obscene nature.

As I entered the elevator, I thought I saw something in the little convex mirror high up in one corner that was supposed to reveal skulkers and lurkers, but when I got all the way inside no one was there.

I turned on the radio when I got inside the apartment. Further details. The body hadn't been on the platform, but in a tunnel beyond; and it had, indeed, not only been mangled almost beyond recognition but was missing in part. However, the marks on it were not the marks of teeth or claws, and the New York police, wise in the ways of violence, knew as much about claws

and teeth and the kind of marks they left as they did about bullet wounds and knife cuts.

I wished there were somebody I could, indeed, call up just to talk to, but I couldn't think of anyone. Candace? Out of the question. Sowocatuk? He hadn't been around for years.

What luxury it would be to be able to go to a psychiatrist and just talk and talk. A luxury I could not afford, however, even though I had a reasonably substantial income. What would I tell a psychiatrist? That I heard voices? Everybody heard voices. I *felt* voices, something trying to get through to me that had no mouth and spoke without words.

The apartment seemed larger, emptier than usual. Eight rooms, three and a half baths, a butler's pantry, not enough closets. Sometimes it was too much room for me; other times the walls closed in to the choking point. A cobweb hung high in one corner of the living room. I knocked it down with an old sword that had belonged to Uncle Peter.

A large cockroach with a bluish tinge crawled across the floor. Quickly I stepped on it before I could feel compunction. The cockroaches had been here before man was; they would be here after we were gone. But the trolls couldn't take the cosmic view. They kept complaining that I was sloppy, and I didn't want them given genuine cause for complaint. I suppose I am sloppy. I don't think I'll ever get used to the fact that there is no longer anyone to wait on me.

I sat down at the big ornate desk that had been Aunt Magda's and not new then, so probably it would be considered an antique now, a "collectible," anyhow. A

lot of the stuff in the apartment probably had gone collectible in this age of indiscriminate acquisition, and would be worth money if I ever moved. If I ever moved . . . ! But I was attached umbilically to this accursed place. And, I kept reminding myself, I didn't need more money.

I opened my bills. This month the telephone company had charged me for a long-distance call to Boston that I had not made. Last month it had been a call to San Francisco that I had not made. Next month it would probably be Mars.

The sound of distant jackhammers stopped. Four o'clock. I took the checks out of their envelopes and carefully filled out the deposit slips appropriate to each, ever fearful of mixing them up. I put each in a postage-paid envelope from its bank. I did most of my banking by mail. All this took time. I had to be very careful not to make an error.

A couple of months before, I had been seduced by a cunning advertiser into buying a home computer, which was supposed to do all these things and more for me at the touch of a button. It was a mistake. I told myself that, in the event of emergency, it would make my records too easily accessible to everyone. The fact was that it made them inaccessible to everyone. Including me.

One check I kept back, payment for a job I'd done for the Ogilvie Company that I would present tomorrow at a bank on Broadway a couple of blocks down, so I would have cash.

I'd turned the job in about a month before. Bud

Lovatt of Ogilvie had called a few weeks before that to see if I could do a fast rewrite job for him. I'd said sure, glad to have a piece of legitimate work where I could later send in a bill with my own social security number, everything right and tight.

On the way down from Bud's fifteenth-floor office, I ran into Mark Foster in the elevator. We had gone down a couple of flights before he asked, "Ted Bogard, isn't it?" I looked at him then and recognized him. He had changed, looked a lot more than—how long had it been?—ten years older. And I have a tendency not to recognize people out of context; he'd been working for Magnificent down on Twenty-eighth Street when I knew him before.

Maybe I had changed, too; you can't really tell about yourself. Whenever I come upon my reflection suddenly, in a store window or a mirror, it is always a stranger who faces me. Sometimes, even when I go to shave and expect myself, it is a stranger who faces me. Occasionally I have thought of growing a beard. Candace says it will suit me, which is why I have never done more than think about it.

Mark stopped in the lobby outside the elevator door, so I had to stop also. He said he hadn't seen any of my work recently. I told him I hadn't been doing any fiction, leaving him to infer that I'd been working on that history of New York I had always planned to write—and still may, although it will be very different from the one I originally had in mind.

"That's a shame. I always thought you had it in you to be another Louis Lamour, if you'd only buckle down to it." Then he said Ogilvie was putting out two Westerns

a month regularly, now that Murasaki Enterprises had taken over, and why didn't I do a book for them?

I told him I was pretty busy these days, but that I would give it a think. I actually said, "Give it a think." Something about the lobby decor made me talk like that. I think maybe it was the sculpture.

I did think about it on the bus home. Here was something I could do if I went straight, so to speak. It wouldn't pay much, but that didn't matter. And it would be something I did on my own, something that didn't owe anything to anybody else.

By the time I got home, I was feeling almost cheerful, even had an idea for a book. I couldn't wait until the next day to call him at the office, so I sat down and wrote a note saying maybe we could have a drink after work or lunch one day next week and we could talk. I didn't say anything about my book idea, in case you're thinking that's what turned him off.

Weeks went by, and I didn't hear from him. I forgot about my idea for a book. I probably wouldn't have gotten around to doing it, anyhow.

There was a sharp peal at my doorbell. I didn't answer. I answered the bell only if I expected somebody, and, since I never expected anybody, I never answered the bell. Its shrillness was picked up by the shriek of a fire engine, diminishing in the distance, so the fire couldn't be in my house. I looked out of the window, toward the Drive. Most of the buildings between me and the river were lower than mine, so I had a view—interrupted, but a view nonetheless. It was darker than it should have been at this time of year. Blue lights

flickered behind the trees, in the park, on the water; I couldn't tell which. I had seen them oftener than usual in the past few weeks. Probably they were something atmospheric or meteorological. Marsh gas, maybe. Riverside Drive was growing increasingly mephitic. *Teddy, Teddy, Teddy,* a bird chattered outside.

The elevator was empty when I got on, but two floors down it stopped to admit the girl from the lobby. She gave me a broad smile. "Hi," she said.

"Hello," I told her.

Which should have ended it, the usual New York elevator conversation between strangers. Or we could have gone on to discuss the weather, crime, inflation, terrorism . . . the usual small talk. She departed from custom, however; I could see from her eye that she was a maverick. "Been living here long?"

"All my life." And several other lifetimes, too. "Have you just moved in?" I was forced to ask.

"Oh, I don't live here. I'm visiting my grandmother —Mrs. Minkus."

Good Lord, the reporter. The tape recorder should have tipped me off. I wondered whether she was the one who had bitten me over twenty years ago; not that I hadn't been almost glad to be bitten at the time, because it diverted the attention of her mother—a very eager lady. She must know perfectly well how long I had been living here, or, at least, that I had been living here for a very long time. Even if she had forgotten me, her grandmother would have told her.

She eyed my briefcase. "Going out?"

Obviously I wasn't going in. "I'm meeting a friend," I said, knowing I didn't have to explain, unable not to.

"Did you know that there have been quite a few disappearances around here recently?" she asked, as we got out in Stanford White's (or somebody's) version of King Tut's tomb. "People who were supposed to be leaving for home on the subway. People who never got there."

"People are always disappearing around here. Or so I understand from the newspapers."

"I work for the *Herald,"* she informed me. "We run a daily crime docket—murders, robberies, disappearances. . . . You must have seen it. Or do you read only the *Times?"*

"If I read any paper at all. The *Times* isn't what it used to be." Both of us were silent for a moment in tribute to what the *Times* had been.

"Our crime expert makes daily charts analyzing crime patterns. He saw this trend even before the Weinstein killing."

"Very acute of him. Friendly with Mrs. Weinstein, were you?"

She gave me a look. Then the smile came back. "I never even met her so far as I know. Anyhow, I'm getting local color for the paper. I'd like to talk to you. You are the one who nearly killed that mugger in the lobby a couple of years ago, aren't you?"

"That's an exaggeration. I simply used just enough force to stop him." I'd had trouble evading reporters then and I had no wish to go through all that again.

"Of course. Mrs. Rensselaer thinks you're 'a fine young man.' "

I smiled. "To her I probably seem young."

The girl opened her mouth and shut it. I know I look younger than I should at my age.

"And why shouldn't she approve of me? After all, I probably saved her from a fate worse than death."

She stopped smiling. "That's no joke."

"I know. They're not very choosy." I saw her expression. "I mean, they're no respecter of age or—or anything."

"Look, could you spare a few minutes? Let's go somewhere and have a drink. On the *Herald,* of course. I really would like to talk to you."

"I'm sorry, but I'm late as it is."

"Another time then. I warn you, I'm going to keep after you."

Why me? I wondered, starting off in the direction of the Drive, because I'd figured she'd head for Broadway, where most of the transportation and all of the stores were. I hardly knew the Weinsteins. It was possible she was really just looking for local color. If she probed too deeply into my background, she was going to find too much of it for my safety.

I looked back. She was standing in the doorway, watching. The light over the door lit up her hair like a halo—highly inappropriate, considering what journalism has come to these days.

It was foggy down by the Drive and growing dark. The fog had a funny smell to it, the smell of decay. It often did. People said it came from New Jersey. Tonight it smelled of death. It often did that, too. There were many dead things in the river. The chill was prickling

my skin into little bumps. I mustn't let the girl disturb me. I reassured myself once again: she wasn't interested in me and my life-style; she was after this thing that prowled the subway, the Phantom of the IRT.

Nobody in sight on the Drive except me and a couple of large dogs leading small people. Could it have been a dog? Dogs sometimes got on the tracks. But the police would have recognized dog bites. Dogs would have left other traces.

It was growing colder. The occasional flashes of blue seemed no closer than they had when I was upstairs. Something whispered wordlessly in my ear, as if trying to gain my attention. The wind. The winds were always strong here, blowing from the west. Which was why the earliest settlers had done their building on the east part of the island. The European settlers, that is. When the Indians sold Manhattan Island to the white man for sixty guilders, it was the white men who were cheated. In the first place, that was a very good price in those days for an obscure island out in the middle of nowhere. In the second place, the island didn't belong to the Indians who sold it, or to any other Indians. No one lived there—no people, anyway. The Indians hunted and fished and camped, but never lived there. They were a lot smarter than we.

The lurid pink streetlights that turned night into an eerie, otherworldly day flashed on. And fear rose in me, not of the girl, not even of discovery, but of something more primeval, something both inside and outside of me, something that seemed to be following me, although, when I turned and looked behind me, I saw nothing.

Almost nothing. If I looked hard, I could see the kind of thing you sometimes see out of the corners of your eyes. I began to run, to the end of the block, then left, away from the river, past West End, past Broadway. I had almost reached Amsterdam when, "Hey there, buddy, slow down!" a policeman stopped me.

I stood there, gasping. "You crazy or something?" he demanded. "Running in leather-soled shoes; know what you're doing to your fascia?"

In case I didn't, he informed me in detail. He also told me that I was headed for low back pain, migraine headaches, and possible tooth trouble if I didn't watch out. "You're going for disaster, buddy," he told me. I was inclined to agree with him.

III

I finally got away, turning east toward Amsterdam Avenue, which was not yet infested by peddlers, strolling entertainers, and other forms of street life, although already there were evidences of creeping chic. I was making for the Blue Moon, a bar that had been there since before I was born and still retained its pristine character. Its old-fashioned decor looked trendy to the outlanders, and the wrong people were always straying in, calling for quiches and goat cheese and wine by the glass. Once they realized that the clouds of smoke were unequivocally tobacco, however, they would scramble out with querulous mutters.

One of the owners was behind the Moon's bar—Bill or Phil, I was never sure which. Only a few people were in front; it was still early—middle-aged males who looked like illustrations from *The Hunting of the Snark.* I had a nodding acquaintance with most of the regulars, although I had never become one of the boys.

"I see Jim's off tonight," I observed, not unhappy about the fact. Jim and I had had a little run-in the last time I'd been there. Nothing important, the kind of thing that happens all the time in saloons. But not to me. I don't like confrontations.

Bill or Phil slid a beer across the bar. Although I am not your basic beer drinker, I conform for the sake of

anonymity. "Jim walked out on us a couple of weeks ago. Can't rely on anybody these days."

"Hey, wait a minute, Bill!" A stubby, sad-looking man banged down his glass. "Jim's been here for over fifteen years, and you know he's hardly ever missed a day."

"Harry, I called the place where he lives. They said they hadn't seen him for over a week."

"Maybe something happened to him," Harry said. "Did you think of that?"

Bill shrugged. "Sure I did. The boys over at the station checked out the hospitals—nothing. And no unidentified—er—bodies showed up."

"Bodies!" a little old man whose head went up to a point shrilled. "Why would Jim be a body? I'm sure he didn't have an enemy in the world." He took another sip of the glass of beer he was nursing.

"You don't have to have enemies to become a body in this city, Herb," Harry said. He turned to Bill. "Why didn't anybody mention this to me before? Maybe I could have—"

"You were busy, Harry, and the boys did everything they could. Honestly. He must've gone South, the way he always said he was going to do someday."

Harry shook his head. "Not without saying good-bye. Jim wasn't like that." The others muttered agreement.

"Where did he live?" I asked, without thinking.

"Somewheres in the Bronx."

Terra incognita. The only time—times—I'd been in the Bronx was when I had to go to Woodlawn Cemetery. I compounded my indiscretion. "Did he go there by subway?"

"No, he walked," Bill sneered. "Of course he went by subway. How else can you get to the Bronx?"

There must be other ways, I thought. Jonas Bronck didn't take the subway, nor did Edgar Allan Poe. Or, probably, the bison. Poe had lived in this neighborhood once; one of the apartment houses in the Eighties on Broadway had a plaque saying he had written *The Raven* on that site, though not, I supposed, in that same house. However, he probably had not commuted. The Indians didn't take the subway, although there were subterranean ways, tunnels that existed long before the white-eyes came; and some of them might have led to the Bronx. To the North River, anyway; I didn't suppose they'd had the technology for building tunnels underwater. I myself had always gone to the Bronx in a limousine and returned the same way.

Harry was quicker than I would have expected. "You're thinking of that woman they found in the subway tunnel last night, aren't you? And you're wondering if maybe the same thing didn't happen to Jim?"

There were protesting noises: ". . . But Jim's a man. . . . They don't do that kind of thing to men!"

Harry pointed to his empty glass and Bill slid another across the bar. He glanced at Herb, who shook his head and took another sip of the beer that still half filled his mug.

"That kind of thing they do to anybody," Harry said. "Didn't you read the papers a while back about this fellow who chopped up his business partner and fed him to his dogs?"

"That's what I'd like to do to my business partner,"

Herb said, ladling peanuts into his mouth. "But my wife's poodles won't even come near him alive."

Bill moved the dish of peanuts along the bar, away from him. "They found parts of that guy, didn't they? And they also found parts of this dame. But they didn't find any traces of . . . anybody else, did they?"

"They found most of her," Harry said heavily, "but it looked as if whoever—whatever—did it hadn't finished."

"*What*ever?" somebody repeated, and Harry laughed and said, "Put that down to overwork. Maybe if whoever did it had finished, there wouldn't have been anything left. At the time, before the lab boys had looked at the body, we didn't think of looking for traces of anybody else. And we didn't give the side tunnels more than a passing glance. What gave you the idea that something might have happened to Jim in the subway, Ned?"

"Ted. And I didn't say I thought anything had happened to him in the subway. I just wondered . . . after you said he was missing. The subways are pretty dangerous, you know."

"I know," Harry said. And waited for me to go on. Everybody waited for me to go on. I dislike being a center of attention.

"Earlier today I was talking to a girl who works for one of the papers. She said quite a few people in the neighborhood, people who rode in subways late at night, were missing." *We?* I wondered. Who were the *we* who didn't think of looking for further traces? And who hadn't given the side tunnels more than a passing

glance? Oh, I'm not that stupid; I already had suspicions.

"That's interesting. Where do you suppose she got her information from?"

"From her paper, of course. And I assume they got their information from the police. She said they had it all organized in daily charts."

"That would be the *Herald.*" He showed me his badge. There was a cold, lumpy feeling in my chest, the tip of the traditional iceberg. I had walked right into this, made myself conspicuous for no reason at all except the compulsion to talk. "What's her name?"

I shrugged. "I don't have any idea." Let him think she was just a casual pickup.

"Well," he said, "she should be easy enough to check out."

"Nobody's safe in this city anymore," Herb said. "It all started when they began painting things blue."

Everybody looked at him. "The buses used to be green. The police cars used to be green, vagabond green they called it, although I would have said it was more of a forest myself. Even the mailboxes were green. Things were okay, then, not great, but okay."

"You know," Harry said, "you could have something there."

IV

I had another beer and left just as soon as I could without letting it look as if I had been scared away. Some of the stores on Broadway were beginning to close. Again, I wanted to pick up some food at Zabar's, but this time it was shut. When I was a boy, Zabar's used to stay open until the wee hours of the morning. There had been ice-cream parlors on Broadway then and two five-and-ten's. Traffic on the avenue had run in both directions, and, yes, Herb had been right; things had been green instead of blue, and there had been a happier feeling in the air—although that could have come from being a boy and not knowing that the future for me was no future at all.

An ambulance passed, squealing like a banshee. So was the man on the street corner haranguing a very meager audience. Once upon a time his long hair and beard and nightgownlike garment would have marked him as a sidewalk preacher. Now he just looked like everybody else. However, his text did seem to be Biblical in nature, something to do with the Tower of Babel. My heart warmed toward him, not because I have any love for the established religions but because he represented a link with tradition.

As I crossed the street, a bicyclist, paying no heed to the lights, charged into me, furiously blowing a whistle. Mother had always carried a crook-handled umbrella to

defend herself against mad dogs and bicyclists. I had to make do with a hearty kick to the wheel that sent both bicycle and rider sprawling in the doggie doo. I continued on my way, stopping off at the local branch of a chain supermarket to pick up a few groceries. First I had to tell the man mopping the aisle that I was not going to wait until he finished his conversation with a friend before I got the things I needed. Then I had to wait for the woman at the checkout counter to call out to the manager for the price, item by item, of all the things the youth who had pushed his way in ahead of me had scattered on the counter. When my turn came, she overcharged me seventy-three cents and mumbled something pejorative in an alien tongue when I pointed out her error. I wondered how there could be so much talk of unemployment when so many obvious unemployables were working.

As I came out, the proprietor of the copy shop next door was closing, pulling the steel grille that was supposed to protect it from nocturnal invaders across the shop front. "You never saw any of these on stores when we were young," he said as I passed.

I agreed, trying to remember what had been in that spot the week before. I was sure it hadn't been a copy shop. "There seem to be an awful lot of places like yours opening in the neighborhood," I said. "What do people copy?"

Even though he wore the customary blue denim, he was old. His eyes were hidden behind huge blue-tinted glasses, and his hair was bluish-gray. "What do they copy?" he repeated. "All sorts of things. You'd be surprised."

Teddy, Teddy, Teddy, the mocking bird chattered in the tree as I walked down the street to my house. Thunder rumbled off in the direction of New Jersey. Or maybe it was an SST. Or one of the gods eructating.

After thawing myself a Polynesian dinner, I sat down in front of the television set in Uncle Gerhard's recliner, which sorted ill with the rest of the furniture but was the most comfortable seat in the place. Everything was in rerun. To boot, something had gone wrong with the color, which flickered blue around the edges, and with the picture, which kept wavering and dissolving. I'd have to call a repairman. Which meant I'd have to tidy up the apartment first.

Someday soon I would try once again to get myself a cleaning woman. There had been Mrs. Madison ever since I could remember, and then she was gone. After Mother left, I'd experimented with one cleaning woman (and, once, a cleaning man) after another, but none of them had worked out. They were too sloppy or too snoopy, usually both. And some were too edgy, kept seeing and hearing things that weren't there.

Things had worked out better at the Village place. I had seen a card posted on the bulletin board of a local supermarket offering the services of a college student at ten dollars per hour. On an impulse, I had phoned the number given and Candace had turned up.

Her appearance was surprising. She was white, with the overblown good looks of an Alice in Wonderland who had grown up and gone on the streets. So far as I could determine, Candace had never actually gone on the streets. Nor was she going to college, either; that

was just a ploy, she told me, to attract a "high class" type of employer. Anyway, she was the daughter of the president of a small southern college—in a pig's eye, I thought—so she felt entitled to give herself an academic aura.

It turned out that she offered other domestic services besides housecleaning. I was tired of picking up girls at concerts and trendy restaurants, so eventually she became what you might call a live-in employee, an arrangement which, I thought, suited us both. She knew that the Village place wasn't my primary residence, since I was away most of the time. I told her I was married. She didn't ask any direct questions—she was far too experienced for that—but she kept pointing out the buttons missing from my shirts, the occasional frayed cuff, and, once, the hole in a sock. I told her I was married to a liberated woman; then I changed my laundry and I went down to Brooks Brothers and got myself new shirts and socks.

She never told me what had brought her to New York originally. I never asked. What had brought all these outlanders here? Greed or fear. Greed for what they expected to get out of the city, fear of what they were escaping from. In Candace's case, I suspected, it was a combination of both.

I tried to read, but the book failed to hold me. Mark Foster came into my mind. He used to live in the neighborhood, I recalled, on Riverside Drive, if I wasn't mistaken. I'd been at his place a few times when I was actively writing, had dinner there a couple of times, along with a lot of other people, nothing intimate. But

still you could say I knew him socially. Enough to call him at home, anyway, if he was still at the same address. Maybe my letter hadn't reached him. An ever-increasing number of letters never reached their destinations these days, especially when they were mailed from this particular postal zone.

I looked him up in the book; he was in the same place. "Gosh, I'm glad to hear from you, Ted," he said, before I had a chance to say more than "hello." "I mislaid your letter and I've been wanting to get in touch. When I told you we were looking for books, I hadn't realized we were all booked up, so to speak"—he gave a little laugh—"for at least eight months."

"Oh, that's okay. I'm not that fast a writer, anyway. It's just that you started me thinking about writing fiction again. . . ."

"I'm glad of that," he broke in, sounding very hearty and Maxwell Perkins. "You should be writing fiction again!"

". . . but I wanted to talk. . . ."

"Fine. Only you've got to let me take you out for a drink. After all, what's an expense account for?"

"Sure, but . . ."

"Thing is, we're going on vacation tomorrow for a couple of weeks, maybe a month. I'll get in touch with you as soon as I come back and get my desk cleared."

"Fine," I said, knowing I was probably not going to hear from him again. "Give my love to Jinny."

"Jinny? Oh, she's—well, it's Sarah, now."

"Well, give Sarah my regards." I wasn't embarrassed, because this kind of thing happened all the time when you were out of touch. Old apartment, new wife or

husband. Spouses were a lot easier to come by than apartments these days. Who knows how many wives I would have run through by now if I'd been able to lead a normal life? But Mother had always made it clear to me: I must not allow myself to get involved with a woman. I couldn't even have a close friend. And, of course, she was right.

Maybe I was doing Mark an injustice; maybe he would have called eventually. But a few days later (while he was supposed to be off on that fictitious vacation) he joined the missing.

That was still in the future, though. Tonight I was alone with the cockroaches and the chattering bird and the rain that had started to spang against the window. No, not rain, hail, tiny luminous globules of ice that formed a quivering curtain between me and what lay beyond.

