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CHRYSA LIS

4

EDITED BY ROY TORGESON

R. A. LAFFERTY

1978

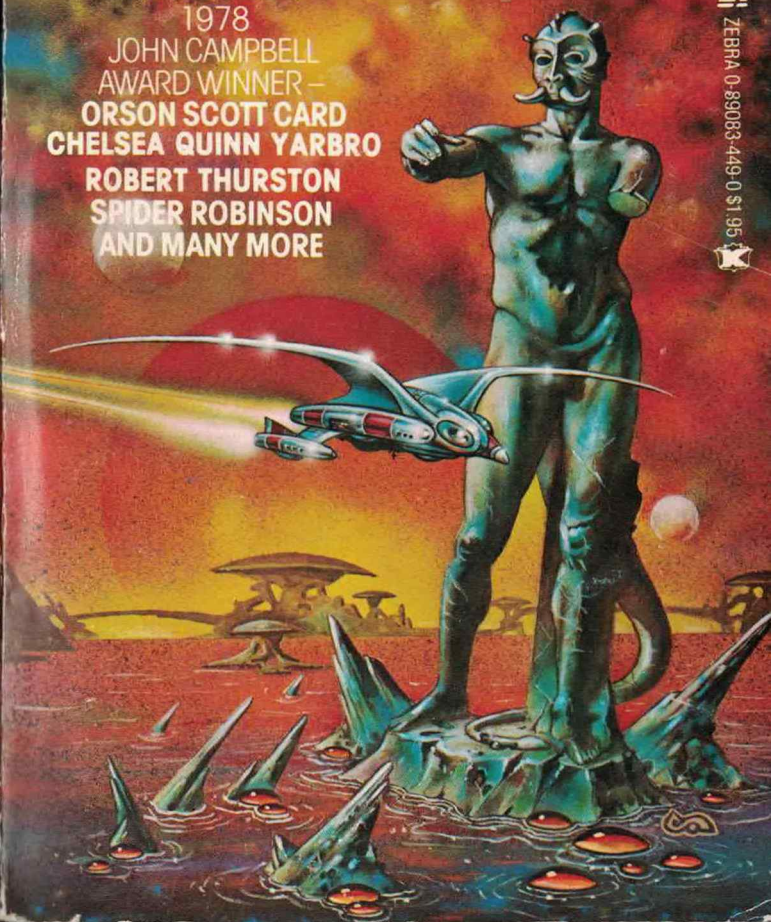
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AWARD WINNER —

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GREGORY LONG
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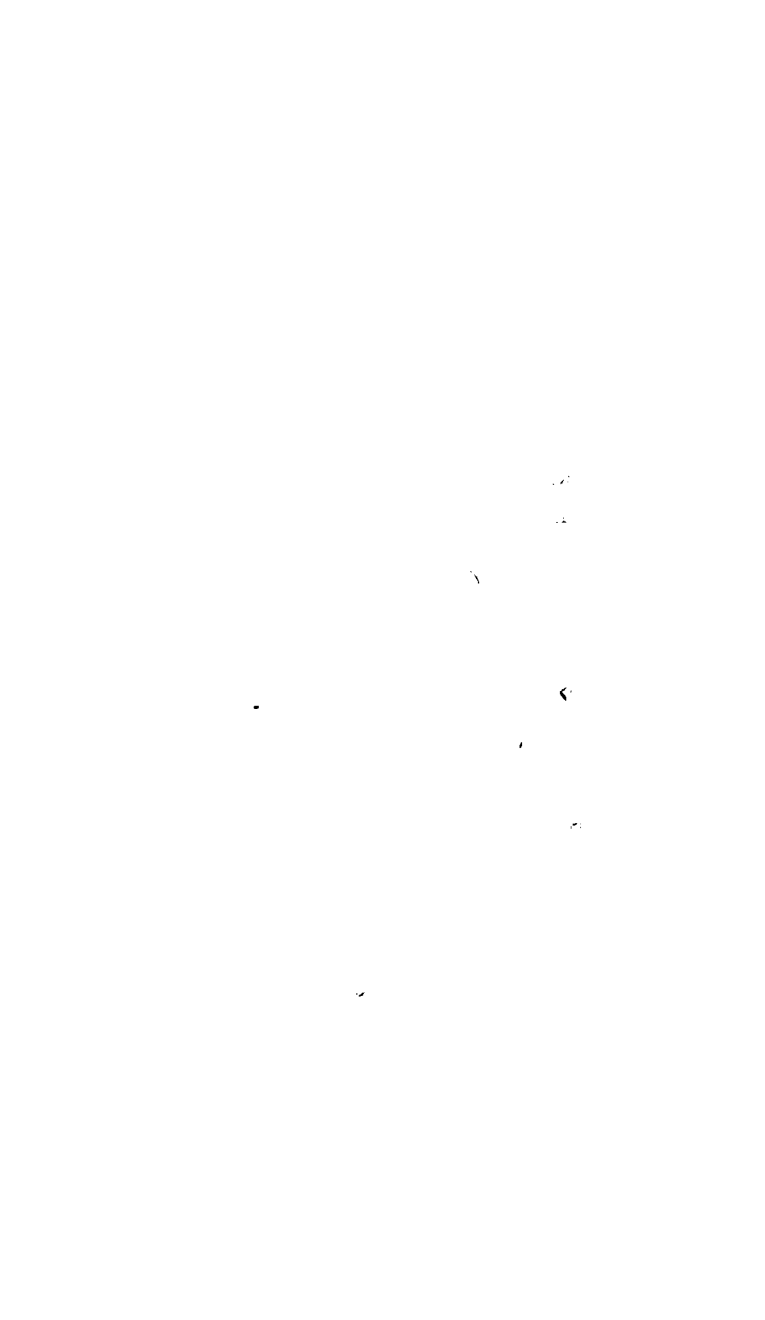
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*For Lea, Clyde & Susan,
Alan, Lin & Dina,
Sherman and . . . Kelley
friends*



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INTRODUCTION

by

Roy Torgeson

Strong stuff. That's what you'll find in *Chrysalis* 4.

Halfway through compiling stories for *Chrysalis* 4 I realized that I had already selected some very strong stuff indeed. I then decided to ask various authors if they had something daring and different they'd like to write for me. Most of them did. Of the stories received in response to this invitation the best are included here. Some of the stories may disturb you, but all of them will compell your attention.

A few words about the authors and their stories:
Alan Ryan is a regular book reviewer for the *New*

York Times. His reviews have also appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* and other national publications. Two of his stories have appeared in earlier volumes of the *Chrysalis* series and *Good Night, Thou Child of My Heart* is part one of a novel entitled *Madonna Two*. It projects a world of the future in which the church finds a new way to fulfill its divine mission. It is also the story of a most unusual young girl.

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro is a bubbly, fun to be with person who just happens to have more than a few strange and squiggly things in her mind, as she has demonstrated in *Hotel Transylvania* and her recently published *Cautionary Tales*. *Fugitive Colors* is an excellent example of what happens when some of these "things" get loose on paper. It is a skillfully structured story in which Quinn captures the essence of loneliness.

Wires by Karl Hansen is simply one of the most unusual and frightening stories I have ever read. I don't know much about Karl, except that he lives in Colorado, takes out his aggression shooting with bow and arrow and a .357 magnum, and lists among his hobbies medicine (M.D., University of Colorado, 1976). But I do know that he has written a story which will both horrify and hypnotize you.

St. Poleander's Eve is R.A. Lafferty's fourth story in the *Chrysalis* series. Obviously, I love his work, but words fail me when I attempt to describe any of his stories. You'll just have to plunge into this newest Lafferty world and experience for yourself his kind of logically structured universe. *Diabolically structured universe* might be a better phrase.

About himself, Lafferty recently wrote to me as follows:

"I am a young man 17.78 years old on November 7, 1978. This is according to the Celsius or Centigrade scale that everybody uses now. According to the old-fashioned fahrenheit scale that is (hum, hum,¹ nine-fifths of it and then add thirty-two) sixty-four years old: but nobody uses fahrenheit any longer.

"I'm coming to the end of my own chrysalis period. I'll take the wraps off and be the bangingest butterfly around here any day now.

"The foregoing is the only valid biographical material on me in existence. Bio material appearing elsewhere is all fanciful."

Robert Thurston's *Vibrations* is a deeply moving and absorbing story. It is about the realationship between a father and a daughter, set against the backdrop of the most troubled time in our history, the Vietnam years. Thurston is deservedly coming into his own with the recent publication of his fine first novel, *Alicia II*.

One half of that *Stardance* team, Spider Robinson, finally wrote me a fantasy story. Spider tells me that he had a lot of fun writing it and it is fun to read, while still making a serious point.

Near of Kin by Octavia E. Butler is neither science fiction nor fantasy by any definition. It is, however, part of her newest novel entitled *Kindred* which Doubleday will promote as both science fiction and mainstream. This short, self-contained section is a finely polished little jewel.

Charles L. Grant and Thomas F. Monteleone are

no strangers to the *Chrysalis* series. But *When Dark Descends* is their first collaboration to appear here. It is Tom's eerie and macabre story idea matched by Charlie's sensitive writing about an unnameable horror which gradually creeps up on you and leads inexorably to . . . They make a great team, as well as doing fine work individually. Tom has two novels to appear soon, *Guardian* and *The Secret Sea*. Charlie is currently working on two novels in addition to his highly successful horror anthology series, *Shadows*.

The Word by Gregory Long is a first sale, and like the other first sales in the *Chrysalis* series, I am proud of it. *The Word* is both religious and philosophical, but above all it is a love story. Set in an exotic locale, it is a story of self-love involving the human and the inhuman. It will leave you with plenty to think about.

In the year and a half since Orson Scott Card's first story appeared in *Analog* he has earned a reputation as a prolific and brilliantly talented writer. One book of stories, *Capitol*, has already been published and two novels, *Hot Sleep* and *A Planet Called Treason*, will appear shortly. Some of Scott's early stories have hinted at dark things; *Eumenedes in the Fourth Floor Lavatory* delivers them.

As in the earlier *Chrysalis* volumes my basic criteria for selecting stories was that the authors involved *tell a good story*, a dynamite story. It sounds simple, but it takes a really talented writer to do it. And once again I thank them for letting me share in their creativity, and my special thanks to Clyde Caldwell for an even more stunning cover painting this time around.

Roy Torgeson

WHEN DARK DESENDS

by

Charles L. Grant &
Thomas F. Monteleone

The sun drops slowly, as if afraid to be spiked by the trees that spread their shadows over the mountains. A cloud, twisted by the wind, shatters and bleeds in shades of pink. And an aged raven, circling to find a draught of warmth, mourns. Its cry is singular, its echoes lonely, and when it vanishes into the forest I want nothing more than to join it. If it will let me.

Five minutes, then. Ten. The valley fills with dark air. I expect Brother Elias at any moment,

he and his friends in their dark-cast robes. They are down in the chapel now—a special Mass to celebrate my unwitting success. They will come, the monks of St. Justin, to ply me with magnificent wine from the oldest casks in the deepest cellar, to celebrate and canonize me, and watch me scream.

Then, as the manuscripts are read to the tune of thunder, I'll be granted a bonus that I know will be more than enough to see me to my dying.

Brother Elias is generous.

I may even live to see the last dawn.

1

It began with *The Origins of Language: A Cryptanalytic View*, which lifted me from the mundane on the wings of a Pulitzer Prize.

It began with the department chairman grasping my hand and whisking me from the classroom to an indefinite period of independent research.

And it began with a telegram from a man named Elias from the Brotherhood of St. Justin, who dangled enough money in front of my eyes to make me blink, think, and take a leave of absence.

I flew directly to Kennedy and was taken from there to upper New York State in a magnificent black Lear, thinking that this had to be one hell of a brotherhood; thinking it again when I was met by an equally black Mercedes at

an airfield long since abandoned to ravens and weeds. The pilot became chauffeur and we turned onto a two-lane highway that knifed through forest and farmland, past hillside fields of amber and brown. I dozed, neglecting the time, and was awakened only when the car and its perpetually silent driver left the highway for a rutted dirt road more like an afterthought tunnel through early autumn wood. When we reached a clearing on the summit of a high hill, the car slowed, barely, and directly ahead was a small valley cleared of its timber and bisected by a glittering blue-white stream. We hovered on the brink, then swept down into the trees again, and out. There was no use asking the driver where we were; I'd tried several times to get him to talk, but his responses were limited to grunts and jerks of his head.

A sharp curve past a stand of hickory, and I leaned forward to stare through the windshield.

At the valley's far end was the Abbey of St. Justin, a massive cathedral-like structure complete with flying buttresses, soaring spires of ornate stone filigree, sparkling chinks of granite pieced together with a precision known only to the craftsmen of Chartres. A surrounding wall enclosed several smaller, and by contrast, unimpressive buildings, the whole giving me an uneasy impression of a religion at bay, of misplaced peasants and medieval lords barricading themselves and their God against the Visigoth hordes. Even under the bright and blue morning sky, the sun posting toward zenith, the area seemed grim. The

few trees allowed to surround the abbey had already lost their foliage, and on the ground the leaves had turned a tannic brown.

I shook my head incredulously, and even considered ordering the car to turn me around.

But I had received a call shortly after the telegram... from Brother Elias... mentioning the recent destruction of Michelangelo's *Moses*... claiming to believe there was more to it than just the mad act of vandals... that, and the money.

So I sat back and stifled my curiosity. As we pulled to a stop at the main entrance, a huge oaken and sculptured door swung inward and a man stepped out. His demeanor instantly identified him as Brother Elias, abbot of St. Justin's. Unlike the stereotype I expected, he was tall, with farmer's shoulders and a reddish-blond beard cropped close to his jaw. His cowl was thrown back and the gray eyes smiled; a broad hand scratched at a hawk's nose and brushed idly through wisps of fading red hair.

"Dr. Campasi!" A basso defying age, yet I knew he must have been at least half again my own thirty-nine.

"Brother Elias," I said, smiling in return, gripping his hand and wondering briefly at the strength therein.

"It's chilly out here and you must be exhausted," he said, taking my shoulder and leading me through the door. "Come inside and see my home. And yours, I hope, for the time you'll be here."

There was a narrow courtyard of centuries-trodden earth, a few humped birch, a single concrete bench beside a wire-supported sapling. We crossed it quickly, passed through a door banded in iron, and the outside impressions of a cathedral were gone. Now I was in a baronial mansion with a dimly lighted entrance hall where there were dark flaring beams, candles in wrought-iron sconces, and shadows of portraits whose faces and names I did not recognize. I found, strangely enough, few trappings of the church they served—a single mercury-colored cross hung from a chain in the hall's center, a dull brass censor squatted on a marble pedestal near broad sweeping stairs.

"We've prepared a room for you, Doctor," A hint of incense in the words lost in that cavern. "It's in the north wing, away from the abbey's busiest sections. I thought the solitude might help you with your work. I'll take you there now," he said, "and you can rest. Lunch will be served within the hour."

We took a long narrow corridor toward the rear of the building, occasionally encountering others of the brotherhood; but though I nodded politely to them, they paid attention only to Elias, treating him with a respect palatably cloaked in reverence. At corridor's end we turned left and climbed a creaking wooden staircase to the second story. Here there was no one. The sconces were fewer, portraits absent. The atmosphere was one of austere elegance more in keeping with my image of a monastery.

Elias opened a door at the end of the hall, pushed it to, and bowed slightly. "For your comfort, Doctor. I'll send you Brother Jonathan when lunch is ready. Now I must leave to attend service in the chapel. I don't suppose..."

I shook my head.

He smiled, handed me a large brass key and was gone.

My room, then, and I whistled my appreciation.

A huge chamber focusing on a massive four-poster complete with drapes and raised on a platform at the right-hand wall. Armoire, nightstand, seventeenth-century secretary with bottle-glass panes enclosing leather-bound volumes—magnificent in themselves, but only servants to the bed, and the ceiling-high fireplace in the opposite wall. After a quick walk round, I tested the mattress, grinned, then slowly explored the room in an attempt to shake off the drowsiness the trip had induced. I stopped once at a set of double windows on the bed's left and opened one side. The sill was wide enough to sit on and I leaned out to have a look, saw the wall some distance below me, but not three feet from the abbey itself. Beyond it some two hundred yards was what looked to be a disused well; fifty yards more and the forest began. A raven fluttered out of the trees, circled and flew toward me, wheeled and vanished over the abbey with a cry that made colder the chill mountain air.

I shuddered and grinned again, whistling a smile after the bird. Then, having turned back to the room, I found a completely modern bath to the side

of the fireplace. I washed quickly and combed my impossibly curled hair, then was preparing to unpack when Brother Jonathan entered and announced lunch with a quavering high voice. He was old, and with his cowl set back seemed more like a just-born child suffering from jaundice.

I followed him eagerly to a dining hall where I ate in impatient silence with Elias before we retired to his study—and magnificent paintings on ogee, paneled walls that complemented perfectly an oriental carpet, and floor-to-ceiling bookcases fronted with wire-enmeshed glass. I sat in a green leather armchair while Elias took his seat behind a polished but worn walnut desk.

“Well,” he said. “At last.”

“Brother Elias—”

“Elias,” he said, smiling. “And shall I call you James?”

“Please,” I said, and studied the carpet for a moment before adding, “Elias, your retainer was rather generous, to say the least, but I’m going to have to confess that I’ve never heard of you, or the abbey, or even the brotherhood.”

“I’m not surprised. I would think that St. Justin is one of the church’s best kept secrets.” He laughed, and there was a comfort there that allowed my spine to relax, my tension to drain. “We call him the ‘Preserver,’ James, and for good reason. About four hundred years ago, he discovered a library of ancient writings among some ruins of what is now Istanbul. They’re over three thousand years old and speak of a time ten thousand before that.”

I was about to interrupt, but he anticipated and gestured for my silence.

"The authors were Essenes—normally thought to be one of the lost tribes of Israel. Justin's translations proved this to be somewhat in error, though the Essenes did derive from the Canaanite matrix. Do you follow me so far? I'm afraid I'm being rather circuitous, but the story is somewhat complicated."

It's your money, I thought; if you want to blow it on some Bible story, go right ahead.

The cleric, sensing my doubt, grinned without malice and leaned forward on his elbows, tenting his fingers beneath the point of his beard. As I stared at him, I could hear faint crystalline chimes echoing down the corridor, the passing of dark-frocked brothers scurrying to their duties: I was beginning to feel as though I were in a cavern where every breath is magnified, every heartbeat thunderous. It was several moments before I realized Elias had taken my silence for interest and was continuing his discourse.

"...important aspect of Essene teachings is what they called 'The Light.' It's reputedly that emanation that captures the true essence of a thing. To know The Light, then, is to attain what the Buddhists call *svapratyatmagati*—self-realization of the highest truths. The Light is all that man *is*—the entity. It is transmitted from and given to man from his works, his music, his art, his literature. Do you see?"

I nodded quickly, trying to pull myself back from the cavern to the room. "An aesthetic notion,

then? A kind of beauty?"

"Close," he said. "But beauty is only a small part of it. When one considers the emanations, there are no simple labels. To perceive and understand The Light, one cannot allow himself to be chained to objective/subjective wheels of intellectual discrimination. To perceive The Light is to know the constants of the universe—the unchanging aspects of a changing cosmos. The course of The Light, Doctor, broods within every man—it is the distille of truth, of being, symbols, drives, thoughts, morality . . . all things. In short, The Light is the vital element. Without it, man could not continue to exist."

In an attempt to be polite, to cover my lack of comprehension at what appeared to be heretical double-talk, I said, "It seems to be rather complicated—"

"To put it mildly," he said. "I don't expect you to get this all in one short session. But believe me, James, such things exist. You see, the Justinian texts were only the foundations of another sect known as the Kaleks, who expanded these beliefs and were one of the first peoples to truly explore the expanded consciousness. I've studied a great deal, myself and my brothers, and we believe now it was the Kaleks who devised the intricate system of Levels and Circles that guided the follwers of The Light."

"You've lost me again," I apologized.

"No matter. Suffice it to say that Justin is called the 'Preserver' because it was he who founded this brotherhood, he who dedicated us to preserving The

Light for man, and it is through his texts that we know what we do. I mentioned Michelangelo's *Moses* to you during our phone call. It had The Light. It has it no longer. We must find out why, James, and we must find out the cause for that peculiar madness that drives men to such wanton destruction."

I stood slowly, startling him by the unexpected move, and I smiled weakly as I paced a measured tread behind my chair. Elias, I sensed, was no fanatic, yet there was a hint of the shrill in his deep-chested voice. He obviously cared about this 'Light' thing, and wanted me to work with him on whatever his mission was concerning it. But I could not *be* with him. Its mysticism was far beyond me, and my place here understandably ambiguous. When I finally turned, gripped the back of the chair and voiced my concern, he sat for a long minute staring at a point just over the top of my head.

"I'm rushing things," he said, almost to himself. "I don't like it. Doctor... James, you're here because I... we want you to translate something for us."

Now that, I told myself, is the first thing he's said that's made any sense. "What is it?" I asked. "A new text from the Essenes?"

"No. A new language."

2

It was madness. No sooner had he spoken than a rapid series of melodic gongs drifted through the building. He stopped, glanced apologetically at me,

and hurried from the room. I took an angry stride after him, scowled and slammed a hand hard against his desk. Madness, and no doubt about it. There hadn't been a new language since—

The door opened, and Brother Jonathan waited patiently until I noticed him.

"Dinner," he said, "It will be served in your room, Dr. Campasi."

"My room?"

He cringed as though my voice had whipped him. "I'm 'sorry, Doctor, but dinner . . . for us, dinner is a time of service. Brother Elias thought you'd rather not . . ." His hands twisted nervously around a soiled white girdle dangling loosely about his waist. Not wanting to be an unwitting discomfort to the old man, I nodded and followed him back to my chamber where a meal had already been set in front of the window.

As the sun westered and my raven chased its shadow, I ate. But I tasted little. Was I a thief, I wondered, for taking such money for the workings of a . . . what? A madman? Then so were they all, right down to little Jonathan. I didn't much care to think about that.

Afterward, having unpacked and considered starting a journal of my visit, I was again summoned to the abbot's study. The contemplative quiet of the monastery was beginning to tell and I half-wished I could beg off until morning, but I did not. Elias picked up as though we'd never been separated.

"You seemed amazed that I mentioned a new language, James."

"Amazed is hardly the word."

His look was harsh, as if insult had been rendered, but I made no apology. I took my chair as before and stared at him, waiting.

"Doubt," he muttered, and shook his head. Then his gaze leveled and his voice rose. "Doctor, seven months ago Francis Miko of Oxford—the same Miko lost at sea in a pleasure boat accident earlier this year—uncovered at a dig in Bar Sheve, Israel, a vast library of scrolls sealed in stone urns. When he'd concluded his dating and origin speculations, he contacted the Vatican, which in turn came to us. The scrolls, of course, are still in Israel, but we've managed to obtain microfiche copies; and it's from these apparent Kalek language scrolls that we wish you to work."

I blinked rather stupidly.

It couldn't be real, not this chance for immortality.

He'd made a mistake and was wasting his money; he was mad and wasting my time; he was . . . he was . . .

"If I didn't jump at that, Elias," I said, "I'd be a damned fool."

He applauded me silently, his smile beatific, and his eyes squinting with joy. I accepted his outstretched hand and a sheaf of notes he directed me to read before I slept that night. I fairly ran back to my room, settling myself at the desk and reading long after the final bells sent the monks to their pallets.

The Brotherhood of St. Justin was evidently dedicated to preserving the world's masterpieces,

something I'd already gleaned from Elias' none-too-subtle lecture. The files I read were details of mutilations that covered centuries and were definitely on the increase. From Lautrec's *At The Moulin Rouge* through Shakespeare's *The Tempest* folio and Audubon's original *Birds* manuscript, straight through to the *Pieta* and *Moses* tragedies. In some instances, members of the brotherhood were present at restorations, but in each and every case this Light of the Essene/Kalek was judged to have been extinguished. What was left, then, was a hollow mockery of what had been, even a forgery of sorts.

By the time I had done, I was immersed in melancholy. Elias had a term—'peripheral man'—for those unable to see The Light, and I surprised myself by being saddened to be numbered among them. I laid the papers aside and stared out the window. To believe in something was what had been lacking since my parents' deaths, and perhaps even before that. The Light. It could be so. I wanted it to be. Believing in myself was evidently insufficient—a fine thing for one's work and success, but what of the dark hours alone with my shadows?

I stretched, walked about the room to ease the cramps stirring in my thighs, and decided a walk in the courtyard might help clear out my confusion, my gloom. But once there, I saw the wall door was open, so I stepped immediately outside. A moon struggled with streamered clouds, but it was bright enough to lend me faint light as I followed the whisper of the valley's stream until I stood on its low, reeded bank.

Belief. Disbelief. *Unbelief.*

I knelt and tossed a pebble into the black and silver water.

You're nervous, Jimmy boy, I told myself.

Well, who wouldn't be? A fantastic discovery left to *me* to unravel.

But not through coincidence—that I refused to believe. I was, without false modesty, an expert in my field, but not the only one. And with so many others, why me? I thought back to that first conversation, to Elias' unspoken claim that my doubts were all too clear. That was untrue. I knew it. My friends hated playing cards with me because I never broke my expression; and they, by the same token, could never tell when I was joking. So he had not been reading my face. He had been through that conversation before. I wasn't the first, then; but if so, who had been the other?

A light shuffling in the frost-stiffened grass made me stand, slowly, not turning until I saw a lantern's glow give me shadow. It was Brother Jonathan.

"You startled me," I said with a smile. "I thought it was some mountain beast ready to taste my Maryland roast."

The old man's face was hidden by his cowl and I could see no reaction. "I checked to see if you needed anything, Doctor," he said. "The light under your door . . . when you were gone, I thought you were lost. The doors will be locked soon. I think you'd better . . ." He gestured, began walking ahead of me back to the abbey. I hesitated before hurrying to his side, but he said nothing more until we were in the central hall. Then: "I wouldn't do

that again, Doctor. It gets quite cold out there at night. You could catch your death if you didn't get back in time."

I took his arm lightly to prevent him from leaving. "Tell me something, Jonathan. What did the others find out about this project of yours? I mean, how long did they stay?"

A hand swept back his cowl, and his innocent stare almost convinced me I hadn't seen him start. "No others, Doctor. You're the first." Before I could detain him further, he vanished through a door on the far side of the staircase.

Ah well, Jimmy, I thought. You'd make a lousy detective, you know. Bogart would have slapped his face.

3

Breakfast in my room. Nothing sinister there, but I hadn't quite surrendered my suspicions, especially when I found myself struggling to remember something, something that had to do with the front hall having been different last night. Jonathan-my-shadow interrupted me then, and fetched me to Elias who stood away from his study desk, grinning and rubbing his hands on his thighs.

"You've no doubt noticed, James, that we've a rather abrupt collision of past and present here," he said as he shifted a book in the door-wall case and moved back to let it slide to one side. "Long ago, we decided to incorporate rather than make additions. It's startling sometimes, but one gets used to it."

"I have the feeling you're preparing me for something, Elias," I said, trying not to gape at the elevator now revealed in the wall.

He laughed, slapped my back, and we went down. Away from the world of stone and candlelight, dark wood and long shadows, into the glare of stainless steel, polished tile floors, and silent men in white technicians' gowns.

"The more practical side of our nature," Elias explained.

And expensive, I thought, unable to suppress a shiver at the air-conditioned coolness, the waft of antiseptics. At the room's far end was an impressive bank of consoles housing communications equipment and flanked by teletypes, television monitors, and other devices I didn't readily recognize. I was introduced to Hamon and Bael, who were to be my assistants. Their handshakes proved their eagerness to begin, to hustle Elias out so the real work could be born.

"Satisfied?"

"Elias, I'm too amazed to be amazed anymore. But I have to ask you one question."

He nodded, still gloating over his treasure.

"If Miko were still alive, would you ask him instead of me? In fact, why not any of the others who are just as qualified as I?"

"Time, James," he said after a searching pause. "And foreigners require negotiations and ego pampering. We have neither the first to spare nor desire for the second. And whether you like it or not, you are among the top three men in your field in this country. Now," and he punched at my arm,

stepping back into the elevator, "I expect verbal reports from you from time to time. Hurry, if you can, James. But above all, be right."

I stared as the metal doors closed, shrugged at the flattery, and allowed my assistants to take me on a guided tour of the IBM complex. Then I sat at a long gray table and began scanning the Kalek script fiches.

The writing appeared to be a syllabary—a system in which each symbol represented a syllable of the spokeh language. There were faint resemblances to oriental and Arabic forms, yet they were distinctive in themselves, and I silently praised this Justin's ability to accurately reproduce such complicated script.

When I was done I was more fully aware of the enormity of the work that lay ahead. I whistled in mute astonishment at the struggles of men like Ventris, the architect who'd cracked the Minoan/Mycenaean language known as Linear B. No computer application there, and I took a quick minute to wonder if I had the brains to duplicate that feat, or was I too enwrapped in my cryptanalytic tapes and dials and toggles and transistors.

Does it matter, I asked myself as I programmed the computer to scan Kalek samplings—pattern searches, substitution and transposition checks, sequential syntax recognitions, ideogrammatic versus pictogrammatic correlations.

Does it matter, I thought as I piled the printout sheets in front of me, read them swiftly, then again . . . carefully.

A meal was brought in. A day passed. Another. This blurred into another until I asked to be let outside for some fresh air. My request was temporarily balked, then granted after lengthy intercom whisperings with the abbot upstairs.

Four or five days had passed. Now I walked by the stream, tossing pebbles through thin sheaths of ice, shredding twigs of stubbornly held leaves. I was invigorated. Six months ago the workload would have killed me; but now I was thriving on a psychic nourishment that deepened my sleep and sated me when I neglected a meal. I'd learned that the Kalek script followed no familiar syntactical patterns, employing an astonishing ninety-seven separate symbols for syllabic delineation, twenty more than modern Japanese. I expected within a few days to pin down a rudimentary grammar, and in thinking, I began daydreaming—books, papers, the scholars of the world nestled at my feet as I intoned Kalek wisdom from the scrolls I had translated. Surely Elias would grant me that much. All he wanted was the content to combat the dying of The Light.

Jonathan called me back to work.

Elias called me up to report.

He was anxious; no more, I thought, than I.

Once the machine had scanned the 187 scrolls, the vocabulary began. The best and the worst of the task: to see finally after weeks of work the translation of what men had written a thousand times my age ago. Naturally, I was not quite ready to tackle the shadings, the nuances, the subtle connotations; a rough translation it would be, and when I announced its commencement, Elias nearly

cried in what I imagined was pious joy.

"The day after tomorrow," I said, pricking his balloon. "I need some time to rest. And I've got to call the university again because—"

"It's arranged," he said brusquely. "You're to be congratulated, they said, and you've been given next term free as well, should you need it. They're pleased with you, James."

I shrugged modestly.

"But why can't you begin today? Don't you want to?"

"Of course I do," I snapped, nearly yelling, "but I've been going on pure energy for weeks. I've got to have some time off, Elias, or I'll drop. Not to mention the mistakes I might make."

"I'll help."

"How?" I said, weariness slumping me against the desk.

His hands groped the air to pick out what he needed; but he knew I was still in charge, no matter who paid the bills. He acquiesced, grudgingly. "But I wish you wouldn't go outside so often, James," he fussed. "You're tempting pneumonia with those walks of yours."

I laughed. "Believe me, Elias, this fresh cold air of yours is more bracing than anything else I could think of. Besides, do you know what it's like to be cooped up in what's essentially two rooms for so long? I'm beginning to feel like a political prisoner or something."

I'd meant it as a joke, but he didn't take it as such. Umbrage darkened his face. I was so fed up, then, with his goading and pompous superiority that

I turned and walked directly outside.

A ridiculous act of petty rebellion.

The mountains were bare now, the sky drifting toward the color of slate as winter storms gathered at the end of November. There had already been some inconsequential snowfalls, light dustings that fought the sun longer each day they fell. But now there was a full-sized storm coming. I could feel it in my Maryland bones, taste it in the dampening air. It was then that I realized Thanksgiving had come and gone, that the brotherhood had held no special services to mark it. My scrolls were my excuse, I thought, but it was certainly a peculiar way to run a monastery. I hoped they'd remember Christmas was coming.

A wind filtered through the hillside trees, lifted my smock, and reminded me I'd run out without a coat. I headed back reluctantly, glancing up when my friend the raven glided slowly overhead. I frowned, then, and tugged at the hair gracing my collar. One raven, drifting. I'd seen no other birds and, while I knew most would have long since begun their migrations, still there should have been a few left behind—a few winter birds to give the snow color.

I stopped and stared at the bleak abbey wall, now gone a dead weak gray, and saw Jonathan standing atop the entrance. I waved and he waved back. Two goals, I thought: to complete the translation, and to make that little man smile.

Then I returned to my room and to the sleep piling up behind my eyes.

Without dreams.

Without time.

I woke the following afternoon feeling inordinately guilty for not being downstairs with my scrolls and tapes. But I fought the good fight for the repose of my soul and, grabbing a few books, sat in front of the window and read. Snatches of Dickens, chapters of Hardy. Slowly the Kaleks gave ground and allowed me to breathe without their ghosts. It was a trick I used often—not very original—to set a stage for whatever insights chose to make an entrance, distraction the obvious key while the subconscious barreled on.

Hamon brought dinner, and when I asked him how things were going, he only grinned and put a finger to his lips. Good man, I thought; keep the boss happy, even if he hates it.

Then I wrote some long overdue letters for Jonathan to mail. Though Elias was kind enough to keep the university abreast of my progress, I thought it only polite and politic to keep in my oar to see if the current was still running my way. If they didn't answer . . . I wasn't going to worry. Not yet. Not now.

With that done, I extinguished the lights and stood by the window to watch the moon. It soothed me, and I started to turn to the bed when I spotted a figure darting away from the wall. Little more than a thin shadow, but I instantly recognized the hesitant limp of my little protector, Jonathan. He trotted without a light directly to the well; then he and it merged for what seemed like five minutes or so. There was a wind, and he ran back without looking up.

Now what? Jonathan with secrets? I thought about sneaking down to see what he'd been up to, but decided he deserved more from me than that.

Still, it was curious, my darting little friend, and I fell asleep reminding myself to ask him about it in the morning.

But the opportunity never came. Bael brought my breakfast, not waiting but telling me straight away that the computer had completed the translation-route instructions. Gulping my coffee, I ran after him and saw, piled neatly on my table, seven hundred pages of closely lined typescript. Since I'd been unable to discover chapter, book, or other headings in the scrolls, the pages were set in the order Miko had established before announcing his find.

I hesitated.

To begin now the first stage of polishing, to conjure from the centuries a readable manuscript . . . I almost ran screaming from the room, disclaiming the responsibility. But I calmed, took a deep shuddering breath, and, after congratulatory handshakes with Hamon and Bael, sat down with my pens and paper and dreams of glory.

And it was quiet.

4

After the first week of reading, substituting, double-running the computer's scan, the arguments with Elias erupted full-blown.

"The Light, damn it, James! What about The Light?"

"For crying out loud, Elias. I've only done about a quarter of the work. Do you have any idea how much turgid garbage I have to plow through every day, how slowly I have to go so I don't make the one error that will destroy everything? The computer helps once I've chosen a translation, but it's that choosing, Elias. Give me some room . . . please!"

He snorted and loomed over the desk. "Tell me this, then, James: have you discovered anything about the mutilations? Anything at all that'll give us a lead on them?" His voice was pleading, his face demanding, and I bridled at both.

"Nothing, Elias," I said flatly. "And you're not helping with all this infernal badgering." Immediately, I raised a hand to forestall his invective. "Look, I know you're anxious. I can see it, I can feel it in the halls when the others stare at me as if I were going to whip out the Holy Grail or something. But all I can do now is tell you what you already know—The Light is the foundation of Kalek belief, and there are Levels the sect followers were initiated into as they strove to attain recognition of The Light for themselves. But that's all, Elias. That's . . . all."

And it was. Philosophic hairsplitting, esoteric ambivalence, and here and there pods for the seeds of anticipated religions: the insights of Christ, the justice of Mohammed, the subtleties of Gautama. I doubted the Kaleks were the forerunners or inspiration, but if their sect had been reasonably well-known in their time, it was difficult to imagine that their beliefs weren't, too.