I turned on the television set again, to the late news. Another manhole cover had blown off on Broadway, injuring several people. Manhole covers had been blowing off at intervals over the last few months, but especially in my neighborhood. A tenement had burned down, and eight people with it. Con Edison had turned off the electricity of a tenant who had been unable to pay her utility bill. She had used candles—and the whole house had gone up in flames. A child had been killed while playing on top of an elevator with a broken lock, a starlet had been (allegedly) raped by a movie producer in his penthouse, a bomb had exploded, a union official had been shot by a person or persons unknown (to the police, not necessarily to him),

a man had been stabbed to death on a bus while the other passengers watched. There had been a fire on the IRT and a derailment on the IND. The usual.

A blow-dried youngish man who looked like a movie actor interviewed Mr. Weinstein, relict (could a man be called a relict?) of the late Mrs. Weinstein, celebrated in death, pest in life. "And how did you feel, Mr. Weinstein, when you were informed that they found the partly-consumed body of your wife in a subway tunnel?"

Mr. Weinstein gave the details of his grief, shock, and outrage in eager detail.

I fell asleep in front of the television set, dreamed that Johnny Carson had turned into something luminous and inhuman that was trying to communicate with me. The next morning I woke up in the recliner, my body stiff and my mind bruised.

The room seemed vaguely disarranged. I must have made an attempt to tidy it up the night before. The only area that seemed the better for it was around the computer. The computer itself seemed to have been shined up a bit and moved. I knew nobody could have entered the apartment while I was asleep, because it was triple-locked—like most New York apartments these days—and I alone had the key to each lock. And, since I was at home, it had also been bolted. No, I must have made the changes myself, and it worried me a little.

V

I showered, changed, and bought a copy of the *Herald* on Broadway. I looked at it over breakfast at the Minotaur, a coffee shop on the corner of my street, on the ground floor of an apartment dwelling far grander than mine, where each doorman wears a uniform with "Algonquin Arms" embroidered on the pocket, and some of the uniforms fit. I kept going back there, even though the service was abominable. Why? Habit, convenience, and the food was good.

There was the crime chart Ms. Minkus (or whatever her name was) had described, plus a list of local people presumed to be missing. The Upper West Side was heavily represented. I have no idea what the usual overall disappearance rate is, but I should imagine it's fairly high. In a city like New York, there are a lot of people who want to disappear, who, in fact, come there specifically to disappear.

I glanced over the list to see if there was anybody I knew or might know. Jim O'Day, bartender at the Blue Moon, had made it. In addition there were a number of people working the late shift at the supermarkets, a dozen rock musicians, half a dozen real musicians, three actors, eight actresses, one lawyer, three writers, a short-order cook, five models (three in quotation marks), three ex-mental patients, four ex-offenders and one current offender, and seven persons who could not

be characterized as other than unemployed (and one of whom couldn't even be characterized by sex). I found myself trying to arrange the list into the pattern of "A Partridge in a Pear Tree."

Over half, the accompanying article pointed out, worked, lived, or had some other connection with the general area surrounding the subway station where Mrs. Weinstein's remains had been found. All this was followed by a number of indignant letters from people who had apparently been listed in previous editions of the paper as missing.

In the booth behind me and the one opposite it a bunch of the people who lived at the Algonquin Arms was complaining about the new management. Apparently the building had suffered a series of landlords, each one worse than the last. This latest one, if the tenants were to be believed, was unusually vicious, even for New York.

A stately middle-aged lady who looked familiar (later I would remember having seen her on television commercials tastefully recommending the laxative "more natural than nature itself") changed the subject. "What do you think of that monster they say is prowling the subway?" Her expression was the one she used while she was still seeking relief.

"Or monsters," somebody sitting right behind me suggested.

"It's the landlord," said an elderly lady. ("Or a bunch of landlords," the person behind me interjected.) "He's doing it to scare senior citizens into heart attacks so they should either die or move."

"They said the victim was half-eaten," another unseen individual protested.

"The monster eats bodies. The landlord eats hearts and souls," the elderly lady said.

"Anyhow, with monsters like Klein," (whom I took to be the aforementioned landlord) a baldheaded man mumbled through a full mouth, "monsters in the subway don't seem like so much."

I finished breakfast and went out into the street. There was a heavy oppressiveness about the air, almost as if it were about to rain, although reports had foretold nothing but fair weather. And, in fact, when you looked at the sky, it was that specious sparkling blue you see more often in New York than is generally supposed. In literal truth, New York is a rather sunny city; its darkness is of the mind and spirit. Almost everybody in the street seemed to be speaking Spanish or a reasonable facsimile. More and more of the buildings were sprouting scaffolding. One of the street vendors who, as the day wore on, would make certain blocks nearly impossible to get through had put up a sign that said "Sales Help Wanted."

I passed the copy shop. Today the old man was pushing back the steel grille to herald the new day. "Good morning." He smiled. "I see we meet again. Can I be of service?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't have anything I need copied."

"Come in, anyhow, when you have time. We also deal in originals."

I went down to the Ansonia Post Office to pick up mail from the box I rented there and to post some

letters that I did not dare entrust to the mercies of the neighboring zone. En route, I passed trucks from Stella Polaris, Con Edison, the telephone company, the Department of Public Works, and various other entities, all busily engaged in digging up the streets. I saw the pale blue van again, coming down Broadway this time just behind me.

There seemed to be words on the side. At a red light, I stepped back to see. They read "Le Van."

I stopped at the Westside YWCA for a workout in the gym; then I took a bus downtown on Columbus Avenue. Before going to the studio I dropped in at the Village Post Office and picked up the mail waiting at the box there. As I came out into the street, something slammed sharply into me from behind. I turned. It was a man in a wheelchair. "What's the matter, fellow, can't you see I'm handicapped?" he yelled, as he trundled on.

Candace wasn't at the studio, not that I expected her to be in the middle of the day. She had a job of some sort in what she called a boutique. Precisely what was sold there was never clear, even when you went inside, and neither were her hours. I sometimes suspected that, if it wasn't a massage parlor in the formal sense, there was more behind the scenes than the mélange of overpriced lingerie and bric-a-brac up front.

The idea did offend me, but I can't afford to be fastidious. The idea of disease didn't disturb me. For some reason that I am only now beginning to understand, I have never been ill in my life. Even the routine ailments of childhood passed me by. I can eat junk food with impunity, and pigeons never excrete on my head. In some ways, I suppose, I am a very lucky man.

I sorted the mail and then fell into a speculative mood. I could fix the studio up, spend more time here. It wouldn't be a clean break from uptown, but it would help. Maybe I'd even go back to teaching so-called creative writing. I'd done that at one of the city colleges for a few years until I gave up in disgust. How can you teach writing to people who can't even read?

I really ought to go out to Brooklyn, too. The real-estate agent who was looking after the brownstone for me had recently made me an offer—a surprisingly handsome offer for a house in what was virtually a slum.

"Well," he admitted, when I called him up to find out more, "it isn't as much of a slum as it once was. They've been upgrading the area a bit."

"Creeping gentrification. I'll bet it's worth a fortune."

"Nonsense. It isn't fashionable yet. And never will be."

But things didn't work that way in New York City (of which Brooklyn has been a part since 1898, though many people still don't seem to know it). Nobody bothered simply upgrading a slum. It had to be made fashionable, with antique shops and gourmet food stores; otherwise, there was no point, no fun, no profit.

"Besides, if you take the money and invest it, you'll make a lot more than any possible appreciation in value could produce. So why hang on to the place? Your taxes are bound to go up even if you don't do a thing to it."

"I don't know. If the neighborhood has improved, I might want to live there myself."

He laughed, taking it as a joke.

I stretched out on the couch, still covered with the heavy Oriental cloth from my mother's day. The walls were hung with faded, rather grimy, tapestries patterned with astrological symbols and designs. Opposite me hung a large oil painting of a woman in gypsy clothing that I had always taken to represent Aunt Magda as a girl. It was one of those jobs where the eyes seem to follow you.

I could get rid of all the exotica, I thought, paint the walls white, get a platform bed, have the cracks in the ceiling fixed, call in the exterminator. But then it wouldn't be home—or rather a home from home.

I got up and looked in the refrigerator. Cold pasta, with disgusting little things in it, a pâté that was either intended to be green or had gone moldy, a piece of repellent-looking cheese. . . . Well, I wasn't really hungry anyway.

I glanced over the reading matter Candace had left—*Cosmopolitan*, the *Reader's Digest*, the current bestseller, and *Poetry*. Candace claimed to write poetry herself. "I don't show it to anybody; I'm not ready for publication yet," she kept saying, although I had never asked to see it—and had no intention of doing so.

I don't like to look at other people's writing. Uptown, I knew, there was at least one other writer living in my house—a Miss Harris, a maiden lady who'd been there for years and whom the ladies of the lobby described as "snooty" because she never stopped to pass the time of day with them. What made this particularly offensive was that she had no husband or children to occupy her time and stayed home doing nothing all day.

Miss Harris and I always exchanged civil greetings

when we met in the elevator or the lobby; after all, we were both New Yorkers born and bred and had standards of courtesy to keep up. But I was careful not to let myself be drawn into conversation, afraid she'd ask me to look at her work. To do her justice, she seemed to sense my feeling, because she never tried to push the acquaintance. In fact, sometimes it almost looked as if she were avoiding me. Then one day I saw her picture on an ad in the *Times* Book Review section. Apparently her latest book, *Uncivil Service,* a steamy exposé of sex in the higher reaches of the municipal bureaucracy, had become a best-seller; as, several years later, did *Lesson Plan in Love,* an amorous investigation of the New York public school system. That was the book which Candace was reading now, and which I hadn't the slightest urge to look into.

Nor was there anything in the rest of Candace's library to engage my interest. The books Mother had left in the floor-to-ceiling case were even worse—astrological tomes, out-of-date histories, sermons, foreign-language textbooks, all chosen carefully to make sure nobody would disturb them. I wished there were a television set or a radio; suddenly I was very anxious to hear the news.

I laughed at myself. I got up and went out and bought a portable radio with a clock in it for $69.95, plus tax. I also bought a peperoni pizza, a bottle of red wine, and the New York *Times.* Back in the studio, I ate the food while I listened to an all-news station, which began by giving a talk on gardening, followed by a debate on the metric system before they got around to news and the

subway murder—that is, that particular subway murder, because there had been two other subway deaths in the interim, although one was a shooting and the other victim had been pushed onto the tracks in front of a train; in other words, natural death, so far as New York City is concerned.

The police had searched the vicinity of the tunnel where Mrs. Weinstein's body had been found and turned up a number of objects that might bear some relationship to the missing persons. Most were of metal or plastic, most damaged, some beyond recognition. But some were recognizable as watches, jewelry, pocketknives, a set of dentures. The only thing definitely identified was a diamond stickpin that had belonged to the missing lawyer. One curious feature was that they were all slightly radioactive—not enough to present any health hazard, the authorities said, but then they always said that until your hair and teeth started dropping out.

An environmentalist, who was interviewed along with a lot of other specialists in diverse fields, claimed it all had to do with leakage from the nuclear reactor at Indian Point. The utility spokesperson kept for indignant denials indignantly denied this. A lot of the interviewees blamed the events on lack of adequate police protection and called for more transit policemen. The head of the transit police came on the air and said New York subway riders were the best protected on the safest subway in the world and the budget simply couldn't be stretched any further. Then the mayor came on and said the whole thing was probably a magpie's cache and the people to whom the things belonged undoubtedly

were all alive and well and angry. He didn't explain the mangling, the radioactivity, or why a magpie should choose to nest in the subway, although there was a faint suggestion that the Republicans had something to do with it. He said he personally was not only going to keep riding on the subway but was going to travel to the very station where the remains had been found, to prove how safe the subway was; fortunately he had an uncle in the neighborhood, so the trip wouldn't be wasted.

I was stretched out on the couch again, listening to the radio as it went on about drug-related killings, execution-style murders, and a possible outbreak of bubonic plague in the Bronx, making a game out of the typos in the *Times* (if you could call them typos; many of them were too consistent for that). One point for a plain error, two if it was in a headline. I had almost drowsed off by the time Candace arrived, all abulge—her eyes, her breasts, the designer tote full of paper and plastic bags. As always, she was slightly disheveled. Her spike-heeled sandals displayed holes in the toes of her sheer pantyhose; a frilly garment showed at the bottom of her skirt, as if to point up the fact that she did wear underclothes. Everything about her was pale—eyes, skin, lank, untidy hair. I found her extremely desirable and slightly disgusting.

She was agitated. "I heard the radio outside. I thought it must be a burglar."

How could a burglar play a radio that wasn't, to her knowledge, there, I wondered. She had a ready answer; she always had a ready answer. "Kids these days have to

listen to the radio all the time. It's like a compulsion. When he cased the joint, he found out you didn't have one, so he brought his own to listen to while he was burgling the place."

"You're very brave to have to come in at all then."

"The stuff was getting too heavy. My arms were tired. What could he do to me, anyway?" Plenty, but there was no point scaring her. She dumped her bags on a little ebony table Mother had always cherished; then pulled a stick of grease from her tote and anointed her full, pale lips with it—a habit of hers that it had taken time for me to get used to. "I never knew you were a news freak. Me, I hardly ever listen to it, especially now with that thing creeping around the subway chewing on people. Lucky it's stayed uptown so far. Gives me the creeps."

"It could come downtown, you know."

"I've told you a thousand times, I never ride on the subway. Everything I need is in walking distance. If you can't find it in the Village, I always say, it isn't worth finding. Anyhow, if I want to go somewhere else, there are plenty of men to drive me wherever in their Caddies. Or," she allowed, "their Mercs. Why don't you get a car, Teddy? You too poor? Or too stingy?"

I had heard this before. "Both. Added to which, I can't drive."

She looked at me in disbelief but it was true. A lot of New Yorkers, particularly those born and bred in Manhattan, don't know how to drive, which amazes most outlanders. A car in New York is impractical and, at least in the days before the mass transportation system went down the drain along with everything else, un-

necessary. Looking back, I think Mother might have deliberately discouraged me from taking driving lessons; she didn't want me too mobile. And, in the old days, there had always been someone to drive me. Perhaps if I had accepted that scholarship and gone away to Harvard I would have learned to drive. But Mother said I had to go to school in town. I couldn't leave; she needed me. Which turned out to be no more than the truth. Mother may have been possessed, in a manner of speaking, but never possessive.

So I went to Columbia, majoring in American history. I also took writing courses. As a matter of fact, I'd started selling to the pulps while I was still at prep school (a day school, of course) and Mother had encouraged me, so I practically felt I was supporting the family with my pen—one of the reasons why, I suppose, I have developed such a thrifty nature. Mother always said it was a heritage from my Dutch ancestors.

I also started bodybuilding and karate and acting at Mother's behest. "You're the man of the family now," she'd said, which could account for the bodybuilding and the karate, but hardly the acting. It was the acting, though, that I liked best. The athletics didn't interest me much; still it was better than participating in team sports. Mother really kept me occupied, and I didn't question her motives.

When I started doing some work Off Broadway, Mother didn't much like it. And when I was offered a continuing role in "All My Children" after a few one-shots on soaps, she decided I'd had enough of the theater. "Acting is so ephemeral, Edward. You should devote yourself to your writing."

Although I was technically an adult, it didn't occur to me to disobey her. I was taking my graduate degrees by this time (I'd made Phi Bete and finished Columbia with honors, thank you for asking) and accustomed to a standard of living I now realized I couldn't hope to achieve for myself. More than that, I was aware by this time that it could be very dangerous to cross Mother.

Candace was still grumbling about people who didn't have cars and people who got eaten in subways. She made it sound like cause and effect. "It's probably one of those ex-mental patients who's doing those terrible things down there. Food stamps don't go very far these days." She took the last of whatever had been inside the paper and plastic bags out; then folded the bags and stuck them behind Aunt Magda's picture.

"How do you know about food stamps? Don't tell me you get them?"

"Of course I do. Practically everybody I know does." She anointed her lips with grease again.

Since I knew she didn't use that address but had a legal residence somewhere else, I didn't worry. Nor did I feel a lofty moral disdain. She was only doing in a small way what I and my family had been doing in a large way for years. Her name wasn't on the mailbox. Neither, as a matter of fact, was mine. Mother had cast horoscopes and read palms and done other things under the name of Mme. Cassandra, and Mr. Cassandra was what I was known as in the neighborhood, except to those who called me, either through misplaced wit or genuine misunderstanding, Mr. Cassowary. Candace knew me as Ted Kroll. Mother had used her maiden

name when she bought the house, and it was simplest that way.

"You want to eat first or make love?" Candace demanded.

"What have you got to eat there?" I asked.

"Sorrel soup. Goat's milk cheese. Broccoli and noodle salad."

I took a Kleenex from a box on the table and wiped the grease off her lips. "Let's make love."

VI

I'd thought of staying downtown, but something pulled me back north. Around eight o'clock, I got up and dressed. Now came the moment to break the news that had been the purpose of my trip here. "My mother is going to come up from Florida in a day or two, and she'll want to use her studio while she's here."

"Can I meet her this time?" Candace asked. "Okay, so I can't stay while she's here, but could I at least meet her?"

I was as appalled as if Mother really existed. "I can't possibly introduce you to Mother. How would I explain you?"

Strange how small and sharp big blue eyes could become. "You could say I was your girl friend. Doesn't she have boyfriends?"

"How can you say a thing like that about Mother?" Almost as if she had known her. Even so, Mother would never have had anything so vulgar as a "boyfriend." Her associates had all been friends of the family until they got promoted to uncle status. Besides, she wasn't married and I was supposed to be.

"She's going to see your wife, isn't she? And the kiddies."

"I've told you I don't have children."

She muttered something about not believing I had a wife, either. I affected to take no notice. "Candace,

Mother probably won't stay longer than a few days. A week at most. All I'm asking is for you to stay away that long—the way you did the other times she came to town." Which had been earlier in our acquaintance, when she had been less well entrenched. "Here's something to tide you over." I put some money in her hand, enough to be taken as a gift rather than payment—several hundred dollars or so; that was not the moment to start counting. "I know you have places to stay."

She often disappeared for days at a time. I never asked her where she went, figuring if I left her her privacy, she would leave me mine. As you've no doubt gathered by now, I'm rather naïf in some respects. Each time she vanished, I was never sure she would come back, and the prospect didn't grieve me overmuch.

When I got back uptown, there seemed to be a party on the block between mine and Broadway. So many people had spilled out into the street, my cab couldn't get through. I paid off the driver at Broadway and got out, wondering why I hadn't seen any notices about a block party (I'm always on the alert for them, so I can stay away).

A female rock group was performing on an improvised dais. Farther up Broadway there seemed to be a fire. Engines raced up and down the street, sirens shrieking as if they were searching for the blaze, although you could actually see smoke and smell what seemed to be fish burning. In point of noise, the rock group came out well ahead. Nobody at the party paid any attention to the fire engines or the smoke. Mrs. Minkus' granddaughter emerged from the crowd and

handed me a paper cup of surprisingly acceptable wine. "It's free, courtesy of the Algonquin Arms' Tenants' Association."

I saw Nikos, the proprietor of the Minotaur, over by the buffet. I couldn't tell whether he was catering or just a guest. "What's the occasion?" I asked.

"You've heard they identified a stickpin that was found in the subway?"

I nodded. "Belonged to a lawyer named Stein. Or Fine."

"Klein. Marvin Klein. Never went anywhere without it. He owned the house and nobody's seen him for three days. The tenants are throwing a party."

An adolescent wearing a T-shirt decorated with a picture of a subway entrance and the legend "Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here" came around with a plastic plate of canapés. Ms. Minkus or whatever her name was took one and I took a handful. She indicated the rock group. "Those are the Daughters of Radon. They come from the neighborhood. Got a good sound, don't you think?"

I shrugged. "Not my cup of tea, really."

"It all seems a little . . . sick, doesn't it? People being eaten in the subway and us eating little hotdogs wrapped in biscuit dough." She swallowed her little hotdog. "Could've used a touch of mustard."

I finished my little hotdog. "Tasted all right to me. And only two people have definitely been eaten or done away with or whatever, so far. One Weinstein and one Klein. Maybe it's Arab terrorists. That building going up across the street is being put up by a firm with an Arab name."

She looked at me, obviously trying to figure out whether any racial slur was implied. "But Arabs just blow people up. They wouldn't eat them. They're kosher. I mean, they have dietary laws like the Jews."

"So we know the so-called monsters can't be Jewish, either. Look," I pointed out, "everybody seems to be taking it for granted that they *were* eaten when all the police said was that Mrs. Weinstein's body *looked* as if it had been eaten. Meaning that parts had disappeared."

"Picky, picky, picky."

"It could just as well have been dissolved by a—a death ray or something like that as eaten," I said, putting my second canapé, a tiny shish kebab, in my mouth.

"That would be a real comfort," she murmured. "Peculiar kind of death ray, though."

"Defective model." I finished my third and last canapé, which was a wee crepe filled with something fishy, and looked around to see if there were any more going. One thing I did miss in my increasingly secluded existence was the press parties.

"There is something funny about that construction site," she said. "People have claimed they've seen flickering blue lights down there at night over the last few months."

"There usually are workmen's lights at night," I said, accepting a brace of miniature quiches from the laxative lady. She had on her after-relief smile now. Klein's tenants were really going whole hog on the funeral baked meats. I hoped for their sakes that Klein didn't turn up alive after all.

"Safety lights are red or yellow, not blue. Besides, the

workmen said they didn't leave blue lights. Why should they lie about it? And the subway tunnel where the—er—remains were found runs along the building site."

"The subway runs down the middle of Broadway, so part of it is bound to be next to anything that's on Broadway," I told her, wishing the tunnel motif hadn't arisen again.

I asked her about herself, to divert her attention from tunnels. She seemed pleased at my interest and readily divulged her dreams. Print journalism was not her ultimate goal. "There's so much more scope for a journalist on television. Less actual news, maybe, but a lot more influence. Besides, newspapers are on their way out."

"Well, why don't you switch over to television?" She looked like the women I saw on television news programs, slim, good-looking, and dressed for success, with a firm resonant voice that carried conviction plus a hint of intimidation. She should do very well on TV.

Her smile was patronizing. "Breaking into television isn't as easy as that, unless you've already made a name for yourself in another field. The best way is to get a mentor—you know, somebody with connections who'll take an interest in you, look after you, introduce you to the right people. Don't look at me like that; it's a perfectly innocent relationship. Or it can be. My mother's husband—"

"Has something happened to your father?" I asked, wondering whether commiseration was in order.

"Not as far as I know. He's living happily in San Francisco with his second wife. Actually, he's done much better than Mummy ever did with any of her husbands.

But, then, it's still a man's world. You never did get married, did you?"

"No," I said, "I never did."

"Anyway, Herschel, my current stepfather, is going to introduce me to somebody important at CBS, as soon as I have my teeth fixed."

I observed her teeth keenly. "They look all right to me."

"Sweet of you to say so, and I suppose they are all right for everyday, but not for TV."

An equipment-laden truck for Channel Seven rolled up to cover the event. We get a lot of television coverage in our neighborhood. There is one supermarket that is filmed so frequently the manager has a set routine for rushing out the less comely customers before the cameras come. I started walking toward my house; I didn't want to figure on "Eyewitness News." To my surprise, she walked along with me instead of staying in the thick of the action. Maybe she didn't want the TV people to see her until her teeth were fixed.

After a moment of silence, she asked, "What's your name?"

Teddy, Teddy, Teddy, the bird in the tree said. She didn't seem to hear him. Or notice him, anyway. He was a blue bird, I saw, but hardly the bluebird of happiness. Not a pigeon, either. Looked more like a hawk. Maybe one of those peregrine falcons they were releasing from Midtown office buildings to serve as role models for muggers.

"Edward Bogard. I'm surprised you don't know already, a demon investigative reporter like you."