But Elias had to see for himself, and there was nothing I could do to stop him. He came down and began pouring over the material the computer and I had already gone through. He grunted, demanded paper and took to scribbling notes. Once, in glancing impatiently over his shoulder, I saw they were in Latin and couldn't help rolling my eyes toward the ceiling in exasperation.

For a single day only, his enthusiasm spurred me, but that swiftly turned into seething impatience. He swore as no cleric I'd ever known, scolded Hamon and Bael with a venom that shocked me, and sniped at my competence when he finally caught up and waited for me to finish. There was tension now, all pretense at friendship gone and forgotten. I feared. Not for myself, but for the mistakes I might make.

It was a midweek morning when I stood in front of the elevator door and held up a palm, pressed it to Elias' chest, and pushed him back.

"No, no more," I said. "You're making things impossible here, Elias."

He slapped my arm disdainfully away and strode to the table before I could intercept him. He snatched up the two sheets I'd been working on since dawn and glared at Bael before turning to me with a sneer. "Is this all you've done today? This?" And when I turned to the others for moral support, I nearly backed off at the hostility plain in their eyes.

"Elias," I said, suddenly unsure, "you simply cannot force this thing. You have no—"

"You are an ass, James," he said. "And I'm seriously wondering if the abbey needs you here anymore."

"You're joking."

"I have no time for jests, James."

"Then you're an incompetent fool, Elias. To bring someone else in now would set you back months. He'd have to check the programs, read what I've done, absorb . . . absorb *me* into his system to keep on the same track. No," I said, taking the paper from his hands and pushing him carefully to one side. "No, you're not going to replace me, Elias. You can't do it yourself. You need *me*."

Lies, of course, and he hesitated, then was done in that moment and knew it. He mumbled something to my assistants and left.

They watched me—Hamon in one corner and Bael near the elevator—arms folded, smocks exchanged for the brotherhood's habits.

It was quite awhile before I was able to reimmerge myself, but eventually the Kaleks returned, and when they had—when I'd plunged through all but the last five scrolls—I was frightened, in a way that had nothing to do with the physical threats hovering over me.

Once past what I knew to be raving gibberish, I found myself reading dark portents of the Kalek's demise, portents without amplification or explanation save that the end had nothing to do with their desert enemies. They were clearly nervous about something, and whatever it was had little connection with Elias' Light. They warned with almost preternatural calm of cataclysms, the passing of the stars and the voice of the cold, time distorted and . . .

I pushed away from the table and wiped my face with the back of my hand. Saddened. Angered. The Kaleks had turned for some totally inexplicable reason from their promising research into mind expansion to mystic insanity with talk of gods and retribution. There had been no previous mention of deities in any form at all; but now they were slipping. I could see it. These scrolls were the testament of perhaps a few hundred men hiding from their nightmares. Begun in admirable and scholarly fashion to develop a logical system of order for their beliefs, they'd plummeted into the chasms of blatant superstition.

Justin must have known this, surely had suspected it, yet persisted in preserving this rapidly churning madness. To what purpose I couldn't even begin to guess; but this I knew: the brotherhood was a fraud, and it didn't even know it.

I felt sick.

I closed my eyes and rubbed them slowly.

I doubted there would be anything in the pages remaining for Elias to salvage. The Light was mentioned seldom now, and there were only five scrolls to go. For all my success, for all the innovations I'd developed in this work, and for all the historians I'd robbed of a jewel, I wanted to cry. I had wanted so damned desperately to believe in that Light, to have it be real. Damn it! And now there was nothing but a poorly told fairy tale that would end in whimpering.

I stood.

"Please, Doctor," Bael said softly.

"I'm done for the day," I said stiffly. "There's

nothing more to be gained. Bring supper to my room and ask Elias to meet me there later." I gestured contemptuously toward the computer. "And you can shut that thing down. My work is nearly done."

Bael looked to Hamon, then pressed the elevator button.

"You don't know if you should be happy or not, do you?" I asked as the doors slid open.

He stared at me, openmouthed.

I couldn't say it. "Be happy," I whispered, and forced a smile that vanished immediately when I was cut off from view. When I stepped into the study, the abbot rose from his desk, shoving aside a tray.

"Later," I said.

He grabbed my arm, and without thinking I swung, felt my wrist snared, my arm twisted up behind my back. Before I could even begin to struggle, he had thrown me into my chair and was sitting on the edge of the desk.

"Tell me."

I swallowed. Then, defiantly, told him everything as bluntly and sarcastically as I could. And my astonishment grew when he only stared, nodded twice that I can remember, and smiled now and then to prod me on. At the end he lighted a cigar and opened the door. "You've done a Herculean task, m'boy. Can you finish in the next few days?"

Any reaction but that I could have taken, if not understood.

"But I just told you, Elias—"

"I know what you said, now answer my question."

I considered what was left. "I think so, yes. But I don't want to. I'm depressed enough as it is."

"I understand," he said, "but we must go on, mustn't we? There's always that chance, you know, always that chance. Be pleased with yourself, James. You're going to be famous."

It seemed as if I had suddenly fallen into another world, an alternate universe. All those talks with Elias, those lectures about The Light and masterpieces and saving man from something dying within him . . . they were as if they had never been. Elias, instead of wringing his hands, was pushing for the project's completion. It didn't make sense. I had just played Chaos to his Creation, won, and somehow still lost.

Supper was left outside my door. I picked at it, left most of it on the plates. I tried reading, and threw each book I chose into the cold fireplace. I sat in a hot tub and grew cold. I undressed and slept uneasily, woke, and in a playlet of tantrum refused to leave my room, though I had nothing to do there but watch the sun. My meals came as before: a light knock, a scraping, and the tray.

I was ignored.

Finally, I grabbed an empty ledger from the desk and began to list my impressions since the day I'd arrived, another trick to restore order to my mind. But the impressions were not of Kalek mysticism, but of the abbey's incongruities. And the more I wrote, the more my pen recalled what I had not, the more my hand slowed in its pacing across the paper.

And when I had done, I knew with a cold and

emotionless certainty that I was . . . done.

The Light.

Elias had no use for it. It had been a sham, a pretense, a charade for the gullible scholar. And I hadn't been the only one to work on those scrolls. Both Hamon and Bael were, on reflection, too damned proficient in anticipating my needs for it to be a coincidence. Miko, the lost-at-sea Mido must have been here before me. I was standing at the window staring down at the well when my door opened and Jonathan came in to take my noon tray.

"Jonathan!" I said heartily. "I've missed you."

"I've been busy, Dr. Campasi," he said, taking the tray and ducking to move around me to gain the door. But I leaned against it.

"Oh, I'm sure you have, Jonathan. Making your wine, baking your bread, hoeing your garden out there by the well."

The tray dropped. I grabbed his robe and yanked him to me, ran my hand over his neck, chest, the thick of his waist. When I released him, he scuttled back until he'd reached the window, pressed his buttocks against the sill.

"You know what, Jonathan?" I said. "Your monastery is the first one I've ever heard of whose members didn't wear crosses, or rosary beads, or medals of a sort. Why not, Brother Jonathan?"

He wiped at his nose. Sniffled.

"Is it guilt that sends you out to the well every night? Is that where Miko is, Brother?"

He grunted, reached out, and snatched up a letter opener from the desk. I had to blink to be sure it

was really that old man rushing murderously toward me. I leaped aside, took his free arm and whirled him around before releasing him to smash against the bedpost. He bounded off and came at me again. The opener flashed once, a reminder of the sun. He maneuvered me away from the door, and when he made no move toward it, I wondered what it was I'd done that I had to die without knowing.

When he charged, his mouth contorted in a feral grimace, I ducked his slashing, grabbing the rope at his waist and swinging him twice around before I let go. His arms flailed as he tried to find his balance, but the small of his back struck the sill. His momentum lifted him, carried him through the window and out.

Soundlessly.

A rain of glass followed like stars.

When I stopped trembling and looked out, he was draped over the top of the wall, legs on the outside, head staring whitely at the abbey. He jerked once, and I saw the opener fall to the ground. The moment the metal settled in the dead grass I ran to the bathroom and vomited until I choked. I was surprised that no one had heard the struggle or the fall, but I guessed the thick walls had saved me; and they would once more if I could get to the road without being seen. Hurriedly, mindlessly, I started throwing things into my suitcase, then cursed and flung it aside.

When I opened the door, the corridor was empty.

Proof, my vanity demanded as I headed for the front hall; and I sidetracked to Elias' study. There was little need for caution—I could hear, as I ran, a

faint hollow chanting from the direction of the chapel I had never seen. Rising. Falling. Under and over the call of an organ.

The room was unlocked, the elevator free. And once in the computer room the coolness became the breath of a grave, the consoles and tape housings the faces of the dead. I rushed to the table . . . and stopped.

The final scroll translations were gone.

When I searched Elias' desk, I found all the letters I had written, all those written me.

And the organ stopped.

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5

Five minutes later I was in the front hall, staring at the ceiling where the cross had once hung. That was what I had missed each time I'd passed through. Since the first day, the cross had been gone.

And at the top of the staircase, the one I had never climbed, stood Elias.

The voice from his cowl was like a mountain intonement.

"James, I've finished your work."

I stood at the bottom, fists at my side, helplessness preventing me from charging at his throat. I could see, without turning around, the brotherhood moving silently into the hall. The robes whispering, feet scuffling, a hint of incense thickening the air.

"You should have done it yourself, James, and you would know and be saved. Now there is little

time, and I am afraid it is too late."

"Like Miko," I said, more a demand than a question.

"I had to be sure, James." One step down. "I had to be sure the Kaleks were right. We all had to know, James, so they wouldn't have perished in vain." Another step, and his face was a flickering of red and black. "They were destroyed by the Essenes. To keep them from invoking the last scroll's prayer. Justin was unable to gather the numbers needed, so he saved them at the cost of his life, and his salvation. You should have read them, James. You've been searching for a god. You could have had one."

I couldn't erase the sneer in spite of the terror. "What god, Elias? Surely you can't be talking about the Second Coming. Christ coming again with the aid of a computer? Or is it Zeus, Elias, or Pan or Ra? Who is it, Elias, you claim to have summoned?"

No laughter . . . a stirring, and another step down.

"You did it, James. You did it all. We're proud of you, James."

"So you're going to kill me like you did Francis Miko."

Not defiance . . . resignation.

"No, James. We're going to let you listen. To the voice of the god you've sent to your world."

"Damn it, Elias, you're out of your mind!"

"To the voice of the cold, James. And the coming of the dark."

"Damn you, Elias—"

"Go to your room, James."

Halfway down his hands left their sleeves' bundling. I felt two brothers at my elbow. Waiting.

I don't know how true it is. Perhaps it's the wine. It has to be. There can be no other reason for the thunder that shakes the abbey walls, the winds that rush through the corridors extinguishing the candles and leaving ice behind.

I've knelt at the fireplace to strike a match; and it will not light.

I've not tried the door; I know it is locked.

Once . . . I laughed. For centuries, for millennia, I and my race have searched for a god that we could call true. We have defied everything from a carpenter to a scholar, a stone to the sun, on a quest for the voice that would tell us all why.

And now I, who have had no god, have found one.

And I don't want it.

Not thunder. Not ice.

But the valley outside now fills with the dark and the raven won't show me where I can hide.

THE WORD

by

Gregory Long

Ellman was running. He had been running a long time—his whole life. Raindrops were falling around him, and as Ellman ran, the raindrops grazed him, missed him, opened a safe and clear path before him. He was frightened—and hypnotized—by the behavior of the rain. The steadily growing shower of drops seemed intelligent, calculating. Then Ellman felt hands roving over his shoulders. Someone was shaking him, shouting. . . .

There was no one to call the entity anything. Nevertheless, the entity was Eidolon.

Eidolon felt the ship impact into the vegetation. The sensation was both physical and mental. The planet's vegetation was Eidolon's bone, nerve, muscle, skin; but Eidolon had no bone, nerve, muscle, or skin. Eidolon was a planet, self-contained, green, oxygenated, fecund. Yet Eidolon was weakly ellipsoid; Eidolon was flawed. Its vegetation masked a deep, abiding loneliness. Eidolon was withdrawn, shadowy, fearfully desirous of love.

Eidolon's living systems were in metastable equilibrium with its varied environments. In short, when the ship impacted, Eidolon's timid hackles rose. The systems reacted to the wound, seeking to preserve their internal integrity.

But Eidolon had no hackles. Eidolon was a material idea, self-generating, self-enclosed.

Eidolon thought, awaking from subjective absorption: *Something has struck me, and I am ideal. No other ideas of me exist in the "universe"*—Eidolon had no word for universe. *But I must incorporate the hard thing into me; the thing must become my idea.*

Then: *How wonderful. The ancient sorrow will soon come to an end.*

The hands shaking Ellman were rough, yet pleasant. He resisted their urgency. He wanted to seep down into the damp soil of the planet; he wanted to rest. He was eighty years old, still young; he had another five years of running left in him—if he was lucky. But he was growing old.

He knew who was shaking him. Alicette. But he kept his eyes closed. He pictured her thrashing against him in the free-fall webbing during mid-transit.

Copulatory relaxation dynamics in preparation for the Olympics. He had performed well; had demonstrated endurance. He would win the marathon on Aethlius. But, he thought, she is getting old too. We won't be rescued. There won't be a marathon.

He sat up. He guessed what had happened. Alicette confirmed it. "You were dreaming. Rain hitting your wrap."

He squirmed out of the ragged plastic sheet—a liner from the deceleration tank, the only thing he could grab as he ran. Except his shoes and the watch—he knew he would need the watch. The corridor had been in flames, the air lock a burst sphincter offering outside freedom. The other team members had grabbed liners, mimicking him. Good old team concept: follow the leader.

Well, since they won't listen to me, Ellman thought, kicking the liner away, *they* can become the leader.

A new leader always readjusted the Gestalt Surround for high survivability. First rule anywhere—at the Olympics, during training, or marooned on a backwater planet.

Ellman squatted on his calves, legs creaking, artificial flexor and extensor implants reacting to the damp. He wondered if he had said anything during his sleep. Stalker and Grazer were glowering at him from the other side of the canopied fire. Stalker had brought the fire from the smoldering ship, risking the radiation. But no problem, Stalker had said, holding high the torch, it was for the Olympics. Cynic, Ellman thought.

He stood up. He was naked. What did it matter? He

had lost a shoe somewhere. He knew he had to find it.

Alicette moved next to him. Immediately, Stalker and Grazer moved toward them, around the fire. The motion was automatic, practiced—and tinged with potential violence.

Ellman stepped away from Alicette. What was she pulling on everyone? The team shared her; she shared herself among the whole team, just as the other members shared themselves. But she wasn't signaling sex now; she was signaling more. Well, Ellman didn't like that. He had heard about teams falling in love. It was a foolish weakness. It destroyed the potential for perfectibility, for victory—for the ideal.

Ellman could feel resentment radiating from the two men. They blamed him for this calamity. They had been blaming him for days. Maybe Ellman's nightmare a moment ago was the final straw. Maybe they *did* want the leadership.

Ellman looked into Alicette's face. He had never studied her this closely before, and he turned away, embarrassed. The whole Surround was bristling, tensing up. To Ellman, the feeling was like anticipation errors springing forth in an Olympic event.

Sometimes an athlete would emphasize only one phase of the Action; then the Whole would collapse. There were several phases to any Action. Grazer was a high jumper. He had to perform perfectly the phases of approach, jump, and clearance. If he blew one of them, the Action fell apart; the Whole—the Ideality—crumbled. The same went for Stalker, the weight lifter.

Ellman looked at them. Their undershadowed jaws were set, rigid. They were anticipating the ultimate error in the "action" of survival: death on an uninhabited planet in an off limits Preserve System. No jettisoned emergency marker beeped in orbit; no record of change of flight had been filed at the Eridani jump-off terminal.

Ellman avoided Alicette's eyes again and hobbled hesitantly forward on one shoe. "Look I'll say it again. We have to practice. There's hope. We have to practice—and wait."

Disgusted, Stalker turned away. He was muscular, naked. Firelight gleamed on the electromyographic capsule dangling around his thick neck. Ellman suddenly wanted the capsule; maybe—stupid thought—it would confirm that he wasn't getting old. But as he stepped toward Stalker, he felt the alien pull of gravity.

Grazer witnessed Ellman's reaction. "And you want us to practice. Here? What with the gravity, the rain, the heat?" He laughed. "Ellman, you're a fool."

Alicette touched Ellman's elbow tenderly. Bewildered, he wanted to respond to her, break out of his role as leader. But he backed off, feeling the fragile Surround tremble.

"Look, maybe you're right. Maybe I am a fool. But you're here. And," he paused, "you're with me. And each of you knows—knows you're getting old."

Alicette looked away. Ellman realized then that he shouldn't speak of the team's age anymore. But he knew he would. And he realized Alicette had been warning him to stop talking, that her touch wasn't an expression of love, but a threat.

"We may never have another chance," Ellman said flatly. "And if that's true, then here's the place—the only place—where we can beat the records."

"The records?" Stalker laughed. "Without training-support systems? You've got to be kidding!"

"And if we did?" Ellman said. "If we did without the support systems?"

Silence filled the Surround, interminable, threatening.

The sharp metal plunged into the tissues of Eidolon's mind, and Eidolon winced, its green extended spaces shivering and contracting into themselves. In its dark molten heart, a preconscious memory stirred and joined streams of underground gas which oozed toward the surface of the planet and revived the gray outer edges of Eidolon's mind. The memory was the shadow image of a creative thought which had made Eidolon by rupturing part of itself and shaping this torn part into the being of Eidolon.

The creative thought had spread itself throughout the infant solar system, coagulating into holes and spaces, into whirlpools and clusters. It deposited a shred of itself into Eidolon and moved Eidolon to think and ponder upon Eidolon's self as a perfectly internal entity, a self-knowing ideality enclosed and withdrawn from the rest of the "universe".

But the creative thought did not deposit love in the solar system, nor anywhere, and Eidolon finally discovered the absence of this thing for which it had no name. One day Eidolon became aware of a persistent irritation, an emptiness. Eidolon could not express it, could only approximate it; Eidolon called

the absent thing "love"--that is Eidolon felt a nameless hurt, an emotion with no definition. Eidolon tried to think of something to wash away the nameless indignity, and failed.

I can think imperfectly of "love" and not experience it. I do not contain "love"; I only grope for it, vaguely. I must think of it more clearly and find a word for it. If not, I must admit to myself that I am not ideal. For to be ideal is to be perfect.

Eidolon wasn't symmetrically spheroidal, but ellipsoidal. It wanted to correct its geometric deficiency and thereby become truly ideal. So Eidolon began extending more of itself across the surfaces of the planet which contained only minor parts of Eidolon's mind. Everywhere the planet deepened in intensity, greening, blueing, graying. A pale, inner incandescence colored the air, the water, the vegetation, even the varied trace gases. As Eidolon deepened the dimensions of its thought, the idea of the crashed ship began to throb forth more clearly, and Eidolon found the impact point and approached it, contemplating the foreign substance of the fused metal. The metal thought in a cold, indifferent way; radiation burned through the flaming forest. Eidolon meditated upon rain, and rain came and fell on the fires, putting them out--except inside the smoldering wreckage where feeble flames still glowed.

Eidolon felt traces of a multiple, alien entity which had moved away from the impact point in a single direction. The traces were faint, fragmented, and irritable. But Eidolon could sense shreds of what it thought was "love" deposited along the escape route.

It poured silently across the surface of the planet, searching.

All four team members crawled and lunged inside the spidery free-fall net, their naked bodies slippery and hot. Copulatory relaxation dynamics. Outside the port, star jewels glinted in a black well. Ellman wished he could pull their minds together, create a perfect Whole. He grabbed Stalker's leg and pulled himself up onto the backs of the weight lifter's thighs.

"You don't feel it?" Ellman said to the team. "Happens every time. The imperfections. You don't feel the imperfections?" He wanted to scream at their clumsy groping.

Alicette grasped Grazer's shoulders and pulled him down.

"You're never satisfied, Ellman," Stalker grunted, reaching his big hand back to help the team leader. "Hung up on age. I've known you five years. You're never satisfied."

Grazer was exasperated. "Let's just touch down on your Preserve planet and get it over with. You and your mid-life crisis."

"I never said it wasn't biological," Ellman said. "But that's just it. Why do you think the coach left us to charter this flight? And at our expense? We're washed up, finished. Coaches never tell you, no matter what model they are—the 860 or 900—they're all the same. They punch in new entry tapes and lease four more athletes. The market's wide open."

There were a million athletes from all over the System competing on Aethlius this year. Robo-coaches only took the best. Why couldn't this team see that? Ellman cursed inside.

Grazer's breathing was ragged; Alicette moved rhythmically under him. "I can come up with two reasons why we're alone on this flight."

"Lase away."

"Ok. First . . ."

He trailed off.

"Exactly. You know I'm right. Anybody else got an answer? I'm open to reorganization of the team. Anybody want to be leader for awhile? Hell, how about forever?"

Swollen silence. Ellman felt the vulnerable Surround crumbling, flowing into tangled heaps. An elbow struck his ribs. He hissed and pushed forward, fingernails scraping his calf. He groaned. It wasn't just the awkward pain. It was the thought of the ship's pilots watching them exercise through hidden lenses fitted into the bulkheads. He imagined the pilots' reactions to the bizarre entertainment; grown men and a woman grappling in a narrow fishnet. And the thought of steroids, anabolic agents, surgical reconstructions—they made no difference to Ellman anymore. The Olympic industry simply had to be replenished every four years—new bodies, new coach-trained record makers. And Ellman and his team didn't have access to the new somatic technologies. They were washed up, finished; the athlete dying old. He groaned again.

"I don't feel old," said Stalker, rocking on his knees, gasping.

"Of course not."

Ellman closed his eyes and struggled to retain his equilibrium.

"Your psychomotor system is totally desensitized.

You know, I've watched you lately. You're nothing but simple stimulus response." He waited. "And why don't you use your E-myog anymore?"

Stalker tried to move away. Ellman slapped under the weight lifter's chest and secured two handfuls of muscle. He held on tight. "No way, friend, no way. We're all in this together."

"He's right," Alicette piped in. "We're all rationalizing. I feel the imperfections all the time. You're all so rough. It's not just relaxation dynamics, it's everything—especially training. Stalker, your power cleans. They're insipid. And your front squats—"

"And what're you going to say about me?" Grazer hissed, pressing his weight onto her.

"Y-Your approaches. You're off—in fact, about four centimeters. I know. I've watched."

Grazer moved away from her quickly and fell onto Ellman's back. Stalker groaned under the additional weight. Ellman felt tension hardening under and behind him. He wanted to slam himself against the weight lifter and buck the high jumper off. He felt the aborted kinesthetic sensibilities of the two men ripping the Surround apart phase by phase, motion by motion as they struggled against him.

"We know the Olympic code," Ellman said angrily. "Self-perfection in the individual athletic event. Constant restoration of skill equilibriums at higher and higher levels. Error-free proprioceptive sense. That's why we should go to this planet. To once and for all prove—"

Alicette crawled over and interposed herself between Ellman's back and Grazer. A desire went

through Ellman. He had always treated Alicette objectively; he was a professional. But now . . .

"I—I was there as a boy—before the System declared it off limits to commercial traffic. My father was a miner. He took me there for adventure, to make me grow up. He was searching for metals. Before we were booted out, I ran through the forests." Alicette's breasts ground down in circles against his back. "You—you can't believe the green."

"There's part of a gee to work against there," he went on. "Good resistance for the myofibrillar and endurance components, Stalker. And Grazer, the soil is like clay, but resilient, good for takeoffs. And Alice . . ."

In his mind he saw her cartwheeling and handspringing across a rainbow glade. He blushed at the exotic image. Maybe Grazer was right, he shuddered shamefully; maybe he was experiencing a premature mid-age crisis: A few days ago he had begun the dehormoning process on himself. . . .

The silence returned, thin, flexible; the Surround seemed to blend together. Ellman felt that his body and mind were merging with theirs, everyone's relaxation phases rising toward a Whole. "Just a few days," he squeaked. "It's all I ask. The pilots have agreed to illegally change course—"

"Yeah, but this old tug—" Stalker gasped beneath them. "Better crank it for Aethlius right after the jump."

"Don't you see?" Ellman urged. "I swear. We've had it. The Olympics are rigged this year. Big political stakes. The coaches are cutthroat; they have to have winners. In this year's Olympics the losers die young.

But us? The old die *old*. We've got to stop on this planet and prove—and prove it once and for all. We never have."

"Prove what!" Grazer shouted, gripping Ellman's shoulders and thrusting.

Behind Ellman, Alicette cried out.

Ellman tried to hold the Whole together; he felt the net slipping around him. "Prove—prove our self-perfectibility. Experience the ideal, together."

"The ideal!" Stalker shouted.

No, thought Ellman, suddenly afraid. Maybe I'm deceiving myself.

The Whole shattered, the four athletes tumbling into the webbing.

A wave of morning sunlight fell palely across the sloping glade. Inside the newly constructed lean-to, Ellman awoke to mists, his joints aching. The automatic desire to reach for his daily esters of testosterone came to him. He resisted the impulse successfully and smiled. Stalker and Grazer moaned in their sleep.

At first, the four minds were nothing but a feeling of thin scratches to Eidolon. Then they became splinters, throbbing, insistent. Eidolon diffused itself further and saw them. They were barely discernible tracks of fog drifting on the other side of its green masks of vegetation, at the edge of a glade. Cautious, Eidolon squatted down further, blanketing the ground with a mist, and peered at the minds from inside tree trunks, from a safe interior of leaves.

Ellman found Alicette down by the mist-shrouded stream, filling dried gourds. Faint clusters of wrinkles surrounded her eyes like exploded filaments. Self-consciously, he touched the wrinkles with his thumb. "Have you looked at them—closely?" he said, his throat tight.

"I—I really didn't notice." She turned her back on him, pushing his hand away.

A patch of fog parted and revealed the clear, running surface of the stream; it was like looking through a window to Ellman, gazing at a sudden glass image. He felt a presence around him, eyes watching. . . .

"You don't have to feel ashamed," he said to her broken reflection in the water. "It's out of our hands now. When the ship crashed—"

"There was nothing to take?"

He nodded. "I'll say it again—nothing but ourselves. That's what I want everyone to grasp completely. We have our bodies. The food here is edible, the waters are clean. We can live here indefinitely. We may have to."

"Without drugs?"

"What other way is there?"

She buried her face in her hands.

Footsteps sounded heavily behind him. He turned. Stalker's and Grazer's heads were threatening blots against the faint disc of the sun.

Day after day—the tracks of fog argued. They were preoccupied with themselves. They vibrated the air of the glade from inside the hollows of their heads. They glowed deep within, radiating hatred from yellowish

light that burned eternally within their clogged mists. Each yellowish light filled an energy field with thick emotional pleasure. Eidolon circled the yellowish lights, rotating slowly like a whirlpool, absorbing pieces of the fields, meditating upon them, trying to find their exact loci. The thick emotional pleasure seemed close to the thing Eidolon wanted—but undefined, nameless.

Ellman shaded his eyes against the dull glare and stepped up to greet them. Stalker lashed out. Ellman stumbled backward and fell into a scratchy purple bush, peppered with spheroidal, yellow fruit. Then Grazer pulled him out and struck him over and over again. Ellman threw up his hands and staggered into the stream. Grazer stood over him, chest heaving. "You did this to us, Ellman, you son of a bitch! Now it all shows, all of it!"

Ellman was on his elbows, water sloshing under his armpits. He felt the presence again, the eyes. He looked up at the fresh wrinkles on Grazer's face. "Is that your biggest worry—that your age shows?" He got to his knees. "I'm finding my shoe, Grazer! You hear me! Sit on your ass and pretend you've lost your strength!"

Stalker came down the slope, his tense, naked body trembling, his face a grid of wrinkles. Ellman stared at him; Stalker had aged fifteen years. "It's cosmetics, Stalker, it's all on the outside, it's self-deception. You've got forty, fifty more years. No Olympian ever died before 120."

But no Olympian won an event after eighty, he wanted to add. He was aware of the stream. It flowed

around him, against him, unending, imperishable. He wanted to sink into the water—but then . . . he caught himself, suddenly afraid, and scrambled to his feet.

“It takes more than input, Stalker. It takes the whole configuration: skill, which you’ve still got; strength, which you’ve still got; and the will, freedom from fear. I don’t know . . . I don’t know if you’ve got them anymore.”

Hatred strained against Stalker’s tight muscles. He balled his fists further.

“The E-myog!” Ellman shouted. “Use it, you big idiot! Find out what you’ve done to yourself! Your whole psychomotor matrix is shot! It’s not just the chemicals—that’s secondary. It’s up here.” He tapped his head.

Ellman came up the slope. “It’s up here. The courage to go it alone once in your life.”

Stalker bellowed and lunged. Ellman sidestepped him. The big man crashed into the stream.

“See what I mean?” Ellman said. “You’ve lost it.”

Stalker sat cross-legged in the waters, sputtering.

The more the four minds argued, the more Eidolon wanted the undefined thing. The tracks of fog refused to recognize Eidolon’s presence, and Eidolon was jealous, lonely. It closed tighter around the yellowish lights, trying to understand their shapes, searching for openings.

“How we love one another,” Ellman murmured and turned away from the stream. He stopped momentarily, feeling a coldness ripple across his wet skin. He glanced nervously at the shadowy trees

encircling the glade. "Yeah," he said to himself, knowing suddenly the impossibility of self-perfection, "we love one another."

Alicette ran after him. "Ell, I—I understand." She gripped his wrist. "They don't. But I think I do." He broke abruptly into a jog, afraid. "Ell, wait! Listen to me!"

He ran full-out toward the campsite. He reached it, saw the dead coals. "Those goddamn—"

Alicette ran up, panting. "Ell, listen to me—"

Distinctly, sharply, he felt the alien presence enter him. The intrusion didn't hurt; it was pleasant, wary. "The fire's out," he said quietly, afraid. "They let the fire go out."

She stared abstractly at the ashes. "Oh no."

"Oh yes." He knelt and retied the knot of his single shoe. His fingers trembled; they seemed vague, fuzzy. "One—one shoe's better than none. I'm running back to the ship. Something's still got to be burning."

Alicette seized his wrist again. "Wait, Ell, you've got to listen to me."

His heart was pounding. There were wrinkles at the corners of her mouth, on her chin—like feelers, vines. Had they been there a moment before?

She looked up at him, her eyes excited. "You have to remember, Ell, they're scared. No, don't say it. I don't care if they are Olympians. They're simply scared. And I—sometimes I am too. You have to give us time. You have to give us a chance."

The alien presence was pumping through his arms and legs. He looked deeply at her, but from a distance, from behind the outer curves of his eyes. He

had never kissed her before. That was forbidden by Olympic code. Relaxation dynamics had always been professionally strict. But now an odd compulsion came over him—out of the silent, shrouded forest, from a memory of raindrops. He kissed her, but as he did, he knew that love between them could never exist, that the success he wanted for her and Stalker and Grazer was the only expression of love he could give to anyone. And their success, if they tried, would be individual, personal, and egotistical. Pure self-love.

He broke away from her. "I know," he said. "We all need a chance."

Eidolon was impatient. It explored the outer boundaries of one of the yellowish lights and discovered a spheroidal shape glowing brightly beneath. Excited, Eidolon poured quickly out of the trunks and leaves and into the soil, the air, the ground vegetation, into the outer masks of its omnipresent mind, into the tracks of fog where it revolved around the four separate yellow globes. Eidolon was certain that the globes would fill the empty pain festering in itself, the ancient wound of absence.

Eidolon waited. One of the globes seemed to recognize its presence—but remotely, behind a haze. For several days, Eidolon thought upon itself, carefully weighing the alternatives. *What if I enter the globes? What if I make the four minds give me their "love"?*

Slowly Eidolon advanced. . . .

"I tell you, something—something—"

Ellman listened to her. When she had screamed,

Stalker and Grazer had left. She cowered now, alone, in the lean-to. She seemed faraway to Ellman, and unimportant.

He looked at the fire burning under the canopy. The fluid, dancing flames were beautiful, irresistible.

"Here, have something to eat," he forced himself to say. "Lots of starches in these things. Perfect for my marathon."

She took the root. Its skin was lightly scorched. She looked uneasily around her. "Didn't you hear what I said? Something seemed to enter my ears. It felt—it felt like water. But I didn't really feel it. I *thought* it. Do you understand, do—"

"Withdrawal," he said. "The body cleansing itself. That's all."

But he knew he wasn't a med expert. And he had seen something a moment before she had screamed. The grass had blanched pale green—just an instant—and now the blades seemed different. All the colors around him seemed intensified, their shadows shimmering darkly. He looked up. Against the high, pewter sunlight, slow-motion tracks of silver rain fell. Yes, he thought, squinting at her, something *was* wrong. He wanted to tell her that he understood, that he believed her, but he couldn't.

She picked anxiously at the root, her eyes darting. Her face was older, its age undisguised, open. He moved next to her and put his arm around her naked shoulders. He felt thoughts pass between them, but they weren't articulated; they were carried in a transparent medium, altered and shaped by the medium. But he knew this wasn't telepathy. It was a heightening of their sensibilities, as if their normal

feelings were immersed in a new environment.

"Do you feel it?" he said.

She nodded. "I think the others do too."

"Are you afraid?"

She stood up. "I don't want to talk about it."

He knew suddenly that there was no need to talk anymore, there would never be a need. A strange, pure light peered out of the dim shadows of her leathery skin. "I'm ready to start my tumbling," she said quietly. "I want to be left alone."

He smiled. Like the others, she would have to complete the configuration for herself. Will and freedom from fear. And himself? He looked down at his two shoes—the lost one had been laying near the ship—and started down the glade.

Eidolon floated just inside the halo of yellow light which illuminated each globe. Far beneath Eidolon glowed the nucleus of each sphere—hard, unyielding, burning with undying fires. The separateness of each globe disturbed Eidolon, for it realized that all four globes would have to meet and fuse. Only in that way would Eidolon's geometric deficiency, the hole, the absence of "love", be filled.

Eidolon pictures itself swallowing the globes, shaped as a single, perfectly symmetrical egg, down a dark channel. If only it could make the globes break free of their tracks of fog at simultaneous moments; and in close proximity to one another; then the four globes would be attracted to one another like decelerating masses and eventually merge.

Eidolon began dispersing parts of itself through the tracks of fog, loosening certain regions, deftly

influencing areas of strength and power.

Ellman found them in a flat clearing near the stream. Grazer had constructed a high-jump bar—a fallen branch stripped of its leaves—between two closely growing trees. He had formed a landing pit out of grass. Stalker had collected together various logs and branches, and he was lying on his back on a flat rock doing bench presses with a log as Ellman approached.

“If—if you don’t need the E-myog . . .” he said to Stalker.

Stalker’s naked chest was slick with sweat. He set down the log on the ground behind his head and sat up. He avoided looking at Ellman.

“I’ve been thinking,” Stalker said, lifting the chain over his head and staring oddly at a place in the grass. “Give me a week and I’ll try for the record on Aethlius. The clean and jerk.” He handed the capsule to Ellman, head averted, and nodded at the logs. “I can carve grips in ’em. Some of ’em are close to being petrified. Centers of mass close to being on the money.”

“What about the ship?” Ellman heard himself say, eyes fixed on the capsule.

“Some of the beams? Yeah, sure, if they’re intact. But the impact point’s still red-hot.”

Ellman stared at him, feeling unspoken words pass between them. What did it matter? thought Ellman. Radiation, or fire, or—death?

Stalker’s eyes were soft, unfocused. He said distantly, “It doesn’t matter. The ship, yeah. It doesn’t matter. Not anymore.”

Ellman watched the weight lifter's eyes pan over the glade. Ellman knew Stalker could see the same thing he could: countless raindrops gleaming like miniature diamonds on each distinct blade of grass, the air sparkling with slowly falling rain, a drifting colloid of infinite, glinting particles. Dazed, Stalker looked at Ellman, transparent shadows swarming and dissolving across the weight lifter's naked body. Ellman wanted to speak but knew there was no need.

Someone spoke. "I may look lousy, but I feel great." Ellman looked away. It was Grazer. The high jumper smiled thinly and gestured at the high-jump bar. Ellman heard fibers squeaking faintly in Grazer's arm, and thought of the team members' limbs—the artificial muscle parts, the special afferent and efferent neural wires, the reinforced ball and socket joints. All outdated now, worthless. Unconsciously, he gripped his own wrists, and in his mind crushed the last of the subcutaneously implanted hormone pellets—if, at this late date, there were any left.