In the lurid pink light of the streetlamps I couldn't be sure, but I thought she flushed. "I meant what do they call you. My name's Kitty—Kitty Fisher."

"How do you do. I'm called Ted."

"Bogard isn't the only name on your mailbox . . . ?"

I sighed. "Hoffman is my aunt's name. Kroll was my mother's maiden name." Nosy is your middle name.

"And Underhill?"

I sighed again, in case she hadn't noticed the first exhalation, but reporters get used to being sighed at—and a lot worse, I suppose. "My mother's stage name. She never really got anywhere as an actress, but she keeps up her Equity membership. I hope you're not going to put any of this in your paper. It would distress her."

"Most people like seeing their names in the papers. Especially actresses."

I let my lip curl eloquently. "My family's old-fashioned. We feel that the preservation of one's privacy is a basic concomitant of civilization."

She hooted.

"Anyhow, Mother wouldn't like it." I pressed the elevator button.

"I'd like to meet your mother." She was the second woman that day who'd asked to meet my mother. "I'll bet you're making a mistake about her. I bet she'd love the publicity."

Where on earth had that elevator gotten to? There were lights over the door that were supposed to indicate its position but those that still lit up had only the most tenuous connection with actuality. I hoped it wasn't stuck between floors again.

"Do you always wear a coat and tie?" Kitty Fisher asked.

"Not always. On the other hand, I sometimes also wear a vest."

"I thought your mother was a spiritualist—table tipping, ectoplasm, tambourines . . . ?"

"She was, for a while. But without tambourines; she's always felt that tambourines were vulgar, and I must say I agree. She gave all that up some time ago. Now she's just a simple, semiretired witch."

"Ha ha," she said coldly.

"What other gossip have you picked up about my family?" I tried to make it sound as insulting as possible, but I suppose reporters have to develop thick skins in order to survive.

"I am not trying to invade your privacy. I told you—I am simply looking for local color."

The elevator finally arrived. "Now, tell me you're just doing your job," I said, as we got in, chasing the shapes and shadows back into the convex mirror high up in the corner.

"Well, I am!"

A cockroach crawled up the notice indicating when the elevator had last been inspected (not recently), paused, then disappeared into a crack between glass and frame.

Kitty grabbed my arm. "Did you see that? It was blue. Blue!"

"Bluish," I corrected her. "It merely had a bluish tinge. Some people have reported seeing pure white ones. Ask the Museum of Natural History. They have an

ongoing roach project there, know everything there is to know about roaches and more."

"Did you see? It stopped and waggled its feelers as if —as if it were trying to attract our attention."

"Well, it seemed to have yours. You're a native New Yorker. Don't act as if you've never seen a cockroach before."

"Not a blue one."

The elevator stopped at the Minkus floor. "I'm going to spend the night with my grandmother." She held the door open, so the elevator couldn't start. "How about coming in for a cup of coffee?"

"Afraid I can't."

"Or maybe you'd like me to come up and have a cup of coffee with you? Or tea?"

"Sorry, but I'm expecting company."

"And she wouldn't appreciate another guest?"

I smiled in a way that was meant to be suggestive, without being enigmatic.

"But the doorman said you never . . ." She paused. Even a reporter must realize there were bounds one didn't overstep. She overstepped them. "He said you never had company."

I wondered whether she spoke Spanish, or whether the doormen secretly spoke English. Come to think of it, they must have some way of communicating with Igor. More likely that they spoke English rather than Romanian or Hungarian or whatever Igor's native tongue was. Of course it was possible that he spoke Spanish. Those Mittel-Europeans were great linguists. They had to be, with their governments changing so much.

I could have pointed out to her that the doormen were absent so often from their posts that they could hardly be relied on for accurate information. Although the information she had was accurate enough. I never had guests at the apartment, least of all women. It would have been crazy for me to take them there. Still, I didn't want her to think that—What was wrong with me? That was exactly what I should want her to think.

So her next words startled me. "I don't suppose you ever ask Mme. Cassandra up here?"

"Mme. Cassandra? She's my mother!"

She laughed. "A likely story."

The door slid shut and the elevator started on its way up. As far as I knew, Mother had never used the name Mme. Cassandra up here. Who had told her about it? And why?

VII

The phone was ringing when I got in. I didn't pick it up. Either a wrong number or somebody wanting to sell me something. I turned on the radio. The police had identified more of the stuff in the tunnel. One of the squashed wristwatches belonged to a missing supermarket checker. The dentures belonged to Jim O'Day. One ring was the property of one of the ex-mental patients, another of the short-order cook. A St. Christopher medal might have been one customarily carried by a vanished actor. Some of the jewelry looked like things belonging to two of the models; their roommates couldn't be sure. A pocket watch belonged to a building superintendent nobody had even noticed was missing; he was so seldom seen in the normal course of events (not Igor; another fate was in store for him). And one of the extra transit policemen that had been put on in response to the public outcry had disappeared. There was talk of adding dogs to the transit force.

The phone rang again, just as I was going to bed. Again I didn't answer. My dreams were really bad.

When I got up in the morning, I telephoned the studio. No answer. But Candace didn't always answer the phone either. I waited until afternoon to make sure she had cleared out. When I reached the studio, all her things were gone, plus everything else portable, including the new radio, all the lamps, the couch cover, the

tapestries, the portrait of Aunt Magda, and an incense burner depicting one of the more involved passages of the Kama Sutra in polished brass and incredibly minute detail. Clearly she had found someone with a Cadillac or a Mercedes to transport her. Apparently this time she didn't intend to come back. Well, I'd have no trouble finding myself another lady at a Mensa meeting (I kept up my membership just in case) or a networking group. But next time I wouldn't make the mistake of bringing a woman to my place—to any of my places. I'd go to hers.

I made sure the front door was bolted. I would have to have the lock changed. I took all the books out of the floor-to-ceiling bookcase and pulled it away from the wall. Behind it was a locked steel door, more like the door of a bank vault than an ordinary one, which led into a small windowless room. It was steel-lined and fireproof. Mother had thought of everything. I really should move most of the papers out of the apartment uptown and down here. Inconvenient but safer.

I changed my clothes to the attire appropriate to this role, and made up my face very carefully, dawdling because there was no point exposing myself to daylight any more than necessary, although I had done it in the past with total success and even more complicated makeup. After all, if Dustin Hoffman could get away with it in *Tootsie,* there was no reason I should fear detection. But that was a movie; this was real life. Glancing at myself in the mirror, I wondered whether I shouldn't get some more up-to-date clothes for Mother. She had always prided herself on being well dressed in a conservative way. But that was not an immediate

concern. I took a small suitcase for credibility, and the already-mentioned umbrella. When I got out of the cab in front of the house on West End Avenue, I was Mrs. Judith Bogard.

The ladies were foregathering on the shallow steps before the front entrance, as they often did when the weather was mild. They greeted me with little tittering cries. "Oh, Mrs. Bogard, you have no idea what's been happening!" Mrs. Trehearne overrode the others. "Mrs. Wein—"

"We do get the news in Florida," I said in Mother's most resonant voice. "And Edward filled me in on the details when I called him from the airport a little while ago. Why, whatever is the matter, Mrs. Gluck?"

For the troll-wife's swarthy face had turned sickly yellow under her makeup. She put a hand to one of the Egyptoid pillars, as if seeking support. Her voice was hoarse. "You're looking very well, Mrs. Bogard."

"I am very well, Mrs. Gluck. But you're looking awful." My arrival seemed to upset her. I was glad to see it. She had probably been making up dark stories, as I had suspected. But how dark could they have been to make her seem ready to faint now?

"I told you not to, Marcia," Mrs. Gluck said, "but you wouldn't listen to me."

"I told you then and I say it again now," Mrs. Rensselaer stated. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

I raised my eyebrows in inquiry. Mrs. Trehearne rushed to fill the gap. "Each time I see you, Mrs. Bogard, you seem to look younger and younger."

I gave a gratified murmur. Just so long as they didn't notice that she had grown taller. However, if they

hadn't noticed the first time, five years ago, they weren't likely to start now. Fortunately, Mother had been an unusually tall woman, and when you have to look up to somebody, you're unlikely to be aware of an increase in the angle of your neck.

Mrs. Rensselaer was saying to Mrs. Gluck in what she probably fancied to be an undertone, ". . . and you had to go and open your big mouth to that reporter, too."

Mrs. Gluck's voice quavered. "She likes him, Shirley Minkus says so, so she wouldn't—at least, not without checking it out. . . ."

"You're talking about a human being, not a reporter," Mrs. Cohen said.

Mrs. Trehearne's voice was very loud, as if she thought that would drown out what the others had already said. "I'm surprised your son didn't go out to meet you at the airport."

"He didn't know I was coming or of course he would have. As you know, he's always been devoted to me. But this was a spur-of-the-moment trip to Canada to visit an old friend who's in poor health. I thought I'd stop off and surprise Edward."

I entertained them for a couple of minutes with details of the imaginary friend's imaginary illness. This led naturally to inquiries about Magda. I told them, phrasing it carefully, that she was getting just a bit feeble and not up to traveling. I simply didn't feel up to doing her again.

Mrs. Gluck's color was returning to troll-normal. "Everybody is entitled to make mistakes," she said to no

one in particular. Three of the ladies sniffed, almost in unison.

"I had thought of staying a few days. But now I'm beginning to wonder whether I'll be able to bring myself even to stay the night. I knew things had been happening up here, but I didn't realize how terrible they were. Or how close to home."

"I don't blame you," Mrs. Cohen sympathized. "If it weren't for the price of everything, I'd be in the Catskills right now."

There was a baffle of conversation as I went inside. They were giving Mrs. Gluck what for, I could hear, but for what? What had she told Kitty Fisher?

There was something in my mailbox. Since the light showed that the elevator was (or might be) on the fifteenth floor, and it was not noted for its speed, there should be plenty of time for me to investigate. I set down my suitcase, opened my alligator handbag (a period piece from before the Endangered Species Act), took out Mother's keys, and opened the box. A letter addressed to Ted Bogard in an unfamiliar hand (what living hand was familiar to me now?); also a letter from Western Writers of New York, an organization with which I still kept up a tenuous link although it had been years since I had gone to any of their parties—which was the only kind of meeting they ever had. And a check from someplace or other. As I stowed them in my bag, the elevator door opened and I swept in, majestic as always. What better way to remember Mama?

By the time I got to the apartment, I was so involved in the part that I expected to greet myself, and it seemed a little lonely and chilling to find no one there.

I looked at the letter. The printed return address was that of the local police precinct. However, the note inside was headed "Memo from Harry Limpkin." It read: "Dear Ted—I've been trying to get in touch with you. Could you call me at the station so we can set up a meeting?" It was signed "Harry Limpkin, Detective." Informal but not cozy. How had he tracked me down? To my knowledge, nobody at the Blue Moon knew my last name or where I lived. He must have gotten hold of Kitty; he'd said he was going to.

Why did he want to talk to me? I had no relationship to anything that was going on, except that I lived in the same building as Mrs. Weinstein. Maybe they were having some kind of a memorial for Jim.

The only way to find out was to call Limpkin, so I did, hoping he wouldn't be there or, better yet, that it was all a mistake. But he was there and it was no mistake. "I'd like to have a talk with you, Ted. How about meeting me at the Blue Moon later this evening?"

"I'd like to—er—Harry. But my mother just flew in unexpectedly from Florida and I'm cooking dinner for her."

"Your mother! Dinner!" Silence; then he began to laugh.

"I'm a very good cook." Why I said it I didn't know; it was unnecessary and untrue. "Don't paint the lily, Edward," Mother had always warned, but, as you've probably noticed by now, I am a confirmed lily-painter.

"I'm sure you are," he said. "You've got to invite me to dinner some time." That was clearly politeness. He couldn't really mean it. "I know you want to spend as

much time as possible with your Mom now. Maybe we could get together and have a chat later in the week."

"Fine," I said. *Mom, indeed!* After I'd hung up, I went to the liquor cabinet. No beer or wine for me tonight. I poured myself a stiff drink of brandy. Then I poured myself another. And another.

I didn't take off Mother's clothes. I had a feeling I was going to have a caller. Sure enough, the bell rang a little after nine. This time I answered the door. I had already adjusted the light in the foyer so that it was even dimmer than usual. My back was to it as I faced Kitty Fisher. There was an ingratiating smile on her face. "Mrs. Bogard?"

"Yes?"

"Can I speak to you for a moment?"

"You are speaking to me. And a moment is all I can give you." I was beginning to enjoy myself.

"I mean, may I come in?"

My voice dripped icicles. "I never see anyone without an appointment. And I don't make appointments anymore." I began to close the door.

"I'm not, I mean—could I speak to Ted? It's really very important." Her nose twitched. Of course, from where she stood, the aroma of liquor must have hit like a tidal wave.

"Edward is in the kitchen, making a soufflé."

"A soufflé!"

"He cannot be disturbed. Neither can I. I'm not a young woman, and I have just had a long and tiring journey. Moreover, I haven't seen my son for nearly a year. I think we are entitled to a little peace and pri-

vacy." I didn't actually slam the door in her face, but its closing was very emphatic.

Now that there weren't likely to be any more callers, I could undress. Mother's corsets were damned uncomfortable. I hung her clothes in her closet. Then I changed to my own things and went to prepare my dinner. Cheeseburgers and champagne, because it seemed only right to break open a bottle of Uncle Kurt's Mouton Rothschild to celebrate Mother's homecoming. Not for the first time, I wondered whether Mother really was dead. She had told me she was, but then you never could really trust Mother.

I turned on the television set, prepared to relax in front of it with my simple meal. Tonight I would forget about people being eaten in the subway, bombs exploding, wars, riots, carcinogens, and computers. I turned to Johnny Carson. Sometimes it seemed to me he was the only real friend I had.

I was wide awake this time and pouring myself a glass of champagne when he flickered and turned blue and something large but no size at all, shapeless but very definite, invisible but all too evident, seeped out of the smoking television set and filled all the corners of the room but not the middle, so that I could look at it only sidewise. If I looked directly, it appeared to shift to left and right, without moving.

Son, its mind rang in mine. *Son!*

The glass in my hand shattered. Chilly bubbles ran over my wrist and down my sleeve. Chilly bubbles ran up and down my spine. "Oh, my God," I whispered. "Father!"

VIII

My father had always been a hearsay figure to me, since he had, as I believe I have already mentioned, died when I was an infant—not surprising; he'd been well into his sixties when I was born. He had been a high-school principal and more enterprising than most retired high-school principals. Unwilling to remain idle, he had started a small company devoted to the publication of certain literary classics that the restrictive laws of the period kept from being offered on the open market. The profits were not large but steady, and, added to his modest pension, produced a comfortable living. I quote from Mother, of course.

As I've said, after his death, Mother and Aunt Magda took over the firm. The ever-broadening interpretation of the First Amendment made it able to go public. Now it's one of the better-known smaller book houses, no longer specializing in erotica, although it still puts out many of the same books with the same illustrations that caused Father (my human father) to be fined and, once, given a jail sentence (suspended) for trafficking in pornography. Now they're considered fine art and collectors pay handsome sums for the original editions. The quality of the paper and printing, alas, has deteriorated since my father's day, and so, in my opinion, has the quality of the books they're publishing now. However, the prices of these inferior works are five or six times

what was charged for books then, and they seem to be selling. I still own a substantial number of shares in the firm.

Father's name had been the same as mine. At various times I had asked Mother what he'd looked like, and she had shown me various photographs. When I pointed out that each photograph appeared to be of a different man, she got angry. "For Heaven's sake, Edward, they were taken at different ages. People do change, you know."

From light eyes to dark? From Roman nose to pug? From receding chin to prognathous exuberance? It didn't seem likely.

Now Father had apparently returned as a spirit. And, if all I could see of him was an amorphous undulation around the periphery of my vision, at least that was better than something silly in a sheet. "Alas, poor ghost," I said, not knowing what else to say. He could hardly expect an outburst of filial affection. We hardly knew each other. A quotation seemed appropriate.

Fury exploded in my head. Blue waves rippled in the corners of my vision. He was not a ghost, had never been a ghost, and never would be a ghost. My whole brain quivered. "Please . . ." I groaned. "Turn yourself down. I can't . . . take it." I tried to protect my mind by visualizing mental hands stretched over it, shielding it from the blast.

Either it worked or he did tone himself down, because the thought waves grew less piercing. *Weakling!* they seemed to say. *Plug in the computer.*

"What?" For a moment I thought he was calling me names.

Plug in the computer! started to crash through my brain; then muted as I raised my mental buffers again. *That gadget of yours over there.*

I got up, surprised that I could move in so orderly a fashion, and plugged in the computer. Too late I remembered my wet sleeve. A jolt ran through my body, accompanied by a jolt to my brain that questioned my mental competency. Perversely, the effect was to compose me. Or possibly I was simply numbed by the psychological and physical shocks combined. I felt almost calm as I reached for the keyboard. Before I could touch it the screen lit up.

"To make it work—" I began.

But words were already appearing on the screen: IT WILL WORK THE WAY I WANT IT TO WORK.

Obviously there had been some rearrangement of the device. Well, it might as well be put to use. I had spent a great deal of money on it.

Now, the conversation that follows didn't unfold anywhere as smoothly as I'm going to recapitulate it. I was too disoriented to ask the questions I should have asked, and he was having too much difficulty communicating on my level, since, as he was quick to inform me, our thinking processes were light-years apart. Every now and then the words on the screen would explode into a jumble of letters and odd shapes and colors; and, even when the words made some kind of sense, the spelling was so atrocious that it took time to figure out what they were intended to be. There were false starts, misunderstandings, bursts of confusion.

So, although I have attempted to give an idea of what

he told me in reasonably colloquial English, even in clichés (one cliché is sometimes worth a few hundred well-chosen words), you must understand that this is entirely for your convenience, and that, in attempting to interpret what he told me, I may have missed a good deal of what he was trying to say—in some cases actually misinterpreting it. As for my reading of his emotions, it is of necessity anthropomorphic. Sorry, but it's the best I can do.

My sense of inner peace didn't last long, not when he started berating me for my slowness in grasping what he insisted were the most elementary of ideas. When I tried to point out that he was not the greatest of communicators, he set my brains to jangling again—tried to, that is, because my clumsy protections were beginning to have more and more effect.

Higher life forms didn't communicate via such primitive methods as speech or writing, he gave me to understand. As for spelling, it was a primitive device designed to mythicize written communication and make its practitioners an elite.

"How could my mother stand it when you talked to her?" was the first question I asked, when finally he gave me a chance to speak. Since he could apparently hear me, or pick up my thoughts, when I spoke, I didn't have to use the keyboard either. "They didn't have computers then."

WE HAD OTHER WAYS OF COMMUNICATING.

I didn't know whether he was being faintly risqué, which seemed improbable, or referred to something like a Ouija board. Or had she been something of a telepath herself? I remembered how, whenever there

was something I was especially anxious to keep from her, she had always seemed to know. I had always ascribed this to maternal instinct rather than ESP, but perhaps they were both different forms of the same thing.

Basically, he explained, he was a life form different from me and my kind. Vague memories of similar shapelessnesses under the microscope in Required Biology came back to me. "Like an amoeba, you mean?"

YOU'RE LIKE AN AMOEBA, COMPARED TO ME, YOU NUMBSKULL! I don't suppose the screen actually thundered, but, accompanied by the backlash from his cerebrations and the flashes of reflected blue light that lit up the room, the effect would have been the same, if I hadn't managed to dampen it. Such testiness was not what I would have expected of a higher life form, but, then, what did I know about higher life forms?

Vigorous agreement. So he could pick up on my thoughts, even when I didn't speak the words out loud. I felt naked, violated. He didn't understand.

We tried again.

He existed in many more dimensions than I did, he told me, and had senses I couldn't even begin to comprehend.

I couldn't even comprehend whether he was physically present in the room with me, or projecting his thoughts from somewhere else. As far as I could make out from his attempts at explanation, what was up there in the room with me—almost, but not quite, visible—was an extension or extrusion of him. His main body—not anything that I would recognize as a body—was

elsewhere. Exactly where, he couldn't or wouldn't tell me.

How close by? Distances were relative.

"If you're a different form of life, how could you—uh—with Mother—that is, be my father, I mean?"

A long, complicated explanation to the effect that in his species reproduction was a more elaborate process than among the "lower animals," involving, I gathered, an "exchanging" among three or more participants, who—or which—did not need to be of the same species, nor was it necessary for all to be present at the same time, although it was more sociable that way,

THAT'S HOW WE IMPROVE THE BREED.

"Which breed?"

YOURS, NATURALLY. IT WOULD HARDLY IMPROVE OURS.

The conclusion I drew was that Edward Bogard, Senior, was my biological or human father, and this being was my father in another sense—my force or energy father, perhaps. It was even possible he'd had no hand (or whatever) in shaping me in the literal sense. Perhaps he was more like a godfather, a spiritual progenitor. . . .

NO, the screen said. PHYSICAL. BUT NO USE TRYING TO EXPLAIN TO YOU. A sigh in my brain, almost: *No use trying to explain anything to him.* Then a faint sense of something like astonishment.

"Do you come from this planet?"

NO. Oh, I thought, if only he could have been a lovable, winsome creature like E.T., how happy I would have been to have recognized him as kin.

Too late I remembered he could read my mind. A

quiver of amusement. I HARDLY EXPECTED YOU TO GREET ME WITH OUTSPREAD TENTACLES—SORRY, ARMS.

Safe question: "What should I call you?"

FATHER, IF YOU MUST CALL ME SOMETHING. BUT DON'T THINK THAT ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS CALL ME AND I'LL APPEAR. I'M VERY BUSY.

I didn't dare ask him busy at what, or why, in that case, he had chosen this time to enter into communication with me instead of waiting for a more propitious moment. Maybe he was always busy.

Since he could read my mind, he picked it up. However, his reply dissolved into confusion. Whether he had real trouble in simplifying his thoughts or whether he was being evasive, I couldn't tell. The general impression I got was that, since he was working in the neighborhood, he'd decided to look me up.

I wanted to ask what he was working at, but the screen exploded in a burst of color that I later came to learn was his way of saying good-bye.

Was he still in touch? I sent out a questing tendril of thought. No response. That didn't mean anything. He couldn't keep me under surveillance all the time, not if he was all that busy with his mysterious work in the neighborhood. Of course I didn't know his capabilities, in how many directions his thoughts could be focussed at one time. I felt uneasy, and not only because I hated having my thoughts exposed to him . . . and possibly to others. Was he the only one of his kind around, or were there more? And would I be expected to regard them as uncles?

I would have to develop a more effective way of protecting my mind from the backlash of his thoughts. Maybe I could develop some kind of shielding that would protect my thoughts from him.

I tried to visualize an appropriate shield. The conventional shield shape wouldn't do; there was no way of knowing from what side the thoughts would approach.

I imagined a globe surrounding my mind, a perfect sphere, very, very shiny, so that, if he unleashed a thunderbolt of thought at me, perhaps it would ricochet right back to him. The idea gave me modest pleasure.

IX

The conversation may sound short. Actually it lasted for hours. It was early in the morning when I finally got to bed, but I didn't get much rest. I lay awake, wondering and worrying.

For most of my adult years I had had the sensation that I wasn't really living at all, just marking time until Something happened, not something in general but Something in particular that would explain my existence. This appeared to be what I had been waiting for. And it was at once more and less than I had expected.

My life had been complicated. Now it was growing positively convoluted. My worries vis-à-vis my own species (if I could still call them my own species) expanded to include my "Father," as I shall call him from now on, to distinguish him from my Father, Edward Bogard, Senior.