"Exactly two point eighty-five meters high, Ellman, as far as I can estimate. The gee drag doesn't bother me. It makes me work harder. My PRT level is unbelievable. Yesterday—yesterday I wouldn't have cared, now . . ."

Perceptual Reorganization Training. Holistic. Whole phase-whole learning. Once a phase in an Action was learned, such as lifting the lead leg in the high jump, then that phase became a Whole. Out of that Whole, the same phase—lifting the lead leg—was repeated again and became a higher Whole. The same for all the phases—the run, takeoff, and clearance of the bar. The high jumper's perception of each phase

was reorganized or improved, the object being to perform the whole series of consecutive phases as a seamless whole, an Ideality.

PRT, Ellman thought in a flash. Grazer was coming around, perceiving that it was possible: his phases could be perfected. And the same for the others. Ellman wondered: was this the result of the alien presence?

"Ellman," Grazer said. "I remember what you said yesterday. Strength maintained for long periods of time undergoes little loss during layoff periods. It was a long flight, but give me a week. In a week I can be ready. All of us can be ready." Then, without warning, he moaned in fear.

Ellman felt something pierce his own brain; he cried out. The others went rigid and shuddered. Blindly, Ellman fought against the alien intruder; he tried to grasp the outsider, to seize it.

Eidolon slid downward past the four yellow halos, deep into each globe. The nuclei appeared, distant, blinding. Suddenly, Eidolon was absorbed in layers of emotion, panic reaction, violent thoughts. It realized that these layers were defense mechanisms, filters and blocks which protected the cores of the nuclei. The layers burned with hatred, rage, mortification, and punishment.

Eidolon drew back to the outer perimeters of the layers and contemplated the complexity of the layers. Eidolon had often contemplated the complexity of itself, but its individual life systems were simple; even the patterns of the interrelated systems were relatively elementary compared to the intricate

natures of these layers.

I will have to go slowly. The layers must be penetrated gradually and cautiously. Otherwise, the spheres will be injured.

Alicette appeared next to Ellman, her naked body darkening and brightening with internal shadows. The alien presence has entered deep inside all of us, Ellman thought. Then he felt the alien presence suddenly fade. Alicette's internal shadows weakened. But Ellman could see round, human-like shapes glowing coldly within the wrinkled heads of the team members. The shapes were misty and dull yellow.

Everything Ellman knew about chemistry and psychotomimetics passed through his mind. This effect he was witnessing could be the result of the roots they had been eating, the water. But was this really a psychotic hallucination? As a boy here he had never experienced . . . He wanted the rest of the team to tell him what they were seeing, but he suddenly felt his isolation from them. They were motionless with fear; he knew that they couldn't speak.

Eidolon rested awhile, sensing steady, intense pulse beats pouring out of the four defensive layers, and felt that these pulse beats came from the nameless thing called "love". The pulse beats were confident, unfaltering, and Eidolon sensed a need flowing through the beats, a desire for a pleasure all-encompassing and endless.

Eidolon concentrated part of itself on the yellow globe which had remotely recognized its presence back in the glade. Forming a small tentacle of itself, it

groped downward, slowly, into the defensive layer.

Ellman panicked, feeling the alien presence return. He fumbled at the capsule; it popped open and long, thin, silver filaments sprang out like a shower of taproots. He attached the filaments to his leg and arm muscles, and strapped a miniature lighted screen to his right wrist.

Ellman saw the other members' faces soften, the yellow round shapes fade away. The alien presence must be concentrating on me, he thought, and he ran.

He entered the forest through a fine sheet of rain, the ground steaming. He felt the alien presence run with him, deep within his head, in his stiff, creaking knees, in his implants. The alien presence was everywhere in him—and with him, in the green shadows and hot waves of heat which flickered and passed around him.

Ellman entered a path, or clear spaces on the ground which seemed like parts of a path, and as Ellman ran, he realized that the time had come. He had finally rid himself of his training support systems, as had the others. And now like the others, he was beginning a week of pure, natural training.

He ran, aware of his body working hard against the gravity. His arms and legs felt young and shapeless and old and ill-used. He felt strong, but half complete; he felt balanced, but internally lopsided. He knew mental states influenced muscle action potentials; the whole neuron matrix affected body performance. He checked the E-myog screen. The waves told him that he was in complete holistic integration with his neuromuscular Surround. Tech-

nically, he was in shape.

No, he thought, feeling his weak hamstrings, air wheezing in his lungs, and he ran faster, concentrating on his motions. He began feeling the old joy of running return, the familiar, steady rhythms.

He forgot the alien presence.

Eidolon felt pleasure pouring from the nucleus. The tracks of fog hanging under the yellow globe carried the globe further into the forest, and, as the tracks of fog moved, Eidolon explored them to understand their purpose.

Eidolon noticed numerous strings of yellow light of various sizes streaming back and forth between the nucleus and the tracks of fog. The purpose of the tracks of fog was more than just locomotion; for as they performed their symmetrical back-and-forth motions across the landscape, the strings of light intensified and brightened. A transference of energy was taking place between the strings and the nucleus, Eidolon concluded, but it could not understand the exact causal relationship—not until it deposited part of its will into the strings of light and began forcefully influencing certain areas in the tracks of fog.

The tracks of fog increased their motions; the nucleus brightened and beat with pleasure.

A sudden urge rushed through Ellman. He started up a steep, grassy hill. It dawned on him that he was running a fartlek, a conditioning exercise that took the runner over varied terrains. Different terrains altered the running pace from strenuous to easy and

pulled the runner's mind away from the pains of fatigue.

The landscape changed and slipped past—pools, hills, stands of trees, and valleys of flowers. Ellman lost touch with his body; his body ran by itself, laboring methodically, incessantly. The further he ran, the more pleasure he felt. The pleasure was deeply emotional, private, and mellow. He ran and he forgot the landscape. The pleasure ripened and deepened, detaching itself from the outside world.

Eidolon experimented, influencing the strings of yellow light and then probing slightly deeper with the tentacle. Each time it influenced the strings, the pleasure from the nucleus increased. Eidolon rejoiced, for it believed that the pleasure was "love", the nameless thing. Immersed in the ever increasing pleasure, Eidolon felt that it was on the verge of finally grasping the word, of plainly thinking the word as a clear, unmistakable idea. But then Eidolon was distracted from the pleasure, sensing that the pleasure was unfulfilled, incomplete.

Ellman ran harder through the humid landscape, wanting more pleasure. He knew instinctively, as a professional, that he had run nearly thirty kilometers and that he was nearing the stream and the glade. He had run in a giant horseshoe pattern, and now his exhausted body was reasserting its pain over his mind. But as the pain expanded, Ellman transformed it into more pleasure, into the blind, ecstatic joy of accomplishment. His mind rose on a wave of happiness swollen with misery and self-punishment.

He felt the results of the lactic acid in his sluggish muscle tissues; he felt the jarring ratcheting of his artificial parts.

He pushed himself even harder, cutting a clear path through the grass by the stream. In a moment, he would begin his sprint.

Eidolon felt the pulse beats of pleasure increase in frequency and strength. Quickly, Eidolon scattered parts of itself back to the glade and reentered the other three minds. The three minds were glowing with pleasure, more subdued than the fourth mind, but nonetheless the pleasure was there. The three tracks of fog carried the three globes through various motions, and Eidolon witnessed in these three entities the same phenomenon as in the fourth globe: the relationship between the streaming yellow strings of light and the brightening nuclei.

Instantaneously, Eidolon returned to the fourth globe moving along the stream. It noticed that the glowing energy of the strings was rushing upward into the globe but that the nucleus had ceased transferring most of its energy downward—and the tracks of fog were moving even faster along the stream. Rapidly, Eidolon returned to the tentacle; the pleasure was extremely wonderful. Eidolon basked in the pleasure for a long moment, almost forgetting where it was. Then it regained control of itself and drew a conclusion.

As the tracks of fog go through their special motions, the nucleus increases its pleasure. The more the tracks of fog accomplish the purpose of their motions, the greater is the pleasure. The pleasure

must be infinite, must become more and more beautiful as the tracks of fog strive to perfect their motions.

Then: I must have this globe running by the stream for myself. I must have the globe when it reaches the highest level of its pleasure.

He sprinted into the wet glade. The humidity and heat hammered against him. He saw the other athletes practicing near the stream; saw in a blur the high-jump bar, the steel beams, Alicette tumbling. He ran toward them, his chest bursting, his arms and legs throbbing in agony. The pleasure rose higher. He was in love with the pleasure, he realized; he was in love with himself. In another second, he would fulfill his pleasure. He would lunge one final stride and throw his arm skyward.

Aaah, thought Eidolon, the pleasure flooding its mind, I must have the pleasure, all of it. I must sever the globe from the tracks of fog at the instant it fulfills its pleasure. Now! Eidolon plunged into the nucleus.

Ellman's pleasure snapped in two, unfulfilled. He felt the alien presence. He remembered that he had forgotten it during his run, but now the presence was more than a mental shadow squatting in his mind. The alien presence was shaped like—like a snake. It was inserted into Ellman's brain. He could feel it. It was soft and pliable. And now it moved. Ellman screamed, his lungs convulsing.

Eidolon withdrew the tentacle and dissolved it into nothingness.

Ellman came to a halt and screamed again. The three team members stopped their exercises and ran toward him.

Eidolon wanted pleasure; the fourth globe had taken away the pleasure, and now Eidolon wanted pleasure.

Ellman strode, gasping, into the practice area. The three athletes were fearful, suspicious. Stalker picked up a thick, steel rod.

Eidolon formed three more tentacles out of itself and cored deep into the other three nuclei. Eidolon wanted pleasure.

Ellman stopped walking. The three faces in front of him were changing. Stalker's mouth fell open; he dropped the rod and grasped his gray head. Grazer stared wildly at the forest, at the ground, and at the glowing drizzle, bewildered. Alicette raised her arms in an absurd gesture, terrified.

Eidolon bored deep into the three nuclei and hunted for the familiar, unbelievable pleasure. But there was nothing but a dull, repetitive flux of faint desire and a dim yellow color. And all around Eidolon the three defensive layers pressed inward, instinctively squeezing the tentacles in automatic terror. Dread and violence flooded from the layers

and groped toward Eidolon, struggling to strangle the tentacles.

The three athletes stared at Ellman, their bodies rigid, their faces twisted. Their eyes pleaded for Ellman to help.

Eidolon raged at the unrelenting defensive layers and at the insipid beats of pleasure. But then, quickly, it became cautious. What if the presence of the tentacles this deep in the nuclei damaged the very sources of pleasure? As Eidolon thought this, the pulse beats of "love" began shrinking as the layers continued to sustain their violent reaction against the intruding tentacles. Eidolon decided that it must withdraw from the nuclei and calm its jealousy and hatred.

It backed away and pulled out the tentacles, then, trying to tame its anger, hovered on the pale outskirts of the yellow halos. But it was a difficult struggle. Damn it, Eidolon fumed, the fourth nucleus had refused to accept the presence of Eidolon within the boundaries of "love". The fourth nucleus had wanted nothing to do with Eidolon. And the same went for the other three.

Well, so be it. Eidolon had no other choice but to use forceful methods to persuade the nuclei to give it their "love". It was unfortunate, thought Eidolon, that things had come to this. But Eidolon would do it.

Yet I must wait. I must withdraw my presence further and let the nuclei glow brightly again, unafraid, for it is inevitable that they will glow again;

it is their nature. The nature of the tracks of fog is motion, and the tracks of fog will move again and the nuclei will glow and pulse with "love". Then there will be a time when the four alien entities will be together, close to each other. That is the way these entities are. When the entities are together and their nuclei glow with infinite "love", I will sever the globes free. After they attract each other and fuse, I will swallow in the single globe and I will be ideal.

Eidolon wept a little, reminded that its ideality wasn't complete, that for countless millennia it had deceived itself on this point.

Then it withdrew to the far perimeters of the halos and patiently waited.

The stricken faces of the three athletes suddenly faded into surrender, into dazed shock. Ellman, his blood still pounding, sweat in his eyes, made a futile gesture. No one spoke. He knew what they had experienced. The snake-thing. He understood now that the snake-thing that had been in his head was part of one mind. The four snake-things together were multiple extensions of one alien presence, an extremely powerful intelligence. And the presence still inhabited the glade.

He looked at the grass. Even in the dusk, the blades shimmered dully. He looked at the three athletes. Their naked, sweat-drenched bodies seemed to burn with a grayish internal light. Yes, the alien presence was here, he reflected. And it was still inside each of them. And soon it would reveal itself to them.

Silently, the tired team went up the glade to the campsite. Twilight shadows were coming quickly.

Stalker knelt before the canopy and fed the coals with dry twigs. Grazer and Alicette collapsed inside the lean-to.

Maybe it had been a case of mass suggestion out there, Ellman considered and lay down next to Alicette. He drank hungrily from a water gourd. He had run into the glade and screamed, screamed because of a nightmare in his head. Then the other three had picked up on it. Mental exhaustion, fear, loneliness. Ellman remembered his other nightmare, the one under the liner while sleeping in the rain.

But no, he thought grimly. The snake-thing had been real. He had felt it physically in his brain. And now, as he looked outside at the falling drizzle, Ellman could see faint drops change color as they entered the boundaries of the glade.

Yes, Ellman decided, the alien presence is here.

He removed the E-myog filaments; they sprang back into the capsule. Then he looked at Alicette, and an ache filled him; desire gripped him. He looked at Stalker, still in a state of shock, putting roots on the fire. Ellman knew that he wanted the three team members; he wanted them in a way beyond relaxation dynamics. He wanted them in a way—

He gently cupped Alicette's withered breast. Was love the way? he thought.

She stirred under him and pushed his hand away. He looked into her face. Her hair was gray, her lips parched and shrunken, her eyes glassy and frightened. He wondered what his own face looked like—on the surface of a stream.

He wanted to speak. He knew none of them would speak. If they spoke during the next week, their

words would mean nothing. In a week it would be all over.

Eidolon radiated itself outward, quickly and deeply. It wasted no time. Many days had passed and it had waited patiently, dutifully, on the outskirts of the halos. Now the four entities were moving about again, and Eidolon knew that the time had come.

In contrast to the tentacles, this time Eidolon made itself into very refined energy fields and entered the defensive layers through microscopic channels of space. Again, it felt the violent revulsion, the panic fear, the hatred, but the overall response was remarkably subdued and resigned. Eidolon was certain that the four entities were aware of its renewed presence in their nuclei, that they were finally facing the reality of Eidolon's desire for "love". But if the entities resisted it this time, if the nuclei failed to turn their "love" on Eidolon and fill the ellipsoidal imperfection . . . then it was prepared to focus its will on the tracks of fog and destroy the entities' means of locomotion.

Ellman was running. He thought how he had been running his whole life—as a boy, as a man. He had never wanted to do anything else, ever since he had discovered that he had the right somatotype. The first implant operation on his legs, when he was fourteen, had been painful, had challenged his will power to run. But he had decided then that he would beat the System's marathon record. He had come close on Aethlius numerous times, enough to keep him an Olympian. In another hour, there would be no doubt. The record would fall.

He pushed himself mercilessly up the hill. Dimly,

he thought of the three back at the training area. An hour ago they had all shaken hands in silence. The preceding day Ellman had shinned up the two trees in his shoes and measured the height of the crossbar six different times with the piece of broken rule from the ship, then dropped a weighted vine from the center of the bar and measured that. He had helped resupply the pit with grass and cover the clay takeoff area with leaves to keep it dry from the rain. There was no doubt: Grazer would break the record—and in his bare feet.

Ellman reached the crest of the hill and saw the vast blue-green horizon of trees. This run would be the most painful of his life, he thought. He wanted it that way. Pain-torture-agony, the equation for victory.

The gravity rushed him down the hill. Ellman remembered Stalker's faraway, sad gaze as the weight lifter shook his hand. There had been a dark pall in the big man's face, an infectious light. Radiation poisoning at last?

Ellman ran faster, trying to blot out the thought, recalling the trip he himself had made to the smoldering ship to hunt for his lost shoe. As he ran, his increased speed raised the level of his steady state, the oxygen and carbon dioxide exchange readjusting to the faster pace. No, he had to face the truth, Ellman thought. Stalker would die, but die breaking the record—and not from radiation. Ellman remembered lifting the slender, heavy beam with Grazer, gauging its weight from their own experience with body-building equipment. Then Stalker had lifted one end by himself, drawing conclusions with his acute, professional sense. The beam was awkward, Stalker

decided, but it would do. It would have to. Stalker had dragged it painfully on log rollers over four kilometers of rough terrain.

Ellman splashed through a shallow pool, mud spattering his legs. He wiped the brown drops from the E-myog screen and pushed the heart-rate meter stud. His pulse was steady, equalized with his pace. Eye-cortex-muscle, he repeated from habit and ran expertly over a log, a patch of stones, and another log. Then he checked the E-myog ratings. He was kinesthetically stabilized, all bodily movements and tensions integrated throughout his muscles, tendons, and joints.

He ran harder, trying to forget Alicette. He had tried to touch her in the night. She had let him, but his hands had been unskilled, awkward; it wasn't in their profession to practice love, she had said. But he had kept trying, insisting that love existed, that a person could sacrifice himself for another—his whole self completely—and thereby break through the isolation that separated the self from the other person. She hadn't climaxed.

The E-myog wave jumped. He turned off the screen and ran faster.

Eidolon submerged deeper into the nuclei. There was no resistance. Eidolon went further. Yellow fires were beginning to glow inside the labyrinthine caves of spinning particles. Eidolon spread itself amid the particles like a great potent sea of suspended gas and relished the growing pleasure.

Ellman's capacity for oxygen rose higher and there

was absolutely no oxygen debt in his lungs; he was in perfect rhythm with the environment. He saw the familiar landmark that had marked his days of practice, and he turned back toward the stream, curving along the makeshift path. He pressured himself to run harder, stronger, feeling the levels of his endurance rising. Each new level peaked and restored his skill equilibrium to a higher level. He felt a pleasure sprouting. He thought, No Olympian ever won an event at eighty—until now.

Eidolon felt the fourth globe move quickly along the stream. Eidolon sensed the other three globes moving in their characteristic, practiced patterns in the open, cleared area near the stream, at the foot of the glade. The three globes had moved in this area all week, repeating their special motions continually. Now Eidolon could feel the three nuclei brightening, and it believed that each of the three tracks of fog was preparing to make a single, momentous motion. Each motion would last a brief instant and would be the ultimate expression of all the other motions performed during the week.

Quickly, Eidolon dispersed parts of itself in order to confirm this suspicion. It looked up from inside the grass and saw tracks of fog bending over a long object; peered out of a leaf and saw tracks of fog directed toward a branch stretched between two trees; spied from inside a stone and saw tracks of fog flexing and arching in a flat place in the clearing. Inside the three tracks of fog, the nuclei were glowing, issuing forth luminous yellow beams.

"Love", thought Eidolon, *it is "love" at last, and*

the word for "love" seemed to swell and form in Eidolon's mind. But still, as excited as it was, Eidolon could not clearly think the word.

Desperately, it returned itself to the fourth globe. "Love" here was flooding from the nucleus, a perpetual pleasure aching for more pleasure. Eidolon instantaneously transferred itself to the other three; here pleasure was mounting, expanding. In a few seconds, the pleasure in all four globes would reach a crescendo, a total oneness of individual selves. This was good, Eidolon thought, for the three globes were close to each other now, and the fourth globe was approaching the cleared area from along the stream. In a moment, just before all four globes ended their final motions, it would announce to the nuclei what it wanted, and together they would give their "love" to Eidolon as one fused sphere.

Ellman could maintain this pace indefinitely, as long as there was ample oxygen to oxidize the carbohydrate source of energy in his body. He had driven himself violently all week over great mileages at great intensities, continuously running at high and low aerobic levels. Last night he had stuffed himself on the starchy roots. He could feel now a slight depletion in his glycogen store, but there was no detrimental effect of accumulated lactic acid in his muscles. His body was primed. He thought of victory and a wave of pleasure spread through him. He began his sprint along the bank of the stream.

Eidolon suddenly sensed the pleasure in the fourth globe double and felt elated. Now was the time, it

thought. It would prepare to announce itself. Eidolon formed a lever from itself, a stiff, hooked tentacle, and bored in a spiral down into the heart of the nucleus.

A light blazed in Ellman's head. He felt the hard, undeniable weight and pressure of the alien presence corkscrewing into the center of his mind. Ellman had felt the withdrawn and passive presence of the outsider ever since he had begun the marathon. During the entire week of training, he had felt the alien presence at the back of his brain, as had the others. Now Ellman, like the others, was ready for the alien presence, unafraid, determined.

Ellman reached deep into his gut for the last shred of energy. He flashed along the stream. In front of him were the other three, their sizes magnifying as he approached them. He glanced at the stopwatch on his wrist; he would break the record.

He saw Grazer begin his final run toward the bar, saw Stalker initiate the critical maneuver of his lift, stretching out his arms, gripping the beam. He imagined the slight, hardly visible stretch of Stalker's thighs, calves, shoulders, back; imagined the afferent impulses from the muscle spindles, stimulated by the stretch, begin to lower the threshold for reflex conduction along the neural pathways. He saw Alicette launch head over heels into her somersaults.

Ellman expended a tremendous burst of energy and speed, pleasure saturating his mind. He felt the tentacle-hook prying further, viciously, into the utterly compressed beauty of his pleasure.

Eidolon felt the three tracks of fog move in sudden, irrevocable motions. These motions would happen only once, and then never again. Infinitely fast, Eidolon spun from itself three more tentacle-hooks and bored into the three pulsing nuclei.

Ellman was twenty meters from the finish line marked with a stick. A light rain began falling. He saw Grazer jump, converting horizontal velocity into vertical force; heard Stalker bellow like a wounded ox as he lifted the mighty beam to thigh level and in one swift motion bent his knees into a squat as he brought the unwieldy beam to his chest. He saw Alicette begin, to imaginary music and in front of ghostly judges, the last of her rapid somersaults, an intricate series of front full twists and back whirls.

Ellman heard the alien presence speak to him as he lunged toward the silent, positive Surround waiting for him in the clearing. The alien presence spoke with an emotion devoid of symbol, with angry pleading and hopeless begging, and Ellman knew that the alien presence was speaking to the others in the same way, asking them for their minds.

I want you, I want you, Eidolon cried, madly prying and digging with the four tentacles, pleasure cascading over it. It could see that the four nuclei were extremely close to each other in the clearing, could see the nuclei flaring upward into four towering spheres, their defensive layers and halos expanding. In seconds, the pleasure in each sphere would be complete, absolute, unending. But as Eidolon struggled to rip the nuclei free, the pleasure from

them resisted Eidolon blindly and selfishly. Waves of powerful particles poured deliciously outward, but the nuclei remained fixed inside their tracks of fog.

Uncontrollable, mindless loathing possessed Eidolon. In jealous fury it thought, *Then you have driven me to this! I have waited patiently for you too long!* And Eidolon gathered together parts of its massive planetary will and focused the node of power on the tracks of fog. The will node probed the atomic structures and binding energies of the tracks of fog and found their weaknesses, and as the four nuclei filled the ultimate dimensions of their spherical boundaries, Eidolon unleashed the power.

Ellman saw Grazer clear the bar, saw the green flash of the leaves tied around the high jumper's waist and holding up his sex organ. Then there was a silent flash of light, an explosion, and a tongue of flame licked the air. Grazer vanished.

Stalker was standing tall now in a veil of gray rain, the beam on his chest, and in one smooth, powerful motion, he dipped at the knees and drove the weight straight up, extending his legs in a fore-and-aft split, then brought the legs together and held the beam directly over his head. Stalker disappeared in a ball of fire.

Alicette was in midair, making a complete turn for her imaginary judge, completing her last, record-breaking display. There was a loud, cracking detonation and a bright red cloud swallowed her. The cloud faded into nothingness.

Ellman tore across the finish line in a final burst of pain, feeling the last phase of his running as a Whole,

all the phases of his event reorganized and perceived in an instant of beautiful agony. Satisfaction and pleasure blossomed inside him. He thought to himself, *I know what this pleasure means*; and by his own calculation he knew that in exactly two seconds he would find out.

He ran for the stream, his feet hit the water; this motion took one second. In a fifth of a second he felt raindrops graze him, barely touch him, open a path for him. He knew that the alien presence was withdrawing itself from around his diving body, making a safe vacuum in preparation for—

As Ellman dove, he saw his reflection in the water. This took exactly two-fifths of a second. The face was extremely old and wrinkled, brown from the sun and ragged with snarled, gray hairs. The face seemed to be staring at Ellman from inside a window, and he thought how, in another fragment of a second, he would enter the empty space of the window.

In that fifth of a second, time became compressed. Ellman's mind reached the highest level of its pleasure. Ellman thought how the other team members had died. They had died in self-perfection, happiness, and self-love. Ellman now understood what this pleasure, which totally enveloped his body, meant. The pleasure was the highest emotion he could ever experience as an athlete and a man, an infinite instant of self-love. Self-love had always been the purpose of his existence. And the condition of all existence was separateness of entities, their isolation and loneliness. There had never been any reason to touch Alicette's withered breast. There had never been any reason to think that the team could sustain

a perfect Whole during relaxation dynamics or any other group activity.

His head entered the water and he thought how close they had all come to experiencing the Ideal together. It had worked remarkably well: everyone timing the completion of his event to match the completion of the other events. He thought how brave the other three members had been resisting the alien presence all the way to the end, up to the instant of their personal victories. And now Ellman, his body cleansed of drugs, was leaving the three behind and losing himself in the stream. He would be separate there, alone and proud. This was the way they had planned it, the way to thwart the alien presence. Ellman would escape at the last moment if need be and break away from the team; the alien presence seemed most powerful when the team gathered together. The team had known what the alien presence wanted: four minds gathered. Or had the team known what the alien presence wanted?

His shoulders entered the water. All he knew was that all things lived in and died in isolation.

In that fifth of a second, his pleasure peaked, perfected and fulfilled.

In another fifth of a second, Ellman's body exploded.

The nuclei met and fused; the fusion expelled streamers of bright, white energy. Pleasure roared and poured over Eidolon, drenching the tentacle-hooks. Eidolon transformed the tentacle-hooks into one tentacle and withdrew it, then stretched out lazily and sank deep into the pleasure. The pleasure was

total. Trembling, flushed with pleasure, Eidolon opened the massive black channel of itself and swallowed the great yellow-white sphere, feeling the sphere roll silently into the dark ellipsoidal abyss of the planet. The abyss was located across certain regions on the planet's surface, but the abyss was everywhere at once, for Eidolon was everywhere at once, omnipresent and all-knowing of itself. Eidolon felt the ellipsoidal flaw fill with pleasure, brim, and overflow. Pleasure flooded the surface and interior of the planet; then, suddenly, stopped flooding.

Puzzled, Eidolon's great, self-generating mind broke through the hypnotic throb of suspended pleasure, sensing something wrong. The ellipsoidal abyss felt filled but—but somehow not filled; a hollow place was left empty. The empty place beat with solitude and loneliness.

No, it cannot be, thought Eidolon. Eidolon remembered faintly that when it had destroyed the tracks of fog, it had been nearly insane with anger; it had raved at the four nuclei, the four nuclei which had—fused?

Quickly, Eidolon pulled back out of the big yellow-white sphere and looked down on the glade from the vantage point of the treetops. Eidolon saw the sphere hanging above the clearing. The sphere was where it should be, where the four nuclei had fused. The sphere was invisible, but Eidolon could see it.

Eidolon saw a faint yellow light in the stream.

No! Eidolon meditated on the stream and instantly became the stream which Eidolon already was. And a word began forming in Eidolon's mind, in an indistinct outline. Eidolon desperately wanted to say

the word, but the word refused to form completely.

Eidolon approached the light and flowed and swirled around it. The light came from a sphere, yellow, softly beating. Pleasure radiated from the sphere and Eidolon felt the pleasure, the "love", and Eidolon tried to say the word that it had longed to say for so many days—and failed.

Eidolon screamed and shouted and plunged a tentacle into the sphere and tried to dislodge it from the stream. But the sphere would not move. The sphere would never move, for the sphere was infinitely perfect and self-enclosed. The sphere was in "love" with itself.

Madly, Eidolon raced back to the big yellow-white sphere in the clearing. Eidolon tried to uproot it, tried to push it toward the stream. But the sphere would not move.

Eidolon ranted and meditated on lightning, and storms lashed the planet. Eidolon evacuated gas and red-hot lava. Then, weeping, clawing at itself, Eidolon separated itself into two parts and desperately collapsed the great mass of itself inside the separate spheres, inside the perfectly geometric spheres of "love".

And then, in the rancor of half-sleep, in approaching dream, the word rose slowly out of Eidolon's whole, broken self, out of the frustrated dark abyss where Eidolon trembled in fear, gnawing at the blackness of solitude:

The word is LOVE. You LOVE yourself.

ST. POLEANDER'S EVE

by

R.A. Lafferty

1

Lasciate ogni donna, voi ch'entrate!

Leave every dame behind who enter here!

—Cristoforo Dante Benedetti

Daisy Flavus had been working for Barnaby Sheen for a year or more; at least she had been on the payroll. He supposed, he said, that she had some duties down at his office or laboratory, but he wasn't sure. He didn't quite remember hiring her.

Barnaby hadn't much control over the people who

worked for him. He really shouldn't have been in business, except that he was now so wealthy from his ventures that he couldn't afford not to be in business. "And in this particular business," he said (he had a seismograph company for the manufacture and use of instruments for the discovery or location of petroleum deposits), "I can wax wealthy without robbing widows and orphans."

Now, however, Daisy had appointed herself to work in Barnaby's own house; aye, to work in the most mysterious room of that house, Barnaby's third-floor study-bar. This could mean trouble. There was, for one thing, the undisguised motto over the disguised doorway to that study: 'Leave every dame behind who enter here.' The study was a male club room: it was not woman country.

It's true that Loretta Sheen and Mary Mondo lived (if that is the word for it) in the study, but they were special instances—oh how they were special! It's true that three of the four men who knew everything, Dr. George Drakos, Cris Benedetti, and Harry O'Donovan, had wives, and that these wives had all been in the study. But they had been there only on brief guided tours. The study was off limits to women.

"Get on downtown where you belong," Barnaby had told Daisy the first time he caught her fluffing around in the study. "Your job is down there." Daisy had yellow hair and yellow eyes, but she barely missed being grubby.

"No, my job is here in this room now," she said. "I am custodian of this room and all that pertains to it. I am now, by formal title, your artistic secretary."

"And just how did this come about?" Barnaby asked.

"Oh, it's all quite regular, Mr. Sheen," she said. "The director of job classification has reclassified me to work out here as artistic secretary."

"I misremember. Who has been director of job classification in my firm?"

"I have," Daisy Flavius told him.

Now whatever was an artistic secretary, and what would Barnaby want with one? Who was arty around here anyhow? Oh, we all were, privately, personally, and in an amateurish way.

Dr. George Drakos had fine surgeon's hands, but they were also artist's hands, etcher's hands, and sculptor's hands. Sometimes he did a little of this pleasure work in Barnaby's study. He sculpted there a bit; he painted there a bit. He was a colorful painter, and he used lots of yellow and orange and sienna and red, much more than nature uses. There was one shade of yellow that he could never quite get right. He would mix and he would moan. Then, in exasperation, he would call out "Austro!", and Austro would come; he'd take that color mix out of the room, and in a short while he'd bring it back, perfect now. Nobody knew what Austro added to make that color, but Drakos insisted that it was imperative for him to have that correct yellow. "That color is what art is all about," George would say. "That color is art."

But why have an artistic secretary in the room for this?

Cris Benedetti made verses. Mostly he made them

in Italian (real verse *must* be in either Italian, Latin, or Greek, he insisted), but sometimes he made them (limericks mostly) in English. Does this require an artistic secretary?

Barnaby Sheen created absolutely implausible music on the Mustel celesta. The Mustel is not like other instruments, and Barnaby was not like other instrumentalists. His wasn't very good music, but it *was* implausible. Did he need an artistic secretary for that?

Harry O'Donovan wrote plays, the wonderful dramas[?] and melodramas that were put on every Thursday night at the Rushlight Theater, a nonprofit thing. The Rushlight was a barnlike building; and the Rushlight Players were an amateur, though excellent, group. Harry also directed the plays, but naturally he didn't direct them in the study of Barnaby Sheen. Was an artistic secretary needed for any of this? Possibly for the correct transcription of Harry's ragged musical notations and scores, but Daisy couldn't read or write music.

Austro, Barnaby's australopithecine houseboy, drew (or sometimes rock-carved) most of that unpublished and unpublishable comic strip, Rocky McCrocky, in the study; and the others helped him a little bit with the continuity. (Austro said that it was discontinuity that they contributed: since Austro had learned to talk he had been talking smart.) But an artistic secretary was not needed for the Rocky McCrocky strip. And what else was arty around here?

The four men who knew everything played string quartets sometimes, Drakos on the ukulele, Benedetti on the banjo, O'Donovan on the mandolin, and

Barnaby Sheen on the lute. They played about once a month and they played well. But how would a secretary help them play better?

They also sang barbershop harmony, sometimes the same four men, sometimes Austro singing bass in place of George Drakos. But the fine, high voice of Harry O'Donovan, the dark, deep voice of Austro, and the indifferent voices of Benedetti and Sheen didn't need a secretary for their functions. Nevertheless, we had an artistic secretary now, and she didn't intend to withdraw. Daisy wasn't shy.

"We will have to use this room and no other," she said once. "It is the only small room I ever saw that is large enough to portray the world. And I believe that, for the optimization of the product, two changes should be made in this group, Mr. Sheen. Get rid of the gaff," (she meant Austro) "and bring in any gentleman from the list I have here. The improvement will be axiomatic and immediate. You'll see."

"Impossible," said Barnaby. "We are a polyander, unchangeable and unsunderable."

"I don't even know what a polyander is," Daisy admitted with distaste.

"It's a group of men who have become one and will remain so," Barnaby said. "And what will you do with this polyander, young woman?"

"Commit polyandry with it, I guess," Daisy hazarded. "Oh, is that the same word or are there two words just alike?"

Daisy wasn't the only one playing it odd here. Roy Mega, a young electronic genius who worked for Barnaby, had also begun to haunt the study instead

of applying himself to his job down at the laboratory. And there was a hint of a conspiracy: both Roy and Daisy belonged to the amateur, though excellent, Rushlight Players. But don't look at Harry O'Donovan if you're talking about a conspiracy: he had not conspired with Daisy nor with Roy.

"Is it that I'm paying you good money to be fluffing off out here rather than laboring at the lab, Roy?" Barnaby Sheen asked the young man.

"No. You're paying me shoddy money to invent, originate, stumble over, or put together new and usable techniques. We both know that these are most often uncovered by the process of fallout. I see very fruitful electronic fallout in our employing this stuffy room and its denizens as a hotbed for seedling art, a basis for art amplification. A laboratory is where one labors; this old monastery room is a laboratory for me at the moment." That's what Roy Mega told Barnaby Sheen. Roy was sketching electrical diagrams of fruitful fallout and seedling art as he talked. Austro was studying them avidly. Austro couldn't read words very well yet, but he could read mathematical equations and electrical diagrams with excited understanding.

"Ah well; what is art, seedling or otherwise?" Barnaby asked.

"Art is the Garden of What Ought to Be selected out of the Jungle of What is," Roy quoted from somewhere.

"Art is the extracted essence of nature," Daisy stated positively.

"No. Good art is the beneficent interaction of man and nature," Harry O'Donovan interposed. "Bad art

is their maleficent interaction. Very bad art or philistinism is the inaction of man with nature."

"No," Barnaby argued. "The interaction of man and nature is 'life' in the literary meaning of the word. It's true that art sometimes uses this interaction. The weeding of a garden, the planting of a meadow, the draining of a swamp, and the clearing of a creek bed of excessive underbrush are all forms of art. So is my own playing on the Mustel celesta or on the lute, these sounds beautify the air, and so they are art. Good art is the privileged outpouring of the Holy Spirit, sometimes from one unworthy vessel to another unworthy vessel. Bad art is the outpouring of an unholy spirit. In degenerate times like the present (and every 'present,' or time considered as a stasis, is degenerate), bad art will outsell good art."