It took time for the larger implications to get through to me. What bothered me now was the knowledge that "Father" had been keeping tabs on me. He must be aware that I had been dressing up as Mother, and as a number of other individuals as well, although less and less frequently. Would he question this? Or would it seem to him a part of normal human behavior? How much did he actually know about us and our ways? How much did he care?

My immediate impulse was to get up, put on Mother,

and vanish into the night with her, possibly forever. A small-hours departure, however, would give rise to talk, if observed, and it was bound to be. Although the twenty-four-hour doorman was a service more honored in the breach than the observance, one of them was generally on hand late at night, because at that time there usually was nothing more interesting to do.

I felt surrounded, hemmed in by hostile forces. Over the years I had learned to live with passive threats, but every new factor in my life seemed to represent an active one. At four or five I finally fell asleep.

A little after seven I was awakened by the shrill scream of my doorbell, followed by a loud knocking on the door. Wouldn't you know the house would pick a time like this to catch on fire? I pulled on a dressing gown that had belonged to Uncle Vernon, who had liked to do himself well. It was of heavy silk brocade, of a quality you couldn't get any more, and rather more colorful than my own tastes would have dictated. But then I would never have expected it to be seen by anyone except a fireman, or, these days, a firewoman.

I opened the door a few inches. It was Kitty Fisher. Before I could move, she had pushed her foot in the opening—one of her reportorial techniques, I supposed. "Ted, I'm sorry to have to disturb you at this hour, but I absolutely have to speak to you. You're in trouble—a lot of trouble."

Hard to tell, because the thrifty fluorescent light the management had installed in the hall generally gave a fish-belly cast to those on whom it shone, but she appeared to be pale. Or perhaps she hadn't had time to

put on all her makeup, although she was otherwise perfectly groomed. She was very pretty, with blue lights shining in her glossy black hair. Her eyes were brown. I liked that. There was something unsettling about blue eyes. Like Candace's. Like my own.

How could I think about things like that at a time like this? What should concern me was which particular trouble of mine she referred to. I must think of her as a valuable source of inside information, nothing more.

She pushed harder with her foot, enough to make the door open a little wider, and blinked as she caught the full magnificence of Uncle Vernon's robe. "Ted, please let me in. It's urgent."

"I'll get dressed and meet you downstairs in twenty minutes. We'll have breakfast together and you can tell me all about it."

She looked at me in wonder. "You always seem so—so calm. Don't you want to know what I'm talking about? Or"—she tried to get the door all the way open, but I was too strong for her—"do you know already?"

In my more active writing days I had wondered what a hollow laugh sounded like. Now I knew. It sounded like the noise I made right then. "I haven't the least idea, but, since it seems to worry you, it's obvious there must have been some kind of a misunderstanding. You go ahead and wait for me down in the Minotaur. Order for both of us. I don't know about you, but I could eat a woolly mammoth. Bacon and eggs with home fries. And hot rolls. Their hot rolls are excellent, especially the ones with seeds."

"No orange juice?"

I overlooked the sarcasm. "Orange juice, of course. A

full glass, not one of those sample portions. And get a seat over in the section by the wall, Demetrios's section, not Mike's. Mike is a rotten waiter, even by Minotaur standards."

I was late. Not that I had taken time dressing—I'd just pulled on a sweater and slacks—but, on my way out, I had run into Mrs. Mortadella with a small child pendant on each hand, en route to the private progressive school they attended in the neighborhood, and which, she told me, was one of the principal reasons they had moved back into the city. In Westport they were too insulated from the verities of life. There was also an older child (she'd married very young, of course), able to make it to school on his own steam.

The Mortadellas were wealthy, I'd been informed previously. They'd pretty well have to be to afford a family of that size. Naturally I placed no credence in Mrs. Gluck's claim that Mr. Mortadella was a minor member of the Mafia (if he had been major, a chauffeured limousine would have picked up the kids). I knew that was just ethnic bias. And it was just common courtesy that made me stop to listen to Mrs. Mortadella's complaints and confidences. All the same, I wished she wouldn't smile at me like that and suggest I come up for tea some afternoon during the short space of time she had free between taking the children to school and picking them up afterward to be delivered to ballet class and psychiatrist respectively. She had so few opportunities for "cultivated conversation."

Fortunately, school schedules are rigid, and it wasn't much after eight o'clock when I joined Kitty in the Minotaur. I was wolfing down an excellent breakfast—

somehow, nothing ever makes me lose my appetite—and she was sitting behind a cup of coffee and an untouched roll, looking at me with disbelief. "Ted, how *can* you? When the police are looking for you? Or didn't you know?"

I broke off a piece of roll and buttered it with care. "If you mean Harry Limpkin, of course I know." She hadn't reproached me for my tardiness but had used the extra time to finish putting on her makeup, which showed a nice attitude. On the other hand, she hadn't ordered seeded rolls. She had also neglected to take a booth in Demetrios's section, but that didn't matter because Mike wasn't around and Demetrios was handling all the tables and booths by himself.

"He sent me a very nice note saying he wanted to see me. When I phoned him, he said there was no hurry; it could wait until the end of the week." I put the piece of roll into my mouth. "Since you seem to be so well informed, do you happen to know what he wanted?" I asked through a full mouth. It sounded more casual that way.

She frowned. "But he said he was going to have a talk with you right away."

I'd known he was going to talk to her; he'd said so. But what had she said that would make him want to talk to me? And right away, too. And there I'd been beginning to think she—well—liked me. Just goes to show how you can delude yourself. On the other hand, why was she taking the trouble to warn me?

"Did you happen to tell him your mother was back?"

"Why, yes, I suppose I did mention it. We chatted for a few minutes. He's an old"—I decided against "buddy"

—"acquaintance. We—er"—no, not "hang out"—"run into each other occasionally at the Blue Moon, that's a bar over on Amsterdam. I sometimes drop in there for a drink and he sometimes drops in there for a drink, and sometimes we drop in there at the same time."

"He told me something like that, but, I must say, I found it hard to believe. Some evening I might just drop in there myself and have a drink with you and the boys."

I didn't tell her that women were not exactly persona grata at the Blue Moon. She would probably report it to N.O.W. There would be a picket line around the place and after that . . . pasta primavera!

"I still don't understand what you've been talking about. And how my mother comes into it. What did Limpkin tell you about my mother?"

"Oh, he didn't tell *me* anything. This was after we had our little chat. He told Bernie, our police reporter, and Bernie passed it on to me. Mrs. Gluck, who lives next door to you, you know ["I know, I know"], told me she thought there was something funny about your mother's staying away so long. She said she had a feeling she was dead and she thought"—despite her profession, Kitty couldn't meet my eye—"you might have—er—done away with her or something."

I broke into laughter so loud that a couple of the other diners looked at me with resentment. The Minotaur was a popular spot for nursing a hangover, and loud laughter or screaming before noon was frowned upon, except by the help; it was understood that it was impossible for them to communicate without screaming.

"I've never heard you laugh like that before."

"You've never said anything that funny before." How did she know what my laughter was like? We had met—on a peer basis, that is—only a couple of days ago.

"It isn't funny. The other day they found a man who'd been keeping his mother's mummified body in his apartment for years. Of course she'd died of natural causes but—"

"I love my mother, but I don't think I'd be quite that devoted a son."

"Ted, I didn't—"

"You haven't eaten your roll and it's cold now. I'm going to order more. Demetrios," I called, "another plate of rolls, please. Seeded ones, this time. And more coffee."

"I have only two hands!" Demetrios yelled—his customary response to an order.

"How can you eat so much and still keep your figure?" Kitty asked. "I mean, now you're wearing a sweater, I can see—"

"I work out a lot," I interrupted, before she got too personal.

"Jogging?" I could see an offer to get up early in the morning and jog with me trembling on her lips.

"Good Lord, no!"

"Ted, why are we talking about jogging at a time like this?" Just like a woman; when she had brought up the subject herself.

"You were, I believe, accusing me of having killed my mother and mummified her."

"I wasn't doing anything of the kind!" She smiled. "I know it's ridiculous to think somebody like you could

have anything to do with . . . anything illegal. And that's what I told Mrs. Gluck when she came to see me. She came to me first, you know." Kitty made a face. "I think she had some idea of getting her picture into the paper. You know."

I laughed. "I know. I've never been able to understand why people should be so anxious to get their faces on public view."

She looked surprised. "Well, of course they'd want to get their pictures in the paper. Everybody does. What I meant was, what made Mrs. Gluck think that her picture would be in the paper for something like that? Even if it were true, it would be your picture they'd want."

Kitty's face flushed a little under the makeup. "When I told her saying things like that could open her to a suit for slander, she accused me of—well—lack of journalistic objectivity."

"Mrs. Gluck will say anything." I had a feeling Mrs. Gluck hadn't put it in those words, though.

"So she went to the police, and she made a good case, Bernie told me, for that and—and other things, enough so that the police felt they had to look into it. Especially since the other old ladies, even though they insisted they could never believe such things about you, not only agreed with most of the points she made, but added a few riffs of their own."

Mrs. Gluck would love being lumped in along with the "other old ladies," I thought. Why, she was barely at the point where brook and menopause meet. Hard to credit it, but I could remember when she was a girl, living with a mother who looked exactly like her. She

had taken an interest in me. I had been an eligible male, and, now that I came to think of it, there weren't so very many years between us—although I hadn't thought of it that way then. I had shown no interest whatsoever. In the end she had managed to find herself a husband. Yet the name on the mailbox was still Gluck. Either she had espoused a cousin or the family was parthenogenetic.

I would have liked to ask for a rundown on the points Mrs. Gluck and her colleagues had made so convincingly, but I feared Kitty would ask for explanations. I'd had a rough day and an even rougher night. I didn't feel up to improvising. "Mrs. Gluck has a habit of making wild accusations about people," I said. "Know what she's been saying about the Mortadellas?"

"I know," she said. "And she's right about them. That's why the police are taking an interest in you."

X

Demetrios set a plate of rolls and two cups of coffee on the table with a thump. "There, anything else Your Majesty desires?"

"Only the check." But he was off again.

"Ted, I really think you ought to take her with you to see Limpkin."

"Mrs. Gluck? Oh, my mother, you mean. Out of the question. She may look hale and hearty, but she isn't a well woman."

"Is it . . . a drinking problem?"

That was as good a problem as any. "I'm afraid so. Listen—this is in complete confidence. You don't have that tape recorder of yours cunningly concealed somewhere on your person, do you?"

"Of course not, Ted. I wouldn't dream of—None of this is for publication. I like to think we're friends. After all, we have known each other for a long time . . . in a way." So she hadn't forgotten.

"I know, and I have the scar on my leg to prove it." That wasn't true. No matter how painful it might have been at the time, an injury never left a permanent mark on me. I had never thought about it before. Now I began to realize that there might have been more to it than vitamins.

"She's been in a retreat—er—drying out. They told me she was cured."

"Ted, don't you know, alcoholics are never cured."

"As soon as she got back she started drinking like a fish. I can't stop her. The best thing, I think, would be for her to go back as soon as possible."

"Oh, I agree. But before she goes back I still think she should go with you to see Limpkin, especially since he and you are such good friends."

"No, if she went with me to the station and started talking and everybody . . . saw how she was, word would get around. And Mother is very proud."

"Ted, it isn't all that bad. Everybody has trouble with their mothers. I have trouble with mine." From what I remembered of Mrs. Minkus's daughter, it had been Mr. Fisher who'd had trouble with her. But maybe she didn't make a practice of it. Maybe it was the peculiarly erotic effect of the elevator. Sometimes it seemed as if you took your virtue in your hands every time you got on it. Of latter days the males were as aggressive as the females. There were two theatrical young men from the floor above mine who were forever inviting me to wine and cheese parties.

"Look, if Limpkin had wanted to see her, he would have asked me to bring her along, wouldn't he? Now, if that's all—"

Gesturing to Demetrios, I started to get up. "I have only two feet!" he yelled.

She put out a hand to restrain me. She had never touched me before. There was a kind of tingling. I wasn't sure whether she felt it too. Was it static electricity or something more?

"There's more," she said. I was startled. Was she, too,

developing a telepathic streak? An unchancy thing in a reporter.

"First Mrs. Gluck said—and then it turned out that once your name came up that a lot of people in the neighborhood who . . . disappeared and are presumed dead—well—quite a few of them turned out to have had some kind of run-in with you recently."

"*What?*" I sank back in my seat. A breakfaster on the other side of the coffee shop looked up and smiled at me before going back to his newspaper. He looked familiar, but I couldn't place him.

"Are you really accusing me of . . . ?" I began, then started again. "First you think I've been keeping the mummified remains of my mother in my apartment. Now you think I went down in the subway—which I never do—and disposed of all those people in some way, probably fiendish."

"I didn't say *I* thought so. I don't think anybody actually thinks so, not like that. But apparently you did have arguments with Mrs. Weinstein and Jim O'Day and maybe several other of the people who disappeared. And there's nothing else to link any of them together."

"Who's been keeping tabs besides Mrs. Gluck?"

"Well, you know how people talk." Like a good little reporter, she was protecting her sources.

I wondered who the "quite a few" of the people who had had "run-ins" with me and had subsequently disappeared might be. I couldn't help wondering about a lot of things that I had never wondered about before. Another cliché—the chill finger touching the spine—suddenly made very good sense.

"I never argue with people. I might have had words,

nothing more. And nothing serious, no actual confrontations. For Heaven's sake, if everybody around here who spoke sharply to someone killed them, the sidewalks would be knee-deep in corpses."

"I agree, the whole thing's ridiculous. And I have an idea Limpkin thinks so, too. He just has to talk to you about it because it's his job and there aren't any other leads. And you are such a strange person, Ted."

"I've always thought I was perfectly ordinary."

All through my youth that had been true. I believed everyone lived the way I did, one life in public, another in private, that every family had secrets. Why, some of the boys in school actually spoke a different language at home. And a lot of the boys had uncles; the only difference was that theirs were concomitant and mine successive. But now I lied. I knew I wasn't ordinary.

Demetrios appeared at the table. "Here's your check. Thank you and have a nice day," he said angrily.

"We'd like more coffee, please."

"Then why you ask for the check? You think I have nothing else to do but wait on you?"

As a matter of fact, I'd had some nonsensical notion of the kind, but I tried to feel gracious. "Sorry to have inconvenienced you, Demetrios. Would you be so kind as to bring us more coffee, please?"

Grumbling, he stomped off. Kitty smiled at me. "You are a bit of a wimp, Ted. It is hard to think of you having arguments with all those people."

"Some people get angry because you refuse to fight with them." A crash of china from the table where

Demetrios was removing dishes seemed to bear me out.

Kitty took out a lipstick and replenished the color on her lips. The tint she used was bright red. I liked it.

"By the way," I said, if you're looking for some kind of a connection among the people who were killed, you might see how many of them were born outside New York."

"But practically everybody in New York was born somewhere else. Most New Yorkers can't afford to live here anymore. Do you think somebody's trying to make New York safe for New Yorkers?"

"The way I look at it is that a lot of people come here to escape something."

"And whatever that something was followed them here and got them? Interesting idea, but I don't think my editor will go for it. He's from Cleveland himself."

She went on, "Speaking of out-of-towners, I heard something else about your house that's even wilder. The police have been talking about staking out the place—something to do with a terrorist ring."

"Oh, that must be Mr. Zapolya and Igor and their cronies. Didn't your grandmother tell you about them? They've been plotting in the basement for years."

"You mean you thought they were just a harmless bunch of nuts?"

I shrugged. "I would assume so. Otherwise somebody would have done something about them long ago."

"According to Bernie nobody ever mentioned them until Mrs. Gluck brought the subject up. And it looks as though they may not be so harmless. He says they're members of the Transylvanian Independence Move-

ment; you know, the ones that have been setting off bombs all over the city." I seemed to have heard something about them, but, up until recently, I had never paid much attention to the news. "But Transylvania isn't a country."

"It was once," I said, and would have told her more, except that she didn't seem to be interested.

"Bernie says they're probably the ones who blew up the Russian Tea Room last month. You remember, they nearly didn't get everybody evacuated in time, because the man who called to warn them had such a thick accent, at first they thought he was just trying to make a reservation."

"Then someone should have reported them a long time ago," I said. But I knew very well why the group had not been reported. If you wanted your leaks repaired expeditiously, and your apartment painted the color of your heart's desire, if you wanted no notice taken of the fact that you were taking in roomers, or had your primary residence elsewhere, or were running a business from what was officially classified as a residence, you did not turn your superintendent in merely for making bombs in the basement.

Mrs. Gluck must have been beside herself to tell the police about it. Probably she hadn't meant to. Probably she had just been carried away.

But it was lucky for me the police had something solid like terrorists to occupy them. "No wonder Limpkin wasn't in a hurry to see you," Kitty said. "If there's anything at all to this terrorist thing, naturally they'd check that out first. In fact, maybe they—the terrorists

—have something to do with the people who disappeared."

I liked her turn of thought. "Of course, that's the obvious answer."

Just the same, I could hardly wait to get up to the apartment and dispose of Mother and all other evidence incriminating me in the misdeeds of my progenitor; and, of course, my own sins, which were mainly those of omission, although I supposed there were some who might not look at it that way. I tried not to look too eager. "Sure you wouldn't like more coffee? More rolls? Something else? Well, I have to get back to Mother. I want to spend as much time as possible with her while she's here. And, of course, keep an eye on her."

Demetrios flung the amended check on the table before me without a word. Silence was, to him, the ultimate insult. To confound him further, I left a handsome tip. On the way out, I caught the eye of the mysterious breakfaster and this time I recognized him. The old man from the copy shop.

"When am I going to see you again?" Kitty asked, after I had paid the cashier and we were going back to the house.

"How would you like to go to a literary cocktail party? Western Writers of New York?"

"You mean West Side Writers of New York, don't you?"

"No, I write Westerns."

She looked surprised. "Have you spent much time out West?"

"I've never been there; it would spoil the pure flow of

my imagination." Actually I researched my books very thoroughly, but I wanted to impress her.

"I'd love to go. When?"

"Saturday. We could have dinner afterward."

"It's a date." No coyness, no looking it up in an appointment book to see if she was free. This was the modern woman. "But I'd like to see you before then. There are lots of things I want to talk to you about. Maybe tomorrow?"

"I'd like to see you, too," I said, without committing myself. "I'll call you."

We had reached the lobby. Before I could touch the elevator button she reached out and gave it a firm feminist push.

"You don't know my number."

"Same as your grandmother's, isn't it?"

"In case you hadn't noticed, I haven't been living with my grandmother for some years—nearly twenty, in fact. I have a place of my own. Here, let me give you my number." She wrote on a scrap of paper she tore out of a notebook and handed it to me. I put it in my pocket. "If you happen to lose it, you can get in touch with me through Grandma."

As the elevator started up, something small rolled out from a corner. Kitty picked it up. "Seems to be some sort of lipstick." She pulled off the cap. "No, it's a glosser —stuff women put on their lips to make them shiny and tempting," she explained.

I stretched out a hand for it. "Maybe we ought to give it to the doorman. Not so he can make his lips shiny and tempting, so he can return it to whoever lost it."

"She'll never want it after it's been rolling around on that dirty floor. I'll just throw it away."

The elevator stopped at the Minkus floor. "Do a lot of women use them?" I asked, holding the door open to keep the elevator from starting up. "Lip glossers, I mean?"

"I'd say almost every woman has one somewhere," she said. "Even I have one someplace, though I'm not using it now."

She turned her face up to mine. What could I do? I kissed her, very lightly. I wasn't going to get passionate in an elevator, especially that elevator. But I had the tingling sensation again and this time I knew she felt it too.

XI

Once inside the apartment, I got out the suitcase I'd used as a prop for Mother and crammed papers into it—birth, stock, and death certificates; deeds; bankbooks and passports; checks; credit cards; letters . . . all the impedimenta of modern living, everything in the apartment that could possibly divulge adverse information. There was nothing I could do at the moment about such things as books, clothes, pictures, and similar memorabilia, which were not as nakedly informative, but might supply clues to the trained observer. Like the wheelchair and Uncle Gerhard's ivory-headed cane.

The suitcase wasn't nearly big enough, so I got another, a big Vuitton that had belonged to Uncle Marc back in the days when most Americans thought Vuitton was a kind of soup. Then I filled a third, a heavy leather job whose provenance I could not recollect.

When they were shut and locked, I paused for rest. That was when I saw the scrap of paper nestling among the crumbs and dust curls in the Oriental rug. I picked it up—the slip Kitty had given me in the Minotaur. It must have dropped out of my pocket as I toiled. Written on it in a bold hand were a telephone number and an address in the Village. The address was less than two blocks away from the studio. How many times had Kitty and I passed each other on the street without noticing?

A thought nagged at me, but I filed it away under

Future Worries. Sufficient unto the day were the evils thereof. My immediate task was to get my set of elegantly mismatched luggage out of the apartment and down to the studio.

Kitty was at her grandmother's for the moment and likely to remain there for a while; it was difficult to get away from Mrs. Minkus even when you were not a relative. And better to risk running into her in the elevator here than in the street there.

I put a blazer over my sweater and slacks and bundled the suitcases into the elevator. If I encountered anybody, I was prepared with a story about how I was taking Mother's suitcases down to the airlines terminal, so they could be booked through. I wasn't even sure you could do that. Maybe I had better make it the train station. Mother could be stopping off somewhere in New Jersey on her way South. Many people had friends in New Jersey.

As it turned out, there was no need for my careful fabrication. No one was in the lobby but the doorman and some compatriots, eating breakfast out of papers and arguing, but most Spanish conversation sounds contentious to me. They might simply be having a peaceful exchange. As usual, they ignored me.

It was, of course, impossible to catch a cab at that time. No use trying to get on a bus either. Even if the driver let me on with three suitcases at rush hour, the passengers were likely to take exception—and exceptions, in this city, were likely to be taken violently.

But it was rush hour only from north to south, not from south to north. I got on a nearly-empty uptown bus and rode to 120th Street, where Broadway was

thick with taxis discarded by high-living teachers and students from Columbia.

The driver of the cab that fell to my lot spoke with a thick accent and appeared to have arrived in the city very recently. I had to guide him downtown, block by block, while he told me his life story. He was a refugee from Communist oppression who had come to America seeking freedom and fortune, not necessarily in that order. He—

"You just went through a red light!" I interrupted.

"Is okay. This is free country."

He half turned in his seat. "You have kindly sympathetic face. You are perhaps banker who could help me get in on the ground floor of high finance?"

"No, I'm—Look out!" A truck had charged out of a side street, missing us by inches.

"Don't worry, I have eyes in the back of my ears. You are maybe stockbroker? Industrial captain? Motion-picture magnate?"

"I'm a writer."

"A writer, bah!" He returned full attention to the wheel. "We have writers in Russia too. We send them to Siberia."

By the time we'd arrived at the building which housed my studio the meter read twelve dollars. "You want change?" he asked, as I handed him a twenty.

"I want change." Reluctantly, he handed over a five and three ones, as I wrestled my suitcases to the sidewalk, unaided. I gave him the singles.

"The other day a fellow countryman of mine had a passenger who gave him hundred-dollar tip when he

found out Vassily was poor refugee from Communist oppression."

"Good for him," I said.

"Bah! You Americans have no heart!" he yelled, as he drove off. "The hundred-dollar bill was forgery!" So, I later discovered, was the five he had given me.

And, finally, I was in the studio, curiously barren without its trappings. I would bring some stuff from uptown to make it look cozier, which would also solve the problem of what to do with some of the potentially embarrassing curios. The portrait of Uncle George in full uniform, for example, would look very well as a replacement for Aunt Magda. I could hang Uncle Peter's swords over the fireplace, give the room a masculine air.

I really should have gotten rid of a lot of the things a long time ago, but it had been enough of a job to dispose of the uncles et al. themselves. After they were dead, of course. Mother had never done away with anyone, no matter how burdensome he became. She just allied herself with gentlemen in their declining years and let nature take its course. She never rushed things.

In my father's case, the alliance had resulted in a bonus—me. To my knowledge, he was the only one whom she had married. But there might have been marriages before. After that, only uncles.

I think all of them were happy with her. They certainly seemed to be. Some lasted for years, and she always stuck with them to the end, even when it turned out that their pensions weren't as substantial as she'd

expected or (as in the case of Uncle Dennis) there was no pension at all.

All of them had received the best of care. And most of them ended their days in the hospital, surrounded by every luxury, all of it paid for by the health insurance of a predecessor who had already departed this earth in actuality and was now due to be phased out legally.

The only ones who had been taken to the hospital from this address were those few who had associated with Mother at the studio and at the Brooklyn brownstone. The rest of them, who had all lived at this address, were taken to the studio and/or the brownstone. Since they had to be buried under other identities, they couldn't be documented as having lived at an address where people knew them and might have been surprised that there were no death notices in the papers.

There were death notices, of course. Mother was careful to observe all the traditional niceties. Perhaps it might be a little unconventional, she said, to have the death notice for Uncle Peter in Uncle Gerhard's name; but, when the time came, there would be a death notice in Uncle Peter's name and another uncle would take his place on the waiting list. There were always flowers in abundance but the funeral ceremonies were, of necessity, simple, although the deceased's religious preferences, if any, were always followed. This had created difficulties when it came to burying Uncle Aaron (Perlmutter) under the name of Uncle Dennis (Callahan), but Mother had surmounted them with her usual aplomb.

When the various gentlemen disappeared in turn, the neighbors took it for granted that they had walked

out on Mother. "Some women just don't know how to hang on to a man," Mrs. Gluck had been heard to say, which caused Mother considerable amusement, tempered, of course, by her grief on the occasion. (I think it was Uncle Marc, that particular time, or had it been Uncle Peter?)

All this juggling required physical as well as mental effort. Although an unusually strong woman, Mother was unable to handle the details single-handed. Since this had been going on for a long time—since before I was born, as a matter of fact—someone must have been helping her before I was big enough to help, but she never said anything to indicate who it might have been, and I never asked.

Mother had a driver's license. We owned a car then, an ancient Rolls-Royce, and we also had a collapsible wheelchair for the easy transportation of invalids. She broke me in, little by little. At first I was disturbed, but she explained to me that she was only carrying out the deceased's dying wishes, or what would have been their dying wishes if they had had a chance to express them.

Then one day, six years ago, she got into that ancient Rolls-Royce and drove South, saying she was going to see Aunt Magda. She never came back. Two years later I got a letter from her saying that she was dying, but I was not to worry. Her death certificate would be under another name; unnecessary for me to know what it was, as she intended to be cremated and her ashes scattered over the ocean, so there'd be no grave, no place for me to lay flowers on and weep, if such were my inclination.

I thought she had told me everything there was to know. I suppose she thought she had told me every-

thing I needed to know. "Father" had no pension and no worldly goods. Apparently Mother had either thought I would never need to know of his existence or she had left it to him to reveal himself to me in his own good time.

All of the disposable assets had already been transferred to me; and, as all the gentlemen had already transferred their assets to Mother (wills and inheritance taxes, she always felt, were an unnecessary complication), everything was mine, more or less legally. All I had to do was to keep on doing alone what I had been doing in partnership with her.

I carried on, continuing to collect the pensions of those who had passed away, except for a few whom Mother had, I felt, allowed to reach an unconscionable old age. So now you can see why I was obliged to lead the kind of life I led, and why it was important, now that the police seemed to be taking an interest in me—even if for other reasons—to get those records of many lifetimes out of the apartment and into the secure hiding place here.

I took the books out of the bookcase. Each time the job became more tedious. Now that it was going to be the papers' permanent depository, I would have to work out some easier method of access—maybe rig the bookcase so it would swing out. Which would mean the books would have to be glued in or something. The problem was that I could hardly hire someone to do it for me. I had no wish to have the concealed room's existence broadcast throughout the neighborhood by a workman anxious to advertise his skill with secret

doors. As for myself, I do know one end of a screwdriver from another, but that's the limit of my manual knowledge.

Finally I reached the steel door and pushed the suitcases inside; then replaced bookcase and books. As long as Candace had keys to the studio I still couldn't feel safe. There was no use bringing things in if Candace was going to steal them as soon as I left the place. I called a locksmith. He said he couldn't get there until late in the afternoon. I didn't want to wait, so we made an appointment for eleven the next morning. By that time, I felt sure, Mother would have been disposed of and I would be able to breathe more easily. Which just goes to show that, if Mother had any actual talent for predicting the future, she certainly hadn't passed it on to me. (Except for a certain talent for picking the horses which I had developed in recent years and which contributed a nice little addition to my income.)

Now that the papers were locked away down here, I felt a weak sense of relief. I knew the police weren't likely to search the apartment uptown; I hadn't been accused of anything. Still, I had more reason for paranoia than most. It was comforting to know there was nothing left up there that could point the finger of suspicion at me. At least I thought there was nothing left. When I got back, maybe I'd better check once more.

As I closed the door to the studio, the man who had the place over me hailed me as he came down the stairs. "Ah, Cassowary, I thought you'd moved out. Have you seen Raul?"

"Who's Raul?"

"The super."

"What happened to Armando?"

"He's running his own design studio in Soho, now. New guy's named Raul, although the Invisible Man would be more like it."

As the building was too small to have a resident superintendent, it shared a part-time one with several other buildings, thus offering unlimited opportunity for disappearance.

"That woman who lives over me let her bathtub overflow again. This time the whole ceiling fell down. Do you know whether it's legal to keep an otter in the city?"

"I have no idea. Why don't you call the agent?"

"I've been leaving a message on his answering machine every hour on the hour. I only wish I could find out who the landlord is. I looked it up, but it's a corporate name." The look that came over his face was the kind you see only in horror pictures and in New Yorkers talking about their landlords. "I'd like to get my hands around that corporation's neck."

I didn't mention that I happen to be the landlord. I didn't want it generally known. Otherwise the tenants might carry their problems to me. I left such things to the agent, who knew how to bring tenants to their knees by hinting darkly of condominium conversion.

As we left the building, a tour bus passed us. Although the glass in the windows was coated to facilitate hijackers, I could feel the stare of thirsty out-of-town eyes. "Somehow," my neighbor said, "whenever one of those goes by I feel I should do something authentically

New York. Would you care to join me in some native folk dances?"

"Perhaps some other time."

I took an ordinary bus, which nonetheless had coated windows, uptown. No sense taking a taxi, since I wouldn't be able to get closer to the house than the bus stop because of the double-parked row of cars that always lined the street. I decided to wait until evening before taking Mother on her last mile. I scheduled my departure for the dinner hour. Meals were the highlight of the lobby ladies' lives, and it was they whom I was particularly anxious to avoid. The other tenants, even if they did happen to be passing through the lobby, weren't likely to attempt to engage me—Mother, that is—in conversation. They would find her far too formidable for casual chatter.

Six hours to kill. . . . I would use them to catch up on my lost sleep. I lay down, but sleep refused to come. I got up and looked at myself in the mirror. The face and body were still those of a stranger.

Could it be that I was fooling myself in thinking I looked younger than my actual years? Maybe all middle-aged people were under the same illusion. It was only in the last few days that I had begun to realize that I was, indeed, middle-aged. I knew that physically I was as fit as ever I had been in my life, fitter than most men. Kitty seemed to regard me in a favorable light, but that didn't mean anything. A lot of younger women liked older men.

XII

I used up a little more time by gathering some of the objects that were most likely to provoke curiosity and stowing them in already overstuffed closets and drawers and underneath things, almost as if I were preparing the place for company. I hid the wheelchair in the half bath and Uncle George's picture in the cedar closet. What I was really doing was putting off something I knew I had to do—to try to do, anyhow.

I turned on the computer. " 'Father,' " I said, very loudly and clearly, because I knew no other way of projecting my thoughts in his direction, "I must speak to you."

I was prepared for no response at all. I was also prepared for the crashing that could start in my head if he was displeased, as he well might be if I succeeded in attracting his attention. I fitted the shining imaginary globe I had envisaged over my brain. There was a faint, a very faint vibration of something like startlement, surprise, perhaps even pain . . . emotion of a sort, anyhow; and a fleeting, almost admiring, thought that could be interpreted as *chip off the old block.* Almost as if I were beginning to pick up *his* thoughts. If so, apparently my shield only muffled them but didn't cut them off.

Words appeared on the screen. Again, I edit, encapsulate, interpret, and epitomize, to give our conversa-

tion a coherency it never had, although communication came far more easily this time.

YOU HAVE INTERRUPTED ME IN THE MIDDLE OF MY DINNER. DIDN'T I TELL YOU NOT TO CALL ME?

"You said don't think I could just call you and you'd appear. Well, I didn't actually think I could. I just thought I'd try."

SEMANTICS AGAIN, the screen sneered. YOU PEOPLE AND YOUR LITTLE WORD GAMES.

"So you eat regular meals," I observed.

I ABSORB NOURISHMENT AT REGULAR INTERVALS. IS THAT WHY YOU SUMMONED ME? TO ASK ABOUT MY DIETARY HABITS?

My mind shield quivered. But his anger couldn't get through, at least not enough to cause me discomfort. What did the shield do about *my* thoughts? Mute them or cut them off entirely? Better say what I had to say aloud.

" 'Father,' a lot of people have been disappearing from around here, and their remains—the artifacts they had on them anyway—have been found in a subway tunnel near here. Did you have anything to do with those disappearances?"

I'd expected him to jib at being questioned point-blank like that. Instead, there was a ripple of quiet color across the screen—his equivalent of amusement. OF COURSE I HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH THOSE DISAPPEARANCES. NOT ALL BY MYSELF, OF COURSE. I'M NOT THAT GREEDY.

"There's more than one of you around, then?"

A sense of exasperation. MANY MORE.

"Are all of you here—in this neighborhood, I mean? Those that are on this planet, of course."

Negative.

Where were they then?

Ambiguity. I thought he said that they were scattered all over the globe, but I couldn't be sure. Although he knew we had set up divisions among ourselves—separate countries, separate cities, separate languages—he wasn't interested in them. He was waiting for me to come to the point.

Finally I asked the question I'd been avoiding. "Exactly what happened to the people who disappeared?"

HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU? WE ABSORBED THEM. THE ARTIFACTS WERE UNABSORBABLE. AND SO—

"You mean you . . . ate them?"

IF YOU WANT TO PUT IT THAT WAY. I DON'T KNOW WHY YOU'RE SO SHOCKED. YOU EAT LIVING CREATURES—CREATURES THAT HAVE BEEN ALIVE, ANYWAY.

"But we don't eat intelligent life."

Pastel ripples of amusement. I didn't push it.

He said he would try to explain in the equivalent of words of one syllable. He and his kind were planet developers. It was their function or role or job—not clear which—to take over empty planets and develop them for residential purposes.

"Empty planets?"

PLANETS DEVOID OF INTELLIGENT LIFE. OF COURSE.

Of course.

They had come to this planet so long ago, in our

terms, there was no way he could describe it so I could understand. For them it was merely a longish tour of duty.

"And you've lived here for generations, unknown to us?"

FOR YOUR GENERATIONS, NOT OURS. WE'RE THE ORIGINALS.

"You mean you're as old as time itself?"

OLDER. TIME, AT LEAST IN THE SENSE YOU'RE USING IT, IS A PURELY HUMAN CONCEPTION.

While I was trying to digest that, he went on: OF COURSE WE DON'T SLEEP THE WAY YOU DO. WHEN WE RETIRE FOR REST, WE REDUCE OUR LIFE PROCESSES TO A MINIMAL LEVEL. THAT WAY, THE NORMAL AGING PROCESS IS NOT ONLY HALTED BUT THE VARIOUS CORPOREAL ASPECTS RENEW THEMSELVES.

Which I took to mean that they spent most of their time in suspended animation and, subjectively, were not as old as at first seeming. But old enough, old enough.

Whenever they set out to develop a new planet, they always took along some members of my kind.

"Took us along?"

THAT'S RIGHT. WE BROUGHT YOU WITH US, THE SAME WAY YOUR EXPEDITIONS TOOK COWS AND SHEEP AND CHICKENS ALONG WHEN THEY CHANGED LOCATION. ALIEN ENERGY SOURCES ARE LIKELY TO BE TOXIC.

Brought us with them. . . . We were not native to this planet. In a way, that was worse than the idea that we were food. That we were edible was not an un-

heard-of concept. In the past, we'd been known to eat ourselves in a pinch.

But that we ourselves were alien . . . "No, no, no!"

YES, YES, YES.

"Are there . . . any species native to this planet?"

DINOSAURS. COCKROACHES. MOST OF THE OTHERS DON'T EXIST ANYMORE. COME TO THINK OF IT, DINOSAURS DON'T EITHER.

"Did you get rid of the dinosaurs?"

NO, YOU GOT RID OF THE DINOSAURS, ALONG WITH THOSE OTHER SPECIES THAT VANISHED. DIDN'T DO TOO WELL WITH THE COCKROACHES, THOUGH.

"How about those cows and sheep and chickens you mentioned?" Because they were mammals like us, with analogous life processes, and at that moment I was ready to claim kinship with any species indigenous to the planet.

WE BROUGHT THEM ALONG WITH US ALSO, FOR YOU TO FEED ON.

"Then how about lions and tigers?"

IF YOU'RE JUST GOING TO ASK A LOT OF FRIVOLOUS QUESTIONS, I'M LEAVING.

The screen started to flicker. I couldn't let him go. There were too many questions that had to be answered right away. "Can't you go on eating while your . . . extrusion is communicating with me?"

WHEN WE INGEST ENERGY, WE ARE TOTALLY COMMITTED. But I had the feeling that he coudn't eat and send out an extrusion at the same time, that he couldn't do anything else and send up an extrusion at

the same time, that he had limitations he didn't want me to know about.

We shouldn't think of ourselves only as food, he told me. That may have been our primary purpose en route, but once we reached the planet of our destination, we took on many diversified roles. In fact, we were the ones who actually prepared the planet for use, though we weren't aware that was our purpose but were under the impression that we were fulfilling our own destinies.

And we did it all on our own, he told us, almost without supervision. They just turned us loose and we set at it instinctively, clearing the land of its vegetation and altering the character of the land and water and atmosphere. WE JUST GAVE YOU A LITTLE GENETIC NUDGE FROM TIME TO TIME, TO SET YOU IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION.

And everything, he assured me, was right on schedule, all according to the master plan. He seemed to think I would be pleased. It seemed to me, if his species had had all the experience with ours that he claimed, he ought to know better than that.

I asked him whether things always worked in the same way with every planet they'd developed. Allowing for variations in climate, mass, number of moons, amount and nature of vegetation, and other undesirable indigenous life, almost exactly the same.

I had run across the concept that we were livestock many times before, in literature, both fiction and nonfiction, and philosophy; and thought it a pleasant conceit. In real life, it wasn't nearly as pleasant. Yet, why

had the idea surfaced so many different times in so many different places, unless . . . ?

In my preoccupation, I must have let my shield slip, because he picked up my thought. EXACTLY. WHERE THERE'S SMOKE THERE'S FIRE.

So there went all of man's hopes, dreams, aspirations. It didn't matter that I had never done anything. It was the people who had composed symphonies, created great works of art, written plays and novels who were the fools. And they would never know it.

Even worse, without those little "genetic nudges," there probably wouldn't have been any plays or novels or works of art or symphonies. We were—all of us—mutations from the original stock, diversified to fulfill the needs of those who had put us here. The useful ones concerned themselves with weapons of destruction and other technological developments necessary to scour the planet clean and make it one fit for the—was there a name for them? PICK YOUR OWN, SON—Them to live on. If some turned out to be useless, going down such blind alleys as art and music, well, you couldn't expect any species to breed a hundred percent true.

"Father" couldn't understand what was troubling me. Apparently it was only my species that was afflicted by the desire to leave behind them footsteps in the concrete of time. He seemed anxious to reassure me. YOU DON'T HAVE TO WORRY, SON. WE WON'T EAT *YOU.*

"You mean you don't eat those who are the result of your—er—interaction with our species?"

WE NEVER ABSORB THOSE WHO ARE THE DI-

RECT RESULT OF OUR INTERACTION. UNLESS, OF COURSE, THERE'S AN EMERGENCY AND NOBODY ELSE IS AVAILABLE, WHICH IS HARDLY LIKELY HERE: YOU EXIST IN SUCH ABUNDANCE. OTHERWISE WE KEEP THEM AS . . .

"Pets? Prize pigs?"

WELL, YOU DO ABSORB VEGETATION, DON'T YOU? He seemed to regard the consumption of plant life, if not plant life itself, as disgusting, if not obscene. PRIME BLOODSTOCK WOULD PROBABLY FIT THE SITUATION MORE PRECISELY.

My lack of comprehension baffled him. I THOUGHT YOU HAD UNDERSTOOD. BY INTERACTING FROM THE START, LITTLE BY LITTLE WE IMPROVE THE BREED.

"But—but if you've interacted from the very start, then everybody, every human being, must have your genes in them by now."

OF COURSE. OTHERWISE YOU'D ALL STILL BE SWINGING FROM—flicker of disgust—TREES. I THOUGHT I HAD MADE THAT CLEAR AT THE BEGINNING.

Disappointment . . . as if he had expected more of me. I wondered whether he'd been planning to show me at some intergalactic fair.

"Then I'm as human as everyone else!"

A LITTLE LESS SO. He meant that as a compliment. EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE WE GET A SPECIMEN THAT'S ESPECIALLY INTELLIGENT, ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, PROBABLY BECAUSE THEY HAVE MORE OF OUR GENES IN THEM. WE CUT THEM OUT OF THE HERD AND BREED THEM. WHICH

REMINDS ME, ISN'T IT ABOUT TIME YOU GOT YOURSELF A MATE? IF YOU LIKE, I CAN FIX YOU UP WITH . . . Whatever he was going to say, it would boil down to the interplanetary equivalent of "a nice girl."

"No, thank you. If I decide to breed, I'll pick my own mate."

NATURAL SELECTION? I KNOW YOU'RE PRIMITIVE, BUT I THOUGHT YOU HAD GONE BEYOND THAT STAGE.

However, he couldn't concern himself with implementing a stock-breeding program right then, he told me. He had other priorities. And there was still time for things like that. The new tenants weren't expected to reach the planet for—wild arabesques raced across the screen as he calculated—five hundred to a thousand or so of "our years." THE PLANET WON'T BE PROPERLY RADIOACTIVE UNTIL THEN. AND THE TRIP COULD TAKE EVEN LONGER, IF THEY RUN INTO TROUBLE EN ROUTE. NOW, I REALLY—

"Tell me, if you've been here all along, how is it that we never noticed so many disappearances before?"

THE LAST TIME WE WERE ALL UP AND DOING AT ONCE, YOUR KIND DIDN'T PAY MUCH ATTENTION TO MASS DISAPPEARANCES. BESIDES, YOU DIDN'T CARRY SO MANY ARTIFACTS ON YOUR PERSONS AND MOST OF THEM WERE BIODEGRADABLE. AFTER THAT, ONE HERE, ONE THERE, WHO WOULD NOTICE OVER THE YEARS?

I thought I sensed a little reluctance when he went on, ACTUALLY IT HADN'T BEEN ON THE SCHED-

ULE FOR ALL OF US TO GET UP AT THE SAME TIME FOR A LITTLE WHILE, A CENTURY OR SO. BUT THERE WAS AN EMERGENCY. Not, he hastened to assure me, the kind of emergency that would require the consumption of prime bloodstock. I strained to see if I could get something out of his mind. A confusion of noise . . . a shaking . . . the sensation of something falling on top of me . . . a disturbance overhead, anyway . . . confusion . . . pain. . . .

A LARGE SUPPLY OF FOOD WAS NEEDED IMMEDIATELY. WE COULDN'T BE PICKY.

"But why did you have to pick so many people as . . . food who had a connection with me?"

Monotone flickers on the screen. Embarrassment. NOT INTENTIONAL. I WAS IN CHARGE. WE OPERATE IN SHIFTS, ONE TO STAY UP AND RUN THINGS WHILE THE OTHERS RENEW THEIR ENERGIES. BEING ACTIVE AND ALREADY TUNED UP, I WAS IN CHARGE OF GETTING FOOD FOR THE FIRST MEAL OR TWO, UNTIL THE OTHERS STARTED FORAGING FOR THEMSELVES. SINCE YOU'RE THE HUMAN CLOSEST TO ME, I SIMPLY HOMED IN ON YOUR EMOTIONS.

Homed in on my emotions? Had I then been broadcasting everything I felt for him or anyone of his species to pick up?

More than that. Because we were related, he was especially attuned to my thought waves . . . vibrations . . . whatever you liked to call them. And he hadn't simply picked them up; he'd had to reach out for them.

The words of the telephone company song came into

my head: "Reach out and touch someone." I took a firm grip on my mental shield.

ACTUALLY, FROM WHAT I UNDERSTAND OF YOUR SPECIES' SIMPLE BUT VIOLENT THOUGHT PROCESSES, I WOULD HAVE IMAGINED I WAS DOING YOU A FAVOR, ABSORBING YOUR ENEMIES.

No use pointing out that they weren't my enemies. *Enemies* was such a positive word. *Unfriends* was more like it. And I didn't want either my unfriends or my friends (even if I'd had any such) to be eaten.

I REGRET IT IF I ATTRACTED ATTENTION TO YOU. IT NEVER OCCURRED TO ME THAT YOUR SPECIES WOULD BE ABLE TO MAKE THE CONNECTION.

So maybe we were more advanced than he would admit. So what?

BY THE WAY, YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED TO KNOW THAT WE WERE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL OF THE ARTIFACTS THAT YOUR SEARCHERS FOUND IN THE INNER WAYS. SOME WERE BROUGHT IN FROM ELSEWHERE BY CREATURES OF YOUR SPECIES. *Opportunistic little beasts.*

It did interest me. "You mean they were planted; the people to whom they belonged aren't dead?"

He said he had no way of knowing, but that he rather suspected they were. I tended to agree with him. AS ARE SOME OF THOSE WHO BROUGHT THE ARTIFACTS. THEY POSITIONED THEMSELVES SO CONVENIENTLY. SURELY YOU DON'T OBJECT TO OUR ABSORBING THEM?

I told him, without a great deal of conviction, that I

objected to his absorbing any member of my species. I suppose pigs and cows and chickens might feel the same way, if anybody asked them. "But why did you eat only people who were in the subway; why in this particular station?"

That brought me too close to whatever it was he didn't want me to know. Suddenly he remembered that he was in a hurry. I'VE MISSED MY MEAL ON YOUR ACCOUNT, AND SOMEBODY'S BOUND TO HAVE FINISHED IT FOR ME. WE DON'T WANT TO MAKE THE MISTAKE I MADE WITH THAT FIRST ONE. Which must have been the unfinished Mrs. Weinstein.

WE WEREN'T PREPARED. WE KNEW YOU WERE PUTTING CHEMICAL BY-PRODUCTS INTO THE EARTH AND THE WATER, BUT WE HAD NO IDEA YOU WERE ALREADY USING YOURSELVES FOR TOXIC WASTE DISPOSAL.