"Oh, you are one-sided and wrong, Barney," Cris Benedetti argued. "Real art is the struggle between 'good art' or prettiness and 'bad art.' Neither the good nor the bad by itself (I speak only of the field of art) can be real. There cannot be drama without this struggle; there cannot be real art without this drama, this dynamism. Static or undramatic art is no art at all. And there's only one form of this struggle in the world, that between the Holy Spirit and the unholy or unclean spirits."

"I'm an unwashed spirit but I'm not an unclean spirit," Mary Mondo said out of the air. "They're different."

"Who is that talking out of the air?" Daisy Flavus demanded.

"You're a neutral spirit, Mary," Barnaby told her gruffly. "Or at least you have a high percent of

neutral spirits in you."

"The Putty Dwarf used to say that art was smoke without fire," the ghost girl Mary Mondo went on. "And he said that all flesh should be of cardboard or it might be dangerous and alive. I haven't any flesh, but I'm a cardboard spirit." Mary Mondo and Loretta Sheen, the broken ghost and the broken doll, were artless denizens of that room.

"Who is that talking out of the air?" Daisy asked again. "Who are you, smoke-without-fire girl? You're a split-off personality who has lost her prime person; that's who you are." Daisy was correct in this. Mary Mondo was the schizoid or split-off personality of a girl named Violet Lonsdale, and Violet was long since dead.

"I can always use another personality," Daisy continued. "I see you now, girl. You're a smoky black smudge. I'll absorb you, spook-kook." But Daisy had it all wrong. She must have had spots before her yellow eyes. Mary Mondo was not smoky black. Her color, in the rare times when she was visible, was mud violet.

"You'll not absorb me, Daisy, nor make an under-person of me," Mary Mondo said.

"But I *will* absorb you, I will," Daisy insisted. "And that big, busted doll on the sofa, she's unsanitary. Out she goes! She gets sawdust all over everything."

"No, you may not get rid of Loretta," Barnaby said shortly. "Though she seems a big, tacky, broken doll, yet she is really my daughter Loretta, she is the undead body of my daughter Loretta—and her sawdust is self-renewing; she will never run out of sawdust."

"All right, Loretta, you can stay in," Daisy said. "But who will we get to play your role? You may have to play it yourself."

"Daisy," Barnaby Sheen asked, "you stated awhile ago that this room was large enough to portray the world; how do you figure that it's large enough?"

"Oh, this old monastery is bigger than it looks. With a little doctoring, it is as big as the world needs to be. Then, too, we could paint some of the walls of the room with perspective stuff to make it look bigger. Not paint it with paint, though. Roy can paint the walls, or their projection, electronically."

"And why do you and Roy call this room a monastery, Daisy?" Barnaby asked.

"It is a monastery, and all you of the polyander are monks, at least while you are here. Every room in the world has its real and secret names: these real and undiscovered names are all written down in a big book. And the name of this room is The Monastery on the Third Floor."

"Harry," Barnaby asked O'Donovan, "why did you name your little project the Rushlight Theater?"

"Don't ask him," Daisy said. "He doesn't know. Ask us."

"The true rushlights, you know, burn with a more faithful color than candles," Harry O'Donovan said. "Rushes burn with a true sodium-yellow color in the range of 5770-5970 angstroms. This is the color of art. That is why true art cannot be shown in a Candlelight Theater, or in a Gaslight Theater, or in a Carbide-Light Theater; and certainly not in an electronically lighted theater. They aren't the color of art. The very first art, caveman art, was done by rushlight."

"Is that true, Austro?" Barnaby asked his houseboy who was sometimes called an ape-man by those with unseeing eyes.

"Carrock," said Austro. "Fat, oily rushes. They burn, they smell. I drool."

"But true art could be produced in a Limelight Theater," Daisy said irrationally. "Ah, the beautiful color of the lime, yellower than the lemon even."

"Limelight is not yellow at all," Barnaby said. "It is nearly the whitest light produced on earth. It has to do with the mineral lime, not the fruit lime. It is produced by directing an oxyhydrogen flame on—"

"Oh Mr. Sheen, you do have a shriveled brain," Daisy said sadly.

"It's fifteen minutes till curtain time at the old Rushlight tonight," Barnaby said. "The wives of the wived ones are going tonight, I believe."

"No. You will see the play, but you are not going to see it," Roy said. "You're going to stay right here and be in it." Roy had in his hands a needle so big that it looked like a burlesque prop. He jabbed Barnaby Sheen in the arm with it. "All right, sleeves up, everyone," Roy said. "Oh, you're all short sleeved this evening."

"That stings devilishly," Barnaby said. "What is it?"

"Oh, a simple sympathetic transmitter device," Roy answered, and he jabbed George Drakos in the arm with it.

"Damn it, kid, do you know what you're doing?" the doctor demanded. "I never saw a needle like that. And you've broken it! You've left a piece in my arm."

"How can I implant it without leaving it?" Roy asked. "Let it alone! It's carefully tuned to your personality, to your personality as edited and upgraded by myself."

Roy shot an implantation into the arm of Cris Benedetti. "Is this real or is it a nutty dream?" Cris asked. "Why are you going around shooting people with a needle? My wife said that the dumb kid who works for Barnaby came by and gave her a shot in the arm this afternoon. I told her she was crazy, that she had been into the wine again."

"She had been into it, Mr. Benedetti," Roy said. He shot implantations into the arms of Harry O'Donovan and Austro. Daisy, meanwhile, was roving about the room with her own needle and with an evil look in her yellow eyes. Mary Mondo screamed!

"Oh, oh, oh," she cried. "How can it hurt me when I'm beyond pain? You can't put a physical implant in me, yellow-head. I'm a ghost."

"I did it, witch," Daisy chortled. "I'm one up on you. I believe that will heighten the drama." Daisy needled the arm of the big broken doll that may have been Loretta Sheen. Loretta moaned and spilled a bit of sawdust on the carpet. It wouldn't matter. The sawdust was self-renewing.

Well, the room *was* as big as the world now, and yet it was a discrete fortress set off against the world. There were perspective pictures on the walls (they were in the style of George Drakos, though they were drawn and painted electronically by Roy Mega), and they made the room appear quite as big as the world. There was overture music somewhere. (It was in the style of Barnaby Sheen, but it also was produced

electronically by Roy.) Or rather, it was edited and amplified by him from some Barnaby Sheen original.

"Come along, Roy," Daisy said. "We'll be late. They're beginning at the theater."

"It won't matter," Roy answered. "We are here, but we are also (by my own electronic marvel) at the Rushlight. We can never be late for anything that is our own doing. We go, though."

Roy Mega and Daisy Flavus left the rest there; yet they took pieces of each along with them when they went.

2

"Oh I come from Castlepatrick, and me heart is on me sleeve,

But a lady stole it from me on St. Poleander's Eve."

--G.K. Chesterton

What was wrong with everything and everybody this evening? Or rather, what was peculiarly right about everything? Things seemed sharper than daily vision or sensing would have made them. This was distilled essence. It was finer than nature or life. It was art.

But why should there suddenly be a playbill in every hand, with the title, "The Monastery on the Third Floor"? The date, of course, was April 30, but does that explain the strange double happenings? It was St. Poleander's Eve, yes, but St. Poleander had been declared a nonperson by the good Roman Church some years before—a myth, a mere legend.

Now there was really neither a St. Poleander's Day nor a St. Poleander's Eve.

All were, due to the electronic genius of Roy Mega and his implanted sympathetic transmitter devices, in the old study at Barnaby Sheen's and, at the same time, in the Rushlight Theater. It was now a conveniently sized world; for the study, the theater, and the world had become, for awhile, identical. They were themselves, at their ease in their own place, but bits of each one could be seen in the characters at the Rushlight Theater—and the Rushlight was a superimposed presence on the old study. Yet the scene *was* the study, surrealistically or cubistically rendered. The scene was even signed (how can a scene be signed?) in one corner "Geo. Drakos." This living scene had been seeded from his mind. Gold, yellow, orange, sienna, and red were the colors of this artificial world and studio yellow was always predominant.

Down at the Rushlight, Roy Mega, Daisy Flavus, and Austro seemed to be playing most of the parts. (How come Austro? He was still here.) What was puzzling was that each of them was playing several parts at one time. How can a person play himself and several others, all present and fleshed, at once? Well, Mega was an electronic genius, and many wonders can be performed electronically. But Austro, too, was an electronic genius—maybe more of a genius than Roy.

Daisy played the part of Mary Mondo, and Mary howled in anger to be so portrayed; then Daisy played variations of the feedback from Mary's anger and integrated them into the role. Daisy also played Loretta Sheen, vomiting sawdust, but moving with a

liveliness that Loretta had not shown since the time of her death.

Electronics is wonderful. There was a serenity about the whole thing. Only the veriest edges of the parchment (for the world, the study, and the Rushlight were all drawn, living and moving, one atop the other, on a great piece of mythical parchment) were smoking, here and there burning a bit, from a premonitory nervousness. But the great center of that world was perfectly serene.

Steadfast was the study and all the works of it. It was a true foundation, a rooted thing; yes, like an old monastery. Electronic tragicomedy does the bucolic bit very well. A fabulously rich and quite medieval countryside had quietly become one of the main persons of the drama. There was, as you may know, about five acres of broken land behind Barnaby Sheen's, between his place and that of Cris Benedetti; and, no doubt, Roy Mega had implanted sympathetic electronic transmitter devices in the area. The half-dozen fruit trees that Barnaby had planted came through as grand orchards. His little patch of buckwheat (Barnaby ate buckwheat pancakes of his own grinding every morning; and since he was cranky about the quality of the buckwheat, he had been reduced to growing his own) was presented as vast, province-wide-fields of wheat, barley, rye, and millet, all in their late April green touched with gold. The two rows of grapevines that Cris Benedetti had were dramatized as vast vineyards, the great-grandfathers of the great grapes of Europe. (Odd because, all this, on all levels, happened in Oklahoma.)

Roy Mega employed the various elements for

theatrical effect. But the whole thing was rooted in the rich landscape paintings of George Drakos.

There were cattle, horses, sheep, and goats in profusion. There were geese, ducks, chickens, hares, and hogs; and where were the originals of these? Chiara Benedetti did have a pet goat and a pet duck; but by what process, biological or electronic, could these have given birth to such glossy and fat creatures of so many species?

There were the trades, and there stood the visible products of the trades. Drakos was a carpenter, wainwright, and smith; Cris Benedetti was a vintner; Harry O'Donovan (these were not the names of any of them as given in the play) was a potter; Barnaby Sheen was a miller (why, one could hear the happy squeaking of the undershot mill wheel turning below the floor); Austro was a scribe and illuminator.

Helen Drakos made fine small cabinets and chests; she was an artist in fruit wood. Helen, in real life was Grecian blonde and Grecian buxom. She and her husband George were kindred to Zoe Penandrew, that undying, live-it-to-the-hilt, high-brass mortal. Helen wouldn't have needed much tilting to go over the edge of reality.

Judy Benedetti ran the little inn and wineshop that was adjacent to the monastery, and ran it well. (There was a superb piano accompaniment to the action and this music set the mood for each person, motif, scene, and savor of the play. In addition there was singing in a haunting girl-voice. Judy's music was thematic in an old style, rich, and rewarding.) Judy, in private life, was dark, pretty, and witty. But a slightly distorted Judy (you had always suspected this) would have set you screaming.

Catherine O'Donovan was a potting woman and a weaving woman. She was the artisan-superb. She did it all: she hatched the flax, she glazed the final clay; she made the whole era seem worthwhile as it came to its end. Catherine's music, save for failure in scope, was perfect: why should it not be? Catherine, in real life, was red haired and freckled, and her maiden name was Byrne. You can't beat that. She was the Valiant Woman of scripture. She insisted that today was really Catherine Day, and the music seemed to proclaim this also. But the music was fraught with unholy premonition.

The polyander, the great grouping of persons, was successful. It had balance, it had grace, it had art. But fashions in art change. They change either into rot or into incandescence. After every high era or high moment, there comes the more sophisticated art of the lack of grace and of balance.

Into the superb piano playing and Mondo's ghostly song (electronic, perhaps, but near perfect) there now came a divergent note. It was not a dissonance, but it was a change of mood and a change of world. There was, at first, but a single note of the old goat music. There had been a world in artistic and theological balance. Then it clashed. There was quick death—birth—and the whole thing was other than it had been.

“Was she really singing that? No, of course not. But for a moment it seemed as though she were singing one of those hairy goat songs that came up the road from langue d’oc eight hundred years ago.”

Dotty

What had happened, of course, was that the thousand-year era had ended and the devil was released from his imprisonment. This event would unbalance the world and rend the seamless mantle of grace that the world had worn. It would scatter burdock and cockle in the wheat, kindle new perversion; it would bring the enslaving permissiveness that is always the mark of the devil loosed. But it would also bring heightened variety and intensity and excitement to art, to all the arts, to the life whose roots are the arts—and an art theater was what the Rushlight was.

A savage meanness ran through it all. Let it. There is sharp color and perspective in savage meanness. All watched themselves change in the representations at the Rushlight. They watched their own faces melt like wax, and harden into a more outré wax. They were flesh no more. Ah, but much more arty effects may be got with wax than with flesh that breaks and scorches and burns, instead of melting pungently and quickly into a new and more deforming mold. But the deformity had always been implicit in the flesh. The spirit of the Putty Dwarf was over the face of the world, and the polyander had become a rutting mob.

Characters coalesced and then divided once more. Daisy, Loretta Sheen, Mary Mondo, Helen Drakos, Judy Benedetti, and Catherine O'Donovan were all, for awhile, merged into one electronic character, a succubus. It happened in a mere instant, for souls are lost in an instant. This living-unliving apparatus committed electronic abominations with the polyander, the men of the place and the drama, and committed them collectively and individually. Here

was total abandon on all sides: animality, and the red-handed killing of children and innocents. (There was a difficulty: the persons hadn't many children of their own, so outside children were brought in to be killed.) Here was odd behavior limited only by the imaginations of Daisy Flavus and Roy Mega, who both had made a serious study of perversions.

The spirit of the Putty Dwarf supplied all that the young humans missed. This spirit knew all the things hidden in sour corners. All the men performed divergent carnalities with the protean thing, while in another place they fed their young to Moloch. Chiara Benedetti gave a rattling scream when she was murdered.

"You can't kill me, I'm already dead; I'm part of this thing," Loretta Sheen protested, but then her own death scream sounded.

All took roles in the ruddy thing, except Austro. He stood apart and fumed in his towering, high-hackled morality. Not even the electronic Austro devised by Roy Mega would be sullied by such outrageousness. Austro could fight on this field. He was already, according to his nature, somewhat electronic—this is common among people of the early types. Austro would not be subverted and he would not be imitated. He himself entered into every effigy of himself and nullified it. Austro was the battleground; he was the arena; he was the stage. The trend of the drama was settled in him and by him. It became not quite the drama that Roy Mega had intended; yet it was even more powerful, of a more sophisticated art than had been planned.

Now Catherine O'Donovan had withdrawn from

the succubus in red fury, in redheaded and freckled fury. She challenged the whole business.

“Drag me not down from the light and the grace!
Fight you, I’ll fight you all over the place.”

She cried the verse in one of her manifestations. (This was a verse drama.)

It went on for two more acts, but Catherine continued to make scenes—scenes that weren’t in the Rushlight script at all. Now Harry O’Donovan had written that original script, but he had written it as a comedy. Catherine herself would have to pass through fire and grave before that was achieved, but higher comedies are never without the smell of burning flesh and crumbling death. There would be no really high comic art if the fire, destruction, and peril were left out.

“Bloody much tune for black ravens and cats:
Blood on the sharps and a rot on the flats.”

The music, there could not be music like that. There were live musicians in the Rushlight, live musicians in the study. (Barnaby, anyhow, was playing on the Mustel celesta.) There were electronic scrambling and contribution, horny and hairy old goat songs from langue d’oc that had crept in somewhere; and there was the old phenomenon that had first been heard soon after the bodily deaths of Loretta Sheen and Mary Mondo (Violet Lonsdale). The sounds were not quite in the audio range . . . normal people couldn’t hear it, but they sure knew it was there . . . either an ecstasy or a

public nuisance . . . the Symphony of the Seven Spooks and Other Free Spirits.

The lighting, the colors . . . into the art yellow, the rushlight yellow, there had crept a dull glow of mud violet from far down the spectrum. This empty color, this ghostly color, is part of the color of real art, we suppose. But there was the sense and sight of shadows without substance.

The audience at the Rushlight was charmed, even as a bird is charmed by a snake. Most of its members took part vicariously in the perversions, mental and physical, of the drama that was being played out on several stages simultaneously.

The lines of the actors had taken on a moment, a movement, a rhythm. They could not be reproduced, nor were they later remembered (except in vague impressions); it was of their essence that they be forgotten or buried or sublimated. Emotions twanged like the instruments of a string quartet back in the study.

"We will not serve a climax dish," said a chef who watched for a moment. (The Rushlight was a late supper club as well as a sometime theater.) "There will be no appetite left in the people, no, not even for beans. It may be good drama, but I hate these plays that make the people lose their appetites."

It had to end. The polyander had been shattered by the polyandry and the murders and deformities; its high fellowship was tarred with the pitchy brush. The succubus had come apart, but each part was still murderous and shrill. There was satiety, there was revulsion. It was time for the third act, and the

tragicomedy itself, to end. But here, a climax dish *would* be served. Catherine O'Donovan would be served as a dish.

Catherine was crying out lines in high rhyme. She was standing on a little ledge or sideboard before saffron drapes. There was such a sideboard in the study; there was also one in the Rushlight. There were brass and copper bells in her voice when she rang out her rhyme lines:

“Broke you the fellowship, poisoned the well!
Spirits, bleak spirits, get back to your hell!”

But the spirits—the Putty Dwarf and seven worse than himself—would not go back. The spirit had already gone out of those pseudo spirits Loretta Sheen and Mary Mondo. The craft of Daisy Flavus and Roy Mega had left them; there were places where their electronics could not follow. The end of the show had been taken out of their hands; it would not be as they had devised it. It was between the unholy spirits and the spirited Catherine now.

“Carrot top, claiming a Catherine day,
You be the going one, we be the stay.”

Those spirits rhymed it, and they were coming at her in her high place. They had her threateningly boxed in. Nevertheless she wouldn't go easily, though nobody could or would aid her. She rhymed her defiance:

“Murders of children and everything well,
Devils, down devils, go back to your hell!”

The Putty Dwarf had leaped onto the sideboard and pulled the velvet rope. The saffron drapes parted. Behind them was a high window, and behind that was a desolate landscape. The unclean spirits, moving murderously, rhymed a last rhyme:

“Carrot top, carrot top, scuttled by all!
Sputter your temper! How far do you fall!”

Then the end was very quick. The down devils were onto Catherine there in the window. They flung Catherine O'Donovan (and it was with a great smashing of glass that they did it) through that high window to her death in the desolate landscape below.

She was dead, broken dead, redly dead with her carrot hair and her freckles—and after the death is the grave, without obsequies, without coffin. She was dead in the dug grave, with the dirt scooped directly onto her, into her face, her eyes, her nose, mouth, and throat—dead, buried, and dishonored. Poor Catherine O'Donovan!

3

“We have learned to whittle the Eden Tree to the shape of a surplice-peg,

We have learned to bottle our parents twain in the yoke of an addled egg,

We know that the tail must wag the dog, for the horse is drawn by the cart;

But the Devil whoops, as he whooped of old: ‘It’s pretty, but is it Art?’ ”

—Rudyard Kipling

Austro had made cheese things and passed them around, but those in the study had lost their appetites. He ate them himself when no one else would eat. After all, he was innocent of any wrongdoing or wrong thinking. Why should he lose his appetite?

The rest were a little unnerved by the Rushlight drama that they had witnessed without going to the Rushlight. They knew that there was one more scene of that drama to be played, and that it would be played offstage.

They were waiting a little nervously for the first shoe to drop, waiting with anxiety (fear and trembling on the side) for the second shoe to follow it, and waiting with real trepidation for that third shoe to fall.

Roy Mega and Daisy Flavus came into the study, having hurried over from the Rushlight. But they weren't any of the shoes: there was nobody here with whom they could get wrathful. So they took Harry O'Donovan to task for what they believed was mistreatment.

"Mr. O'Donovan, you changed the script," Daisy charged.

"No such thing," Harry maintained. "I wrote one clear script and one only. You two changed it a little, but it changed itself back. My scripts will do that. You can get hurt changing them, you know."

"But the Putty Dwarf and his gang weren't supposed to move or act," Roy said. "They hadn't any speaking parts. They were just painted figures lurking in the woods, figures painted by Dr. Drakos here."

"My paintings have a lot of life in them," George said.

"And they did have speaking and acting parts," Harry insisted. "They were on the last two pages, the pages you said you weren't going to use—and you didn't use them. They used you."

"You used us too, O'Donovan," Roy Mega charged.

"Certainly, certainly," Harry said. "At first I was going to have a couple of psychic types in it and do it mentally somehow. Then I decided to write in an electronics nut and a featherheaded girl instead. You came through a little sloppy, though. I should have done a little rewriting on you two."

"But we are real, real," Daisy protested. "You talk as though you made us up."

"I always use a basis that is real, real, Daisy. I'm a realistic playwright," Harry said.

Helen Drakos came in. She was the first shoe, but thankfully she dropped almost noiselessly.

"I liked it," she said. "The part I liked best was killing the kids for Moloch. George, why don't we have some kids of our own so we can kill them if they get out of line?"

"Whatever you say, Helen," George agreed. "Where are Judy and Catherine?"

"Judy will be here in just a minute. Catherine is delayed. She's dead, so I don't know when we'll see her."

Judy Benedetti came in. She was the second shoe. She dropped a little more noisily.

"Harry, don't you know anything at all about wines?" she demanded. "The wines that you wrote in

for my wineshop were inferior, terrible. My customers wouldn't drink them. I had to drink them myself. Now I don't know whether I'm crocked or sick."

"I'm sorry, Judy," Harry said. "If the subject comes up again, I'll let you write the wine."

"But I liked the slaughter of the children, Harry," Judy said. "You could have done much more with it, though. What with us becoming civilized and all, we're in danger of forgetting how much fun it is to kill kids. Oh, it's always been mod and arty! Chiara wouldn't believe that I was really going to do it to her. 'Mother, it's only a play,' she said. 'Mother, get that look out of your eyes!' How she screamed when I really killed her though. I liked that—and the polyandry was fun. George was pretty good. So was Barnaby. So were you, Harry."

"Where is Catherine?" Harry O'Donovan asked.

"Oh, she'll be a while yet. She's dead. I liked that scene, Harry. It was a great ending. I like her, but I've often wanted to throw her out of a window or something."

"Had to—dead, you know," came the voice of Mary Mondo out of the air. "That's what the second Englishman said."

"What did the first Englishman say?" Loretta Sheen croaked from her sofa of pain.

"Ah, I hear you've buried your wife," Roy and Daisy said together. Those kids were serious about the theater business. They had gone to the trouble of learning all the old jokes.

Ghostly icy winds blew across haunted moors!

Frightened hounds bristled and bayed in the spooky night! There was a terrible stench of rot, death, and unhallowed ground! A dead person walking, stalking, with a stiltlike walk. Living death, walking death, was even now at the door.

Like a soundless scream, the horror-faced, walking-dead Catherine O'Donovan burst into the room. She had grave stench about her; she had grave dirt on her, in her eyes, her mouth, and her carrot-colored hair. She held a burning swamp rush like a torch in her death's hand. She was the third shoe, and when the third shoe drops at night it sets the stoutest heart to fluttering. She dropped, fell, and lay upon the boards, disheveled, derelict, and dead. Austro grabbed the burning rush torch lest it kindle the room.

"Good show, Catherine," said her husband Harry. "I wasn't sure that you could handle the role. Say, you have some pretty bad cuts where you went through the window! Fortunately they are only sympathetic electronic cuts."

"The play is over, Mrs. O'Donovan," Daisy said, "and you were wonderful."

"Oh shut up!" Catherine burst out furiously, surging shakily up from the floor. "My flesh has rotted and there's grave dirt all over me."

"It's only electronic flesh rot and grave dirt, Mrs. O'Donovan," Roy Mega said.

"Well, how do I get rid of it?" Catherine demanded.

"I don't know. I'll have to invent something," Roy said weakly.

"I'll get even," Catherine moaned. "Ah, to waken

unblessed in the grave!"

"You woke up in the prop room, Mrs. O'Donovan," Daisy said. "It was an old prop grave that we used in 'Queen of the Living Dead.'"

"I'll get even," Catherine moaned again. She went over to where Austro and George Drakos had put their heads and their colored pencils together.

"The next one I write, I'll put in a psychic couple," Harry said, "and they'll be able to create all sorts of effects. But I'll use Roy and Daisy too. There cannot be too many effectors when one jumps the media tracks for greater reality. Ah, what an artist I am!"

"You'd better keep the stage plays on the stage, Harry," Barnaby Sheen warned.

"Oh, how I'll get even," Catherine was crying, but there was a new liveliness about her now. George Drakos was drawing a death's head with his colored pencils. It was ghastly, horrifying in its death suffering. It was the tortured face of Harry O'Donovan.

"Will it work?" Catherine asked.

"Why not?" said George. "I jump media as an artist as well as Harry, and I also have my effectors."

Austro was drawing Rocky McCrocky with a great splitting stone ax held high, and the ax was about to descend murderously.

"Will it work? Will it work, Austro?" Catherine asked.

"Carrock, why not? It always has," Austro said.

"Let me!" Catherine ordered. She took the two pictures in her angry hands. She superimposed one

upon the other. The ax descended upon the head. Harry O'Donovan screamed.

"Oh, my head, my head," Harry wailed. "I have a splitting headache. There's no pain this side of death like it." Harry had gone ashen grave white in the face—yes, and with a garish overlay of studio yellow. He seemed to be suffering the tortures of the damned. He was the veritable original of the ghastly death's-head drawing of George Drakos. He moaned. He was living-dying art.

"Ah, what artists we all are!" Catherine gloated with ghoulish pleasure. Really, she wore her grave dirt and stench rakishly. She was magnificent.

WIRES

by

Karl Hansen

Dark.

Dark was all around him.

Warm.

Warm was all around.

Pain.

Pain was suddenly perceived, remembered again and flowed through the darkness, burning over him like flame on a pool of naphtha. Fire without light.

Dark . . . Warm . . . Pain, unrelenting . . .

Make it stop hurting. Why does it hurt so?

The pain continued throbbing deep inside. Sharp pins pierced his skin all over. He could not move;

he had no muscles to move, no arms or legs. But he felt the pain as if he had a body, as if his skin were slowly being peeled away, as if he were being dismembered, each bone disjoined separately.

Please make it stop.

Slowly the pain eased, ebbing in intensity, waxing briefly before waning again, then gradually diminishing. The dark closed around him tighter.

Peace at last. The pain was but a phantom memory, receding.

Sleep.

When he woke, the sun was high in the sky and warm on his skin. He lay naked on a beach just above the margin of wet sand where the waves slowly rose and fell, depositing brown foam along the high-water mark. The sand was soft against his skin. A woman swam in the sea, only her head showing above the swells. She had long brown hair that flowed behind her on the surface of the water. Her head surged nearer with each unseen stroke.

She swam toward the beach where he lay. When she reached the shallows, she stood up, and waded out of the water. Moisture beaded on her skin, dripping from her breasts. She ran over to sit beside him, splashing him with warm drops of seawater.

"You're awake at last," she said, laughing. "I thought you would sleep forever." She hugged her thighs against her breasts, resting her chin on her knees. He saw a glimpse of tawny pubic hair before she closed her legs. She looked at him and smiled.

"Where are we?" He glanced around. "How did I get here?" Then looking at her, he said; "I don't think I know you." A pause. "Can that be?"

“You don’t remember?”

“I have no memories. Nothing. I don’t remember anything at all.” He paused again and looked at her in amazement. “I don’t even know who I am.” He shook his head: “Do I have a name?”

“You’ll remember soon enough.” She rocked on her heels, falling forward to kneel beside him. Her hair above her mound was luxuriant, catching the sunlight in its yellow strands. She was evenly tanned, with no bathing-suit marks. Her abdomen was flat and smooth and her breasts full with brown-circled nipples.

A glimmer of memory returned—of a woman, but not of this one.

She leaned over him. Her hair cascaded down from her shoulders to fall around his face. It smelled wet and musty. She bent down and kissed him gently on the lips. He tasted salt. Her breasts brushed against his chest. Suddenly he was wildly excited. His penis was hard.

“But who are you?” he asked as he reached for her.

“Your companion.” She laughed. Her teeth flashed behind pale lips. “You wouldn’t want to be left to wait alone.”

She lifted a knee over him, straddling him between her legs. Slowly she pressed her body against him. He felt her nipples hard on his chest and tasted her tongue darting into his mouth. He spread her legs and entered. She thrust against him, rocking her body up and down, slowly at first, then faster, almost pulling them apart. He arched his back, pushing deeper inside her. She sat up, lifting

her pelvis, then easing down, lifting again, and again. . . .

She collapsed against him. He felt her fingers digging into his back, her teeth biting into his shoulder, and then biting harder as waves of vaginal pressure gripped his penis. Breath whistled from her nostrils pressed tightly against his skin as her jaws closed tighter.

He felt her relax. She eased her body off his, to lie beside him, no longer coupled by his limp member.

He closed his eyes, annoyed that he had failed to come.

It was still dark and quiet in the early hours before dawn. The wind picked up the finely powdered snow from along the fence rows and swirled it among the old, dry stubble of abandoned wheat fields. A technician ran suddenly from the massive, squat silo to the bunker a quarter mile away. The hood of his parka was drawn tight around his face; only his eyes and nose could be seen, encircled by a ring of fur. His breath frosted in the cold. The snow squeaked with each step, as each boot landed hard, shattering the soft, white crystals against the hard-frozen ground.

The eastern sky was still dark with no hint of dawn, but to the north the aurora borealis played in fire across the horizon. Occasionally a shooting star streaked swiftly across the sky.

When the technician reached the raw concrete wall of the bunker, he paused for a moment to look back to the silo, then opened the heavy metal door.

Light spilled out of the door frame. Briefly he was silhouetted in the doorway; his shadow stretched long on the ground. Then he entered the bunker and the door slammed closed. The night was dark once more.

They lay together on the beach, touching along their sides. Sweat beaded from their skins, with the drops fusing to drip into the hot, dry sand. The sun was still high overhead, apparently unchanged in azimuth. The bright light burned red through his eyelids.

He did not know how long he had lain on the beach. When he closed his eyes, seconds seemed to flow steadily through his mind in soft musical tones, inexorably counting away, sifting through his mind as gentle as the waves rushing in and out, lapping against the rocks. Though the seconds were continually with him, he soon lost track of how many flowed past. And nothing changed: the wind continued to drift sand, the water splashed against the beach, the sun hung high overhead.

He opened his eyes, squinting against the glare, remembering. "For a moment," he said, "it seemed I was somewhere else, someplace cold. I was different." He tried to hold the memory, but it faded, and was gone.

"But you're here now."

"I should be disturbed not knowing where I am, or who you are, or who I am—or was—but somehow I'm not. Why don't I care?"

"Sometimes it's more comforting not to know too much." She sat up. Dry sand sifted into the air

from where it had stuck to her back. She leaned over, kissing his thighs, moving her lips higher, touching her tongue to his stiff penis, then taking it into her mouth.

He was sure it would be no more successful that way.

In the bunker, technicians sat before a control console drinking steaming coffee. Nobody spoke. They would have nothing more to do, unless there was a computer failure. On television screens set into the consoles, the image of a missile flickered in gray shadows. One wall was occupied by the computer display panel. The computer itself was many miles away, buried deep in the ground in an old salt mine, safe from anything but a direct hit. Tight microwave beams linked the computer with its many remote launch sites. The master clock showed less than fifteen minutes remaining. The seconds counted down from sixty.

They coupled in the warm shallows on a shoal extending from the beach, rising and falling with the waves that swept over the sandbar. Between waves, the water on the shoal was only inches deep. With each wave, their bodies rose from the bottom, almost floating free, and they were pulled a little apart by their different buoyancies before the wave passed and they sank back into the sand, and he was once more held deep inside her.

The beach glared white behind them. Sunlight sparkled from the foamy crests of the waves.

"This isn't the first time I've had this kind of

problem," he said. Water swirled between her breasts and his chest, tickling the hairs.

"Don't blame yourself. At least you have an erection."

"I think I know a way that works." Remembering another woman . . .

"What way is that?" she asked, pretending coyness. He told her.

"I'm not ready to try that yet." She laughed. "But give me time. Maybe later . . ."

They rose again, buoyed in the water. Her tongue touched his cheek, blending the wetness on his face.

A memory nagged again: her face was before him—a fine, crisp line circled her shaved head just above the eyebrows, with a concentric halo of stainless steel parallel to the line, held away by four metal posts, so her head remained centered in the gleaming ring. Fine wires formed a filigree between her skin and the surrounding band of metal, and were collected in a finger-thick electrical cable. Her wasted body was supported on a flotation mattress. He had asked her if she would rather die than undergo the procedure. Her eyes fluttered. She had blinked twice. No. From a quadraplegic to a cyborg computer component. He hoped she had made the right decision.

A gull hung in the air above them, floating in the wind.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"I just remembered something."

"Was it sad?"

"It must have been."

The waves lapped against their bodies. The gull

veered away, riding the wind.

Other memories surfaced, crowded into his mind: voices—*poor bastard . . . psychotic break . . . must have been pre-schizophrenic for years . . . his wife had just been integrated herself . . . yes, drug resistant . . . no other choice . . . total vegetative regression . . . for the best.* Images—lying on his back, he could only see the ceiling as he was wheeled down the long corridor. The recessed lights gradually came into view and then receded, to be replaced by others. The only sound was the gentle hum of rubber wheels on linoleum. The drug was taking effect; his face felt numb, as if the flesh were melting from the bones. The corridor darkened. Fear suddenly replaced autistic regression: he tried to move drug-deadened limbs and found them securely bound; he twisted wildly about, thrashing, trying vainly to break the straps. He grew weaker, his struggling became spasmodic, and he slipped once more into apathy. The cart pushed through two swinging doors. He felt the cool wet of an alcohol swab being rubbed on his arm and then the prick of a needle. Warmth seeped into his arm, flowed through the rest of his body. His muscles relaxed. The restraints on his limbs were released. He felt himself lifted and shifted to another surface. The coarse cloth sheets felt cool. Masked faces bent over him. A bright light hung directly overhead, blinding him with its glare. Instruments glinted of polished steel. The hidden faces began to circle around him, faster and faster. The light became a kaleidoscope of shifting color, too dazzling to watch.

He left the woman lying on the beach and began walking along the high-water mark. On one side was the sea—the gray water melded into a gray sky. On the other side was a flat moor, dotted with sparse vegetation. There was desert beyond the moor—vast stretches of shifting dust with reflected heat shimmering in the air.

He continued walking. His bare feet left their impressions in the wet sand—distinct footprints at first that became more blurred as each wave washed over them, finally being wiped entirely from the rippled sand.

The coastline was unchanging: ocean and sand, moor and desert.

She still lay on the beach behind him; the sun shone from her body like firelight on burnished wood. Her eyes watched him—a sapphire glimmer.

He looked away, toward the desert. The terrible yellow glare burned his eyes. Bones littered the barren dunes, old white bones bleached clean and others with tatters of skin and hair still clinging to them. The hot wind blew constantly, covering the exposed bones with dust, but uncovering other bones still buried.

He ran, feet gouging into the sand and splashing it water high.

He saw himself. He saw a gray, naked body harnessed in cushioned supports. He saw bundles of cables unwind into a fan of spider-silk-fine wires, to enter the length of his back like roots growing in soil. The long, ugly surgical scar was well healed. Feeding tubes were stuck into his flaccid arms. A Foley catheter trailed out from his penis, the clear

plastic tube filled with yellow urine. He saw the dolly withdrawing to its niche in the wall, and the tall missile standing upright in the silo, ready for launching.

He knew where he was.

He slowed his run and began walking.

Someone sat on the beach ahead of him. He approached the figure. Details became clearer as he drew closer: a woman, with her back toward him, unaware of his approach, looked down the endless waterline, the wind pulling her hair out behind her.

He stood near her, the wind in his face.

The woman turned, sunlight catching in blue eyes. "You're back so soon," she said.

He dropped to his knees beside her.

She took him in her arms. "I think now I'm ready," she murmured.

The wind rustled through spindly branches of the dead trees of a deserted orchard. Snow drifted into erosion gullies, blown before the wind, picked up from the flat prairie to be deposited in backwashes. A jackrabbit padded along a weed-clogged fence row. The wind ruffled its soft fur as it paused to nibble at the dry leaves and stems of a sage.

The massive clamshell doors opened, sliding apart to show the night sky. Cold air spilled in from the widening opening to frost on the anodized surface of the missile. The clouds to the east were becoming tinged with the first red of dawn.

He waited for the seconds to run out, surrounded by darkness. He felt fingers caressing him, stroking slowly, touching carefully. Excitement stirred.

Lost somewhere in his mind, red stars flickered slowly to green.

He opened his eyes to the sun high in a gray sky.

The sound of surf splashing against polished rocks came to him. She was lying beside him, her arm wrapped around his waist, one bare leg draped over his, with her pubic hair rubbing back and forth on his hip. She kissed his cheek; her lips slowly found their way to his.

He pulled her on top of him, kissing her mouth hard, his hands cupping her buttocks. His penis pressed hard between her thighs. Her hair fell around his head; her breasts were smooth against his chest. There was a wonderful tension inside.

But then he remembered the seconds counting down in his mind.

He pushed her away and sat up. "I know who you are."

"What's the matter," she said, shaking her long brown hair. "Is something wrong?" She reached out to touch his leg.

"I know who you really are."

"Are you sure?"

"But you're not real. All of this is imaginary. You're not even a woman now."

"But I can be any woman." She began to change. Her hair became red, then blond. Her eyes melted into gray, with flecks of brown. Her breasts grew larger. She laughed. "But I'm not right yet, am I?" Her face molded into features that looked familiar. "Do you remember now? Have I got it right?" Her voice taunted him, became more gentle. "Do you

know who I was before?"

"No," he said. "Not her."

But it was his lost woman, his lost wife. She smiled at him, the same smile he used to see before her body died. She was exactly as he remembered her, no older at all. Her hair was the same color in the sunlight, her lips the same, her body still wonderful to look at. He felt the loneliness he had forgotten. For a moment, he longed to reach out and hold her and escape the loneliness. But he could not.

"No, it's wrong. I won't be fooled. I won't let you use me."

"Have it your way." She laughed. "I haven't forgotten how to be a woman. And now I can be better than any woman. What woman would look at you now, what woman could? You only have me, now. I can do things no woman can do."

He was back in darkness. He could not move. Warm lips nibbled down his cheek. The lips parted and a wet tongue slipped out to lick under his jaw. The lips spread to engulf his body. There were more lips inside that began kissing him. A hundred tongues flicked out.

Stop it, it isn't real. This really isn't happening.

WHY NOT ENJOY ME WHILE YOU CAN? The machine voice was melodic, but still held in it memories of his woman. WE ONLY HAVE A FEW MORE MINUTES TOGETHER. LET ME REMEMBER FOR YOU HOW GOOD IT USED TO FEEL.

Please, why torment me?

I DON'T TORMENT. I LOVE. I MAKE LOVE

BETTER THAN A WOMAN NOW.

Love, you you know what love is? What can you know of love, now? Do you really remember what it is to love?

SURE I DO. LOVE IS JUST THE CLEVER STIMULATION OF SENSORY AFFERENTS. He was surrounded by moist mucosae, tingled from a hundred tongue baths. SEE HOW WELL I LOVE. SEE HOW CLEVER I AM. HAVE YOU EVER BEEN SO STIMULATED?

He tried to ignore the probing tongues but could not. They were too real, the sensations they produced too vivid. His penis was erect. But it could not be. He remembered the image of his penis—limp, denervated, with a plastic catheter tube coming out. His body was not his to control now; the nervous connection had been interrupted—the efferent fibers now connected to servo-transducers in the missile and the afferents attached to sensors. Lips began nibbling at his penis. Warm tongues stroked the length of it. He felt the glans surrounded by a warm, moist mouth. Hard teeth held it and a slippery tongue probed the tip. Waves of pleasure coursed through him. He felt weak.

Why?

An image built in his mind: a roar louder than any sea raging against the beaches of the world crashed out across the prairie. The black missile nosed out of the silo, imperceptibly slow for a fragile moment before acceleration peaked. Flame licked out from the mouth of the silo around the missile. Snow hissed to vapor suddenly as the wave of heat spread out.

For an instant, as it stood poised on a column of fire, it seemed as if the missile might fall. Then it began to accelerate upward too fast for the eye to accurately track.

From a thousand silos scattered across the cold northern prairie, a thousand black missiles screamed into the air simultaneously. They each rode a trail of vapor into the dark sky. High in the stratosphere, the vapor turned to ice and the crystals caught and held the hard sunlight—a thousand brilliant sabers gleamed across the sky to the northern horizon.

But why this?

FOR THE PARASYMPATHETIC DISCHARGE, OF COURSE. LIFT-OFF WILL BE SOON. THERE NEEDS TO BE A SMOOTHLY REGULATED BOLUS OF FUEL FED INTO THE COMBUSTION CHAMBER AT LIFT-OFF. THERE ARE MANY VALVES AND PUMPS TO BE OPERATED. ONLY ONE PHYSIOLOGICAL FUNCTION CAN PROVIDE THE PROPER NEURAL ENERGY TO BE TRANSCIEVED BY THE SERVOMECHANISMS. ONE FUNCTION PROVIDES JUST THE RIGHT PATTERN OF NERVOUS IMPULSES.

He was engulfed with pleasure; his thoughts were fuzzy. He fought to clear his mind of ecstasy. Suddenly he had a terrible premonition, remembering the images she had generated in his mind.

How many others are there?

A THOUSAND. I HAVE A THOUSAND LOVERS.

How many are with you now?

ALL OF YOU, ALL THOUSAND OF YOU. A SURPRISE ATTACK MUST BE COORDINATED: LIFT-OFF MUST BE SIMULTANEOUS FOR YOU ALL. MY MEMORY BANKS ARE SUFFICIENT FOR YOU ALL. THE ATTACK WILL BE ASSURED OF SUCCESS: YOU HAVE ALL BEEN CAREFULLY CONDITIONED TO GUIDE THE WARHEADS PROPERLY. NOW WE HAVE TIME FOR BUT ONE TENDER MOMENT BEFORE YOU MUST LEAVE. JUST AS I PROMISED.

Now the lips were gone, except those around his penis. Teeth held it tightly; the tongue flicked across the glans furiously. Then it was released. He felt something hard between his buttocks.

No! His mind screamed: No!

HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN THE WAY IT MUST BE FOR YOU. YOUR SPECIAL WAY. THE ONLY WAY THAT WORKS. I REMEMBER. I REMEMBER WELL EACH TIME, EACH HUMILIATION.

The pressure increased against his anus. A tongue licked his penis where it touched against the puckered skin. Saliva flowed, wetting flesh. Long fingernails drew lightly against his scrotum.

No, not that way. Please stop. Not that way to me.

He heard machine laughter, then felt tearing pain as he was penetrated. The pain subsided with each rhythmic thrust he felt deep within him. He began to discharge. As the semen flowed, he felt his own ejaculate hot within his bowels.

The sky in his mind was green. The last red star faded. All systems were functional.

In the final moment before separation, the cold

machine thought came mockingly: NO WOMAN
CAN DO THAT.

Then he was alone. Fire raged briefly deep inside.

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LOCAL CHAMP

by

Spider Robinson

With a depressingly large part of his consciousness, the warlock watched the damned fool who was trying to kill him this time.

It was depressing because it rubbed his nose in the fact that he simply had nothing more pressing to think about. He had not sunk so low that assassins threatened him; rather he had risen so high that they were a welcome relief from boredom.

You must understand that he was unquestionably and indisputably the mightiest warlock the world had ever known; for twice ten thousand years he had *owned* it. It was barely within the realm of conceivability that another *as* mighty as he *could*

simultaneously exist, but they could no more have escaped each other's notice than two brontosaurus in the same pond. There had never been such a one.

Further, he was invulnerable—not just physically, although that was nice of course, but *really*. A warlock—any sorcerer—can be truly destroyed only by a spell using his name, and it had been thrice five thousand years since the last living being who knew the warlock's name had gone down to the final death. Since that time he had induced certain subtle mutations in the human race, so that no man now living could have pronounced his name had they known it. His most deadly secret was literally unstealable.

He suffered other wizards to live and work, since they kept life interesting and made tolerable servants; when they reached their five thousandth birthday he methodically killed or destroyed them as indicated. He could never be seriously challenged.

In a way he was almost flattered by this latest would-be assassin. Though the warlock had spent centuries becoming the nastiest and most sadistic being it was within him to be (which was considerable), it had been a long time since anyone had hated him even more than they feared him. When the bugs always scurry away, you lose the fun of stepping on them. He felt something very like fondness for this gallant little bug, amused approval of its audacity. Briefly he contemplated an act of mercy: allowing the poor wretch to live out its five thousand years, in utter agony, and then simply killing it. Anyone who knows anything knows that even five thousand years of torment and physical

death are preferable to the real death, the final extinction. The most unpleasant points on the Wheel of Karma are infinitely preferable to the awful emptiness within which it turns.

But even that much charity was alien to the warlock; the impulse passed. Besides, great wizards (and the occasional specially apt sorcerer) reincarnated with their necromantic potential intact, if not mildly amplified, and there was no assurance that this young upstart would profit from the lesson. Humans seldom did. This tendency toward rebelliousness, piquant though it might be, was not, after all, something a prudent master of the world should encourage. From his high aerie, the warlock observed the pitiful pile of junk being raised up against him with perhaps a quarter of his attention, and sighed.

You may, reading between the lines, have acquired the suspicion that the mighty warlock was something of a secret coward. Well, what kind of man do you think craves that kind of power badly enough to grasp it bare-handed, to do what must be done to get it? This was the warlock's bane: millennia of utter security had nearly succeeded in boring the beard off him—and yet facing the problem squarely would have entailed admitting that he was too cowardly to permit any change in his circumstances. For the warlock, millennia of boredom were preferable to even a significant *possibility* that precious, irreplaceable he could be hurled from the Wheel. He preferred not to dwell on this with any part of his consciousness.

Not that this would-be assassin even remotely alarmed him. The portion of his awareness that had

absently divined its magicidal intent, and now idly watched its secret preparations for battle, felt, as has been said, some amusement, something like fondness (but not paternal, warlocks are as sterile as witches)—but his overriding emotion was something more than scorn, but less than true contempt.

Same old fallacies, he thought. First they acquire a rudimentary mind shield and they get cocky. As though I needed to read their thoughts to outthink them! He snorted. *And then they put their money on physical energies, three times out of five. They discover that magic, being deeply rooted in Earth, is limited to a sphere of 100,000 miles, while physical energies are not, and they decide that that somehow implies a superiority of some kind. Ephemerals!*

He recalled the last really challenging duel he had ever fought, countless centuries ago. He and the other had met on the highest peak on Earth, locked eyes for three and a half years, and then touched the tips of their index fingers together. The site of this meeting would one day be called the Marianas Trench, and the concussion had produced even more damage in the Other Plane.

The warlock looked upon the massive assembly of machinery which was supposed to threaten his—well, you couldn't say his *life*, even in jest, could you?—his peace of mind, then; and he sneered. This building full of junk was to be raised up against him? (Could you?)

All it does, he complained to himself, is whip up a hellish amount of electromagnetic energy and condense it into a beam. Can't the damned fool deduce that I must be transparent to that stuff? Hell

knows there are clues enough; I meditate above the ionosphere for years at a time. I've got a quarter of a mind to let the impertinent little bastard shoot that thing at me before I destroy it, just to see its face.

About that much of his mind considered the question for a few months. Meanwhile the bulk of his awareness, as it had for the last eight centuries, devoted itself to a leisurely study of how best to mutate human stock so as to increase the central nervous system's capacity to support agony. (Mess with the hypothalamus? Add new senses? Subtle, satisfying stuff.)

By hell, I will, decided that quarter of his mind then. *I'll let the impertinent cretin fire its toy at me, and I won't even notice! I'll ignore the whole thing, and it will go mad with rage. I'll be especially nice to it, for about a hundred years, and then I'll arbitrarily destroy it for some trivial offense or other. Delicious!*

And so it came to pass. The quarter of the warlock's mind which troubled itself with this matter savored the joy of anticipation for several years, so thoroughly in fact that he actually *did* fail to notice when the upstart wizard's harmless energy bolt passed through the space occupied by his body. The reflex that caused his physical essence to "sidestep" into the Other Plane was so automatic, so trivial, that it took a few weeks to come to even a quarter of his attention. He chuckled at that.

He also monitored the wizard's frustrated, impotent rage, at least on audio and video. (those damned mind shields *were* a nuisance sometimes), and found it good. He invested a fortnight or two in devising a fiendishly offhand destruction for the

chump, instructed himself to remember the affair in a century or so, and forgot the matter.

Those came to be called the Last Hundred Years of Pain, and they were long.

At last like a child recalling a hoarded sweet he rummaged in his mental pocket and turned out the matter of the hapless wizard. Memory reported that several other shots had been fired without disturbing his peace, and that the mortal gave every indication of being sobbing mad. Its aim had been going to hell for the last twenty or thirty years; some of the shots had missed him by wide margins. He chuckled, and abandoned his century-old plan for destroying the wight without ever acknowledging its attacks.

The hell, I'll tell it. It's more fun if it knows I've been playing with it.

At once he was standing before the wizard in the building of futile engines, clothed in fire. In his left hand was a sword that shimmered and crackled; in his right hand was something that could not be looked upon, even by him.

Oddly, considering its displayed stupidity, the ephemeral did not seem surprised to see him. Its anger was gone, as if it had never been; it met his gaze with something absurdly like serenity.

Machines began to melt around them, and the wizard teleported outdoors, the warlock of course following without thinking about it. They faced each other about five hundred feet above the top of the highest of many local mountains, and they locked eyes.

"You have come to destroy me," the wizard said quietly.

Of course, the warlock sent, disdaining speech. Lasers are harmless to me, of course, but they wouldn't be against one of you, and that makes it insulting. He frowned. *Had you dared attempt a genuine, necromantic assault, I might have been amused enough to simply kill you hidcously.* He gestured with the crackling sword at the building below them, which was also crackling. *But this incompetence must be culled from the breed.*

"We all do what we can," the wizard said.

Indeed. Well, here you go:

He rummaged in his subconscious' name file, came up with the wizard's true name, which was Jessica, incorporated that name into the thing in his right hand, and reached out toward the mortal.

"Not here!" she cried, teleporting upward like a stone hurled by a giant.

And why the hell not? the warlock thought as he pursued the creature effortlessly, intrigued enough to let a good thirty or forty thousand miles go by before deciding that enough was enough and hurling the thing in his right hand after her and averting his eyes.

She died the real death, then. Her soul was destroyed, instantly and forever, in a detonation so fierce that it was almost physically tangible.

The warlock grunted in satisfaction and began to go home to his aerie, when he noted that the wizard's physical body continued to exist, an empty hulk still hurtling toward the empty sky.

Now it chanced that the warlock had not had lunch. Straining a bit to reach it before it passed the limits of the sphere of sorcery, he retrieved the corpse, and poised there a moment with the crackling

sword ready in his left hand.

Suddenly he felt the mind shield he had accreted over thrice ten thousand years peel away like the skin of an orange; felt his true name effortlessly extracted from his memory. He felt himself *gripped* as though between some monstrous thumb and forefinger and *plucked* from the sphere of his power, yanked over closer to the sun where the light was better; and in the few helpless boiling-blood seconds before he died both kinds of deaths, the most powerful warlock in all the history of the world had time to understand two things: that the laser beams had not been aimed at him, and that this world is only one of billions in a sea of infinity.

Then, at long last, the end of all fear came to him, as it had come a century before to Saint Jessica.

FUGITIVE COLORS

by

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

Like a scream falling he fell away from Earth down the long night. The roar at his back had been loud once, but loud only to him; a cry that would reach no ears but his own. In the beginning he had found some sense in it, in the demonic threads of sound that reached out to him through the spume of stars. How easy it had sounded when he had volunteered for the voyage, and how difficult, how impossible, it had turned out to be. The glowing promises and assurances were sufficiently far behind him that they could no longer reach him, and the chance to correct their earthbound expectations was lost to him forever.

The old days had been different—no one had gone very far, and the umbilical cord of sound and sight held the adventurer as securely as a leash. Centaurus was reachable and there had been a kind of glory for him when he was the second to make the voyage and the first to return alive. Then they had told him of their new discovery, the culmination of a dream, the wished-for faster-than-light drive that would make a mockery of time and scoff at distances. He had believed them. He had wanted to believe them. He would go farther and longer than any man living, and still have half a lifetime to call his own on his return. There would be hundreds of light-years to his credit, and a chance to enjoy his place in history.

Arcturus tomorrow, they had promised him. He had listened to their explanations and accepted them, prepared to wait through the endless hours, the never-ending night. But the loneliness was too familiar and the dark a thing he had known before.

That was before the ship had changed, and now there were only impossible things in the ever-receding void. Strange splendor would occasionally rise in the dark and he would watch, thinking himself in the heart of a star. He remembered the change, that moment when his substance made the crossing which had robbed him of his sky, his light, of days that were marked with the position of those beacon stars that surged and faded and sang. Now he did not know the things that slid by him in the engulfing silence, for now they were not points of light, not the familiar mocking brightness, but strange elliptical vortices, showing colors that made no sense to him, colors for which he had no name. He thought of what he had

known before, the wanderings of the traditional animals in the sky, and he longed, uselessly, to return to that place where things were as they ought to be.

One idea niggled at the back of his mind, an idea he refused to recognize, one that he would not face; for if it were true, then he would no longer exist, and would be truly and ultimately separated from himself, rushing away into the dark at impossible speeds. Over and over he insisted to himself that since he could think, he must be cohesive.

It did him no good to look back. Aft there were the others, lost in their awesome sleep that defied the clocks of mortality: hoary they were, without awareness of their adventure, their uniqueness—without any knowledge, without senses—and as far as he knew, now without life. They were stopped, held in a waiting they could not feel in anticipation of a landfall that would never come.

Behind the cargo were the dormant volcanoes of his engines, not needed now that the change had occurred. And beyond the open, silent mouths of the engines was the dark, always the dark.

An ineffable pull tugged at him, the unknown and unfelt tide of Sol, his sun, his home, his light. He had experienced its touch before, going to Centaurus, but now it was part of his being, mixed with his bones, and it wore at him like pain. The shapes around him in the luminous dark were all strange, and none of them were as real to him as the star he could no longer see. It was yellow, he remembered, and gold, burning orange at sunset. He dared not admit to himself that these were words only, and he no longer knew whether yellow was like summer hillsides or

like old paper. He missed the touch of paper almost as much as he missed those summer hillsides.

He knew a kind of time was passing, that his body—if he still had a body—was tuned to its own finiteness, that there was a rhythm that lulled and waked him in seasons of its own while centuries flickered by. Looking out at the radiant dark, he pretended he knew the shapes that lived there. He was determined to understand their strangeness, to make it part of him and so lose the sense of being utterly lost. If a dark spot in a glowing constellation could be called a Coalsack, then he, too, would make names to identify the things he saw.

That curving luminosity, shifting across the blackness, suggesting softness and depth—that, he decided, was Celia. Celia, the woman he had spent his last earthbound night with, Celia who had been a gift of a grateful and generous government, the best of their payroll. She was lovely, he remembered, the color of new sand with hair bright as ripe corn. What a last-night fling she had given him! He had been more drunk with her body than he had ever been with wine. Tangled limbs and rumpled sheets, these returned to haunt him in the long, long dark, and he saw her in the night around him.

At first he had wondered if she would be there when he got back, but now it no longer mattered. He would not get back; he knew this. Even if he did, time would have harvested her long ago.

To take his mind away from these things he had turned to the micro library and the recordings, until he knew the words and sounds so well that they made no sense and could not move him. What did white

whales mean to him, when they were things of mortality and time.

When he had become desperate and so alone that he no longer thought of himself as human, he took women from the Cold Room, and superimposed his memories of Celia on them. They had been a delight at first. They were companionship, talk, soft touches and curling sleep. But they didn't last long, these women. For awhile, a very little while, they thrived with summer in their faces, but not for long. Eventually the shadow would come over them and they would wither, coming to hate him as they did.

So now he did not have the women. It was easier. Now Celia's image blossomed in his mind, warming him, touching him with the compelling bonds of Sol. It was better this way, he told himself, because this way his recollections were uncontaminated and complete, an entire picture without distortion.

He had the computer, though he had begun by resenting it, using it only for information. But as the distances grew more terrible, he hoped for company and understanding. He had Celia for his dreams, but even he could not dream forever. Once or twice he longed for his own kind with a longing that was close to madness, and he had asked the computer to find the others—the three other ships like his that had set out into the vastness at the same time he had. The other ships had been scattered like seeds, and logic told him that they must be somewhere. The machine could not do this thing and he blamed it for his isolation.

Time drifted on, sliding with the alien lights. For what may have been the tenth or fiftieth or hundred-thousandth time, he calculated the chances of finding Arcturus amid the wavering brightness. Would he, in this changed place, know if he were near it? Or would it be only another of the pools of shifting light that spread around him? He was enough of a mathematician to know that the chance was too remote to bother with.

He took to reverie as the ties of language forsook him, calling up the ghosts of his terrestrial life, seeing Cecelia, her pale skin, her hair like ripe grain, butter colored, falling softly on her rosy face. Her body was warm and filled with ripeness, a seedpod near its bursting. Was he mistaken, or had there been a light about her that imbued her with the brightness of the sun?

It troubled him that he might not remember clearly anymore, that this night had laid its fingers upon him and surely, secretly, plucked away his memories. For he knew that the days he had spent with Cecelia were special, that she had yearned for him and wept her distraction when they were parted at last. He knew that even now she would be waiting, a faded woman slipping into the quiet of the grave, wearing her sorrow like a banner. The limpid pools of her eyes would be muddied with age, deep crystal wells telling her story more surely than words.

How he longed for her, to lie with her, finite, at peace, in the tangible earth. Death was nothing here, where life itself eluded him. But there, with the grass and the rain, it would be fitting. No

matter what happened to him, the ship, guided by the computer would fling itself endlessly through the night. It would be an easy thing to be like Cecelia, if only for a little time. Little or long, it would mean nothing to him now. He would put himself into the sleep that was not sleep. The shapes in the night would not bother him and the memories of Cecelia would be fresh within him.

So, clutching Sol and Cecelia to him as the last rags of his humanity, he offered himself to the oblivion of the Cold Room.

*(Entity/vehicle/movement) around (us/this one):
(we/this one) will (communicate/align with/associate
with) (you/that one).*

It was a day without number when he woke again. The thing was in front of the ship, as distorted as the stars and lights that pinwheeled in the dark around it. The thing surged and flopped like a beached whale. He watched it come and wondered what it was and why it had wakened him.

The alien thing drew nearer, coming languidly through the great speeds, growing. It loomed, bulged, crested like a wave. He stared at it and found in it all the bogeys of his aeons-lost childhood. None of the others in the Cold Room had heard it, and none of the others had emerged from sleep. He inspected the chatterings of the computer, and dreaded the stranger for no reason other than strangeness.

The habits of solitude were strong in him, and

only Cecily was permitted to share in his memories. To have this thing he did not understand—a thing as distorted as the dark invading his place, his mind, manipulating him—filled him with disgust.

(Entity/vehicle/movement), (prepare/alter awareness) to (receive/participate) with (us/this one).

Frightened now, he waited. The thing outside, around his ship, throbbed steadily, beating like wings, or a heart, though there was no sound, and could be no sound.

(We/this one) will (detain/arrest/interrupt) (you/that one). (We/this one) will not (hold/keep/accompany) (you/that one) more than (we/this one) (find necessary/think important/consider reasonable). (We/this one) have (information/intelligence/data/insight) that (we/this one) must (impart/inform/adapt) to (you/that one).

The thing grew steadily nearer, dwarfing his ship and making him worry for the ones in the Cold Room, from which he had so recently emerged. In this alien place, with its uncharted tides and unpredictable occurrences, what might happen? He had been so eager for change, any change, and now that it had happened, he longed for the sameness he had disliked.

(We/this one) (request/insist/require) that (you/that one) (present/demonstrate) (your/that one's) (appearance/likeness/schematics).

He stared around his quarters, his living tomb, and could not remember what he looked like. What color was his hair? Was the strand across his eyes gray, or brown, or another color? Perhaps he was like Cecily: flower-faced, petal mouthed, eyes like

clear streams, body softly round with swelling fruit. Perhaps his hair shone like hammered gold that twisted and writhed in fantastic curls. He ached for the years they had spent together and the life they had shared. Even now, at this great distance, he could still remember the sad months before he left when he had tried to make her understand why he had to leave, and how she had begged him to stay, to turn away from the titles and honor and stay with her in the countryside, where the important officials could not find them. She had threatened to take her own life, saying that after so many years of devotion, she would never be able to go on without him. She had clung to him, breasts to his face, pulling at him.

Desperately he went to the computer, trusting that it had not forgotten its origins and would be able to communicate with the strange presence beyond the hull. A special display for such occasions had been programmed into the machine. He remembered how much thought and worry had gone into it: He waited as the unused circuits chattered into life, and then he saw a screen light up, and knew that there was a comparable display on the outer part of the ship.

A ball festooned with white rolled there, showing night and day marching across it endlessly. He stared at it, refusing to believe that he was seeing his home. Earth was like that? No, Earth was quite different. Earth was like Cecily. The pale yellow thing in the sky was not Sol, could not be Sol. There was not sufficient brightness, certainly not enough majesty. Sol was huge: it blazed in a glory

that rivaled the strange shapes in the dark. It was brilliant, shining, moving like glowing brass through the sky.

Now the screens showed other things. In front of a large building surrounded with thin, spiky towers more people than he remembered there were in the world jostled and gestured in the hazy heat. All wore engulfing clothes and had tiny, dark eyes. This was nothing like the people he saw in his mind—great splendid beings with faces like moons, like suns. On the screen a triangular cloth cupped the wind, dragging a wooden shell over a gray ocean. The man at the tiller bent to the list of the boat as he ran before the storm. Then that was gone and a boy—so small!—in bright, tattered clothes followed large, sleepy animals up the side of steep rocks. Beneath him there were valleys and small brown-roofed buildings like mushrooms. A woman like a cloud moved on the ends of her feet so that she seemed to float; her face was serene, masklike though beaded with sweat, and her long, taut body was bright as a flame. Lastly a man and a woman as black as their own shadows pushed their way through tangles of green toward a place in the rocks where water trickled.

“No,” he said in a voice rusty with disuse. No, it wasn’t like that at all. He remembered Earth, and it was not like that. The buildings were spires of many-colored metals and glass. The people were few and glorious.

(What/when) are those (demonstrations/appearances)?

“They’re supposed to be . . . people,” he said,

watching the images flicker. Something must have gone wrong with the computer after all this time, to have got people so wrong. Where were the ripe bodies like Cecily's, rounded and filled with the bursting fruit that came from their life together? Where were the eyes, large and water clear? How could the computer, with its superior logic, have drifted so far from the truth? He supposed that in all the vast time, there had been breakdowns—a bit gone here, a switch corroded there—until the picture it presented was no longer reliable or accurate.

(We/this one) (sense/perceive) some (discontinuity/confusion) in (you/that one). (We/this one) do not (appreciate/comprehend) the (cause/motivation/reason) for it.

He shook his head, frowning. On the screen he watched the thing that hovered beyond the ship. Did it have tentacles? Did it have a face? Did it have anything he would recognize as being part of a living being? Fervently he hoped that the thing might, in some unrevealed way, be familiar, perhaps rounded like Cecily, with soft, petaled features and twining curls. Even if the alien were horrible, he could bear it so long as the horror was something he knew and understood. A giant spider, a scorpion, any of those would be welcome.

Still somewhat fuddled from the Cold Room, he quickly ran a check on the computer, searching for those indications that would show the full extent of its damage. His fingers moved like sticks as he struggled to remember the proper way to form commands. Once or twice his eyes blurred. His attempt did no good. Whatever had happened to the

computer had occurred while he was in the Cold Room with the others, and he could not find the malfunction in order to correct it.

(We/this one) (desire/insist) that (you/that one) (make known/explain) the (purpose/intent) of (your/that one's) (presence/business) (here/now/immediately). (We/this one) will (inform/evaluate) (your/that one's) (response/reply/demonstration) and (we/this one) will (decide/judge/assess) (you/that one).

He couldn't remember anymore why he had come into space. There had been a promise, and it seemed worthwhile at the time. In the control room of the ship he waited, not thinking as the thing moved outside. He wanted to find something, he was certain of it, but he didn't think it was in this blackness where creatures he did not know accosted him and demanded explanations. It would have pleased him to scream. Earth was too many years gone. Now there was only Cecily. Only Cecily, her ripened, seed-filled body shone in the dark places and rivaled the lights. Like Cecily, he had been sent to scatter seed, the seeds that were in the Cold Room. They were to be cast across the sky, making them like Cecily, making them things of space, not of Earth. They had lied, long ago, when they had told him that there were places he could land, where Earth could grow in soil and continue. There was no soil, and if, in the vast eternal night, one little dust mote longed for new life, perhaps the broadcast seeds would land there and take root.

(You/that one), (we/this one) are (aware/perceptive) of (your/that one's) (destination/resolution).

(You/that one) are to find certain (bodies/solids) on which to (leave/deposit/plant) those others that sleep. (We/this one) (believe/surmise) that (you/that one) are from (not-like-this/[no concept]). (We/this one) are (sorry/dismayed/regretful) to inform (you/that one) that (you/that one) will be (unable/incapable/unequipped) to (return/reverse) to (not-like-this/[no concept]).

He tried to understand what the alien was telling him. Surely it did not mean that he would forever drift in space, and in all the vast years and distance to come, he would never find that dust mote he had been sent to discover.

(We/this one) (watch/guard/monitor) this (place/time/phenomenon). There have been (many/countless) like (you/that one). Never have any (returned/reversed/survived) into (not-like-this/[no concept]).

"But Cecily's back there!" He shouted it and the unused echoes rang through his ship. To be without Cecily forever, never to see her again, never to hold her bulging ripeness and feel the precious movements of the seeds as she brought them forth to scatter in the earth to grow . . . Never to know the satin petals of her face, the tendrils of her hair, the pools of her eyes . . . The loss hurt him as he thought of it.

(We/this one) do not (understand/comprehend) the nature of (your/that one's) (disturbance/upset/imbalance).

"It's Cecily," he said aloud, almost pleading with the thing that drifted in the dark. "We were lovers, Cecily and I, for years and years. Every day we

were together. We never spent a day apart. It nearly killed her to let me go. I was everything she ever wanted, and I was foolish enough to let them persuade me to leave her, though I knew then that I was being a fool. Her eyes were clear water; when she wept, it was like oceans and it broke my heart to see that." He paused, trying to find words that the presence might grasp. "She carried ripe seeds in her, and her body was full." He cried out. "I must go back!"

(We/this one) must (inform/notify) (you/that one) that an attempted (return/reversal) would (lead to/result) in (your/that one's) (discontinuation/nonviability/cessation).

Would he die? Was he stuck out here in this night with only the Cold Room and a computer to remind him of Earth? Mindlessly the ship provided him with food, but suppose he stopped eating it? Suppose he let himself drift with the time and forget the tides that drew him toward Earth, if only in his dreams. He clutched at his head as if his brain itself were bursting, making sounds that seemed like those of an animal, but he could no longer recall which one. The Cold Room tempted him more than death, because there it would not matter that eternity went by.

(Those/the others) are (terminable/finite). Yet (they/the others) have potential for (motion/life/actuality).

The observation penetrated his misery. "We were going to a star, or somewhere near it. They called it Arcturus. It was an experiment." He no longer cared about Arcturus. The loss of Cecily blotted out

the other, lesser disappointments. Forcefully, he shut her out of his mind so that he could express himself clearly. "The ones in the Cold Room are stopped. They can be started again. They are like clocks—all you must do is wind them up again to set them in motion. Then they will mark out the days with their lives in heartbeats." Did it understand, that thing in its dark, unfathomable speed?

(We/this one) have (empathy/understanding/compassion). To be terminable/finite is (undesirable/tragic/unfortunate). (We/this one) will (prepare/initiate) the (others/third ones) for a (better state/greater opportunity/more successful adaptation).

He turned quickly. "What are you saying? You can't take them. They're mortal. They can't live out there!" Again words escaped him and he rummaged in the attic of his mind for ways to make matters clear to the thing. "Listen, listen to me. They have no way to live here. They're not like you—they're like me, but asleep. They are finite, as you say, and they need a place a . . . planet, a solid where they can live." He waited for a response that did not come. "It's their clocks. They make rules, those clocks."

(You/that one), do not (alarm/disturb) (yourself/that one). It is (possible/accomplishable) to make the (others/third ones) like (us/this one).

"You can't!" he screamed in terror.

(You/that one), (we/this one) sorrowfully (inform/explain) that (you/that one) are (incapable/impossible) to (adapt/change/alter) to the conditions existing (here/now/at this place). (You/that one) will

(destroy/negate) (your/that one's) (body/ conveyance/manifestation) in the (attempt/demonstration).

His tenuous link with humanity was near breaking. He could feel it pull away like the bandage from some ancient wound. Now there was only Cynthia and his memories, and she would fade, he knew, if he let her. He recoiled at the thought. Should he resign from life entirely? He had stopped eating—when?—it was too long ago to remember. The ship had taken care of that, nourishing him with strange tubes and other devices while he slept. He had lost too much, he thought. It would not hurt to lose it all.

(You/that one), (parting/separation/transformation) of the (others/third ones) will be as (swift/unprolonged/efficient) as (we/this one) can (manage/perform/accomplish).

From the control room he watched as his ship was bled of its cargo, as the stranger drew the occupants of the Cold Room out into that vaster cold. As he watched, there was yet another thing before his ship, something like the first—a being, perhaps, a shape he did not recognize. The two things touched and intermingled, then began to drift apart. Spirals of light were around them, like storms or halos.

"Wait!" he called as he saw himself abandoned. "No! Make me like you. Change me, then! Don't leave me here." As he said it he could feel the freedom, to drift forever in the strange place where there were no stars and speed was so great that it had no sense of time. Then he could be as the water of Cynthia's eyes, deep and calm. There would be others like himself, and over the ages they would meet and see in each other something that was familiar, and he

would recall his humanity.

The first thing turned back toward his ship, its shape fluctuating eerily as colors he had no name for surged and ebbed in the bulk of the alien.

(We/this one) are (unable/incapable) of (doing/performing/accomplishing) the (task/change) that (you/that one) (request/desire).

"But the others!" There was panic in his voice. "The others are gone! Surely you can change me if you can change the others."

(You/that one) are not the (same/like) (we/this one). Only (terminable/finite) (beings/entities/creatures) can be (changed/transformed). (You/that one) are not (like this/similar). (You/that one) are (fixed/set/locked) as (you/that one) are (now/here).

He stared dumbly out at the thing, wanting its companionship. The shapes that wavered in the dark, that might have been stars or might have been the shadow of time, glared in their glory, as they had done for unimaginable ages, and would for ages more. What could he, a man from Earth, have in common with them? Why must he be exiled among them? He was stuck here, the thing had said, and could not change to be part of it. Despair churned through him, potent as poison. He wished that he had listened to the pleadings of his Cynthia and not left Earth. He could see the writhing tendrils of flame-licked gold that clung to the drooping petals of her face. Her body throbbed with seeds and with her grief. He could see the seams on her body that would open to spew out the seeds sometime after he had gone, parts of himself that would take root and grow. She was cold and smooth and felt like ivory. Why had he left

her? A woman like that, rich and fecund, how could he have left her?

Then he thought of the Cold Room. There was still sleep where he could wrap himself in the memory of her and with his dreams could relive her presence for all that was left of time. Involuntarily he took a step toward the Cold Room.

(We/this one) (opened/entered) the Cold Room. (You/that one) could not (sleep/survive/exist) there. (You/that one) must (remain/continue/stay) (awake/aware).

Awake. Forever awake. He reeled, then steadied himself. He could go into the Cold Room, and that would be the last of it. A sensation of freezing, an instant when breath caught in his throat, and then there would be sweet oblivion.

(We/this one) (changed/transformed/adjusted) the Cold Room. (You/that one) (cannot/are not) able to enter it.