It must have been those diet pills Mrs. Weinstein had been taking. Was there any way of getting everybody in the vicinity to stock up on them? But, from the way "Father" spoke, he and his kind must already have developed some way of immunizing themselves from the obnoxious effects of our search for beauty.

WELL, I'VE STILL GOT WORK TO DO. I MUST GO, BUT I'LL TALK TO YOU AGAIN VERY SOON, IN YOUR OWN TERMS. THEN I'LL BE IN A POSITION TO TELL YOU THE REST OF WHAT YOU WANT TO KNOW.

The screen kaleidoscoped in his colorful good-bye.

But I already knew what I had wanted to know.

XIII

I was so dispirited it was difficult for me to go on as planned. Yet, aside from the fact that now I knew the secret of the ages, the meaning and purpose of our existence, nothing had changed. This was the way things had always been and this was the way things would be for another five hundred or a thousand years —more, if the new tenants ran into "trouble" on their way here.

Maybe I could persuade "Father" and his kind that other kinds of meat were just as nutritious and even tastier than human. Small chance of that. Eating habits were fundamental and very difficult to change. I remembered what little success nutritionists had had in convincing my own species that earthworms could make an inexpensive and wholesome addition to our diet.

Anyway, "Father" had said something to the effect that it wasn't so much the meat that provided them with their basic nutrients as the "essence"—which was the best word either of us had been able to come up with. At the moment, we were the only essential animal. Would we stay that way? And, if we stopped being a dietary requirement, would we stop having a reason to exist? All very well for him to say we had other functions, but would those functions be necessary once

the planet was ready for use? I knew what we did to no-longer-wanted pets.

What puzzled me most was why, in spite of all his protests, "Father" had allowed me to hold him so long in conversation. Did I have some power over him? Unlikely. Did he have some fondness for me? Even unlikelier.

With leaden hands, I arrayed myself in Mother's clothes. It all seemed futile. What was it Humphrey Bogart had said to Ingrid Bergman at the end of *Casablanca?* Something to the effect of, "Our troubles don't amount to a hill of beans [kid? baby?] in this crazy world of ours." How very true.

When I was completely done up as Mother, I turned to the six o'clock news—the quarter-past-six news, actually, because I'd missed the beginning. I came in on the tail end of the usual list of those missing in action; then the president of the City Council appeared, dressed in sober garments, begging us to be brave in our hour of adversity. "And, for those of you tuning in who do not live within the boundaries of our fair city, let me urge you not to let this tragedy keep you from coming to New York. The rate of disappearance among nonresidents has been very small."

It turned out to be a pity that I had missed the lead story. It might have prepared me for what I encountered when I locked the door behind me with the three keys and summoned the elevator to bear me down into the Egyptian ambiance of the lobby.

At a quarter to seven, it should have been almost as deserted as the tomb it resembled, save for latecomers rushing in and bon vivants rushing out to dinner. In-

stead, it was crowded. I don't just mean there were a lot of people about, I mean it was jammed. Every tenant I knew by face was present, plus a host of faces I didn't recognize. A couple of mimes seemed to have gotten into the act, but then they could easily have been neighbors in whiteface. Not only was the doorman on duty there, but both of the porters. No sign of Igor, though. Somebody, either inside the lobby or just outside, was playing the flute.

My first thought was that war of some kind had been declared. But, no, that wasn't enough to account for both of the porters' being around. It had to be something bigger than that. I saw the reporters with their tape recorders and microphones and the camera people with their gear; and, over by the main entrance, the glint of television lights. Whatever had happened had happened right there, in that house.

Mrs. Cohen and Mrs. Minkus had taken up posts close to the elevator, ready to be the first to pass on the bad news to anyone coming out who, by some lucky chance, had not yet heard. Bony claws and fat paws reached out to grasp me. "Mrs. Bogard, Mrs. Bogard, have you heard: The police have arrested Mr. Zapolya and Igor?"

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said, halting because there was no way I could get through the crowd to the front door without betraying more muscle power than was seemly in a woman of my age and refinement. Besides, I was not sure I wanted to reach the front door. "What are they supposed to have done? I trust it's nothing serious."

"They're the leaders of a ring of terrorists," Mrs. Co-

hen hissed. "Alleged terrorists," she added. Her son was a lawyer and she knew what was what.

"My, my!" An utterly inadequate response, even for Mother. "I can't believe it."

"Believe it, believe it!" Mrs. Minkus said. "I don't know what I'm going to do now. My sink is running slow. Igor was supposed to come up tomorrow and fix it."

"Don't worry," Mrs. Cohen reassured her. "He'll probably be out on bail by tomorrow."

My eyes panned out over the crowd. Most of the other ladies who frequented the lobby were scattered through the crowd, giving their thoughts on the human condition to members of the press. Even Miss Harris was there, crowded against a column, submitting to an interview under the eagle eye of her agent, who happened to live in the neighborhood. I knew because I had seen her on the five o'clock news. What had made her newsworthy was that one of her clients was a murderer who had been unable to speak for himself owing to a prior incarceration. Miss Harris must really be top-flight to rate an agent of that caliber, I thought, not without envy.

No sign of Mrs. Gluck. Good. I didn't want her babbling irrelevancies about the other tenants (specifically, me) to reporters. Through gaps, as the crowd shifted, I did see some of the other trolls milling around. Although Mrs. Mortadella remained unseen, her clear suburban voice rose high above the babble and tootling. "We should never have come back to the city. Maybe Westport doesn't have museums and theaters, but it isn't radioactive."

"But can you be really sure?" an anonymous voice asked.

I assumed the reference was to the subway tunnels. But why?

"It's a pity Kitty isn't here," Mrs. Minkus mourned. "She's been so anxious to get to know you, Mrs. Bogard. That is, she is here, but she's out there, where the TV people are. She knows a lot of people in TV. She's a very smart girl."

A cameraman—still, not TV—was perched on the top step of the three that led to the door with the brass doctor's plate, getting candid shots of the tops of people's heads. I joined him. From this vantage point, where you could see the bald spots, it became apparent that most of the young were not so very young after all. It was a question of outlook and income.

"Excuse me, young man," I said, elbowing him aside. "Medical emergency."

He glanced at the plate that said "Jerome Podgorny, M.D., Podiatrist," and then back at me.

"My feet are killing me," I said, and slid inside, shutting the door behind me.

The doctor's buxom blond receptionist sat at her desk, exuding resentment. Obviously she would have liked to join the merry throng in the lobby, but Dr. Podgorny, so she had told me, as myself, many a time, was a stern taskmaster. He was outside, giving interviews, while she had to stay in and fend off patients.

"Doctor never sees anyone without an appointment."

"That's why I'm here, to make an appointment." I smiled at her.

She gave me a cold look—far different from the glances she was wont to cast on me as myself. Once or twice I had been tempted; she looked so clean and healthy and uncomplicated. But no, not somebody inside the building, even if she only worked there. Too dangerous.

Triumph in her voice. "We're all booked up until a week from Thursday."

But mine was the last word. "A week from Thursday was the very day I had in mind."

The appointment was duly recorded. Gripping my umbrella tightly in case strong measures were needed, I sailed past her desk in the direction opposite from the one by which I had entered. This brought me to the doctor's street entrance, which debouched around the corner, well out of sight of the scene of action, though I could still hear it.

Easy enough to get a cab at that hour, although I had to walk over to Broadway to do it. The driver was under the influence of something—liquor, drugs, perhaps the spirit world—but he knew the way. As we rode downtown, he carried on a cheerful conversation with himself, in which I was not encouraged to participate.

I relaxed and started making plans, as if "Father" did not exist, and all my problems were on a strictly human level. I would spend the night in the studio, and come back uptown in the morning when the commotion should have died down. I wondered whether "Father" could reach me at the studio. I had never had any of the sensations down there that I'd had up here and that must have emanated in some way from him. Not that it

mattered. I wasn't planning to do anything but sleep, and he was welcome to watch me if he liked.

I unlocked the door to the studio, and froze. The ceiling light was on; it was the only light left, since the lamps had disappeared.

Candace was reclining on the couch, the picture of winsome girlhood in a ruffled pink cotton pinafore dress. She got up, smiling, ever respectful of her elders. When she spoke, her Southern accent had grown so pronounced it seemed as if butter was not only melting in her mouth but oozing out of her pale pink lips.

"Good evening, Mrs. Kroll, I'm Candy Clermont." And, as I remained speechless, "Ted's fiancée. Don't tell me he's never told you about little old me?"

How did she expect to get away with this? Was she planning to play the woman wronged? Well, Ted might be a bit of a wimp, but Mother was a tough old bird.

I closed the door behind me with an emphatic but ladylike click. "On the contrary, Miss—ah—Clermont, he has told me a great deal about you, none of it, I am sorry to say, good. To begin with, he has told me that you are a thief—"

"That's a rotten lie!" she screeched. "I could sue him for slander. I could—I could do a lot of things," she said darkly.

I looked around the room. "He has already told me that a number of valuable antiques have disappeared. I see now that it's true—"

"Lot of old junk. Hardly worth anything at all." Her voice had grown more subdued. "Matter of fact, I was wondering what had happened to all that stuff. I

thought maybe Ted had thrown it out, because he was planning to do the place over."

She gave me a bright smile. Poor Candace, she still hadn't given up hope. "It could be fixed up to look real nice . . ."

"Now, now, young woman, you can't pull the wool over my eyes. He told me that he—er—gave you your congé a couple of days ago, and that yesterday he came back here and found the place stripped. And that you were the only one who had the keys."

"He didn't give me anything, except some money. Which he owed me. But somebody could have picked the lock. Or he could have taken the things and put them somewhere himself."

Both her color and her voice rose. "Maybe he put them in that—that secret *vault* he keeps hidden behind all those stupid books. Why would he have a thing like that there unless—unless he had something to hide?"

So she had been snooping. Clever of her to have replaced the dust, but, then, she had been a cleaning woman; she had the expertise.

I was shaken, but I kept myself under control. Mother never lost control. "As you know, this is my studio, and I am the one who had that safe installed. In these high-crime days it's a precaution many honest citizens take, especially when they're obliged to let all sorts of riffraff onto the premises."

I didn't look at her, not wanting to make the insult too pointed. "If Edward had taken the precaution of putting that extremely valuable original oil painting and those other valuable antiques inside, the family

would not now be missing some of its choicest heirlooms."

She took out her lip glosser and absent-mindedly oiled her lips. Something I'd said appeared to have struck home. I pressed what I imagined to be my advantage. "Important items like that can be traced, you know. The police—"

"If you go to the police," she shrieked, "I'll tell them all about that son of yours!" When she was in a fury, her pale blue eyes bulged out of their sockets, which always had a curiously erotic effect upon me. "Did you know the police were already taking an interest in him?"

I tried to look bored. "As a matter of fact I do, but how do you know?"

She gave up all hope of worming her way into my heart. "Because I've never trusted him, you hear. Right from the start there was something funny about him. So I've started to keep an eye on him. I wanted to know what he was up to. I followed him up to that apartment he has uptown in that weird house. I guess it's your apartment, too. Anyhow, I know a lot more about him than he thinks."

So that *had* been her lip gloss in the elevator. And the van that had been following me—so much for her friends with their Caddies and their Mercs. Not that the van wasn't more than enough.

She was in full swing now. "I got to talking with some old witches in the lobby." I could imagine how they would have responded to her. But they would have listened to her—they would have listened to anybody with dirt to dish out—and they would have talked to her. What, after all, could she tell them? That I had a

light of love down in the Village. Although they might pretend to be shocked it would do no harm to my reputation. But what could they tell her? What had they told her?

"They had plenty to tell me about him." Was she, too, reading my thoughts? "How he isn't even married—"

"I doubt that the police would be interested in that."

"And never has any visitors or gives any parties, and —and they said a lot of people in the neighborhood had disappeared and were probably dead and they thought he had—might've had—something to do with it. . . ."

Apparently she hadn't heard about the latest turn of events. "Now, that's silly, and you know it."

Candace pouted. "Well, maybe it does sound silly, but it's always the quiet ones, you know. Anyhow, they think it's funny he should be living in a huge apartment like that, practically alone, because you're never there, and also have another place down here."

My voice was gentle. "Now that they've seen you, my dear, I'm sure they understand why he feels the need for another place."

Her face swelled and twisted with rage. If there had been any loose objects left, she would have thrown one of them at me. She started sputtering something, but she was so far gone in fury that the words were at first incomprehensible. "And you know what else I found out? I checked, *and he doesn't have any credit cards*—not a single one!"

Never had she seemed more hateful . . . or more desirable. Sweat was beginning to bead my makeup. I had to get her out of here, before Mother cast off her

corsets and made a lunge that would forever destroy the reputation of my unhappy family.

My voice trembled. "Miss Clermont, if you don't leave right now, I shall be forced to call the police right away. Otherwise, I will consult with Edward to see what he feels should be done. Now, go!" I wanted to grab her and push her out bodily, but I didn't dare touch her right then.

She moved toward the door of her own accord. "Okay, I'm going, but this isn't the end, hear? I know there's something mighty fishy about him—and about you, too. I'm going to keep an eye on both of you, that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to go back uptown and—"

"Miss Clermont," I interrupted, "Edward has probably told you that by profession I am a—a seer."

"A fortune-teller. Lot of nonsense."

"Although I have retired now, my talents are still as strong as ever. I warn you, there's great danger for you in that neighborhood."

"Think you can scare me, do you? Well, I don't scare that easy." As she flung open the door, she turned for a parting shot. "Here's something you ought to know about your precious son, Mrs. Kroll or Mme. Cassandra, or whatever your name is. He glows in the dark."

The door slammed shut. A small piece of plaster drifted down from the ceiling and disintegrated on the bare wood of the floor. I saw now why the place had looked so barren. She had made off with the rug, too.

I bolted the door, turned off the light, and looked at myself in the mirror. Sure enough, even through layers of maquillage and fabric, a faint bluish radiance outlined me in the darkness.

XIV

After I had undressed, I checked myself again in the mirror. In the dark all of me glowed a lambent blue, like something out of a science exhibit. I wondered how it was that Candace had never mentioned it before. Lucky I had learned about it at all; otherwise, I might be caught sometime, somewhere in total darkness with a stranger.

I fell asleep, and I had a dream. It began, as usual, with me wandering through the labyrinths of the subway, where eerie pale blue trains, ungraffitied, unlittered, and unpassengered, moved swiftly and silently on tracks that were gleaming bolts of light. As usual, all tracks led to Bloomingdale's—a different Bloomingdale's, no, the same, only more so. It was a Bloomingdale's that had taken the final step and exploded into the fourth and fifth and possibly sixth dimensions of color and sound toward which it had always been headed. It was thronged with indefinable shapes and inchoate forms that shifted and merged dizzyingly and dazzlingly. It was a store that had reached its epiphany, where customer and merchandise had become indistinguishable from each other.

I was outside, without knowing how I got there. No Lexington Avenue, no Third Avenue, just a vast blueness, full of creatures whom in one way I could not precisely see and who were plainly visible in another.

Among them were some . . . people? Blue men and women, who looked as I had looked in the mirror. They were more definite in outline than the others, but still not stable. Some of them appeared to be . . . attached to the other beings with chains of light.

Thoughts came to me in flashes, not from the humans, if they were still human—all I got from them was profound sadness—but from the others. *Remarkable job they've done here . . . much the nicest planet yet . . . so well organized . . . so far away, so safe . . . they'll never be able to find us here. . . .*

I awoke in that classic state, a cold sweat. It was still dark. I stretched my hands out in front of me. No glow. And, when I checked myself in the mirror, the rest of me was dark also. I tried to persuade myself the glowing had been part of the nightmare, but I knew it hadn't been. It was reality that had become part of the dream.

Just the same, I felt relieved when I got back into bed. Apparently I didn't shine in the dark all the time, only on occasion. When under the influence of strong emotion perhaps? And, since Candace had been the one to notice, it was possible I glowed only when erotically aroused. This was going to play havoc with my sex life.

The sleep that followed was dreamless. At noon I was awakened by the locksmith. I had forgotten about our appointment. I waited, forcing patience, while he installed the most modern pickproof lock available.

"Of course a lock is only as good as its door," he said when he had concluded his task.

"Don't tell me you install doors, too?"

"No, but I have a cousin in Bay Ridge—"

"I'll mention it to the landlord."

Another problem. I had planned to leave the studio as myself. But Candace or her friends might be watching, and it might further arouse her already overstimulated curiosity if I was seen to leave the place without ever having entered it.

The answer was simple. Inside the "vault" (despite the locks, now that Candace knew of its existence, I would have to give thought to finding another safe place) was not only a full makeup kit, but a collection of guises left over from personages who had been allowed to pass into legal as well as actual oblivion. No need to disguise myself as anyone in particular, simply as someone other than myself.

So, clad in an Inverness cape, a deerstalker on my head and a full black beard on my chin, I left the house and was absorbed unobtrusively into the midday street scene of Greenwich Village. A cab carried me to Penn Station, where I entered a washroom that was empty save for a shabby-looking individual asleep on a nest of paper towels. As I left a cubicle, myself once again, I placed the cape and hat upon his recumbent form. "Here, my good man, your need is greater than mine."

He didn't open his eyes. "How about the beard?" he asked.

"Sorry, but I couldn't part with that. It belonged to my mother."

I bought all the papers from a street-level stand, except the *Herald,* which was sold out. BOMB SUSPECTS ARRESTED, said a modest headline in the lower left-hand corner of the *Times;* TRANSYLVANIAN TER-

RORIST RING CRUSHED was carried in a double headline across the top of the *News;* while almost half of the *Post*'s front page was occupied by the word *VAMPIRES!* printed in red.

When I got home Mrs. Cohen and Mrs. Rensselaer were hanging around the lobby, looking forlorn without their usual cohorts. Once more they had been joined by Mrs. Mortadella. Normally she would have been in Bloomingdale's or Saks at this hour, she informed me, but today she hadn't the heart.

"How about Macy's?" Mrs. Rensselaer asked.

Mrs. Mortadella appeared to be considering the suggestion.

The rest of the regulars, they told me, were upstairs, waiting their turn for Igor's services; for, as Mrs. Cohen had prophesied, Igor was out on bail. "He's busy upstairs fixing things as fast as possible," Mrs. Mortadella said. "You never know when he might be arrested again."

"Did he have any kind of explanation?" I asked.

Mrs. Mortadella shrugged. "Said his lawyer told him not to discuss it."

Mrs. Cohen nodded. "Very wise."

"Supposing he's tried and convicted and goes to jail," Mrs. Rensselaer said. "What will become of us without a super?"

"The landlord will have to get us another one," Mrs. Cohen said.

"I think they've arrested the landlord, too," Mrs. Mortadella said. "Or something. There was a lot about him in the papers."

"Don't look on the dark side," Mrs. Cohen said. "My son says the appeals could take years."

Mrs. Rensselaer was not one to forget the courtesies. "How is your mother taking all this, Mr. Bogard?"

"She went back to Florida this morning. Asked me to say how sorry she was she didn't have a chance to say good-bye to all of you. She felt she couldn't stand it around here an instant longer."

"I don't blame her," Mrs. Cohen said.

As I turned the corner into the elevator alcove, I ran into Kitty, who was just coming out of the elevator. Grabbing me by the arm, she pulled me back into the alcove. Again my flesh tingled at her touch—more than tingled. Was it love or the aftermath of my set-to with Candace, combined with the knowledge that Candace would no longer be available? "Ted, I have the most wonderful news!"

"I know. Those vampires seem to have got me off the hook."

"Oh, please don't give me vampires. Some papers will do anything just to grab a few extra readers. Of course I am glad the police aren't bothering you anymore. Terrorists do make a lot more sense. But that wasn't what I wanted to tell you. It seems that Freddy Sunshine, the news director of Channel Three, has been following my stories in the *Herald.* And, when he saw today's piece . . ." Her eyes scanned the papers under my arm. Something was missing. "You did read it, didn't you?"

"Couldn't get a copy. They were all gone."

"Of course. Well, anyhow, he wants to interview me

for a spot on their investigative news team. *Television,* Ted!" She squeezed my arm. "My, you are muscular, aren't you? Of course Three is only a local station, but at least I wouldn't have to worry about my teeth."

"We ought to celebrate. Let's have lunch. But not the Minotaur. In fact, why bother with a restaurant. Let's go up to my place. Now Mother's gone . . ."

She patted my arm this time. "Now, now, we can't celebrate until there's actually something to celebrate. Besides, I've already had lunch, and I absolutely have to get back to the office. I'm still a working woman, you know. Couldn't we make it dinner tonight? I'd love to see your place. And, of course, I'd love to get to know you a lot better."

Dinner . . . ? It would be dark by then. I couldn't afford darkness. Maybe I loved this girl, maybe someday I would tell her all—nearly all, well, a judicious amount—about myself. But it was still too soon to tell her that I glowed in the dark. These things have to be broken gently. TV or print, she was still a reporter. Supposing she wanted to know why I glowed.

"Come early for drinks," I said. We could always eat afterward if we were still hungry.

The days were still long and nowadays people didn't necessarily turn off the lights when they made love. Just to make sure, maybe I could gimmick the lights in the bedroom so they wouldn't go off at all. In the past they used to do that of their own accord until Igor had fixed them. Maybe I could tell her I was afraid of the dark. She thought I was a wimp anyway.

"I'll try to get there as early as I can, I promise, but

my schedule is up in the air right now. Everything seems to be happening at once. I'm so excited!"

I wondered whether she had hopes that this Freddy Sunshine would become her "mentor." What would she think if I told her that all her petty preoccupations, with TV, contacts, mentors would mean nothing in five hundred or a thousand years? Rhetorical question. I knew what she would think. I wasn't sure of what she would say.

"Father" had been safe in divulging his existence to me. He knew I couldn't blow the whistle. Nobody would believe me. The same situation had probably arisen before, on other planets. Another cliché established itself as a truism: the more things change, the more they remain the same.

So, if there was nothing to be done, wasn't it better to leave the human race in happy ignorance? It was certainly easier.

"Phone me first," I said, "so I'll know when to start cooking."

"Don't go to a lot of trouble. I like the simple things in life."

She turned her face up. I kissed her. "Sorry if I seem a little less than ardent, but, with the eyes of the grapevine upon us, I can't help but feel a little inhibited."

"You're much too inhibited, Ted. Today it's the thing to be demonstrative in public." She glanced over her shoulder at the mirror. "Anyhow, they can't see much through the graffiti."

"Which gives their imaginations full play. And they can read the graffiti. It looks like a—a commentary. They'll confuse the word with the deed. They'll tell all

the neighbors they saw us carrying on in the lobby. Your grandmother will demand that you make an honest man out of me."

"Who knows, maybe I will."

Had I proposed to her and been conditionally accepted? It didn't seem like such an awful idea. I could renovate the Brooklyn brownstone. As I remembered, there was ivy growing over it already. But how could I explain to her that she would have to live there alone?

"I'll walk you over to whatever transportation you're planning to take," I said. The old ladies beamed at us as we passed. We seemed to have brought a little cheer into their lives. They still believed, in spite of an overwhelming body of evidence to the contrary, it was love that made the world go round.

Mrs. Mortadella didn't beam at us. She knew better.

"I'm going to take a bus. I just can't bring myself to ride in the subway yet."

"When you're an anchorwoman on TV, you'll be able to take taxis all the time."

She laughed. "Well, you certainly are the supportive type." *Supportive*—that was a word you used about a permanent fixture, not a passing fancy. "Can you see if there's a bus coming?"