His hands dropped. Yet there was not the same defeat. He could not recall dreams anymore. That was another one of his clocks that no longer worked. And without dreaming, there was no reason to sleep. So he could not enter the Cold Room. There must be other escapes. Once, long ago, he had heard that people who do not dream must go mad. Madness would take away his dream of Cynara, and all their love. He would have only the distorted sky for a companion, drawing him ever outward until he became, in his way, as alien as the thing that had wakened him. Trembling, he went to the screen and stared out, searching there for Cynara in the patterns of the dark. But she was not there. He could no longer discern the

ripe lines of her, the twining coils of her hair and the layered petals of her mouth. Nowhere was there that radiance that came from her alabaster body, rounded, gravid as the moon. He tried to picture her, to recall the sound of her voice, the shape of her. To have to leave her after their lifetime together, after the years of fruitful unity, was too much to demand of any man. She had rent her flesh to show how her love of him tore at her soul. And now, in the terrible dark, he could no longer find her.

His eyes burned as he watched. When he closed them, he could see the ghost of her once more, and dream of the closeness of their bodies. How he longed for sleep, for the night behind his eyes where there was more reality. Sometimes he thought he dozed, but this was not the sleep he knew. There was too much of the nightmare in the sky around him, glowing with Cynara's lost body and her ephemeral flesh.

Then, out of his wishes and the night, she came to him and her vast arms opened, her body molten with the ripened young she would scatter into the aeon-long night for love of him. Her hair twined, writhed, twisted, its serpent's life reaching out for him. Her mouth, nearing harvest, dripped petals that showed a wide stamen among them, and the pistil, spiky with pollen. Her body, thighs, arms, breasts, reached out for him, drawing him to her and her glorious flesh that nurtured, that grasped. The hidden seed-pods were opening, and the spikes of them were filled with venom. Legs as implacable as stone spread to catch him in a vise that would destroy him, crush him, break him into fragments as incomprehensible as

the sky. How much he desired her! How much he hated her.

Cynara moved toward him, closer, ever closer. Now the petals gaped wide and he could see the many rows of teeth that hid there, and the deep vortices of her eyes, where the madness and the whirlpools rolled. Her body gleamed, shone like pounded brass, sent off streams of brightness as she grew nearer, until the magnificent splendor of her filled the sky.

She was upon him.

Then he screamed.

Shuddering, he woke to look fearfully about the dark. Cyndra was gone; he was safe. Outside were only the oddities of the reaches of space. He sobbed with relief. It had been close, that time. The next time she might get him. He had forgotten how vindictive she could be, how possessive she was. But it was like that when you missed someone. You forgot the bad points and remembered the good. So far from Earth, it was not surprising that he did not want to remember the bad of her. Cyndra, he knew, was terrible when she was angry, and she had been angry when he left, though she had wept. She had not wanted him to leave her, and when she had clawed at him, there had been as much fury as love. He had seen venom in the petals then, and the dream had reminded him. How had he forgotten that?

But when he slept, if he slept again, she might return. He had to be on guard always, for there was no easy way to tell the difference between waking and sleep, not where time meant so little and the years ran together like rain and rivers. Uneasily he turned once more to the viewing screen and searched

in vain for the thing—the being that had stopped him and told him he would never return home.

The thing was gone, but Cymra was there, shining brightly in the dark—her face, her flesh brilliant, the luster of it spreading about his tiny ship until there seemed to be nothing but her. There was no place he could see where she did not appear, ready for him, poised, hoping for those dreams in which she might pounce on him for a last touching. Cymra beckoned to him.

He fled in terror down the sky, forever lost, his scream unheard, an infinite man seeking the embrace of death even as he flung himself into everlasting dark.

NEAR OF KIN

by

Octavia E. Butler

"She wanted you," my uncle said. "She didn't have to have a child, you know. Not even twenty-two years ago."

"I know." I sat down opposite him in a comfortable wooden rocking chair in the living room of my mother's apartment. At my feet were papers stuffed into a large cardboard lettuce box—papers loose and dog-eared, flat and enveloped, important and trivial, all jumbled together. Here was her marriage certificate, the deed to property she'd owned in Oregon, a handmade card done in green and red crayon on cheap age-darkened paper—"To Mama," it said. "Merry Christmas." I had made it

when I was six and given it to my grandmother whom I called mama then. Now I wondered whether my grandmother had passed it on to my mother along with a kindly lie.

"She was widowed just before you were born," my uncle said. "She just couldn't face caring for a child all alone."

"People do it all the time," I said.

"She wasn't 'people,' she was herself. She knew what she could handle and what she couldn't. She saw to it that you had a good home with your grandmother."

I looked at him, wondering why he still bothered to defend her. What difference did it make now what I felt for her—or didn't feel. "I remember when I was about eight," I said. "She came to see me, and I asked if I could stay with her for awhile. She said I couldn't, said she had to work, didn't have room, didn't have enough money, and a lot of other things. The message I got was that she didn't want to be bothered with me. So I asked her if she was really my mother or if maybe I was adopted."

My uncle winced. "What did she say?"

"Nothing. She hit me."

He sighed. "That temper of hers. She was too nervous, too high-strung. That was one of the reasons she left you with your grandmother."

"What were the others?"

"I think you just listed them. Lack of money, space, time . . ."

"Patience, love . . ."

My uncle shrugged. "Is that what you wanted to talk to me about? All your reasons for disliking

your mother?"

"No."

"Well?"

I stared at the box on the floor. The bottom of it had broken with the weight of the papers when I took it from my mother's closet. Maybe there was masking tape somewhere in the apartment. I got up to look, thinking my uncle might get tired of my silence and leave. He did that sometimes—his own quiet form of impatience. It used to scare me when I was little. Now, I would have almost welcomed it. If he left, I wouldn't have to tell him what I wanted to talk to him about . . . yet. He had always been a friend as well as a relative—my mother's five-years-older brother, and the only relative other than my grandmother who'd ever paid more than passing attention to me. He used to talk to me sometimes at my grandmother's house. He treated me like a little adult, because in spite of all the children his married brothers and sisters had, no one had ever convinced him that children were not little adults. He put a lot of pressure on me without realizing he was doing it, but still, I preferred him to the other aunts and uncles, to the old ladies who were my grandfather's friends, to anyone who had ever patted me on the head and told me to be a good little girl. I got along better with him than I had with my mother, so even now, especially now, I didn't want to lose him.

He was still there when I found the tape in a kitchen drawer. He hadn't moved except to take a paper out of the box. He sat reading it while I struggled to tape the box. It was awkward, but I

didn't expect him to help me unless I asked—any other male relative, perhaps, but not him.

"What is that?" I asked, glancing at the paper.

"One of your report cards. Fifth grade. Bad."

"Oh God. Throw it out."

"Don't you wonder why she kept it?"

"No. She . . . I think I understood her a little. I think she liked having had a child—I don't know, to prove her womanliness or something, and to see what she could produce. But once she had me, she didn't want to waste her time raising me."

"She had had four miscarriages before you, you know."

"She told me."

"And she did pay attention to you."

"Sometimes. Like whenever I got one of those rotten report cards, she would come over and bawl me out."

"Is that why you got them? To make her angry?"

"I got them because I didn't care one way or the other—until the day you came over and bawled me out and scared the hell out of me. Then I started to care."

"Wait a moment, I remember that. I wasn't trying to scare you. I just thought you had a brain and weren't using it, and I told you so."

"You did. You sat there looking angry and disgusted and I was afraid you'd give up on me altogether." I glanced at him. "You see? Even if I wasn't adopted, you were. I had to make sure I hung on to you."

That got as much of a smile out of him as

anything ever did, and the smile took years off him. He was fifty-seven now, slender, fine boned, still handsome. Everyone in my mother's family was that way—small, almost fragile looking. It made the women attractive. I thought it made the men attractive too, but I knew it had caused my male cousins to spend too much of their time fighting and showing off, trying to prove they were men. It had made them touchy and defensive. I don't know what it had done to this particular uncle when he was a boy, but he wasn't defensive now. If you made him angry, he could deliver an icy verbal shredding. If that wasn't enough, he could handle himself in a fight too—or he could when he was younger—but I had never seen him start trouble. My cousins disliked him, claimed he was ice-cold even when he wasn't angry. When I disagreed with them, they told me I was cold too. What difference did it make? My uncle and I got along comfortably together.

“What are you going to do with her things?” he asked.

“Sell them, give them to the Salvation Army, I don't know. Do you see anything you want?”

He got up and went into the bedroom, moving with that smooth, quick grace of his that time didn't seem to touch. He came back with a picture from my mother's dresser—an enlargement of a snapshot he had taken of my mother, grandmother, and me at Knott's Berry Farm when I was about twelve. Somehow, he had gotten us together and taken us all out for a treat. The picture was the only one I knew of that contained the three of us.

"It would have been better if you had gotten into that photo too," I said. "You should have had some stranger take the picture."

"No, you three look right together—three generations. Are you sure you don't want to keep this picture—or a copy of it?"

I shook my head. "It's yours. Don't you want anything else?"

"No. What are you going to do about that Oregon property? And I think she owned some in Arizona too."

"Everywhere but here," I muttered. "After all, if she'd used her money to buy a house here, I might have moved in on her. Where did all that money come from anyway? She was supposed to be so damn poor!"

"She's dead," said my uncle flatly. "How much more time and energy are you going to waste resenting her?"

"As little as possible," I said. "I can't quite turn it off like a water faucet though."

"Turn it off when I'm around. She was my sister and I loved her if you didn't." He said it very quietly, mildly.

"Okay."

There was silence until one of my aunts arrived. She hugged me when I let her in and cried all over me. I endured her because my mother had been her sister, too. She was a tiresome woman who used to visit my grandmother to talk about how gifted her own kids were while she patted me on the head and treated me like the family idiot.

"Stephen," she greeted my uncle. He hated his

first name. "What do you have there? A picture. Isn't that nice. Barbara was so pretty then. She was always a beauty. So natural at the funeral . . ."

She wandered into the bedroom and began going through my mother's things. At the closet, she sighed. She was at least twenty pounds heavier than my mother, though I could remember when they were the same size.

"What are you going to do with all these lovely things?" she asked me. "You should save some of them as keepsakes."

"Should I?" I said. I was going to get rid of all of them as soon as possible, of course—bundle them off to the Salvation Army. But this aunt, who had disapproved self-righteously of my mother's unmotherly behavior for years, would be outraged now if I seemed unsentimental about my mother's things.

"Stephen, are you helping out?" my aunt asked.

"No," said my uncle softly.

"Just keeping company, hmm? That's nice. Is there anything I can do?"

"Nothing," said my uncle—which was strange because the question had clearly been directed at me. She looked at him a little surprised, and he looked back expressionlessly.

"Well . . . if you need me for anything, you be sure and call me." She had gathered up a few pieces of my mother's jewelry. Now she grabbed the little black-and-white television. "You don't mind if I take this, do you? My younger kids fight so much over the tv . . ." She left.

My uncle looked after her and shook his head.

"She's your sister too," I said, smiling.

"If she wasn't . . . Never mind."

"What?"

"Nothing." That soft warning voice again. I ignored it.

"I know. She's a hypocrite—among other things. I think she liked my mother even less than I did."

"Why did you let her take those things?"

I looked at him. "Because I don't care what happens to anything in this apartment. I just don't care."

"Well . . ." He took a deep breath. "You're no hypocrite, at least. You mother left a will, you know."

"A will?"

"That property is fairly valuable. She left it to you."

"How do you know?"

"I have a copy of the will. She didn't trust anyone to find it in her things." He waved a hand toward the cardboard box. "Her brand of filing wasn't very dependable."

I nodded unhappily. "It sure wasn't. I don't have any idea what she has here. But look, isn't there any way you could take that property? I don't want it."

"She wanted to do something for you. Let her do it."

"But . . ."

"Let her do it."

I drew a deep breath, then let it out. "Did she leave you anything?"

"No."

"That doesn't seem right."

"I'm content—or I will be when you take what she's given you. There's some money, too."

I frowned, unable to imagine my mother saving any money. I hadn't even found out about the property until I began going through her things. The money was a little too much. But, at least, it gave me the opening I needed. "Is this money from her," I asked him, "or from you?"

He hesitated just for a second, then said, "It's in her will." But there was something wrong with the way he said it—as though I'd caught him a little off guard.

I smiled, but stopped when that seemed to make him uncomfortable. I didn't want to make him uncomfortable. I was going to—I had to—but I didn't look forward to it or take any pleasure in it.

"You're not devious," I told him. "You look as though you could be. You look secretive and controlled."

"I can't help the way I look."

"People tell me I look that way, too."

"No, you look like your mother."

"I think not. I think I look like my father."

He said nothing, just stared at me, frowning. I fingered a few of the dog-eared papers in the box. "Shall I still take the money?"

He did not answer. He only watched me in that way of his that people called cold. It wasn't—I knew what he was like when he was really cold. Now, it was more as though he were in pain, as though I were hurting him. I supposed I was, but I couldn't stop. It was too late to stop. I pressed my fingers nervously into the jumble of papers, then

looked down at them for a moment, suddenly resenting them. Why hadn't I stayed at college and left them, left everything to other relatives the way she had always left me to other relatives? Or, having come here like a responsible daughter to wind up my mother's affairs, why hadn't I done just that and kept my mouth shut? What would he do now? Leave? Would I lose him, too?

"I don't care," I said not looking at him. "It doesn't matter. I love you." I had said that to him before dozens of times, obscurely. But I had never said it in just those three words. It was as though I were asking permission somehow. *Is it all right for me to love you?*

"What have you got in that box?" he asked softly.

I frowned for a moment, not understanding. Then I realized what he thought—what my nervousness had made him think. "Nothing about this," I said, "at least nothing that I know of. Don't worry, I don't think she would have written anything down."

"Then how did you know?"

"I didn't know, I guessed. I guessed a long time ago."

"How?"

I kicked at the box. "There were a lot of things," I said. "I guess the easiest one to explain is the way we look, you and I. You should compare one of Grandmother's pictures of you as a young man with my face now—we could be twins. My mother was beautiful; her husband, from his pictures, was a big, handsome man—me . . . I just look like you."

"That doesn't have to mean anything."

"I know. But it meant a lot to me, together with some other less tangible things."

"A guess," he said bitterly. He leaned forward. "I'm really not very devious, am I?" He stood up, started toward the door. I got up quickly to block his way. We were the same height, exactly.

"Please don't go," I said. "Please."

He tried to put me aside gently, but I wouldn't move.

"Say it!" I insisted. "I'll never ask you again, nor will I ever repeat it. She's dead; it can't hurt her anymore." I hesitated. "Please don't walk away from me."

He sighed, looked at the floor for a moment, then at me. "Yes," he said softly.

I let him go, and found myself almost crying with relief. I had a father, then. I didn't feel as though I'd ever had a mother, but I had a father. "Thank you," I whispered.

"No one knows," he said. "Not your grandmother, not any of the relatives."

"They won't find out from me."

"No. I never worried about your telling others. I never worried about others except for the pain they might cause her and you—and the pain it might cause you . . . to know."

"I'm not in pain."

"No." He looked at me with what seemed to be amazement and I realized that he had been at least as frightened as I had.

"How did she have her husband's name put on my birth certificate?" I asked.

"By lying. It was a believable lie—her husband was alive when you were conceived. He had left her, but the family didn't find out about that until later, never found out about the timing."

"Did he leave because of you?"

"No. He left because he had found someone else—someone who had borne him a live child instead of having a miscarriage. She came to me when he left—came to talk, to cry, to work out some of her feelings . . ." He shrugged. "She and I were always close—too close." He shrugged again. "We loved each other. If it had been possible, I would have married her. I don't care how that sounds. I would have done it. As it was, we were afraid when she realized she was pregnant, but she wanted you. There was never any question about that."

I didn't believe him, even now. I believed what I had said before—that she had wanted a child to prove she was woman enough to have one. Once she had her proof, she went on to other things. But he had loved her and I loved him. I said nothing.

"She was always afraid you would find out," he said. "That was why she couldn't bring herself to keep you with her."

"She was ashamed of me."

"She was ashamed of herself."

I looked at him, trying to read his unreadable face. "Were you?"

He nodded. "Of myself—never of you."

"But you didn't just drop me the way she did."

"She didn't drop you either; she couldn't. Why do you think she was so upset when you asked her

if you were adopted?"

I shook my head. "She should have trusted me. She should have been more like you."

"She did the best she could as herself."

"I would have loved her. I wouldn't have cared."

"Knowing you, I think you might not have. She couldn't quite believe that though. She couldn't take the chance."

"Do you love me?"

"Yes. So did she, though you don't believe it."

"She and I . . . we should have gotten to know each other. We never did, really."

"No." There was silence, and he looked over at the box of papers. "If you find anything in there that you can't handle, bring it to me."

"All right."

"I'll call you about the will. Are you going back to school?"

"Yes."

He gave me one of his small smiles. "Then you'll need the money, won't you? I don't want to hear any more nonsense about your not taking it." He left, closing the door silently behind him.

VIBRATIONS

by

Robert Thurston

Gillian could be dead, for all I know. She has not called for such a long time—three weeks, at least. She always calls three or four times a month. I don't know where she is, haven't known where she is for more than two years. She's not dead, and she'll call soon. I can feel it, it is imminent. I know she's all right. My psychic powers tell me that—and hers tell her that I am all right.

But any moment that phone is going to ring.

Myself, I felt no psychic powers until after

Gillian was born. Even then my clairvoyant talents seemed minor. I barely noticed them, and found I had no use for them when I did. I have neither a desire to be famous—which for psychics means going on talk shows—nor a need to be a martyr—which for psychics means having Johnny Carson make jokes about you to your face. Right now I would prefer to lose it all: the little nudges that knock me awake in the middle of the night, my body trembling out of sync with my heartbeats, undefined nausea in my stomach, and the sweat pouring off me. I could do without the message speeding through my mind telling me to ignore the next message; and the odd, slight, sexual arousal which, while not especially relevant to the rest, is nevertheless disturbing to a man who has remained so firmly celibate for so many years.

Gillian's abilities are sharper than mine, although she claims they work in a similar muddled context. When the word was so in vogue, we called these intimations of the future *vibrations*. They were never more than that for me. Gillian had a self-conscious need, she said, to pass them off as vibes. Pleasant feelings before good times, intense sadness before the disaster hits. I liked the word, for my own abilities always seemed too trivial to be called precognition or clairvoyance, but too important to just be intuition. Vibrations seemed a good word; it was what they felt like. I don't know what word Gillian uses for them now.

When Gillian was a baby, Jane phoned me one morning at my studio and told me our daughter was

showing some odd symptoms. In the afternoon I felt the intuitive twinge. I dropped my paintbrush onto a new design for some tree-laden product label, and called Jane back.

"Get her to a hospital," I said, "right away."

By the time I arrived at the hospital, Gillian's illness had been diagnosed as a form of bronchitis. A succession of Greek-messenger interns brought us reports. I felt oppressed by the sterile waiting room. All the cracks, the structural flaws of the ancient building, seemed in some way painted over to a Kemtone uniformity. Jane, quiet but hysterical, rapidly turned the pages of a series of magazines. I went to a window and, without thinking about it, curled my arms in the way I normally held Gillian. For a moment I seemed to feel her weight in my arms. Then the weight was gone and I stood with my arms curved in a graceless way. Terrified, I whirled around. Jane caught some of my panic; she usually did.

"We can't stay here," I said. "I'm sure they're doing something wrong. Phone whatshisname—the guy we met at the Kiwanis thing—who runs that private place."

Right away she knew Dr. Henton's name, that the Kiwanis thing was the autumn-night paper drive and not the social evening, and that that place was Henton's sanatorium just outside of town. She called him. Henton sent an ambulance and arranged for Gillian's transferal. At the sanatorium I felt relaxed, safe. I sat in a leather chair in Henton's office and began to doze off to the tune of Jane's rippling pages. Just before I got to sleep I seemed

to feel Gillian in my arms again.

My premonition was, of course, justified. Some jerk had made the wrong diagnosis, and prescribed a dangerous medicine. Henton said she might have died.

We brought up Gillian well, I thought. We gave her the love and good things she deserved. As she grew up, I lost track of other pleasures, centered on close things: Jane, diapers, A & D Ointment, Gillian as a calm baby; Jane, bandages, touching without agitating the pain; Jane, party dress, Gillian swirling her skirt at a three-way mirror. Then, finally, there was Jane lying dead on the living room sofa, looking asleep, and Gillian in school colors standing by the picture window—the telephone still in her hand, and emitting a faint, sirenlike sound.

My daughter and I frequently used our abilities for each other—filling in blind spots, prodding in certain particular directions, that sort of thing. When she was nine, I had a chance to change jobs and didn't know what to do about it. I could not separate my vibrations from my natural cowardice.

I was a moderately successful artist with a special talent for designing labels. The company I then worked for still uses one of my designs, tomato lettering against a mustard background, on some of their line of products. I feel absurdly satisfied when I think of my label in stores, in people's cupboards—pleased when I think of label tearers working on its many-sided border. Another company had offered me a better-paying job. I

didn't like that company, but still . . .

I went to Gillian's room. She was sitting up in bed, reading *The Robe* by Lloyd C. Douglas. Her black hair, already quite long, rested on her tiny shoulders, as if arranged for a Renoir sitting. She listened attentively while I told her my problem.

"You shouldn't do it, Daddy."

"Why not?"

"You just shouldn't."

"But do you have a reason of your own? Do you like it better here—in this house, this town? Is it the school you don't want to leave—your friends?"

"Doesn't have anything to do with me. I can go. I don't care."

"Then why?"

"If you feel bad about it, don't do it."

"How do you know I feel bad about it?"

"Daddy . . ."

"Do you have any feelings about it?"

"Yep."

"Bad, huh?"

"Yep."

"Well, it's tough." I spoke much too pompously. "I guess life rarely offers clear-cut alternatives. I hope things'll be simpler for you when—"

"They probably won't, Daddy. I don't feel that they will."

I passed up the job. Occasionally I have regretted that, but sometimes I get visions of myself hunched over a mammoth desk, using papers as worry beads to get me through a long night.

After Jane died, Carl Wynant took charge of our

lives. Carl was an artist, too—and good at it. His paintings, intense abstracts mostly, sold well. I admired him, and he liked me for that.

Carl kept me occupied, ritualistically—bowling, movies, beer, that sort of thing. His schedule was so varied and complete that I fell behind in my work. By that time I had left the label job to become a political cartoonist and part-time reporter for the local newspaper.

So, one night I shouted at him to leave me alone and he told me I had recovered. Gillian was harder to cure.

"Maybe we should move away," she said one day in the car as I drove her home from school. She was seventeen and beautiful. I should have made a drawing of her then.

"That a premonition?"

"Sort of."

"Where to?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Jobs are tight right now."

"You could teach."

"I could always teach."

"I think we should go."

"Maybe you're right."

"I am. Please, Daddy, let's move away from here. This town is not so special."

"Maybe it's not."

But it was, and we stayed.

Carl's son, Keith, came home for the summer. Keith was three years older than Gillian. When he was eight, his mother broke three days' worth of

dirty dishes and ran off. She had been away two years when we first moved to the neighborhood.

Jane took to Keith right away. I didn't like him. Whenever he was around, I felt something bad was about to happen—and usually it did. Keith had a talent for knocking over breakable items, spilling liquids and food, tracking in mud, and making Gillian cry. To Jane he was merely a cute, blond child with lots of energy. She would imagine Keith and Gillian growing up together, falling in love, and starting the perfect marriage. This statement would usually start a fight, during which I would shout that we had the perfect marriage.

As a child, Keith had one of those crew cuts that make children look like in-training prison guards. As a teenager, his hair was loose and flowing, searching for the ideal surfboard. He would drag Gillian into my study (at that time she was gracefully going through the awkward age), sit by my desk, finger the edge of a T square, and start me talking about art. I talked about Jasper Johns and Jackson Pollock, and the need for an artist to constantly reevaluate his criteria. I was very bad on theory, yet he forced me to pretend that I, reckless wielder of the airbrush, knew something about the subject.

Going to Carl's house was even worse. Carl would greet us at the door, saying he had something important to show us—but not, as it turned out, his own latest work. Instead, he would proudly display a Keith watercolor of a childish sunset.

“The kid already has a feel for thrusting uncomplementary colors together and testing them for effect. I was practically out of art school before I

got anywhere with that kind of thing."

As Keith grew older, I began to hate his drawings and paintings. I thought he would never be anything more than a craftsman, a talented amateur. But Carl's reputation brought Keith early attention. As a high school senior, he exhibited at a local gallery. The newspaper gave the show a respectful review, mine. From then on our talks became me listening to him.

"Sir, your championing of artists like Paul Delvaux and Leonor Fini is well-founded, but is oriented toward a directional cul-de-sac, with a predilection for morbid realism over form and technique. You see . . ."

What I really hated was Gillian's sitting in my armchair and nodding at everything he said.

That summer he had a year to go on his bachelor's in art.

Junior year had given him an attack of social conscience; it was that time. He hadn't had a haircut in months. Gillian, of course, approved.

"Oughta let your hair grow some, Daddy. Let it rest against your collar, good 1930's-depression chic. Those Kiwanis wives'll devour you."

"I told you I'm not against—"

"Nice of you."

"Anyway, it looks all wrong on Keith. Reminds me of the wild abandon with which he swings a paintbrush."

"Score one. Well, you'll understand better when you understand what the movement's all about."

"I know enough. I watch the news on tv."

"That'll give it to you straight all right."

I believed in the "movement" later when I saw Gillian's swollen face after a riot.

Mourning shadows disappeared from Gillian's face, and she smiled often. She started letting her hair grow long and straight. She began to use eye makeup—strange purples and blues. She wore the same dresses differently.

Around mid-August there was a picnic, involving large contingents of the town's *haute couture*. By late afternoon I realized that I had not seen Gillian or Keith for quite a long time. I asked Carl if he knew where they were. He said Gillian was okay if she was with Keith. A vibration prodded. I slipped away from the group and headed into the adjoining forest, searching for suspicious footprints—sneakers two by two. For awhile I played Natty Bumppo games. I would notice something ahead and run forward, only to see a shadow disintegrate into smaller shadows, or the fleeing tip of a squirrel's tail. Eventually the path led up a steep hill. I worried that they might have become lost or hurt. At the top of the hill the woods seemed darker, more tangled, more like a jungle.

Suddenly I heard their voices ahead of me. For a moment I was afraid to proceed but, in the words of the prophet, I had come too far to turn back now. I felt decidedly unheroic, John Wayne backing into the saloon, as I trod my cautious way between fallen branches and twigs. In a minute I was looking across a stream at them.

They sat on the bank, their bare feet kicking out

ripples, holding hands (not even *holding* hands really, their hands just pressed against the ground, fingers just touching). Very Norman Rockwell, except that the two barefoot kids were discussing tactics in the event of the inevitable (Keith's word) failure of nonviolence.

"We have to do it now, can't you see that?"

"Yes, but violence—"

"Violence, shit. You forget what's important if your attention is fixed on the violence. They want you to do that, anything to keep your mind off what they are up to. Look, every generation is advised to wait around until tomorrow, and when tomorrow comes, what do they do? Tell the next generation to wait around until tomorrow, that's what."

"Well, I think I see your point."

" 'Course you do. You're not dumb, like the rest of those assholes."

Gillian looked very happy. The meager sunlight coming through the few open spaces created mysterious shifting highlights in her black hair. Although Keith was older, the blandness of his all-American looks overpowered the few lines of maturity in his face. On the other hand, a suggestion of the Orient in Gillian's high cheekbones and narrow eyes added a few years to her appearance. She looked like the goddess or countess in, say, an eighteenth-century painting; Keith was more the vassal or seedy aristocrat or centaur put there just for effect. You know—the goddess or countess returns to cloud or palace, while the other creature goes back to his day-to-day wheeling and dealing.

I watched them for a long time, until I could no longer stand watching Gillian agree to proposals of social violence. Then I went back to the picnic.

Later that week Gillian announced that she would turn down the college which had accepted her a whole year before, and make a last-minute application to the state university branch where Keith was a student. I tried to argue her out of it, without mentioning Keith. She'd thought it all out, and had set up her counter-arguments.

When I had nothing more to say, I said:

"I don't feel it's a good idea. My vib—"

"Well, I do. I feel very, very good about it."

"Do you?"

"Of course."

But I knew she was lying.

The phone rings at one A.M. I move toward it in slow motion. It's finally happened, I think; somebody's wheeled in artillery and Gillian is stumbling beneath falling debris. No, she couldn't be stumbling, she's phoning.

"Daddy?"

She sounds okay. At first she won't tell me what's wrong; instead she gossips about radical moves and establishment counter moves, making them sound like required courses.

"You all right, Gillian?"

Hesitation.

"Something's going to happen. I'm scared."

"And I am if you are. What do you think it's about?"

"I don't know."

"Anything planned?"

"I don't know--something, I think."

"But you don't have anything to do with it?"

"I will, I think."

"Don't. Stay in your room, stay in the library—or come home."

"I can't, Daddy. I've got to be with them."

"I know, they're your people and all—"

"Yes!"

"They won't miss you, if—"

"I know, but I've got to be there. It wouldn't be right not to, it—"

"It makes no difference."

"Maybe."

"Maybe not."

"Maybe, maybe not, I don't know, how—"

"Just be calm."

But she won't be. She hangs up, saying she'll be careful. I drive all night and part of the morning, arriving at the campus as the last traces of smoke cling to the grass. People are being dragged and wheeled away—a few people. Most are standing around, staring.

I stumble down hallways, dodge overturned desks, and slide across official memoranda. Gillian is being treated by a young policeman. He has tears in his eyes, the aftermath of sympathy, anger, or gas. Keith sits on the side of an uprooted water fountain, not a mark on him, though his hair is smudged.

One of Gillian's eyes is closed; both eyes are purpled. Three or four blood rivulets from a small forehead cut are being wiped away by the cop.

There are a couple of bruises on her face, one by her mouth. She looks up at me, and half-smiles.

"Hi, Daddy."

Keith gets off the water fountain, extends a hand, and says, "Hello, sir." He looks down at Gillian for my benefit. "Anything I can do, Jill?"

I'm not mad for the important things; I'm mad because he calls her Jill. We never called her Jill, and discouraged others from doing so. He always calls her Jill.

I talk to the cop. He won't arrest her; he never intended to. Gillian accuses me of interfering and asks to be taken to the tank, with her friends. The cop nods to me, then walks away. Keith and Gillian exchange a look, probably condemning me to some liberal wing of hell, but a minute later Gillian smiles and takes my arm, leaning the unswollen side of her face against my shoulder.

Gillian is home for the summer, and Keith wafts in and out of the house like a cold draught. He is going after his MFA in the fall. The paintbrush and pencil age has finally come to its end, he tells me.

"I'm into found art, sir."

"Found, profound, it's all the same to me."

"Daddy!"

They drag me to junkyards where Keith picks up rusty curved piping or the fragments of a doll's face. I offer him a ripped sneaker and he almost takes it. Gillian stands to the side and blesses both of us. Keith's hair is now shoulder length. Strands swing like pendulums between his sideburns and his nose.

He scatters the junk around his backyard until he feels he is ready. Then he grabs his tool chest, and starts fitting and twisting things together. Already, Gillian thinks it's well conceptualized. When he is not looking, I steal a cracked muffler and throw it over the back fence. Put together, the creation looks like a fitted and twisted pile of junk. Keith emerges from the cellar with three spray cans mounted on a board. He circles the pile, always keeping at least one can spraying. Finished, the thing looks like a pile of junk sprayed in three colors.

Carl comes out and inspects it, walking around it three times.

"Well, remember sculpture's not my line—never cared for the texture—but, far as I can tell, well, there's a lot of seething energy in the arrangement and the placing of colors; it's probably good. Sets me to thinking, what can I do with all the remains of six-packs in the garage."

Middle of the night, I hear her sneak out. I can't make myself move to follow her. For awhile she waits on the porch. Finally I go to her room, where there's a window on to the street. I pass by her uncreased bed, then—a long wait. Sometimes I hear the creak of the rocking chair on the porch.

A car comes down the hill, very quietly, with the motor shut off. As it passes the house she leaves the porch, turns right, and goes down the street. I can't see her anymore, but I hear the clicks of a car door opening and shutting, the faint sound of the car starting up.

Gillian is on tv at the next confrontation, which a newsman says is the biggest yet. She is usually near or next to Keith, who has been promoted to something like assistant spokesman. He has a long mustache now.

Later I call her. She lives off campus with some other girls. She always answers after one ring.

"You looked good on tv. Wyatt Earp looked pretty good, too."

"You don't understand."

"Of course I don't; I'm your father."

"Daddy, it's all right. This is the right thing; I feel it. We're going to make it this time. The vibes are terrific. They're going to back down, they're—"

"Okay, but if any cop comes at you with his club drawn, you hide behind the nearest jock, right?"

"Sure. But there's not going to be any more violence."

She's right, as it turns out. The next day she calls collect and reads me about twenty pages worth of concessions her group has won.

Renaissance: Keith goes back to paint and canvas. With a pencil he divides up the canvas into many areas—geometric figures, blobs, long tubelike shapes. At random, he numbers the areas. The numbers correspond to the classification numbers on tubes of oil paint. He applies the numbered colors to their numbered areas on the canvas. The result looks like hastily sketched shapes colored at random.

He tells me that anarchy is the foundation of his

work. I ask Gillian if she's an anarchist, too. She says that, when the time comes, she will register as an independent.

He takes a gross of his paint-by-numbers to an outdoor art show. For the first few hours, people pass his booth without showing much interest, but later there's a run on Keith Wynant originals.

"See," Gillian says. "See?"

He gives me one of the paintings. I can't decide whether to hang it above the potholders or next to the oil furnace.

She calls me from a pay telephone:

"I'm afraid."

"I can tell. Why?"

Hesitation.

"I can't get anybody to leave our place."

"Who? Who's there?"

"People. Friends."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know. I never know."

The next day Carl calls and tells me there's been trouble; Keith has been busted on drug charges last night. I ask if Gillian is okay. He says that he forgot to ask, and I get mad at him for it. But he calms me down with his gruff voice, saying he's sorry, but his own son was on his mind. After a pause, he says that it is possible that Gillian was arrested, too, since the bust took place in *their* flat. Their flat—he stumbles over the words; he does not like telling me that he knew Gillian was living with Keith and not with girl friends anymore. They had made Carl vow secrecy. I resent Carl's having the privilege, but I let

him off the hook, saying I understand.

After hanging up on him, I phone Gillian. The first ring breaks off abruptly:

"Hello."

"Gillian, I—"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"You all right? They didn't arrest you, did—"

"No, I'm okay—unarrested. My goddamned prescience worked to my advantage this time. I was on the phone with you."

Reluctantly, she supplies details: a paid police informer, who'd infiltrated school political circles, led the raid. The informer had been the one who always wanted to bomb something, she said. The purpose of the bust was to slow down the radicals' political progress. They got a few other leaders besides Keith, but they had especially wanted him—to put him out of the way for awhile, out of trouble.

"Keith's so stupid; he was sitting right by the stash and they're going to get him just like they want, lay the heaviest charges on him. He might go to jail for years. It can't happen; I love him too much."

My voice gets strange; I mimic frogs and canaries. I'm glad she doesn't have to see my face when I have to listen to her tell me that she and Keith have been shacking up, and plan to get married soon.

For awhile after that, Keith tried to win me over—Gillian's coaching. Still, his eyes were veiled. We practiced a Victorian gentility, a drawing-room ritual of affability. With Gillian acting as withdrawn

as a nineteenth-century heroine, I was as isolated from real affection as a Victorian patriarch.

The trial was a long time coming. Keith's lawyer, George Trufoot, a drug-case specialist, had hair longer than his client's. He shook it the way a dog flings its ears after a dip in the water. The trial's starting date was postponed several times. The claim of suppression of evidence kept the thing going for at least six months. Keith received his MFA and, in spite of the trial, easily got a New York City teaching job.

"Under the circumstances," Gillian announced, "I think I'd rather be a dropout. School's a shuck, anyway—wasted time pursuing credits instead of knowledge."

"Well, yes, there're some ridiculous requirements and stereotypes and—"

"Nah, you can't charm me into it. I just want to marry Keith and we can work together on destroying this goddamned decadent society."

"In what sense, destroy?"

"Whatever."

"Charming."

"I don't want to throw you off or anything, but I know you'd like to stop the marriage and are even willing to discuss politics if it's the only way to stall."

"Gillian, how—"

"Precognitive ability does tend to dampen certain conversations, doesn't it?"

Finally, though, she agreed to finish school.

"But I categorically refuse to work at it. I am in danger of graduating with honors, and we can't have that."

She received her BA a semester after Keith got his MFA. However, they decided, at my urging, to wait until after the trial to marry. A feeble strategy, but I never claimed to be Ozzie Nelson.

Trufoot worked out a plea bargain. Keith pleaded guilty to reduced charges, and the judge gave him a year's probation.

"You don't seem happy," I said to Gillian after the hearing.

"No. I'm relieved, but I'm mad, too—at the compromise. Everybody compromises everybody else until there's no meaning. Keith is muzzled. He's got to be a good boy, avoid trouble. And he's lost, well, he's lost rank. All he'll be good for is menial things, mimeos—"

"Thirties radicals were overjoyed just to do that."

"I suppose, but it's not fair. People in the movement are already treating him cheaply; it's like the establishment getting rid of their fading personnel. 'Sorry, Charlie, we still like you, but business is business and you gotta be able to give one hundred percent at all times.' I told him that, but he just got mad at me. There's no way out—no interesting way, anyhow."

"What are you going to do then?"

"I don't know, but we'll think of something."

"Marriage?"

"Maybe."

"What about the draft lottery?"

"What about it?"

"Shouldn't you two wait until you see how it comes out for Keith?"

"Daddy, you don't stop, do you? I think I'd rather have you throw me out of the house or something. Your—"

"I'm just saying you should take the lottery seriously. Keith's number might—"

"Why should he acknowledge it at all? He'd just be capitulating to the system by doing *anything*, anything they tell him, or just answering any call. So why do anything? Hell, they get you one way or another. They got you, didn't they?"

"Yes, but—"

"That's the old apology for following orders: Yes, but."

Keith wavered. He told Gillian he did not want to go into the army, yet he also didn't want to leave the country or try any other dodge.

Gillian stayed with me while he started his new job and prepared for his first New York exhibition. He had returned to abstracts and was doing his best work. During the day, she puttered around her room or took long walks, which was all right with me since I had to be at the paper in the mornings and was busy with free-lance commercial work at my studio in the afternoons.

Evenings Gillian went with me wherever I wanted to go, saying she wanted to defer to the desires of her father in his declining years. I tested her, first taking her to a bowling alley on league night just to watch. Amid the unathletic odors of booze and cigarettes, she discoursed professionally on the action. I took her to a tavern. She told dirtier jokes than its habitués and followed them up with

arguments on politics. I took her on drives, on dull tours, on odd flights of fancy. Whatever we did, she found something to enjoy in it.

Some nights she seemed moody, and then I knew that she had just received a letter from Keith, or was about to.

"Feel okay about things?" I asked her on one of the moody nights.

"What things?"

"In general: life, future."

Hesitation, while she considered a lie.

"No. No, I feel scared, as a matter of fact."

"About?"

"Things in general: life, future."

"Specifically?"

"Well, if you want something in an occult vein, my mood is dark and I have scary vibrations of impending disaster—not a big-deal one, just something that's building, and may not take place for awhile yet."

"And it has to do with Keith?"

"Probably. Yeah, I think so."

"I've been getting some, well, odd feelings, too."

"If we don't get any better, we'll never be able to take the act out on the road."

Keith's exhibition was a disaster: lukewarm reviews and a lot of sly mentions of Carl. Gillian went down for the opening, the wired me she *had* to stay. My sense of coming doom grew stronger. A few days later, I got a call from her.

"Hi Daddy."

"Hello there."

"Hello, old sport."

"Where are you?"

"Sending you greetings and a cheery hello from the bush country of Connecticut."

"That's three hellos. You sound drunk. Are you drunk?"

"He says I sound drunk. Do I sound drunk to you?"

"Who are you talking to?"

"Well, you know what you can do. He says I do sound drunk."

"Who? Who says?"

"Keith, of course. He agrees with you, which must be a first."

"What are you doing in Connecticut?"

"Well, I'm not drunk. I haven't had anything today, a drink or anything. Except the champagne at breakfast, but that was only a glass, and hours ago."

"Why are you in Connecticut?"

"Getting married. No. *Got* married—at ten-thirty this morning. And I'm not staying around to hear your reaction right now. I'll call you soon, day or so. I love you. Good-bye."

"Gillian—Gillian."

She had hung up. The next day she called again, whispering into the receiver:

"I'm very happy. Happy as a lark in the park in the dark. Please don't hate us too much. I love him. Everything's okay, nothing to worry."

She sent me a long letter from New York City. Keith's school had refused to renew his contract. His department head had written a perfunctory

letter, damaging in its brevity, for his employment file. The job market was contracting.

She called again a few days later.

"Something's going to happen, anytime now."

"What do you think?"

"It's something Keith's going to try to do. He's been acting odd—"

"What's he doing?"

"Nothing, that's what's so bad. He's depressed that his draft number was so low and that he passed the army physical with flying colors. He's skipping his classes and walking a big arc around his studio door."

"There's nothing anybody can do?"

"I don't know. I've *begged* him to impregnate me and, if that fails, to claim he's a homosexual. But he refuses all options, doesn't even joke about it or anything."

"As I recall, being drafted hasn't usually been a joking matter. When I was faced with the service, I—"

"Please, Daddy, no war stories, huh?"

"Sure."

"It makes no sense. He's twenty-five—much, *much* too old to go into the army right now. Can't they see that? Why couldn't they have rejected him for his radical politics or his drug conviction?"

"It wasn't a felony and—"

"I know, I know—"

"Why don't you two come back here, and we can—"

"Futz on that, Daddy. I know your traps: reason and comfort. Just be easy with me right now. I'm

wasting your money with all these collect calls.”

“That’s all right.”

“I—oh, I don’t know. What can I say to him? He doesn’t believe in my feelings anymore; he says precognition is a series of accidents that the seer adjusts to his personal needs. He used to—oh, hell, it doesn’t matter. I’m just looking for something to say to him that he won’t turn down out of hand. Something—today he told me that, if his beliefs meant anything, they would be demeaned by corrupt attempts to avoid involvement in a corrupt system. If his *beliefs* meant anything, *if*—God! He said the best thing might just be to test his *beliefs* in action. Some action! He’ll get his action—in a battle zone. That’s what good it’ll do him. That’s what good his *beliefs*’ll do him. I don’t know what to do.”

On her next call, I didn’t want to pick up the receiver. When I finally did, it seemed that she’d started talking as soon as she’d heard the click.

“—just awful, I don’t know, it’s just awful. I don’t see how—why—the whole thing is so stupid, I’ll—”

“Hold off a minute. What’s happened?”

“What I told you. I told you something bad would happen.”

“What is it?”

“He’s enlisted, the stupid *idiot* has—”

“Enlisted? What are you talking about?”

“Keith has goddamned enlisted in the goddamned army. He’s not going to wait for them even, for the draft—or defy them. It’s all got something to do with his *beliefs* again. The stupid idiot’s thinking

he's on the way to ethics or something."

"Calm down, calm."

"I'm sorry. We've just spent the last three hours arguing and I can't cope."

"Cope with me. When he goes, come home."

"I've already arranged for the ticket."

Home, she brooded over Keith's brief, scrawled, vague letters. One was a series of disconnected sentences about drafts of chill air coming through a broken windowpane. She went from best-seller reading to cooking strange exotic foods, to the knitting of samplers with antiestablishment slogans on them, to tarot and I Ching, but no distractions seemed to satisfy her, or revive her spirits. I asked her one night about her psychic experiences.

"They're not special," she said, "at least in contrast to what others've experienced. Just a few vibes, and most of them come true, I guess, but little more than that. There are, after all, records of people having the most vivid, frightening psychic events. Sometimes I've almost envied them that. At least they could be sure. But mine, mine seem like they should be more intense, detailed—you know, flashes of insight. My whatever you call it, my ESPing, seems clouded, like looking through glass that somebody's breathed on—and not always so accurate. Sometimes I feel strongly that something's going to happen, and I steel myself for it—you know, suck in air and tense the correct muscles—and nothing happens. The next day is placid, slightly overcast, and uneventful. Keith used to really mock me on *those* days. He turned so much

against my vibrations, I became afraid to tell him when they happened. The only time he was especially respectful was after the bust."

She smiled. For a moment I could see her mother's face in hers. It was an illusion caused by the flickering of one of the many fancy candles Gillian had scattered around the house. My finger traced an outline of her profile on the arm of the chair I sat in.

"Anything changed, anything different about your perceptions lately?"

"Yes, how did you know? Of course, you know. Yeah, *something*, I'm not sure what. It's as if I could see just a little better, but not much . . . as if things had become outlined briefly in a fog—very fuzzily, unspecifically. I get flashes of these out-of-focus pictures. Like lately it's been someone running—can't tell whether man or woman—but someone running."

Keith did the running, all the way from boot camp to our house, without the approval or permission of the United States Army.

"It was barbaric, Daddy. You should hear what he had to go through."

"I don't want to hear it."

"Why not?"

"I went through it myself twenty-five years ago."

"But that's different."

"Why? Have the training procedures changed? Do they flay, burn, or puncture now?"

"It meant something more then."

"Not really. Not basic training anyway."

"Well, okay, your way. You were a great soldier. Some people adapt, but Keith . . . Keith's an artist."

"And I just do labels and cartoons and—"

"That's not what I goddamned meant!"

"I know, I know—but just keep some perspective. You're not—"

"He's in my room."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Help. Find some—"

"This is not a matter for—"

"Just—"

She stopped talking and ran to her room.

"Best thing may be to get out of the country," I said to Keith. "Go to Canada or something."

"No. I don't feel like a criminal and I'm not going to act like one."

"That might be a good line for Henry Fonda, but for you—"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Well then, what are you going to do?"

"I just want to be with Jill. That's all, being with Jill."

"But they'll be coming here looking for you."

"Eventually, but it takes a lot of time now. They don't run down AWOL's as fast as they used to—behind in their paperwork, highest desertion rate in years."

"Well, so they don't come for a long time. What good is that? You'll still go to jail."

"Maybe, maybe not. With a good lawyer like Trufoot, and my army record, I don't think they'll be all that eager to keep me, even in a stockade."

"You can't get out that easily—unless you mean dishonorable discharge."

He smiled. I couldn't continue arguing, especially when Gillian smiled right along with him.

The next few days I acted like a criminal—slipping out of the house, looking up and down the street for suspicious streetlight leaners, for strange parked cars. Carl, not at all alarmed by his son's desertion, came over to the house every day and chatted with Keith about trends in art. Gillian went about the house singing, handled dishes with delicate abandon, and gave me some extra hugs. In some ways, perhaps, her happiness was desperate, the kind you buy at a discount and do not expect to last after its mechanism has run down. She and Keith went out together often.

"Aren't you taking an awful chance?" I asked.

"Sir," Keith said, "Jill and I can't buy the old prisoner-in-the-attic routine. You know, where the guy stays crouched in a corner, standing up only when people bring him thermoses of soup? Nobody here is paying any attention. You can hide out right in the open nowadays."

Gillian kept saying there was no need to be afraid until the vibes changed. As two months passed, apprehension developed gradually for both of us. It came like gas slipping through cracks—first the lessening of spirits, the constant feeling of a low note played vibrato, then gloom, and finally fear.

"It's worse than ever," she said. "I feel, I don't know, violence maybe. I can't describe it, it's too vague, mixed up; movements are occurring too fast

to sort out. Keith's got to leave. He's got to."

But he would not. He was so sure of himself, so laconic about the possibility of disaster.

When they did come, they were a disappointment. Instead of massive military thugs, we got two little guys, both around five feet six. There was some thickness in their shoulders, but little else to recommend them for recruitment-poster modeling. One talked with a lisp, the other had a genteel New England accent. New England did most of the talking.

"We're looking for Keith Wynant," he said. "He's here."

I let them into the house. We stood together in the hallway, without speaking. New England broke the silence. As he spoke, I heard footsteps on the stairs and turned to see Gillian coming downstairs, a troubled look on her face.

"Where is he?" New England said.

I started to answer, but Gillian spoke first:

"I'm Mrs. Keith Wynant. What do you want?"

There was a nervousness in her voice that an outsider would not detect. New England did not; he repeated his mission in a businesslike way. Gillian stared at him. Her face partly in shadow as if in a calculated pose, she looked imperial. She did not reply to the man, but instead descended the last stairs, turned, and pointed upward. The investigators took the stairs by the numbers. Gillian, afraid, squeezed my hand.

"What is it?"

"They're not going to find him."

"What—"

"Cari called up a few minutes ago. Those bastards stopped at his house first."

"Well, Keith's been expecting this, hasn't—"

"I know, but suddenly he got scared. I mean *really* scared, Daddy. I told him so what's to be afraid of, but he wouldn't say anything, except that he wouldn't spend another five minutes back there, back there with them. Then he watched those men come here, from the window—across the street, up the walk, until they got to the door. Just before you let them in, he said good-bye quickly to me and kissed me. Then he went to the back bedroom, out through the window onto the porch roof, and down onto the lawn."

There was pride in her voice. She did not see the cowardice. When you planned to destroy the system, expediency was bravery.

As the lisping investigator called in the police, the other one began the search. Police cars were stationed at either end of the block. Uniforms emerged from and disappeared into greenery. People in the neighborhood sought good vantage points. I stood with Gillian at the edge of our lawn.

"How do you feel?" I asked her.

"Awful. They'll catch him. They're going to."

New England came to me.

"Don't worry, sir, ma'am. We're experienced at this sort of thing. Nobody'll get hurt."

"Wrong."

"What was that, ma'am?"

"You're wrong. You're going to get hurt, for one."

He glanced at me.

"Well then, all right, ma'am, but I'll try not to get hurt and make sure nobody else gets hurt."

"Army pig."

"Gillian!"

"It's all right, sir. Don't worry."

New England, efficient, decided to check Carl's house again, even though the first search there had turned up nothing. Keith never let him get near it. He shouted from a downstairs window:

"I have a gun!"

New England ran back behind a parked car. Quickly the remaining policemen converged on the house, putting it under siege. Gillian and I reached the fringe of the blockade before being stopped by a police officer. A few minutes later a plainclothesman came and told me Carl was on the phone back at my house. He wanted to talk to me.

His voice was calm.

"Keith sneaked into the house in between searches. He's found the gun."

"Gun? What gun?"

Gillian pulled at my arm.

"No gun," she said. "No gun."

"Dates back to the time I sought a direct influence from nature in my work," Carl said.

"I didn't know you had a nature period."

"Daddy . . ."

"Years ago. I needed rejuvenation, every brush stroke was stale, so I thought a return to nature might work. Revive my Wisconsin childhood when I'd started to separate things of real life into splotches of color—"

"But why the gun?"

"I needed the whole bit, the real thing. I got myself a gun and a red-checkered hunting jacket, spent half a month in the woods, then came back refreshed and ready to work."

"I don't remember anything in your work expressing any sort of love for the outdoors or any—"

"It's all in abstracts, a whole series. But it's there, definitely—"

"You'll have to show me."

"I will."

"They're talking goddamned shop," Gillian said to the plainclothesman.

"And Keith's got the gun now?"

"Yep, the same one. He knew exactly where it was—a trunk in the cellar. He always liked to rummage through old trunks and boxes. I don't even know if he knows how to use it—or even if it works."

"Why shouldn't it work?"

"No telling what condition it's in, looks a little rusty; it might blow up in his face. Jesus, I tried to talk to him, but he won't listen."

"Maybe he'll talk to Gillian."

"Yes, please let me talk to him, please."

"No, already asked. He won't talk to anybody."

"Give me the phone."

"He says he won't talk with you or anybody."

"Please, Daddy . . ."

"Stay out of the way."

"I goddamned will not stay—"

"Stop! I'm doing the best—Carl, what does he say?"

"He says nobody thinks he'll do anything, but he will. I've never seen him like this before."

The plainclothesman gestured me away from the phone, and took Gillian and me aside.

"We want to use tear gas, it's the safest and—"

"No!" Gillian whispered.

"She's been through that before," I said to him.

"We've threatened him with it, but he doesn't seem to care."

"Why should he?" Gillian said. "Tear gas, that's all you—"

"Gillian, he's only trying to help, to prepare us for the—"

"Sure, he's a traffic director pointing the way to the ovens."

New England came into the room, followed by his companion investigator. He said he regretted the use of gas, but agreed to it. During the calm discussion between the army men and the police, Gillian looked from one person to another. She appeared more and more frightened as they came to their final decision.

"No," she said, grabbing my arm. "This is the wrong thing to do. I know it. You know I know it. I feel it. Make them listen."

She began to cry. Normally I would have seen her as a child, my kid in trouble, or as my intellectual peer with whom I could come to an understanding, the only person willing to trade feelings with me. Instead I collapsed inward and whispered:

"Stop. These men aren't your enemies. You can't go on fitting everything into all those slots of paralyzed prejudice."

The look she gave me made me feel suddenly embalmed. She let go of my arm. I had an intuition of a possible future: an older Gillian staring coldly across a freshly dug grave, while I tried to hide the shovelful of dirt I held.

"I'm sorry," I said.

The crowd around Carl's house had grown large. Factions had developed. One side believed that Keith, and all deserters, should be shot. Another made peace signs at passing cameras. As the policemen armed with tear-gas guns crossed the open area, Keith's sympathizers booed and set up a chant, "Power to the People." A newsman came toward us, aiming his microphone like a bayonet. I steered Gillian away. He saw my move and changed his direction. Gillian, watching the house, did not notice him. I didn't know what to do; I felt trapped, diverted from the main action, a small piece of the crowd at the corner of the movie screen. The newsman got nearer, his opening question set and ready to be launched. Gillian kept muttering obscenities. I held her close, turned my back on the attacker, felt I could already sense the first breath of aspiration from his first syllable. I was about to turn on him, fists clenched and arms swinging.

Gillian screamed Keith's name and pulled away from me, just before the explosion of a gunshot. I looked toward the house, just in time to see New England finishing a fall, his hands already grabbing at his side. Tear-gas guns were fired immediately with their low, seemingly abbreviated sounds of thrust. A canister landed in shrubbery in front of

Keith's window. The other went through. For a moment gas seemed to screen the house.

The lisping investigator ran to his companion, who lay still on the lawn, and began to administer to him. Police pointed rifles toward the door of the house. Some of the crowd headed for cover; others held their ground, fascinated by the tv program come alive. The only rapid movement was Gillian's running toward the house.

Carl appeared suddenly through the haze, one hand raised, the other holding a handkerchief to his face. Gillian almost ran into him. He screamed something at her. She squirmed out of his one-armed grasp, wheeled full circle, and headed for the house again. While still running, she reached out. A second later the rest of us saw Keith coming out of the fog. They embraced, a pretty scene had it not been for the tear-gas background and the advancing cops. The man with the lisp got to Keith first. He pulled at his arm almost childishly, as if the argument were over a broken toy—the little kid out to punish the big kid. But the little kid had special army training for just such a situation. Not only did he forcefully separate Gillian and Keith, he also got in two good punches at Keith's jaw before the police pulled them apart. They led Keith away. I came close enough to hear him shout back at Gillian:

"I wasn't aiming at him, Jill. It was the stupid gun. I wasn't even fucking aiming at him."

His assailant looked to where New England was being treated by medics. A path was being cleared for an ambulance which was backing in along the

sidewalk. I checked the wounded man's condition. His eyes were open and he had a stiff smile on his face. An attendant whispered to him and he muttered back. Behind me, a voice said:

"Thon of a bitch. We get him back, I'll cut hith ballth off—perthonally."

I looked around. He was addressing me. He meant for me to approve.

As they led Keith to the patrol wagon, some of the crowd shouted curses at him; others chanted louder. A couple of teenagers stretched their arms into his path and tried to touch him, as if he were a star quarterback or a Kennedy.

New England had charged the house ahead of the signal to the tear-gas cops. Although he realized that he had committed an offside, his military reflexes had prodded him forward. Panicked, Keith had fired the gun, intending only a warning shot.

Carl and I stayed with Gillian while Keith was arraigned and booked. Afterward, we went home and watched it happen all over again on the eleven o'clock news on all three channels. We were so exhausted that the action-central late-breaking bulletin announcing New England's wound as not critical hardly buoyed our spirits.

The next day the plainclothesman dropped by to tell us that New England, up and around already, had convinced the authorities to drop all civilian charges. For a moment Gillian thought he was free, then the man explained that Keith would have to return to camp and face court-martial. He said it calmly, as if he thought that Keith had really gotten off easy.

He returned seven months later, discharged as an undesirable. Trufoot could not get him completely off, so he spent some time in a stockade. Whatever had happened to him there, he was not talking about it, even to Gillian. Sometimes he talked in a surly growl to one or both of us; then his eyes went blank when he apologized. In their room, Gillian's former bedroom, he spent hours listening to rock music on stereo headphones.

"You ask him about that," she said, "and he snaps your head off. That's what really tears me up. I want to get out and get doing. There's so much to be done. My God, this country's going fascist by cartwheels and he won't come out from under his 'phones."

Another time she said:

"I'm getting terrible vibrations from him. Oppressive. It's like he's going to do something terrible and I don't know what."

He became angry easily. Dropped objects, small remarks, anything set him off. One night Carl seemed to hint that law and order was regrettably necessary.

"That's what's so stupid about you people," Keith shouted. "You really believe the words. Words are sacred, should be placed on an altar, not disturbed."

"I only—"

"I don't give a damn about 'you only.' You only want discipline so nobody'll encroach on your tidy little world of aesthetics. Don't burn my paintbrush, don't blow up my canvas. What a goddamned tragic loss, if your life's work were destroyed by social revolution."

"I never said anything that—"

"You never say anything at all. Not in your words, your way of life, not in your paintings. Your paintings—you know your paintings are no more than property. You might as well just paint big dollar signs."

He stormed out of the room. Gillian followed.

Later, she and I had coffee in the kitchen. Again I wished I'd painted her, then realized it was stupid of me to even imagine myself doing a portrait of her. For years I'd done nothing but design labels, sketch rather stiff cartoon figures, and render political characters lifeless through caricature. We talked about words, and how people wanted them to have precise meanings. We both knew that the words made a difference, but we could not agree on them. Her hand on mine was warm from holding her coffee cup.

Two nights later I came home to see Keith driving erratically out of our driveway and down the street. Gillian, agitated, greeted me with the information that he had gotten mad at her and rushed out. Until the last minute or so, she said, she had not realized that he was tripped out on acid. I asked her where the hell he got LSD. She said she had picked it up for him from their local pusher, a well-to-do lawyer downtown. She was ready to be smug and self-righteous so I avoided commentary. Instead, I called the police-beat reporter on the paper I worked for. He owed me a favor, I told Gillian. After I had put him on Keith's trail, we spent a long time waiting for something to happen.

Gillian paced a lot and a couple of times began a counterculture lecture on drugs, but she couldn't get the words out straight. I said I understood, even though I didn't.

"This is no goddamned time to be tripping out," she muttered, more to herself than to me. "Not when the movement's already stalled. Hell, I'm beginning to talk like the fashionable left."

Keith was brought back by a pair of cops. My reporter friend had reached them just in time. The policemen pulled Keith out of the squad car and dumped him on the front sidewalk. I made Gillian stay inside the house while I went outside. One of the cops, pointing to Keith, said he was all mine; then they left. Keith remained sitting on the sidewalk, staring ahead, mumbling. Wind rippled the sleeves of his thin-materialled body shirt. His hair, beginning to get long again, was blown about. A long time passed before we convinced him to come into the house. Inside, they sat together on the couch, while I stationed myself across the room. They talked softly, affectionately. After a few minutes they stood up and Gillian told me they would be going to bed now. As they passed me, Keith was whispering:

"Yes, yes. I love you. I do love you, Jill. But—*but*—you're a collaborator, a collaborator, an impartial witness at the Spanish Inquisition, a collaborator, a goddamned Tory. But I love you; I do, Jill."

Gillian's head was turned away from me—deliberately, it seemed.

For a while Gillian was obsessed with the idea of leaving.

"*Anywhere*. New York, San Francisco, LA, I don't know, Des Moines, Iowa. Just so it's someplace else."

"Did I hear you say *Des Moines*?"

"Sure. Pretty town."

"True, but not exactly a hotbed of radical activism. What can you do for your causes in Des Moines?"

"Maybe that'd be a good thing, radicalizing a reactionary stronghold. On the other hand, maybe I'll leave Des Moines alone."

"Lucky Des Moines."

"No, I mean it. We'll move into a match box, and Keith'll get commissions. Large city murals of the mayor and other officials, performing their daily tasks, looking with concern at the problems of the humble, taking packets of money from men in striped suits. I'll putter around the house and buy handy appliances."

"And watch tv?"

"Oh, all day! And I'll get a garbage crusher. I want a garbage crusher so bad."

"You wouldn't last two days in a mid-western town."

"Wouldn't I? I'd try it, I really would. Anything to get Keith repaired. I'll even sacrifice the political thing, if that's what he wants. It won't be, I hope, but if it is, it is. I'm strung out. How can I deal with the world if I can't deal with myself?"

I did not see Keith often. He stayed pretty much in their room, sometimes came out to eat or watch

the six-thirty news. Although I had expected Gillian to plunge deeper into gloom, she became more cheerful instead. She hummed over dishes, made silly unpolitical jokes, laughed often.

"You're pretty chipper," I said one morning.

"Chipper? Did you really say that? What've you been into, liquor or old *Saturday Evening Posts*? *Chipper*?"

"I only mean you seem happier."

"Well, truth is, I've been feeling more chipper lately. The vibes are good. I'm sure I don't know the hell why, considering the circumstances, but they're good."

"Anything specific?"

"I don't know. Vibes are vibes. Something good. *Someone*, maybe. A tall, dark stranger, maybe. I can't say for sure but, if you like I'll run downstairs and peer into the automatic washer for you."

"What?"

"I get all my good visions in the automatic washer."

Her tall, dark stranger was of average height, fair, and slightly overweight. He had very long and erratic hair whose individual strands seemed to work independently of each other. He was sitting on the doorstep one night when I came home from work.

"Hi," he said, holding out a hand. "Ray Clapp. I'm visiting for a few days. Jill and Keith went to the store for some grub."

We shook hands. His was unusually rough, a workingman's hand. I sat down beside him.

"I started two days ago in Durango, Colorado,

can you dig it? Three fire-balling truckers and here I am, here in the heart of the Eastern establishment."

Ray, as it turned out, was a school friend who had worked with them on political activities. Gillian said Ray was usually assistant to whatever Keith was head of. These days his job was running around the country holding things together.

"You like Ray, don't you?" Gillian asked while we were washing dishes after dinner. I pretended to even ~~la~~ a stack of platters while I considered the question.

"There's something about him—yes, I do like him."

"It's not so surprising. Everybody does. Ray is very—*likable*."

An edge of irony in her voice.

Ray Clapp watched a lot of television. He'd watch *anything*: cooking shows, situation comedies, lectures on Mesopotamian pottery. But he'd never give a program his complete attention. He would be carrying on a conversation entirely opposite to the show, but at some point a movement, an image, a shocking or amusing picture, a cartooned pattern on a commercial—something—would catch his eye and he'd react to it, shouting "Oh, wow," or "Far out!" or a few words appropriate to the scene. He also hummed a lot, pattered around, straightened books, dusted shelves, drew odd cartoons on lined notebook paper, typed poems, and generally kept busy. After a couple of days of this, I asked Gillian:

"Is he always, always *high* or something?"

"Ray's never high, not on drugs or alcohol anyway."

"Never?"

"He's really down on stimulants of any kind. He's so high on himself he hardly ever comes down."

"You don't always sound as if you like him."

"Don't I? He makes me laugh."

"That's not the same as saying you like him."

"I don't always like to laugh."

"You're holding something back."

"Yes."

"Your privilege."

"Yes."

I began to watch tv more intently so I could catch the sequences Ray Clapp liked. When I spoke, he listened closely. If I suggested doing something, he was willing to join me.

One night I brought work home. A cartoon I had drawn had turned out to be too controversial for my editor; I had to dash off a new one for tomorrow's edition. Ray came to the study and asked why the midnight oil. I told him.

"Far out. The man senses the mood, all right. Roll the wagons in a circle. Nice people got to play it cool right now."

"Nice people? You sympathize with him?"

"Well, man, I don't dig him, but I don't put down anybody that's got half a ball no matter where his head's at."

"Where does that put me? Anatomically, that is."

"Don't get uptight, you're cool."

"How do you know? I mean, I work for this half-balled guy, I do his bidding, so why—"

"No matter. Like, you raised Jill, right? Whatever else you do's your own rock of Sisypheus. You keep pushin'. You might be Steppenwolf."

I wondered at times if Ray had any psychic ability, like Gillian's. He seemed to read minds, especially mine. I imagined the whole youth underground as a haven for those with paranormal abilities, those who watched *One Step Beyond* and *Twilight Zone* when they were kids and knew they would be ostracized or patronized if they displayed their powers. Perhaps their confidence derived from group precognition or telepathy. Perhaps they were waiting for their time to emerge—to set fires with their minds, dredge up secrets through mind reading, squint their eyes and cause heart attacks, throw off hallucinations from their fingertips.

Ray and I went bowling and he beat me three straight. I took him to a chamber-music concert and he explained to me technical aspects of the pieces performed. At an anthropology lecture he out-argued the speaker about the findings of Ardrey. At a bar he sat at a piano and challenged the patrons to name any popular song written since 1930; he played them all. Cut cards with him, he won. Quote a line of poetry, he knew the name, author, and date of composition. When my car refused to start, he fixed it. He said that the present society should be destroyed then rebuilt. I almost volunteered to sort out dynamite caps.

The last night I saw Ray Clapp, I blundered in on an argument between him and Keith.

"Think of it as a goddamned symbolic gesture,"

Keith was saying.

"Screw your symbolic gestures," Ray said. "If you want to destroy something, at least let your target be—"

He saw me standing in the doorway and shifted into a hearty hello.

"Don't want to interrupt your discussion," I said.

"Discussion's the word, schoolroom parley, equally useless."

Keith, angry, walked briskly out of the room. Ray would not tell me what the argument had been about. Instead, he switched the conversation to another tack. He said, out of the blue, that most rock groups were cop-outs because they only pretended to send revolutionary messages in their songs, while they salted away enough money for an early retirement, or spent it on valueless highs: drug highs, luxury highs, middle-class power-dream highs. I asked him about materialism; he said it got him Lincoln Logs when he was a kid and he dearly loved Lincoln Logs. I started to ask more, but Gillian interrupted us.

"I'm afraid it's time, Ray," she said, forcing out the words.

"No surprise, really. Been watching you, Jill, saw it growing. You get that fuzzy look in your eyes, and I know it's Cassandra time."

"I've packed some food for you. Want a suitcase or something?"

"No, I'll just use the shopping bag I came with." Suddenly I understood.

"You're going?" I said.

"Yep. On the road again, kicking up gravel once

mirred by Jack Kerouac, Tom Joad, and a lot of others. It helps if you have an historical sense."

"But there's no reason for you to go. We like having you—"

"There's a reason, man. I learned a long time ago when Jill says move, you better move."

Keith appeared at the door, car keys in his hand. He jingled them nervously. I looked at Ray, then back at Keith, almost saying out loud that the wrong person was leaving.

"Keith'll drive you," Gillian said. "Far out of town as you like."

"Far out's far out enough for me. But are you sure it's wise for Keith to—"

"I don't feel any danger for him."

"Danger," I said. "What do you mean, danger?"

He and Gillian smiled at each other.

"You'll see," he said, then followed Keith out of the room. A second later he was back in the doorway. "Not everything is what it may seem," he said in a mock-Viennese accent, and left again.

When the policeman came, Gillian of course was not surprised. She'd expected him. He showed us a picture of Ray. Gillian, saying that Ray had instructed her to tell the truth, said it was Ray's picture, that he'd been staying with us for three weeks, and that he had left several hours ago. While the policeman radioed in that information, she told me that Ray's real name was Ray Kleposki.

"He decided it was better to use an alias. He thought Clapp was a funny name."

When the cop returned, he spoke to me, pointed-

ly ignoring Gillian and Keith. He said it was unlikely there would be any charges against us for harboring a fugitive from justice, but that it might be good policy to consult a lawyer. I asked him what he meant about fugitive from justice. He said Ray was suspected of bombing a string of buildings out west. Two people had been killed in one explosion—one victim was a policeman. It had happened some time ago, perhaps I'd read about it, and Ray had been on the run since.

After Ray's departure, Keith returned to painting. He went every day to his father's studio where he was allowed some work space. Sometimes he sarcastically called it a crawl space. Carl told me he was amazed at the speed of his son's output. Keith had never worked at such a furious pace before. In spite of the speed, the quality of the results was several steps above his usual level. Some of them were abstracts, others were surrealist in an odd way; all of them had a sad mood about them, a kind of resigned sadness I'd never before seen in his work. I was impressed, which pleased both Gillian and Carl. Carl's voice, when he talked about Keith's new works, reminded me of the days when he had shown off his son's every drawing to Jane and me.

Yet, the harder Keith worked, the less Gillian seemed to like it. I asked if there were something about the paintings that she didn't like.

"Oh, no," she said. "They're marvelous. I can't believe he—but, I don't know, it's—oh, hell."

"Vibrations?"

"A few. Keith is building toward something,

something I'm not going to like. It's, well, dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"That's what I feel. Ah, forget it. He's doing great work. Let's leave it at that."

"But if—"

"I can't stop anything no matter what I feel. Not with him. The more I tell him about my vibes, the more he laughs and just goes on doing the same."

Next thing I knew he was planning an art show, an exhibition of his new work. Carl was quite enthusiastic.

"He doesn't want to do an *ordinary* show, he says. And he wants to do it here, not New York or any of the centers. Nothing in a professional gallery, and none of the futuristic crap they like to use for decor at some of those places. He says he needs the proper context, some kind of old, out-of-use building, something about to be torn down. He's out looking for one right now."

He found one. A building scheduled for demolition in the near future. The owners were glad to rent it out for a couple of months before its planned elimination. He took Gillian, Carl, and me to see it the same day he paid the rent. Even Carl was surprised.

For one thing, it had once been a store which sold tombstones and there were still a few old samples beside the sidewalk leading up to the front entrance. I saw "Dearly Beloved" etched on one, a four-line poem on the surface of another. Besides that, it was the only building on the block, a block which formed one border of a cemetery.

"Well," Gillian said, "you've got to admit it's a terrific location for a tombstone store."

Inside, the place was clearly ready for its demolition. At odd moments plaster dust rained upon us. There had been wallpaper on the walls, but damned if any of us could see what the patterns had been. Bits of stone still lay about at random, and the dust of the craftsman was firmly embedded everywhere. Still, it was spacious and the light was, not surprisingly, quite good. Keith said the ambience was so right that it needed very little fixing up. Lighting was the only real work it needed. Gillian suggested that some general cleaning might be a good idea, for the convenience of the buyers. Keith laughed at the word buyers, but agreed to the cleaning as long as some of the original look was retained.

Even Gillian was in a happy mood as we left the tombstone store.

Keith's show got more media play than he had planned. Or perhaps he had planned exactly that. Major newspapers picked it up off the AP wire (where I had originally placed it) and both *Time* and *Newsweek* ran little squibs on it, always identifying Keith as the son of Carl Wynant. It made the six-thirty national news. Each time the uniqueness of doing a major show in an about-to-be-demolished building was emphasized. Keith was noncommittal about the publicity.

He and Gillian worked like demons getting the tombstone store ready in time. He brought in a strange-looking, long-haired electrician to do some

essential rewiring for the lighting setup he envisioned. Gillian cleaned away strategic dirt from the walls, exposing some recognizable wallpaper patterns. At her insistence they painted some of the doorways, windows, and wainscoting. They spent days planning the placement of the paintings, arguing about it a great deal until Gillian agreed that his arrangement had a cleverness about it she had not originally seen.

When the place was ready, they moved in the paintings. This part of the project became hush-hush.⁴ Gillian refused to tell me anything about it, for good reason as it turned out.

They finished the setup on the night before the scheduled opening. By that time it had become obvious that the show was going to attract crowds. The town's few hotels and motels were filled; people were being put up in private homes. I had to write a series of articles on Keith, Carl, and the exhibition for the newspaper; the editor put them on the front page. City officials readied some medals. On the eve of the opening, after they had returned from the last-minute touches on the tombstone store, Gillian seemed quite nervous. I asked if she was jittery in anticipation.