I craned my neck. Not a bus in view. Hard to tell, though, since my line of sight was blocked by the double row of trucks that stretched uptown, some parked at right angles to the street to ensure clogged traffic.

A meter maid was trying to induce a truck driver who had parked right by the bus shelter to move on. "I'm not axing you, I'm telling you!" she yelled, waving

her ticket book at him. The truck drove off, accompanied by a string of obscenities from the driver and a cloud of fumes from the engine that enveloped Kitty, me, and the meter maid in its noxious vapor. A truly symbiotic relationship.

"By the way, did you know Mrs. Gluck is missing?" Kitty asked, after we had all stopped coughing. She brushed herself off as if the exhaust had somehow marred her immaculacy.

It would be hypocritical to say I was surprised. "Oh, you think . . . ?"

"That's what everybody thinks. After all, she was the one who spilled the beans about the terrorists to the police, although I don't suppose she realized she was doing it. She just started talking and couldn't seem to shut up."

"Omerta," I observed.

"That's your friends, the Mafia. These are terrorists, a whole other scene. In her case, it might not even be terrorists. It could be neighbors. I understand Igor was —is—a treasure."

"That's one way of looking at him."

"Anyhow, Mr. Gluck seems to be sure she's gone forever. He proposed marriage to me in the elevator this morning."

"You're too tall for him."

"I know," she said, looking up at me.

"Considering the magnitude of the offense—the alleged offense—I'm surprised that the judge even set bail for Igor and his chums. Or, at least, that the bail wasn't prohibitively high."

"It was a million dollars apiece."

I stared at her.

"The landlord posted it."

"Our landlord? Old Erdely? For all of them? Where would he get that kind of money? Besides, Mrs. Mortadella said she thought he was in jail himself."

She smiled. "This is way out of the Mortadella league. If you'd read my story, you'd know what's been going on." She added grudgingly, "I suppose the later editions of the other papers would have picked up some of it. Erdely's just a front—for an international consortium with suspected links to the KGB."

I was surprised and said so.

"A couple of the gang members turned out to have diplomatic immunity," she said, as if that constituted proof. "Of course they can't be held. They'll just be declared persona non grata and kicked out of the country."

To me it seemed unlikely that the KGB would sponsor a movement for an independent Transylvania. But I could see them blowing up the Russian Tearoom.

Who was I to look a gift horse in the mouth? Just bring up the possibility of Communist or CIA involvement and no one was going to look anywhere else. It looked as if I was home free.

A convoy of three buses approached in stately procession and halted, cleverly positioning themselves so that none actually stopped at the bus shelter, or, in fact, anywhere near the curb. As we parted Kitty kissed me, right there in the street, and so ardently I nearly exploded. Nobody paid any attention. On Upper Broad-

way that's mild stuff. You should see what goes on on the benches in front of the traffic dividers.

I watched all three buses until they became lost from view in a traffic jam. Then I turned my attention to the meal I was going to prepare for Kitty that night. I was determined to make it a truly memorable one. Upstairs in my apartment there was champagne, caviar, and various wines, plus an assortment of TV dinners and all the ingredients necessary for making cheeseburgers. However, I felt the occasion called for more.

There was no help for it. Ever since I could remember, if you wanted the components of a memorable meal, you headed for Zabar's. Other gourmet stores could come and go, but Zabar's had the weight of tradition behind it. Even if it had acquired a honky-tonk atmosphere, that, too, had the weight of tradition behind it. At that time of day it was difficult simply to reach the store. So many sidewalk vendors and solicitors had created the ambiance of a bustling flea market in the surrounding streets that there was scant room for pedestrians. I forced my way through clots of androgynous blue-jeaned rumps, which I was sorely tempted to kick in the designer labels. Ignoring entreaties to buy luggage, sign a petition against Westway, and take a free stress test (that was certainly the place for it), I went inside, took a number, and waited my turn for chicken in phyllo dough, roast smoked duck (or smoked roast duck), ratatouille, and something in pesto sauce.

What about dessert? Fruit and cheese should give the touch of elegance I was striving for. I wasn't sure what kind of cheese, except that it had to be imported. I took a number and got on another line. Standing on line

seemed to be a way of life for the trendies; they stood on line in food stores, in restaurants, outside movie houses. Sometimes, it seemed to me, they went to the food stores, the restaurants, and the movie houses more for the experience of standing in line than for the food and the films.

I bought a representative selection of cheeses, choosing carefully because it was impossible to disentangle the aromas from my side of the counter. In order to pay for my purchases, I had to stand on still another line. It was almost like being in Russia.

Fruit next. I crossed the street, avoiding a bicycle that was going against traffic, refused to sign a petition to save some obscure endangered species, and made my way to the stand run by a family of surly Koreans (who, I felt, deliberately cultivated brusquerie to point up their lack of relationship to the ever-smiling followers of the Reverend Moon). At least they didn't make me stand on line. I bought an eclectic array of fruits, both in and out of season—few fruits were ever out of season these days; it's always summer, as the SST flies. Vegetables. The ratatouille and whatever lurked beneath the pesto should take care of that. But salad was a cultural necessity. Iceberg lettuce, I knew, was out. On the other hand, spinach, I had noted from my researches at Zabar's, was in. I purchased spinach and an assortment of greens, most of them strange to me. Good. The odder, the inner.

Then panic struck. Maybe I was trying to be too trendy.

I dashed into a bakery—not one of the croissant shops that had been popping up all over—but a good old-

fashioned bakery where croissants had always been a quiet part of the traditional repertoire. I bought a chocolate torte, a number of fruit tarts, and (remembering there was only half a package of commercial sliced bread upstairs), a variety of little rolls in strange, phallic shapes.

But suppose she was on a diet, like most well-groomed modern young women anxious to make their mark on television, which, it is said, adds ten pounds to the person? The hell with it; she'd just have to pick something out of the line-up.

As I left the bakery, clutching my parcels, I was accosted by hairy persons urging me separately to buy a squeaking plush unicorn and to sign a petition against nuclear proliferation. I turned them both down, but I admit I was tempted by the unicorn.

XV

Upstairs, I was too restless to relax. I tried to tidy up the place a little, hid a few more things that I didn't feel like explaining, took off a little of the top layer of dust, succeeded in making the place look as if it had been hit by a weak whirlwind.

I forced myself to sit down and look at the papers. They were the late editions and they seemed to have the whole story. It seemed that Mr. Erdely wasn't even the actual owner of our building, but, as Kitty had told me, the head of a firm belonging to a huge multinational conglomerate that was buying up real estate all over Manhattan and which, indeed, was "alleged" to have ties behind the Iron Curtain—an instance of economic ecumenism which I did not fully understand. Mr. Rapolya was mentioned as one of the firm's officers. So that was what he had not been working at as an executive all those years.

Enough evidence had apparently been found in the subbasement to hang the conspirators ten times over. I speak metaphorically, of course, because the death penalty has long since been abolished in these parts as being uncivilized and barbaric. What seemed to impress the papers the most was not that there was a supply of ingredients for your normal, terrorist-type bomb sufficient to blow up the entire Metropolitan Area sequentially, but that the whole subbasement was

faintly radioactive—not enough, they assured us, to warrant alarm. (So that was what Mrs. Mortadella had been referring to.) Question was: what had caused that radioactivity?

The assumption made was that something which nobody quite dared to name had been there and had been removed from the premises. The terrorists denied all knowledge of any such thing. Since, however, they denied all knowledge of any kind of illegal activity, their words did not carry much weight. The authorities would have plenty to keep them occupied for a long time to come.

I glanced at the other news. Another space probe had been launched, carrying pictures of human beings, equations, tapes, a select miscellany designed to inform extraterrestrials that there was "intelligent" life on earth. A group of scientists had also set up a giant radio telescope, which did nothing but listen for radio signals from the far corners of the universe and beam out signals of their own, to let them know we were here, waiting. Little did the scientists know that the only message their probes and scopes could give was "Free Lunch."

The phone shrilled. Kitty at last! I leaped for it. A man's voice. "Hello there, Ted, how've you been keeping yourself these days. . . . It's Bud"—then, impatiently—"Bud Lovatt from Ogilvie." Editors were not accustomed to having writers fail to recognize their voices. "I've been trying to reach you for days. Did you hear about Mark Foster?"

"Hear about who?" I wished he would get off the line. At this very moment Kitty might be trying to reach me.

"They found his Phi Beta Kappa key and his fraternity pin in a subway tunnel. Even in your ivory tower, you must have heard about what's been happening in the subway tunnels."

"Yes, of course. Transylvanian vampires. Listen, Bud, I'm expecting an important call—"

"That vampire nonsense was just a gimmick to step up circulation; you know that. What those Transylvanians were doing was experiment with some kind of secret gas. That's why they used the tunnels. Didn't you see the story in the *Herald?*"

"No, I didn't; they were all sold out by the time I got up." Why was everyone so set on gas? I would have thought a death ray would be a much more plausible explanation. However, since neither was true, the point was academic.

"That'll teach you to get up earlier. You writers, roistering all night and sleeping until noon—I envy you, really I do. If it weren't for the regular paycheck, I think I'd quit my job and become a writer, myself."

"I'm sorry to hear about Mark, Bud, and—"

"You ought to get hold of a copy of the *Herald.* The piece there mentioned you as one of the distinguished writers who live in the house where the terrorists met. It put you in the same class as Madeleine Bayard [which was Miss Harris's pen name] and Tancred Blaine. How come you never mentioned they lived in your house?"

"A lot of people live in this house. I didn't even know Tancred Blaine lived here." I didn't even know who Tancred Blaine was.

"Tell me, though, is it true that, when they dug up the subbasement, they found the landlord with a stake through his heart?"

"Look, Bud, can I call you back . . . ?"

"This is important. You know—or knew—a lot of the people involved. You live right there in the house. You're a distinguished writer"—he gave a little laugh—"according to the *Herald*, anyway." Always put the writer in his place. "I want you to write a book for me—a fast book; we can rush it into print before all the publicity dies down."

"A book about what? Mark Foster? Terrorists? Vampires?"

"Any of them. All of them. All I want is a product that will sell. Come down to the office right away, and we'll work out something. It's late, but I'll wait for you."

"Sorry—"

"All right, if you insist, I'll come up there."

"I have a date."

"Break it. I don't think you understand. I'm offering you"—he swallowed—"top rates."

"I'm sorry but it's impossible."

"Tomorrow morning, then. First thing?"

"All right, all right," I promised, since it was the only way to get him off my back and off the line. I had no intention of keeping the appointment. I write Westerns. He knew that. He thought that, like most of the writers he had to deal with, I would write anything given sufficient financial impetus. What he didn't know was that, unlike most of the writers he had to deal with, I was not starving. I had other sources of money than my pen, too many of them for my comfort.

Maybe, when Mother had started out, we had needed the money from those pensions, but I didn't need them anymore; I had just kept going out of inertia. There was my interest in the publishing company and in other companies, the real estate, a number of very sound investments my broker had made for me, and so forth (a very large category in itself). I would "kill" *all* of the remaining pensioners, and I wouldn't have to worry about them anymore. Unless someone found out about the past. Why would they? How could they? There was no further reason for anyone to investigate me, unless "Father" and his kind did something else to draw attention to me.

My dreams took wing. Even if the world, my world, wasn't going to go on for very long in cosmic terms, no reason why I couldn't start leading a normal life from now on. I would get rid of the furniture, move away from this apartment—but could I? Mother had been so insistent. "We've always lived here, Edward. When I'm gone, you must go on living here." With rents being what they were, I had never had any incentive to leave, even if there hadn't been that compulsion to stay close to home.

But, as I'd noticed earlier, I had been able to go down to the Village not only with impunity but without feeling "Father's" presence the way I did here. I had gone to Brooklyn, I remembered, and out to Long Island and even to the Bronx and felt nothing.

Maybe the main reason I'd felt tied here was that those incriminating papers had been on the premises and now they were down in the Village. Chances were "Father" didn't care where I went.

So long as you don't go too far away. The words formed in my brain and I honestly didn't know whether the words were mine or "Father's."

Then it hit me. If Kitty came up here, "Father" might also be present in one form or another. I didn't fancy the idea of having him hovering around, spying on us, which he would have no hesitation in doing, even if he'd had any conception of privacy—unlikely in a species that carried out the initial stages of the reproductive process in small groups. To him it would be watching a pair of domestic animals couple, watching the breed in the act of improvement.

Of course, Kitty and I could simply talk and eat, the way dates used to be (were supposed to be, anyhow) in the old, innocent days when the buses and mailboxes and police cars were green. But times had changed, probably as a result of those adaptive processes "Father" had told me about. More than that, I was in such humor I knew that when she came I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off her. Even if I could, she wouldn't be able to keep her hands off me. Girls were so forward these days.

So, when the phone rang and Kitty's voice said, "Ted, I really am sorry, but I can't make it tonight; the people at Channel Three want to meet with me at dinner," it was hard for me to sound decently disappointed. She went on, "I tried to reach you before, but the line was busy."

"A business call."

"I'll bet it was Mme. Cassandra."

"I've told you she's—"

"Your mother. Come now, I've seen your mother, Ted. And I've seen Mme. Cassandra."

Which meant she'd seen Candace and me in the Village. Foolish to think she wouldn't have noticed me, not if she'd recognized me. You don't forget someone whose leg you've bitten. Neither do you forget someone who bit your leg. However, she'd been a child and I had been an adult. I hadn't changed much; she had been transformed. Lucky she'd taken it for granted that the Village place was Candace's, probably thinking that I had an affinity for fortune-tellers.

"Are you having dinner with that Freddy Sunshine?"

"Among others." But I had a feeling it was going to be a tête-à-tête.

"How about tomorrow night?" she asked.

"That would be fine, but we can't make it here. I—I'm having the exterminator in tomorrow afternoon, and the place'll probably still—er—smell."

"What a romantic thought. Let's make it my place, then. You have the address and number? Sevenish. We can watch the surgical program on PSB afterward. I hear they're doing a liver transplant this week, and I don't want to miss it. But I do want to see your apartment, Ted. Or is it a case of Bluebeard's castle?"

Bluebeard! There was something sinister about the color blue. In many parts of the world, it was thought to be a charm against the evil eye. A fat lot they knew. "It's just a bit messy. Bachelor pad, you know."

"I've never been able to understand why men shouldn't be expected to be as tidy as women."

So she was one of those who doesn't believe biology is destiny. Well, I hadn't really thought she was perfect.

"I'll see you tomorrow then, around seven." We said our farewells.

The fact that I couldn't—and didn't want to—see her that night didn't dampen my desires, although the liver transplant had helped. The cold shower I took helped even more.

The phone was ringing when I came out of the shower. I ignored it. There were screams in the street. I ignored them also.

XVI

At around seven o'clock the doorbell rang. For some reason—perhaps loneliness—I opened the door, against custom. Outside was Harry Limpkin, Detective Harry Limpkin.

I stood there wordless, staring at him. I'd thought I was in the clear as far as the police were concerned. And now here he was. What had he found out about me? The shock was particularly sharp, coming so soon after I'd let myself indulge in all those foolish daydreams.

He smiled. "I'd like to talk to you, Ted." At least he had my name right. Wouldn't he have called me "Mr. Bogard" if I'd been under any kind of suspicion? "Mind if I come in for a minute?"

"No, I mean, please do." Now that I had opened the door, there was no way out. I offered him a chair, which he accepted (was that the clink of handcuffs I heard as he sat down?), and a drink, which he accepted as well. Didn't that mean he wasn't on duty, or was that only the British police?

He seemed affable enough, but I knew that the police were required to study psychology these days. They were trained to make you relax, so they could catch you off guard. Then they pounced.

"Nice place you have here," he said, looking around,

his eagle eyes no doubt taking in all sorts of things I wouldn't have thought of.

"Thanks, I'm afraid it is in a bit of a mess," I said automatically, as I poured myself a drink and sat down opposite him, looking desperately casual all the while. "I suppose you've come to talk to me about the Transylvanians."

"Why, do you know anything about them?"

"No, but I thought you might want to talk about them, anyway. Since I live in the building, I thought you might have to interview all the tenants. Matter of routine or protocol or whatever."

"There are a hundred and five apartments in the building, and each one seems to have at least one resident who's anxious to give me inside information about Transylvanians. I've had it up to my ass with Transylvanians. One lady even asked me if I could recommend a publisher for a book of Transylvanian recipes."

"Tell her to try Bud Lovatt at Ogilvie."

"The guys over at the station house have been doing Dracula impersonations until I'm ready to puke. Anyhow, thank God, it's not my baby anymore. The Special Joint Terrorist Task Force has taken over. . . ."

He took a sip of his drink. "Actually I came to see you about something entirely different. This isn't official. I'm doing a friend of mine down in the Sixth a favor. He's been trying to get hold of you all day, and either the line was busy or there was no answer. So I said I'd stop by when I went off duty and see if you were around."

I didn't allow myself to relax, which was lucky; otherwise, his next statement would have made me choke on

my drink. "It's about a woman named Candace Clermont. You know her, don't you?"

I let the liquid in my mouth slide down into my gullet before I answered. "Yes, I know her quite well." No way I could conceal the connection now, so I might as well be frank and open about it.

Poor Candace, I—Mother—had warned her, but she must have been nosing around the neighborhood again, and "Father" or one of his associates had done away with her. It must have happened before I'd spoken to him about his habit of choosing people with whom I'd been in conflict for absorption. (I couldn't help being reminded of those seafood restaurants where live fish are on view, swimming about in tanks until their moment of truth. I've never been able to eat in such places. Hypocritical, of course. I do occasionally eat seafood, albeit without enthusiasm.)

No, it couldn't have happened before. I had seen her *after* I had spoken to him. And he had promised me—well, actually he hadn't promised me anything. But I had thought his expressions of regret sincere.

A flickering in my mind . . . Hurt? . . . Impossible!

No matter what she had done, I wouldn't have wanted anything like this to happen to her. Maybe I ought to offer to pay for the funeral. There wouldn't be a body, of course, but perhaps a simple, dignified memorial service. What had been done about the others, I wondered. Had they definitely been declared dead, or would the regulation seven years have to pass? If so, tough luck for Mr. Gluck.

But why was Limpkin talking to me about this? Wasn't it now the province of the Joint Terrorist Task

Force? And how would "Father" have managed to lure Candace into the subway, considering her strong views on the underground? I knew now that he couldn't operate physically outside that immediate area, and I had a pretty good idea of why.

I pretended ignorance. "I hope she's not in trouble." I had suitable expressions of shock, dismay, and grief all prepared.

"She's in very serious trouble."

So she was alive, after all. I felt shocked, dismayed, and aggrieved. And guilty for having misjudged "Father." *And so you should.* His thought or mine? I couldn't tell.

Once I had stopped feeling surprised, I felt relieved that she wasn't dead. Naturally.

But my surprise had stopped too soon. "She's been charged with attempted murder," Limpkin said.

"Murder!" Hers was a violent personality, true, but I never thought she would go beyond rude words and the jaculation of small, preferably breakable, objects. Still, I knew little about her private life.

"Whom did she attempt to murder?"

"An antiques dealer named Serafin Kinkopf." Limpkin looked at me.

The name was not familiar. I shook my head.

"She hit him over the head with a brass samovar"—the Muscovite motif again—"and damn near killed him. Her story is that she brought him some stuff for him to sell for her on consignment. He said it wasn't worth much, but he'd take it, just as a favor to her. Then, she says, she found out it was valuable"—I began

to feel guilt again—"and she started thinking Parke-Bernet or Christie's, and tried to get the things back."

He took another sip of his drink. "Well, Kinkopf told her he didn't know what she was talking about. He said he'd never set eyes on the stuff. That was when she got mad and let him have it with the samovar."

"I'm sorry to hear it, but where do I come in?"

"To begin with, she got the stuff from you—you don't deny that?"

I was wary. "She got some stuff from me. I don't know whether it's the same or not."

"Well, it turns out the painting, and maybe some of the other things, is valuable—maybe even museum quality, but I guess you know that."

I made a vague noise that didn't begin to express my feelings. Actually I had concurred in Candace's opinion that it was all a lot of junk—well, maybe worth some money because people were collecting all sorts of things these days—but valuable? Just how valuable? I wondered. "Museum quality" must be an exaggeration.

"When we checked, we found everything she'd described in Kinkopf's back room. Now he's claiming he figured it must be stolen, that he just told her he'd take it on consignment to keep her happy while he checked with us. While he checked to see if it was hot, most likely."

Limpkin made a face that indicated his opinion of antique dealers was not high. I supposed he had been exposed to the seamier side of the business.

He took a handful of the small cheese crackers I had piled on a Limoges plate in a small gesture of hospitality

and popped them into his mouth. Obviously I was no longer under suspicion.

"She claims you gave her the stuff. If you did, it'll go a lot easier with her. Otherwise, it would be attempted homicide plus burglary."

"Oh, yes, I gave it to her all right."

"Sure you're not just being . . . noble?"

"Quite sure." Not even quixotic. If the stuff had been stolen, I would be involved. They'd want to inspect the premises from which it had been taken and ask me all sorts of incisive, impertinent questions. If it had been a gift, it seemed to me I shouldn't need to be involved at all.

In addition, if Candace had an atom of decent feeling in her, she ought to be grateful enough not to tell tales about me. It wouldn't make her jail sentence any shorter. I hoped nothing would make it shorter. Jail was a good, safe place for her to be for the foreseeable future.

Not that there was anything significant she could tell the police about me now. On the other hand, I'd hate to have the whole precinct come around and turn out the lights so they could watch me glow in the dark. (Don't ask why it didn't occur to me that I might be radioactive. The answer is that I wouldn't let it occur to me. But, if you're worried, I'll tell you here that I had it checked out later, and I wasn't—at least, not in the sense that a Geiger counter could pick up.)

I couldn't help thinking everything would have been so much simpler if it had been Kinkopf who had hit Candace with a samovar, or the antique of his choice; and had done a more effective job on her than she had

on him. Or if "Father" had absorbed her after all. There were limits to my nobility. "Museum quality" indeed.

Limpkin got up. "Well, I'll pass the word along. I imagine that they'll want you to come down and identify the items, but I doubt that you'll have to testify at the trial. I can see how it would be kind of embarrassing."

Since I'd started out noble, I carried it through to a noble conclusion. "If she needs legal representation . . . ?"

"Oh, her family's taking care of all that. Her father's the president of Southeastern Transcendentalist College—that's in Virginia or Georgia, some place like that. Didn't you know?"

"Of course I knew, but I thought he might have disowned her. Is she out on bail?"

"No; her dad thought it would be better for her to stay where she is until her case comes to trial." He smiled. "I guess he didn't trust her not to skip bail and leave him holding the bag."

He sounded like a very sensible man.

Limpkin grinned. "All kinds of things seem to have been going on around you, haven't they, Ted? Your girl friends, your janitor, your neighbors . . . and yet the excitement doesn't seem to have touched you. Looks as if you're a—a—"

"A catalyst," I suggested.

"That wasn't exactly the word I had in mind."

I knew the word he had in mind. *Wimp. Yes, Harry, I am a wimp. Think wimp whenever you think of me. It isn't always the quiet ones. . . .*

"You won't have to worry about Clermont. She'll be able to get the things back from Kinkopf, since they're legitimately hers, and she can sell them. From what I understand, that would make her able to afford F. Lee Bailey or Melvin Belli or another one of the big guns."

And it would be just my luck to have him get her off. Maybe, if I endowed a chair or something at Southeastern Transcendentalist, I could persuade her father to carry her back to old Virginny and keep her there.

As Limpkin turned toward the door, something made me say, "Look—er—Harry, you said you were coming off duty. If you haven't eaten yet, how about having dinner here? Remember, we sort of had a date."

"Thanks, I'd like to." He looked surprised, nonetheless.

I gave him a rueful grin. "I have to admit I've been stood up. A friend was supposed to have dinner with me tonight, and couldn't make it. So there's lots of food with no place to go."

"That reporter?" he smiled. "Nice girl." *Much nicer than that other one* hung unspoken in the air. At any rate I had established my normalcy by being mixed up with two women at once. I was well on my way to becoming one of the boys.

I skipped the champagne and caviar, figuring they were a little ostentatious for the NYPD. And I wasn't going to go to the trouble of tossing a salad, especially since some of the greens looked as if they were capable of tossing me right back. While we were eating, there was a series of shots in the streets below, followed by screams, not unfamiliar sounds in that neighborhood of

an evening. Limpkin didn't look up from his duck. "Somebody'll call the precinct," he said. "I've had a long, hard day."

As we were drinking coffee and eating our fruit tarts, we did hear the siren of a patrol car in the silence.

"I really appreciate this," he said, when we shook hands at the door. "It's been a long time since I had a good home-cooked meal."

XVII

After he had gone, I turned on the TV, with the object of watching Johnny Carson. Instead of his familiar countenance, there appeared a woman with the face of an undernourished sheep. You couldn't even trust Johnny Carson any more.

Her face sagged and wavered; the screen shimmered and turned blue at the edges. *Can we talk?* Father's thought said in my brain.

I turned off the TV set and turned on the computer, even though it wasn't necessary any more. I could pick up the thoughts he aimed at me, although I couldn't always understand them completely, and I was beginning to pick up some he didn't aim at me, although they were even harder for me to understand. Sometimes, that was. Sometimes they were strangely easy.

But it was better to use the computer, because I had a feeling it might be unwise to let him know how far I had progressed; because it was easier to force him to scale the thoughts that were intended for me down to my level of comprehension; and also because, when I opened my mind (like extending a pair of imaginary antennae), I kept getting a whole mess of thoughts from all sides. Very disturbing thoughts some of them were too.

Mind shield in place. "Okay, Father, what do you want?"

WHAT DO I WANT? I THOUGHT YOU WERE ANXIOUS TO TALK TO ME, THAT YOU HAD MORE QUESTIONS TO ASK.

"I've been mulling things over, and I think I know as much as I want to."

A moment of confusion that was not a difficulty in communication; he was confused. I had the feeling that there was something about me like nothing he had ever encountered in my species before. Again, I couldn't be sure. We all like to think that we're somehow special.

ACTUALLY I CAME TO DELIVER SOME NEWS. I WASN'T ABLE TO TELL YOU BEFORE. WE'RE LEAVING THE NEIGHBORHOOD. IT'S BECOME TOO UNLIVABLE. HARD TO EXPLAIN TO YOU.

Hard to explain to a New Yorker that New York had become unlivable? "I know," I said.

Of course that was why they were all up at once, all needing large supplies of energy. They were getting ready to move, a formidable task for any species, especially one that still could not live on the surface of this unfinished planet. And I knew where they had to be. Underneath the Stella Polaris. It was the only place in the neighborhood where things had been changed drastically underground. And, of course, to be concealed in the neighborhood for any length of time, they would have to be underground. When they originally had picked that site as their headquarters, they could never have expected us to reach down that far, get so close to them. Maybe we weren't as predictable as they thought.

YOU DON'T SEEM SURPRISED.

"Nothing surprises me anymore."

He was not convinced. A thought came through that I knew was not intended for me: *Did someone already tell him?*

What someone? Who on earth was there who could tell me? I couldn't ask him.

Another question I could now answer for myself. Why hadn't he been able to tell me about their proposed move at the beginning?

And the answer, which also answered a lot of other questions, some of which I hadn't thought of asking: because he was *afraid*—afraid that the knowledge would give me a clue as to where they were now.

It seemed that, although they existed in many more dimensions than we, in some we co-existed; and, within those shared dimensions, they must be potentially vulnerable to us. If we knew precisely where they were, we might be able to do something to head off our fate. Or, even if we couldn't, even if we were unable to exist without them, we could do something to head off their future. On this planet, at least.

Something thudded against my mind shield, but it held firm. He must not pick up what I was thinking.

The words that appeared on the computer screen were mild enough: WE'VE FOUND OURSELF A VERY DESIRABLE RESIDENTIAL SPOT UPSTATE.

"Seems a lot of trouble to go to for such a short time." Five hundred, a thousand years, a few weeks or months in their terms. Not that there could be any real equivalent. All time is subjective rather than absolute. One species' perception of it can never be measured against another's.

I even knew where they were going. I had guessed or

picked it up from him—I didn't know which—and I held my mind shield rigid against a leakage which, I knew, could be dangerous.

They were settling under one of the reactors at Indian Point, an obvious retreat for creatures seeking radioactivity and seclusion. There was always talk about shutting down the reactors, but, even if that came to pass, it would make the site even more desirable, because it would be even less liable to disturbance.

I offered the conventional expression of goodwill, ridiculous under the circumstances, ridiculous under any circumstances: "I hope you'll be happy there, wherever it is."

The question I was going to put to him next was unwise, I understood, but I would never again have another chance to ask it. " 'Father', are there others—other higher life forms—besides you?" Were they really just developing the planet for simple residential purposes, or were they running away from something, someone (pronouns were so difficult when it came to different forms of life)? Or did they themselves "belong" to some superior species?

The emotion I got from him was incomprehensible. Not anger, not surprise, not amusement, not . . . anything I knew. There was a lot that was still outside my experience, much more than lay within it. I was learning, but not fast enough.

THE UNIVERSE IS A BIG PLACE, SON, FULL OF MANY THINGS. EVEN I DON'T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS.

"Is there anyone who does?"

THAT'S ONE OF THE ANSWERS I DON'T HAVE.

"Will I ever get a chance to talk to you again?"

Pause, not for reflection but for sentiment. I'M AFRAID IT'S NOT LIKELY. PITY WE WON'T BE ABLE TO KEEP IN TOUCH, BUT MY SHIFT IS OVER. I'VE BEEN UP FOR MORE THAN A HUNDRED OF YOUR YEARS, AND I'M GETTING A LITTLE TIRED. TIME SOMEBODY ELSE WAS IN CHARGE.

My reaction should have been relief, and later it was: no more sensation that someone was keeping watch over me. But at this moment all I could think of was that he was my only living relative and, when he had gone, I would be alone again.

THE NEXT TIME I'M UP, I EXPECT TO SEE THE PLANET ALL CLEANED AND SHINED AND READY FOR USE.

Stripped of vegetation, sterile, radioactive, its lakes and rivers poisoned, all life gone except for their species and whatever became of mine—the future the doomsayers kept predicting and trying to stave off, without knowing that was the way it was supposed to be.

But, if we continued to be their food supply, what would we be expected to eat? And, if we didn't, what did they expect to eat?

Another problem, a personal one, might seem petty in cosmic terms but was of great moment to me. "Father, I . . . glow in the dark."

GOOD FOR YOU, SON, GOOD FOR YOU. SOMEDAY ALL OF YOU WILL BE GLOWING IN THE DARK.

So much for that.

"Good-bye, Father, I"—was that actually a lump in my throat?—"I'm going to miss you."

The screen flickered a little. I'LL MISS YOU TOO. Then it steadied. REMEMBER, THRIVE AND MULTIPLY. WHEN I GET UP AGAIN, I'll EXPECT TO SEE YOUR PROGENY—more likely my progeny's progeny —RUNNING ALL OVER THE PLANET.

A vivid splash of color on the screen; then a tiny, explosive sound, a puff of smoke, and the computer shorted out.

It didn't matter. I would never use it again.

XVIII

I felt odd, as if I were a different person, neither better, nor worse, just different. I looked at the clock. One in the morning. Was it too late to call Kitty and change the scene of our tryst tomorrow? Now that we would be unchaperoned, might as well have dinner up here. I still had the caviar and champagne, as well as plenty of cheese and greens and cake. Between she could make do with a TV dinner. I'd had it with shopping.

My hand was on the phone when all the lights went out. I turned on the radio. It wouldn't play. I looked out of the window. The streets were dark; the whole city was dark. Across the river, New Jersey was dark. I couldn't get a dial tone on the telephone. The Metropolitan Area was experiencing another blackout, and this time I knew what was causing it. Father and his kin, like so many New Yorkers before them, were moving to the suburbs.

Past experience with blackouts—both citywide and local, when the hall lights went out—had made me keep a flashlight in the drawer of a table in the foyer. I satisfied myself that the batteries were alive and that I was not glowing. I still wasn't entirely sure what triggered that luminescence of mine, and I was not anxious to arouse comment among the neighbors. Then I locked the door on all three locks (catastrophe does not

make me careless) and groped my way down the stairs to the lobby, barking my shins on a bicycle en route.

That cavernous Egyptoid interior was an eerie sight. Some of the tenants—younger ones, for the most part—milled around with candles, flashlights, and small whimpering cries. A haze that was not tobacco hung over the scene. As I had anticipated, some had brought along portable radios, and it was from these I learned that the whole southeastern section of the state had been blacked out, as well as a bit of northern New Jersey.

Consolidated Edison's spokesperson, almost in tears, couldn't predict when the power could be turned on again, because they still hadn't been able to locate the source of trouble (I smiled to myself). Meanwhile, elevators were stuck between floors, alarms were not working, food was spoiling, and baby-sitters were running up enormous bills. Looters had been reported in various sections of the city. We had been through all this before. We would probably go through it again. And each time the citizenry would accept it the way they did any other natural disaster, as a personal insult.

"Really," one of the theatrical young men said, "all this is getting to be just too much!"

He addressed me as I started toward the front door: "You're not really thinking of going outside, are you? It's dangerous out there. You don't know what might be abroad in the dark."

"Dark or light, it's always dangerous out there," his roommate said and shivered, as if the idea gave him sensual pleasure. I must not let them know I glowed blue in the dark, or they would never let me alone.

Some of the others, female as well as male, joined in the protests. What was I going outside for anyway? There was nothing anybody could do until the power was turned back on. Why didn't I stay in the lobby with them? A concert was being planned, as soon as they could scare up enough nonelectrified instruments. There would be refreshments. Some of the more gifted among the tenants ("all professionals, honestly") would perform. A rock singer would give us his latest. A stand-up comedian would deliver a monologue. This was going to be the best blackout ever!

"Or, if you felt up to clambering back up those dreadful stairs," one of the theatrical young men suggested, "we could have an impromptu festivity in our place. Only classical music permitted and both lights—I refer to candles, of course—and decibel level will be low. We have oodles of wine and cheese. . . . Of course you're all invited," he added. "Most of you," he corrected himself, looking at the comedian and the rock musician.

"I need fresh air," I said, as I removed myself from his clutches—literally, because he had laid a light hand on my arm. "Darkness gives me claustrophobia."

"I do understand," he said, reaching out in vain as I continued toward the exit, trying not to look as if I were in a hurry, "really I do. Why don't we all have claustrophobia together? Besides, it's even darker outside."

In point of fact, it wasn't. There was no moon, but the stars cast a faint glimmer over the streets. I looked up and wondered which one of them we had originally hailed from. Or was it in another galaxy entirely?

The streets were not silent. While I was crossing West End Avenue, which is generally quiet except when

there's a street fair or criminal activity, I could hear yells, screams, and the crash of breaking glass from Broadway.

On the other side of the avenue a dark figure leaped out of the even darker shadows that anticipated the service entrance to the Algonquin Arms. "I gotta knife. Gimme everything you got."

I took him at his word and gave him my all. Not what he expected. I left him behind me, heaped on the sidewalk in sorry condition. I felt a sense of exhilaration; it was so refreshing to be able to use my fists again here, in the darkness, where nobody could recognize me and want either to overwhelm me with citations and medals for heroism or to arrest me for assault and battery, depending on which way the wind blew.

My eyes seemed to be growing accustomed to the darkness. Then, as I turned into Broadway, tossing the knife into a litter basket as I passed (for it would not be well for me to be found with it on my person once the lights came back on), I saw myself reflected in the remains of a shop window and knew I had erred. My eyes had not grown accustomed to the darkness. I was seeing by my own light. Apparently any strong emotion would serve to turn me on.

Across the street, the excavation where the Stella Polaris was to rise gleamed ghostly blue. It did not give off light of itself, but had been touched by the light-givers.

There were many more people in the street than you'd find at half-past one on an ordinary September night, moving along in a constant flow, most of them headed uptown, all hurrying as fast as the heavy bur-

dens they carried—television sets, sides of beef, cameras, food processors, videocassette recorders, small pieces of furniture, clothes, vague shapes that could have been anything—would allow them to go. They were laughing and joking; some were even singing. A night like this came only once every few years, and they were making the most of it.

Nobody seemed to pay any attention to me, except for the voice across the way that yelled, "Look, Leroy, there's a shiny blue man walking down the street!"

And Leroy: "Long's he don't bother us, no reason for us to bother him. Come on, we got more important things to worry about!"

Nobody tried to interfere with me. If there were policemen about, they didn't bother me. Why should they? They had far more pressing, if less exotic, problems on hand.

Occasionally a car would glide slowly down the street. Whenever that happened I would duck back into the shadows as far as I could, trying to get out of range of the headlights. People in cars were less likely to be preoccupied with filling their shopping lists, and more likely to be connected with the law. Then I realized that my worrying was unnecessary. When I was within range of the headlights, I would stop glowing. Not that it was a crime to glow.

It was a beautiful night. In the shadows somebody was playing a guitar, nonelectric, of course. It had a good sound. Uptown, I could hear the happy cries of looters and the tinkle of breaking glass, diminishing in the distance, as they stripped the streets.

I felt at peace with myself as I never had before. At

this moment it was good to glow with a blue light and walk free under the stars. Later on, I would no doubt think otherwise, but for this night I would have no cares. Why worry about the future? Did the future worry about me?

Several TV trucks rushed past, headed for the combat zone uptown. I looked over my shoulder. Three quarters of a mile away, darkness exploded into brightness as the powerful TV lights went on, powered by their own generators. The singing stopped. There were screams, yells; was that a shot? The media had arrived and the joyous occasion had turned into a riot.

But that was fifteen blocks uptown. All the stores here had been worked over. All was quiet.

A small blue glow paced delicately ahead of me. When it paused to sniff at what first looked like a decapitated body and turned out to be a headless mannequin, stripped of all adornment and flung out into the street, I saw it was a luminous cat.

Down the street, some blocks away, I saw another blue glow. At first I thought it was another cat, but, when I got closer, I saw it was a man. As I drew near, I could see by our combined lights that he was the old man who ran the copy shop.

But what was the emotion that was triggering him into turning blue? (I hadn't wondered about the cat. Who knew what motivated cats in their mysterious ways?) "Welcome! Welcome! I've been looking forward to this!" He came toward me and, before I could back away, threw his arms around me.

There was a shower of sparks, and a sharp jolt of

electricity coursed through me. Every hair on my body sprang to attention. "I think we had better exchange greetings from a distance," I said. "At least while we're lit up."

"Come in." He opened the door of the copy shop. I went inside. He followed. The luminous cat slipped through, just as the door closed. A few feet inside, the cat halted, jumped up, and seemed to hang suspended in the air, washing himself. Every time his paw made contact, there were tiny flashes of light, which did not seem to perturb him in the least.

XIX

The old man pulled the shades down over the windows, so that we couldn't be seen from the street. "Now that they've gone from the neighborhood, we can start making our plans."

He seemed to be taking a lot for granted. I felt uneasy. No point pretending absolute ignorance. "What kind of plans? What I mean to say is, it doesn't look as if there were anything we can do about them."

He glowed a little more intensely, but it was impossible to read his expression, since I couldn't actually see his face, just the blue glow that followed its general contours. I couldn't read his mind, and there was no sense that he was reading mine.

"There are many things we can do," he said. "They're not invulnerable, you know."

"I don't suppose there's any living species that is. But it looks to me as if they were invulnerable as far as we are concerned."

I knew that wasn't exactly true, but I wanted to find out how much he knew before I let him know how much I had guessed. And, in a way, it was true. "Father" and his folk might be physically vulnerable, but of what use was that knowledge if we had no way of reaching all of them. Granted, I knew where the local group was spending the last lap of its tour of duty, but "Father" had indicated that there were similar outposts

scattered all over the planet. Even if we looked in the likeliest spots—Washington? Los Angeles? Moscow?—that wouldn't mean we'd be able to find them. And, even if we did, how could we possibly deal with them all before they dealt definitively with us?

He didn't offer to exchange confidences. He didn't trust me any more than I did him. And he was wise. Well, he was old; he should be wise. (How old was he? If his apparent age was in the same proportion to his actual one as my apparent age was to mine, he must be ancient, indeed.)

"But we can't just sit back and let things go on," he said. "At least we've got to try. We've got to make ourselves believe there is still hope for the human race." He moved toward me. This time I managed to back away. His voice rose. "Together, we must dedicate ourselves to its salvation." His glow grew so bright it was embarrassing.

I made a note for future reference: avoid excessive enthusiasm.

I wondered whether he had devoted all of his life to the future of the human race. Apparently he had managed to carve a niche for himself in the community. Well, maybe running a copy shop didn't seem like much, but different people had different goals. I remembered that the copy shop was new to the neighborhood, but he might have moved there from somewhere else.

I spoke very carefully, anxious not to offend him. "I don't want to rush into anything. I'm with you, naturally. But I only learned about . . . Their existence a

few days ago. Things still haven't had a chance to sink in. I have to get used to the idea before I can start making any definite plans."

"I understand." He didn't sound as if he did. Or rather he sounded as if he might understand all too well.

If the human race was going to be saved, it wasn't going to be in my lifetime, even less in his. The idea of sacrificing myself for the possible weal of my possible descendants did not hold much appeal. The idea of sacrificing myself for the possible weal of other people's descendants held even less.

Maybe the human race wasn't free, but (unless the authorities found out about some of my previous activities) I was as free as any member of my species could hope to be, freer than I had ever been before. And I was determined to enjoy that freedom.

I would move out of that neighborhood, maybe even out of the city. But not to Westchester. Maybe New Jersey. No, that would be going too far. I could go out West, see at first hand what I had written about. Or I could go to Europe. Certainly I would want to visit it. (Would there be any difficulty about a passport, I wondered. Money, of course, could buy anything in this society, but I had no idea how to get in touch with the criminal establishment.) The important thing was that I must learn to lead a normal life, get married, have children, learn to drive.

I must not rush off half-cocked. First I would take driving lessons; then I would get married. And, even though it would be playing into "Father's" hands (extrusions), I would have children, superior children.

Since that was what I had apparently been bred for, it would be the best way I could serve my own future. Let them try to save the world for humanity, if they had a mind to.

I thought I was in love with Kitty. But did I know what love was? She was the only one I would consider marrying right now, but I hadn't been considering the idea of marriage for very long. Was she the woman with whom I would want to spend the rest of her life, if not mine? Of course I knew that nowadays marriage was far from being a permanent contract. Look at Kitty's own background. If I had children, I was going to make sure I raised them.

And supposing she didn't want to have children at all, now that motherhood had become somewhat declassé. Worse yet, supposing she was the sort who opted to wait until near middle age until she embarked on reproduction. Bound to produce inferior stock. That was no way to improve the breed, especially since she came of inferior stock herself.

Was I not perhaps naïf in thinking she might want to marry me? Supposing she just wanted to have what used to be called an "affair"? Women were so independent now.

I hardly knew her, and she didn't know me at all. After our dinner tomorrow night, I would know her a little better; and, by the time our date on Saturday was over, I would know the real Kitty. The Western Writers of New York's cocktail parties had been known to bring out the worst as well as the best (though less often) in people.

I would wait. Kitty might be my first love—if she was

my love at all—but a man didn't always marry his first love. I was still young; no, I was young without qualification. My years could not be measured by ordinary statistical standards. As our species advanced and our life spans increased, the spans of our youth grew longer and longer, even for those without my advantages. There was plenty of time for marriage. Maybe somewhere, someplace, I would find a girl who would also glow in the dark (a lot more convenient, in addition to the obvious genetic advantages).

There were other things I wanted to do before I sat down and started thinking seriously about whether or not I wanted to save the world for humanity. For starters, I would like to take a crack at doing some serious writing. What did it matter to me that in five hundred or a thousand years both I and my work were destined to be forgotten? Most writers were forgotten in a lot less time than that.

"Have you come to any conclusions?" my companion asked. I could hardly see him now in the darkness. The blue glow had faded to a faint haze. I wondered if I had faded too.

"Not exactly," I said. "I was thinking. . . . If all of us have a little of them in us, and some of us more than a little . . ."

"Yes?"

"Does it ever get to the point where there's more of them in us than there is of ourselves?"

A long silence before he answered, "I'd been wondering about that myself."

All of a sudden the lights went on again. The cat was just a tabby, sitting on the counter, washing himself. The man was just an old man in blue denim. The shop was just a copy shop in need of ventilation, smelling faintly of dust and old chemicals, the way copy shops do. But it would not be wise to open the door to admit air. The streets, suddenly silent, were no longer safe.

He was perspiring slightly. "Well," he said, mopping his forehead with a blue bandanna, "now that the power seems to be back on, how about a cup of coffee?"

"Sounds good to me."

He plugged in a coffee maker. Outside, we heard sirens in the street. The city was coming back to life. Or death.

"Might as well sit down and make ourselves comfortable." He dragged out a couple of folding chairs, and I helped him set them up.

He bustled around, getting out mugs and milk and sugar, and a saucer, into which he poured a little milk for the cat, who lapped it up as if he were just an ordinary animal.

"I'd ask you over to the apartment for coffee, but I don't want to wake up the wife."

"Do you live in the neighborhood or just work here?"

"I live a few blocks uptown, across the street from the Algonquin Arms, you know, the big building on Broadway. I've seen you in the coffee shop there. Shame about Mike."

"Yes, isn't it." We both smiled, sharing knowledge. "I live down the street, on West End. I've been thinking about leaving, though. The place is much too big for me, and the neighborhood isn't what it was."

"I know; I feel the same way sometimes, specially now that the kids are all gone."

"Married and left the nest, eh?"

"Yep, all married except the youngest. She's away at college. You've really got to come up and meet her—and the rest of the family—when she comes home for the holidays."

"I'm looking forward to it," I said.

About the Author

Evelyn E. Smith is the author of two previous science fiction novels, *Perfect Planet* and *The Unpopular Planet,* and, under another name, of "Gothic" novels and shopping guides. She has written a number of science fiction stories and articles on a wide variety of subjects for various magazines. A former features editor of *Family Circle* magazine, she is a native New Yorker.

I turned on the television set, prepared to relax in front of it with my simple meal. Tonight I would forget about people being eaten in the subway, bombs exploding, wars, riots, carcinogens, and computers. I turned to Johnny Carson. Sometimes it seemed to me he was the only real friend I had.

I was wide awake this time and pouring myself a glass of champagne, when he flickered and turned blue and something large but no size at all, shapeless but very definite, invisible but all too evident, seeped out of the smoking television set and filled all the corners of the room but not the middle, so that I could look at it only sidewise. If I looked directly, it appeared to shift to left and right, without moving.

Son, its mind rang in mine. *Son!*

The glass in my hand shattered. Chilly bubbles ran over my wrist and down my sleeve. Chilly bubbles ran up and down my spine. "Oh my God," I whispered. "Father!"

from

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