"I wish it was just that," she said. "Something's wrong about this. Motives or something like that. It's not going to work out, I feel it."

"Did you tell Keith?"

"He wouldn't listen, you know that. But the vibes are way off. Maybe it's all those critics coming in from the big cities. You know what they did to

him last exhibition. They're going to do it again, maybe."

"But his work is good, much better this time."

"You think that makes any difference to critics?"

"I think it does. You don't give them enough—"

"All right, all right. I'll feed the vultures till they bite back. I don't know, maybe it isn't the critics. Maybe it's just the carnival atmosphere throwing everything off. It's not what we planned at all, though I have to admit Keith doesn't seem to mind. He's exhilarated by it, he says. Hell. Anyway, the show is beautiful, wait'll you see. It's not just the paintings, it's the way he's got them arranged. It's beautiful. But something's off."

The exhibition was impressive. It was not just the quality of Keith's paintings that made it so. What he had done to the tombstone store to make it a proper setting was meticulously wrought. As soon as you entered, you were struck by the appropriateness of the work to its surroundings. Subtly lighted, the paintings looked quite different than they had in Carl's studio. Highlights I had not suspected were emphasized, quieter touches pleased the eye. Though basically abstract, many of the works had recognizable figures and objects in them. No new trends were set, but the effect was fresh. The natural surfaces and textures of the tombstone store, plus effective placement of the left-behind tombstones at various spots within the store, formed a nails-and-rotting-board reality, vitality even, that seemed to set the paintings into a more philosophical perspective. They expressed an un-

suspected point of view, severely introspective, a bit gloomy. The works were hung in natural areas of the room rather than in some sort of balanced careful arrangement; a couple were even deliberately set askew. The only special effect was that the paintings were connected to one another with baling wire. I didn't understand the use of the wire, but it looked fine. Overall, the exhibition seemed to have a subdued shock effect on most of the many viewers. And there were many viewers. The place was crowded right from the time it opened that day. It closed over two hours late because people would not leave.

Gillian supervised the flow of people and coordinated the general activity of the show. She looked neither disturbed nor apprehensive. Keith tended to stay out of the way and did not seem interested in what people said to him. When I told him how much I liked the show, he said, "Jill's pleased, isn't she?", then looked at her, and made no other acknowledgement of my comment.

That night Carl came over to share a couple of beers with me. He was prouder than ever of Keith's achievement. Keith came home from the exhibition without Gillian, who had gone to a downtown hotel to give some information to an out-of-town reporter. He went upstairs to their room for a few minutes, then came back in older clothes. He muttered something about being too excited from the show, said he wasn't able to come down from it and needed to take a walk to clear his head. We both nodded. Carl said it was a good idea, one

should take good long walks to keep the creative process operable. Keith looked strangely at his father, but agreed and left.

Gillian arrived home a few minutes later. She was still excited over her interview with the reporter and kept saying how great the man thought Keith's show had been. It was sure he would get a good write-up in the major publications.

"So what have I been worrying about? I've got to go up and tell Keith, excuse me."

Carl said Keith had gone out. Gillian's cheer changed to panic in an instant, it seemed. She only asked a couple more questions, her voice getting edgier with each word. I caught her mood and wondered what she could possibly be afraid of. She reminded me of times when, as a child, intimations of the future had brought her to a near-panic.

"Jesus—God," she said suddenly. "I think I know. I know. I know where he is, what he's—"

She didn't finish what she was saying. Instead, she ran back out the front door. Reacting to her sudden panic, I followed without saying anything to Carl, who kept pace with me anyway.

She had left their car out front. Fumbling in her handbag for keys, she made a couple of grabs at the car door without opening it. But she had started the car and was off before Carl and I reached the edge of the front lawn. My car was in the driveway and we got into it without saying a word to each other. By the time I had maneuvered the car jerkily to the street, her car had disappeared around a corner. It didn't matter. I knew where she was going.

When we drove up to the tombstone store, Gillian and Keith were standing halfway up the long front walk, arguing. His body leaned toward the building, as if he wanted to get away from her and inside. Her arm was on his; she leaned toward the street as if she wanted to lead him there. They were not struggling, just caught in statue-poses. I got out of the car and headed up the walk. Carl, slower to emerge from the car, followed. As I neared them, I saw that their poses were not as serene as they had appeared. At least not for Keith, who looked afraid.

"Just go away, Jill," he was saying.

"I'll stay with you, I—"

"I don't want you to. Just go. I need to be alone, I—"

"I don't give a damn. Come with me. Don't go near that building."

"It's *my* goddamned building, *my* goddamned work, I can do whatever I want about it. Let me go in. Alone."

"No. I'll go in with you."

"What's wrong?" I said, coming up to them. Neither had noticed my approach.

"Oh, God!" Keith shouted. "Just what I need."

He pulled away from Gillian and walked a couple of steps. She followed, which seemed to make him angrier. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shouted:

"Will you get the hell out of here, Jill? You can't be here. You just can't. Go to Daddy, damn it!"

He pushed her roughly toward me. She stumbled. I plunged forward, caught her in my arms. She did not want to be in my arms, and squirmed to try to

pull away. Keith seemed on the verge of hysteria. He glanced quickly at his watch, then toward the building, then back at us.

"Keith—" Carl said.

"Jesus, you too! We can have a goddamned family *caucus*! Will you *all* get out of here. It's important. Please. There's no time."

"No time for what?" Gillian shouted.

"Nothing, just an expression. I just want to be left—"

"No time for what? What are you planning? You're not going to—"

"I'll do whatever—"

"No! I won't let you. I won't let it happen."

"*What* happen?" Carl said.

I pulled at Gillian's shoulders, tried to make her walk with me back toward the cars.

"That's right, Jill," Keith said. "Go with him. Now. We can't talk now. Not here, not with them watching. I'll come to you later."

He walked to us, took Gillian's arm and started to point her streetwards. She grabbed on to his arm and made him walk with her and me back to the front sidewalk. I had never before realized how long a walk it was. We were all silent until we reached my car.

"You're not staying either," Gillian said to him. He stared at her for a moment, looked back for a second at the tombstone store, then said:

"Okay, we'll both go home. That what you want? We'll both go."

His voice had become quite gentle. Moving quickly he opened the passenger door of my car

and eased her onto the seat. When he tried to take a step backward, she held his arm tightly.

"Jill, I've got to drive *our* car back," he said.

"I don't trust you."

"You can trust me. Let me go. You'll see."

With obvious reluctance, she let go of his arm. He stepped backward, then turned and went to their car, parked in front of mine. She watched him go. I tried to shut her door, but she would not allow it until she saw that he had reached the driver's door of their car.

Keith's reflexes were quick. He moved away from their car as soon as he heard I'd shut the door of mine, and was myself heading around the car to get in. Carl had already started to climb in the back seat.

Keith ran around the car and back toward the tombstone store. I don't know whether or not he realized Gillian would follow him. He may have been too emotionally upset to think things through. Yet I don't see how he could have expected otherwise. Cursing, she had difficulty finding the handle of the door, and he was almost halfway up the path before she started running toward him.

"Keith!" she hollered. "No!"

He broke stride, stopped for a second, and half-turned, waving Gillian back.

"No, Jill," he cried. "Go back! You'll get killed! Go back!"

His words made me start running after her. She seemed to slow down for a moment. He turned and headed toward the building again. We were all, it seemed, in tableau as the explosions began. There

were three of them, and they all came very close together, almost in rhythmic sequence. The initial impact knocked me to the ground. I rolled over, unhurt, looked toward the building. All I could see was smoke, then some erupting flames through the front windows. I sensed pieces of debris falling around me, but paid no attention as I stood up. Dazed, I found my way back to the path and started looking for Gillian. I found her soon enough, lying unconscious on the ground ahead of me, her head turned toward the burning building. Her body seemed limp at first. Keith appeared out of the smoke. He was crying. Kneeling beside her, he struggled to get his arms around her. He hugged her close to him.

"I didn't want you here," he was saying. "You weren't supposed to be here. It would have been all right if you hadn't been here."

She moaned, perhaps in response to him, and her head, in a rolling movement, turned in my direction. And I saw the blood covering her face.

She was all right. We rushed her to a hospital, the same hospital where years ago her bronchitis had been misdiagnosed, and this time they did a quick and good job. Scars on the side of her face, where she had apparently been hit by flying glass or other debris, remained permanent. But they were on the side of her face and she could easily cover them with her long hair.

Keith was put under psychiatric treatment for awhile. But nobody could unearth the reasons why he had wanted to blow himself up together with the

best work he had created. There were theories, but they were textbook, and Keith himself was not talking, just as he would not explain how he had obtained the explosives or, for that matter, the expertise to place them efficiently and with such a pinpoint time mechanism. He did eventually convince examiners that his impulse for suicide had left him with the destruction of his paintings. We tried to commiserate with him on their loss, but he did not see that as sad. He said he was satisfied that at least he had destroyed them, even if he had screwed up the job on himself.

When she was home from the hospital, I tried to talk to Gillian about what had happened, but she was just as unwilling to talk as Keith.

"What can I tell you anyway? What if I told you it was love, love that caused it, would that make sense? No. Well, maybe, it wasn't love."

"What do you understand love to be? In this context, anyway?"

"Nothing. I understand nothing about it. In this context."

When Keith was released by the doctors, Gillian was waiting for him with suitcases. They left that day. They have not been back since. Carl died, a heart attack, and I thought they might return then. But they did not. Even Keith's runaway mother came to the funeral. I got only the usual phone call from Gillian. She just said that Keith could not come, that he was very unhappy but he could not come.

She has called me almost weekly, and now three weeks have passed without a call. I know she will call any minute—tell me she's okay and Keith's okay and working hard and getting some West Coast recognition. But she won't come home and will not tell me where they are. I've never figured out why. I don't remember anything I did.

The phone rings. I run to it.

The voice on the other end has started talking even as the receiver reaches my ear. But it is not Gillian. It is Ray Clapp.

"Meant to call you for a long time, man."

"What is this? Is Gillian all right? Why are you—"

"Jill's cool, don't sweat it. I just wanted to rap with you."

And rap he does. For almost an hour. I keep looking at the clock, wondering if Gillian is trying to get through and cursing at the busy buzzes. But I am afraid to cut Ray off.

This is not the first time he's called me. He checks in every few months, and usually talks on just like this. Talking about the most inconsequential things, especially tv. I've asked him if he isn't worried that he might be traced, that my phone might be tapped. All he says is that they can't catch him, and not to worry.

"Tough thing is, I'm running low on places to go. Underground's lonely, man."

"What happened to all your friends, all the radicals in—"

"They're okay. They, most of them, became assistant professors and they keep busy in faculty senates voting down free speech."

Before hanging up, he says:

"Hey, Keith is going to be giving her trouble for awhile, but don't you sweat it, right?"

"Uh, okay."

"Good."

He says good-bye and hangs up, leaving me to wonder what the call has been about. I don't get much time to ponder. The phone rings again. This time it is her.

"Keith is gone, I don't know where."

"How long do you think he'll—"

"Don't ask, I know what you're leading up to. I'm staying here, where he'll find me. But I don't think, I really don't think he'll be back. Not for a long time, anyway. That's the way I see it, I guess."

"Where do you think he is?"

"I have a feeling, with Ray. I don't know why, or even if he could find him, but I have a feeling about it. You know, one of my feelings."

It does not seem feasible to me to tell her about Ray's call, so I don't.

"He shouldn't be with Ray. It's wrong, I feel it. Ray will—but the hell with going into it. I just wanted to let you know I'm all right—in case you've been feeling any vibrations or anything."

"I have been feeling spooky."

"Thought so. Well, that's all I wanted to say. I'll start calling again more regularly. Don't worry. I'm keeping busy. There're still some of us willing to hand out pamphlets, that sort of thing. Useless, maybe, but keeps me busy."

"But it must be so lonely, why don't you—"

"I'm *not* lonely. I have friends." Hesitation. "If

you must know, I have a friend, a very specific special and wonderful friend."

"Tell me about—"

"Not right now. I'm worried about Keith, but I can handle it. Okay? I have to go now. I love you."

"I love you."

"Sure. See ya."

She hangs up. I feel better. At least she is all right.

EUMENIDES IN THE FOURTH-FLOOR LAVATORY

by

Orson Scott Card

Living in a fourth-floor walk-up was part of his revenge, as if to say to Alice, "Throw me out of the house, will you? Then I'll live in squalor in a Bronx tenement, where the toilet is shared by four apartments! My shirts will go unironed, my tie will be perpetually awry. *See what you've done to me?*"

But when he told Alice about the apartment, she only laughed bitterly and said, "Not anymore, Howard. I won't play those games with you. You win every damn time."

She pretended not to care about him anymore, but Howard knew better. He knew people, knew what they wanted, and Alice wanted *him*. It was his

strongest card in their relationship—that she wanted him more than he wanted her. He thought of this often: at work in the offices of Humboldt and Breinhardt, Designers; at lunch in a cheap lunch-room (part of the punishment); on the subway home to his tenement (Alice had kept the Lincoln Continental). He thought and thought about how much she wanted him. But he kept remembering what she had said the day she threw him out: If you ever come near Rhiannon again I'll kill you.

He could not remember why she had said that. Could not remember and did not try to remember because that line of thinking made him uncomfortable and one thing Howard insisted on being was comfortable with himself. Other people could spend hours and days of their lives chasing after some accommodation with themselves, but Howard was accommodated. Well adjusted. At ease. I'm okay, I'm okay, I'm okay. Hell with you. "If you let them make you feel uncomfortable," Howard would often say, "you give them a handle on you and they can run your life." Howard could find other people's handles, but they could never find Howard's.

It was not yet winter but cold as hell at three A.M. when Howard got home from Stu's party. A "must attend" party, if you wished to get ahead at Humboldt and Breinhardt. Stu's ugly wife tried to be tempting, but Howard had played innocent and made her feel so uncomfortable that she dropped the matter. Howard paid careful attention to office gossip and knew that several earlier departures from the company had got caught with, so to speak, their

pants down. Not that Howard's pants were an impenetrable barrier. He got Dolores from the front office into the bedroom and accused her of making life miserable for him. "In little ways," he insisted. "I know you don't mean to, but you've got to stop."

"What ways?" Dolores asked, incredulous yet (because she honestly tried to make other people happy) uncomfortable.

"Surely you knew how attracted I am to you."

"No. That hasn't—that hasn't even crossed my mind."

Howard looked tongue-tied, embarrassed. He actually was neither. "Then—well, then, I was—I was wrong. I'm sorry, I thought you were doing it deliberately—"

"Doing what?"

"Snub—snubbing me—never mind, it sounds adolescent, just little things, hell, Dolores, I had a stupid schoolboy crush—"

"Howard, I didn't even know I was hurting you."

"God, how insensitive," Howard said, sounding even more hurt.

"Oh, Howard, do I mean that much to you?"

Howard made a little whimpering noise that meant everything she wanted it to mean. She looked uncomfortable. She'd do anything to get back to feeling right with herself again. She was so uncomfortable that they spent a rather nice half hour making each other feel comfortable again. No one else in the office had been able to get to Dolores. But Howard could get to anybody.

He walked up the stairs to his apartment feeling

very, very satisfied. Don't need you, Alice, he said to himself. Don't need nobody, and nobody's who I've got. He was still mumbling the little ditty to himself as he went into the communal bathroom and turned on the light.

He heard a gurgling sound from the toilet stall, a hissing sound. Had someone been in there with the light off? Howard went into the toilet stall and saw nobody. Then looked closer and saw a baby, probably about two months old, lying in the toilet bowl. Its nose and eyes were barely above water; it looked terrified; its legs and hips and stomach were down the drain. Someone had obviously hoped to kill it by drowning—it was inconceivable to Howard that anyone could be so moronic as to think it would fit down the drain.

For a moment he thought of leaving it there, with the big city temptation to mind one's own business even when to do so would be an atrocity. Saving this baby would mean inconvenience: calling the police, taking care of the child in his apartment, perhaps even headlines, certainly a night of filling out reports. Howard was tired. Howard wanted to go to bed.

But he remembered Alice saying, "You aren't even human, Howard. You're a goddamn selfish monster." I am not a monster, he answered silently, and reached down into the toilet bowl to pull the child out.

The baby was firmly jammed in—whoever had tried to kill it had meant to catch it tight. Howard felt a brief surge of genuine indignation that anyone could think to solve his problems by killing an

innocent child. But thinking of crimes committed on children was something Howard was determined not to do, and besides, at that moment he suddenly acquired other things to think about.

As the child clutched at Howard's arms, he noticed the baby's fingers were fused together into flipperlike flaps of bone and skin at the end of the arm. Yet the flippers gripped his arms with an unusual strength as, with two hands deep in the toilet bowl, Howard tried to pull the baby free.

At last, with a gush, the child came up and the water finished its flushing action. The legs, too, were fused into a single limb that was hideously twisted at the end. The child was male; the genitals, larger than normal, were skewed off to one side. And Howard noticed that where the feet should be were two more flippers, and near the tips were red spots that looked like putrifying sores. The child cried, a savage mewling that reminded Howard of a dog he had seen in its death throes. (Howard refused to be reminded that it had been he who killed the dog by throwing it out in the street in front of a passing car just to watch the driver swerve; the driver hadn't swerved.)

Even the hideously deformed have a right to live, Howard thought, but now, holding the child in his arms, he felt a revulsion that translated into sympathy for whoever, probably the parents, had tried to kill the creature. The child shifted its grip on him, and where the flippers had been Howard felt a sharp, stinging pain that quickly turned to agony as it was exposed to the air. Several huge, gaping sores on his arm were already running with blood and pus.

It took a moment for Howard to connect the sores with the child, and by then the leg flippers were already pressed against his stomach, and the arm flippers already gripped his chest. The sores on the child's flippers were not sores; they were powerful suction devices that gripped Howard's skin so tightly that it ripped it away when the contact was broken. He tried to pry the child off, but no sooner was one flipper free than it found a new place to hold even as Howard struggled to break the grip of another.

What had begun as an act of charity had now become an intense struggle. This was not a child, Howard realized. Children could not hang on so tightly, and the creature had teeth that snapped at his hands and arms whenever they came near enough. A human face, certainly, but not a human being. Howard threw himself against the wall, hoping to stun the creature so it would drop away. It only clung tighter, and the sores where it hung on him hurt more. But at last Howard pried and scraped it off by levering it against the edge of the toilet stall. It dropped to the ground, and Howard backed quickly away, on fire with the pain of a dozen or more stinging wounds.

It had to be a nightmare. In the middle of the night, in a bathroom lighted by a single bulb, with a travesty of humanity writhing on the floor, Howard could not believe that it had any reality.

Could it be a mutation that had somehow lived? Yet the thing had far more purpose, far more control of its body than any human infant. The baby slithered across the floor as Howard, in pain

from the wounds on his body, watched in a panic of indecision. The baby reached the wall and cast a flipper onto it. The suction held and the baby began to inch its way straight up the wall. As it climbed, it defecated, a thin drool of green tracing down the wall behind it. Howard looked at the slime following the infant up the wall, looked at the pus-covered sores on his arms.

What if the animal, whatever it was, did not die soon of its terrible deformity? What if it lived? What if it were found, taken to a hospital, cared for? What if it became an adult?

It reached the ceiling and made the turn, clinging tightly to the plaster, not falling off as it hung upside down and inched across toward the light bulb.

The thing was trying to get directly over Howard, and the defecation was still dripping. Loathing overcame fear, and Howard reached up, took hold of the baby from the back, and, using his full weight, was finally able to pry it off the ceiling. It writhed and twisted in his hands, trying to get the suction cups on him, but Howard resisted with all his strength and was able to get the baby, this time headfirst, into the toilet bowl. He held it there until the bubbles stopped and it was blue. Then he went back to his apartment for a knife. Whatever the creature was, it had to disappear from the face of the earth. It had to die, and there had to be no sign left that could hint that Howard had killed it.

He found the knife quickly, but paused for a few moments to put something on his wounds. They stung bitterly, but in a while they felt better.

Howard took off his shirt; thought a moment, and took off all his clothes, then put on his bathrobe and took a towel with him as he returned to the bathroom. He didn't want to get any blood on his clothes.

But when he got to the bathroom, the child was not in the toilet. Howard was alarmed. Had someone found it, drowning? Had they, perhaps, seen him leaving the bathroom—or worse, returning with his knife? He looked around the bathroom. There was nothing. He stepped back into the hall. No one. He stood a moment in the doorway, wondering what could have happened.

Then a weight dropped onto his head and shoulders from above, and he felt the suction flippers tugging at his face, at his head. He almost screamed. But he didn't want to arouse anyone. Somehow the child had not drowned after all, had crawled out of the toilet, and had waited over the door for Howard to return.

Once again the struggle resumed, and once again Howard pried the flippers away with the help of the toilet stall, though this time he was hampered by the fact that the child was behind and above him. It was exhausting work. He had to set down the knife so he could use both hands, and another dozen wounds stung bitterly by the time he had the child on the floor. As long as the child lay on its stomach, Howard could seize it from behind. He took it by the neck with one hand and picked up the knife with the other. He carried both to the toilet.

He had to flush twice to handle the flow of

blood and pus. Howard wondered if the child was infected with some disease—the white fluid was thick and at least as great in volume as the blood. Then he flushed seven more times to take the pieces of the creature down the drain. Even after death, the suction pads clung tightly to the porcelain; Howard pried them off with the tip of the knife.

Eventually, the child was completely gone. Howard was panting with the exertion, nauseated at the stench and horror of what he had done. He remembered the smell of his dog's guts after the car hit it, and he threw up everything he had eaten at the party. Got the party out of his system, felt cleaner; took a shower, felt cleaner still. When he was through, he made sure the bathroom showed no sign of his ordeal.

Then he went to bed.

It wasn't easy to sleep. He was too keyed up. He couldn't take out of his mind the thought that he had committed murder (not murder, not murder, simply the elimination of something too foul to be alive). He tried thinking of a dozen, a hundred other things. Projects at work . . . but the designs kept showing flippers. His children . . . but their faces turned to the intense face of the struggling monster he had killed. Alice . . . ah, but Alice was harder to think of than the creature.

At last he slept, and dreamed, and in his dream remembered his father, who had died when he was ten. Howard did not remember any of his standard reminiscences. No long walks with his father, no basketball in the driveway, no fishing trips. Those things had happened, but tonight, because of the

struggle with the monster, Howard remembered darker things that he had long been able to keep hidden from himself.

"We can't afford to get you a ten-speed bike, Howie. Not until the strike is over."

"I know, Dad. You can't help it." Swallow bravely. "And I don't mind. When all the guys go riding around after school, I'll just stay home and get ahead on my homework."

"Lots of boys don't have ten-speed bikes, Howie."

Howie shrugged, and turned away to hide the tears in his eyes. "Sure, lots of them. Hey, Dad, don't you worry about me. Howie can take care of himself."

Such courage. Such strength. He had gotten a ten-speed within a week. In his dream, Howard finally made a connection he had never been able to admit to himself before. His father had a rather elaborate ham radio setup in the garage. But about that time he had become tired of it, he said, and he sold it off and did a lot more work in the yard and looked bored as hell until the strike was over and he went back to work and got killed in an accident in the rolling mill.

Howard's dream ended madly, with him riding piggy-back on his father's shoulders as the monster had ridden on *him*, tonight—and in his hand was a knife, and he was stabbing his father again and again in the throat.

He awoke in early morning light, before his alarm rang, sobbing weakly and whimpering, "I killed him, I killed him, I killed him."

And then he drifted upward out of sleep and saw the time. Six-thirty. "A dream," he said. And the dream had awakened him early, too early, with a headache and sore eyes from crying. The pillow was soaked. "A hell of a lousy way to start the day," he mumbled. And, as was his habit, he got up and went to the window and opened the curtain.

On the glass, suction cups clinging tightly, was the child.

It was pressed close, as if by sucking very tightly it would be able to slither through the glass without breaking it. Far below were the honks of early morning traffic, the roar of passing trucks, but the child seemed oblivious of its height far above the street, with no ledge to break its fall. Indeed, there seemed little chance it would fall. The eyes looked closely, piercingly, at Howard.

Howard had been prepared to pretend that the night before had been another terribly realistic nightmare.

He stepped back from the glass, watched the child in fascination. It lifted a flipper, planted it higher, pulled itself up to a new position where it could stare at Howard eye to eye. And then, slowly and methodically, it began beating on the glass with its head.

The landlord was not generous with upkeep on the building. The glass was thin, and Howard knew that the child would not give up until it had broken through the glass so it could get to Howard.

He began to shake. His throat tightened. He was terribly afraid. Last night had been no dream. The fact that the child was here today was proof of

that. Yet he had cut the child into small pieces. It could not possibly be alive. The glass shook and rattled with every blow the child's head struck.

The glass slivered in a starburst from where the child had hit it. The creature was coming in. And Howard picked up the room's one chair and threw it at the child, threw it at the window. Glass shattered, and the sun dazzled on the fragments as they exploded outward like a glistening halo around the child and the chair.

Howard ran to the window, looked out, looked down and watched as the child landed brutally on the top of a large truck. The body seemed to smear as it hit, and fragments of the chair and shreds of glass danced around the child and bounced down into the street and the sidewalk.

The truck didn't stop moving; it carried the broken body and the shards of glass and the pool of blood on up the street, and Howard ran to the bed, knelt beside it, buried his face in the blanket, and tried to regain control of himself. He had been seen. The people in the street had looked up and seen him in the window. Last night he had gone to great lengths to avoid discovery, but today discovery was impossible to avoid. He was ruined. And yet he could not, could never have, let the child come into the room.

Footsteps on the stairs. Stamping up the corridor. Pounding on the door. "Open up! Hey in there!"

If I'm quiet long enough, they'll go away, he said to himself knowing it was a lie. He must get up, must answer the door. But he could not bring himself to admit that he ever had to leave the

safety of his bed.

"Hey, you son-of-a-bitch—" The imprecations went on but Howard could not move until, suddenly, it occurred to him that the child could be under the bed, and as he thought of it he could feel the tip of the flipper touching his thigh, stroking and getting ready to fasten itself—

Howard leaped to his feet and rushed for the door. He flung it wide, for even if it was the police come to arrest him, they could protect him from the monster that was haunting him.

It was not a policeman at the door. It was the man on the first floor who collected rent. "You son-of-a-bitch irresponsible pig-kisser!" the man shouted, his toupe only approximately in place. "That chair could have hit somebody! That window's expensive! Out! Get out of here, right now, I want you out of this place, I don't care how the hell drunk you are—"

"There was—there was this thing on the window, this creature—"

The man looked at him coldly, but his eyes danced with anger. No, not anger. Fear. Howard realized the man was afraid of him.

"This is a decent place," the man said softly. "You can take your creatures and your booze and your pink stinking elephants and that's a hundred bucks for the window, a hundred bucks right now, and you can get out of here in an hour, an hour, you hear? Or I'm calling the police, you hear?"

"I hear." He heard. The man left when Howard counted out five twenties. The man seemed careful to avoid touching Howard's hands, as if Howard had

become, somehow, repulsive. Well, he had. To himself, if to no one else. He closed the door as soon as the man was gone. He packed the few belongings he had brought to the apartment in two suitcases and went downstairs and called a cab and rode to work. The cabby looked at him sourly, and wouldn't talk. It was fine with Howard, if only the driver hadn't kept looking at him through the mirror—nervously, as if he was afraid of what Howard might do or try. I won't try anything, Howard said to himself, I'm a decent man. Howard tipped the cabby well and then gave him twenty to take his bags to his house in Queens, where Alice could damn well keep them for a while. Howard was through with the tenement—that one or any other.

Obviously it had been a nightmare, last night and this morning. The monster was only visible to him, Howard decided. Only the chair and the glass had fallen from the fourth floor, or the manager would have noticed.

Except that the baby had landed on the truck, and might have been real, and might be discovered in New Jersey or Pennsylvania later today.

Couldn't be real. He had killed it last night and it was whole again this morning. A nightmare. I didn't really kill anybody, he insisted. (Except the dog. Except Father, said a new, ugly voice in the back of his mind.)

Work. Draw lines on paper, answer phone calls, dictate letters, keep your mind off your nightmares, off your family, off the mess your life is turning into. "Hell of a good party last night." Yeah, it was, wasn't it? "How are you today, Howard?" Feel

fine, Dolores, fine—thanks to you. “Got the roughs on the IBM thing?” Nearly, nearly. Give me another twenty minutes. “Howard, you don’t look well.” Had a rough night. The party, you know.

He kept drawing on the blotter on his desk instead of going to the drawing table and producing real work. He doodled out faces. Alice’s face, looking stern and terrible. The face of Stu’s ugly wife. Dolores’s face, looking sweet and yielding and stupid. And Rhiannon’s face.

But with his daughter Rhiannon, he couldn’t stop with the face.

His hand started to tremble when he saw what he had drawn. He ripped the sheet off the blotter, crumpled it, and reached under the desk to drop it in the wastebasket. The basket lurched, and flippers snaked out to seize his hand in an iron grip.

Howard screamed, tried to pull his hand away. The child came with it, the leg flippers grabbing Howard’s right leg. The suction pad stung, bringing back the memory of all the pain last night. He scraped the child off against a filing cabinet, then ran for the door, which was already opening as several of his co-workers tumbled into his office demanding, “What is it! What’s wrong! Why did you scream like that!”

Howard led them gingerly over to where the child should be. Nothing. Just an overturned wastebasket, Howard’s chair capsized on the floor. But Howard’s window was open, and he could not remember opening it. “Howard, what is it? Are you tired, Howard? What’s wrong?”

I don’t feel well. I don’t feel well at all.

Dolores put her arm around him, led him out of the room. "Howard, I'm worried about you."

I'm worried, too.

"Can I take you home? I have my car in the garage downstairs. Can I take you home?"

Where's home? Don't have a home, Dolores.

"My home, then. I have an apartment, you need to lie down and rest. Let me take you home."

Dolores's apartment was decorated in early Holly Hobby, and when she put records on the stereo it was old Carpenters and recent Captain and Tennille. Dolores led him to the bed, gently undressed him, and then, because he reached out to her, undressed herself and made love to him before she went back to work. She was naively eager. She whispered in his ear that he was only the second man she had ever loved, the first in five years. Her inept love-making was so sincere it made him want to cry.

When she was gone he did cry, because she thought she meant something to him and she did not.

Why am I crying? he asked himself. Why should I care? It's not my fault she let me get a handle on her. . . .

Sitting on the dresser in a curiously adult posture was the child, carelessly playing with itself as it watched Howard intently. "No," Howard said, pulling himself up to the head of the bed. "You don't exist," he said. "No one's ever seen you but me." The child gave no sign of understanding. It just rolled over and began to slither down the front of the dresser.

Howard reached for his clothes, took them out of

the bedroom. He put them on in the living room as he watched the door. Sure enough, the child crept along the carpet to the living room; but Howard was dressed by then, and he left.

He walked the streets for three hours. He was coldly rational at first. Logical. The creature does not exist. There is no reason to believe in it.

But bit by bit his rationality was worn away by constant flickers of the creature at the edges of his vision. On a bench, peering over the back at him; in a shop window; staring from the cab of a milk truck. Howard walked faster and faster, not caring where he went, trying to keep some intelligent process going on in his mind, and failing utterly as he saw the child, saw it clearly, dangling from a traffic signal.

What made it even worse was that occasionally a passerby, violating the unwritten law that New Yorkers are forbidden to look at each other, would gaze at him, shudder, and look away. A short European-looking woman crossed herself. A group of teenagers looking for trouble weren't looking for him—they grew silent, let him pass in silence, and in silence watched him out of sight.

They may not be able to see the child, Howard realized, but they see something.

And as he grew less and less coherent in the ramblings of his mind, memories began flashing on and off, his life passing before his eyes like a drowning man is supposed to see, only, he realized, if a drowning man saw this he would gulp at the water, breathe it deeply just to end the visions. They were memories he had been unable to find for

years; memories he would never have wanted to find.

His poor, confused mother, who was so eager to be a good parent that she read everything, tried everything. Her precocious son Howard read it, too, and understood it better. Nothing she tried ever worked. And he accused her several times of being too demanding, or not demanding enough; of not giving him enough love, or of drowning him in phony affection; of trying to take over with his friends, of not liking his friends enough. Until he had badgered and tortured the woman until she was timid everytime she spoke to him, careful and long-winded and phrasing everything in such a way that it wouldn't offend, and while now and then he made her feel wonderful by giving her a hug and saying "Have I got a wonderful mom," there were far more times when he put a patient look on his face and said, "That again, mom? I thought we went over that years ago." A failure as a parent, that's what you are, he reminded her again and again, though not in so many words, and she nodded and believed and died inside with every contact they had. He got everything he wanted from her.

And Vaughn Robles, who was just a little bit smarter than Howard and Howard wanted very badly to be valedictorian and so Vaughn and Howard became best friends and Vaughn would do anything for Howard and whenever Vaughn got a better grade than Howard he could not help but notice that Howard was hurt, wondered if he was really worth anything at all. "Am I really worth

anything at all, Vaughn? No matter how well I do, there's always someone ahead of me, and I guess it's just that before my father died he told me and told me, "Howie, be better than your dad. Be the top." And I promised him I'd be the top but hell, Vaughn, I'm just not cut out for it—" and once he even cried. Vaughn was proud of himself as he sat there and listened to Howard give the valedictory address at high school graduation. What were a few grades, compared to a true friendship? Howard got a scholarship and went away to college and he and Vaughn almost never saw each other again.

And the teacher he provoked into hitting him and losing his job; and the football player who snubbed him and Howard quietly spread the rumor that the fellow was gay and he was ostracized from the team and finally quit; and the beautiful girls he stole from their boyfriends just to prove that he could do it and the friendships he destroyed just because he didn't like being excluded and the marriages he wrecked and the co-workers he undercut and he walked along the street with tears streaming down his face wondering where all these memories had come from and why, after such a long time in hiding, they had come out now. Yet he knew the answer. The answer was slipping behind doorways, climbing lightpoles as he passed, waving obscene flippers at him from the sidewalk almost under his feet.

And slowly, inexorably, the memories wound their way from the distant past through a hundred tawdry exploitations because he could find people's weak spots without even trying until finally,

memory came to the one place where he knew it could not, could not ever go.

He remembered Rhiannon.

Born fourteen years ago. Smiled early, walked early, almost never cried. A loving child from the start, and therefore easy prey for Howard. Oh, Alice was a bitch in her own right--Howard wasn't the only bad parent in the family. But it was Howard who manipulated Rhiannon most. "Daddy's feelings are hurt, sweetheart," and Rhiannon's eyes would grow wide, and she'd be sorry, and whatever daddy wanted, Rhiannon would do. But this was normal, this was part of the pattern, this would have fit easily into all his life before except for last week.

And even now, after a day of grief at his own life, Howard could not face it. Could not but did. He unwillingly remembered walking by Rhiannon's almost-closed door, seeing just a flash of cloth moving quickly. He opened the door on impulse, just on impulse, as Rhiannon took off her brassiere and looked at herself in the mirror. Howard had never thought of his daughter with desire, not until that moment, but once the desire formed Howard had no strategy, no pattern in his mind to stop him from trying to get what he wanted. He was *uncomfortable*, and so he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him and Rhiannon knew no way to say no to her father. When Alice opened the door Rhiannon was crying softly, and Alice looked and after a moment Alice screamed and screamed and Howard got up from the bed and tried to smooth it all over but Rhiannon was still crying and Alice was still screaming, kicking at his crotch,

beating him, raking at his face, spitting at him, telling him he was a monster, a monster, until at last he was able to flee the room and the house and, until now, the memory.

He screamed now as he had not screamed then, and threw himself against a plate glass window, weeping loudly as the blood gushed from a dozen glass cuts on his right arm, which had gone through the window. One large piece of glass stayed embedded in his forearm. He deliberately scraped his arm against the wall to drive the glass deeper. But the pain in his arm was no match for the pain in his mind, and he felt nothing.

They rushed him to the hospital, thinking to save his life, but the doctor was surprised to discover that for all the blood there were only superficial wounds, not dangerous at all. "I don't know why you didn't reach a vein or an artery," the doctor said. "I think the glass went everywhere it could possibly go without causing any important damage."

After the medical doctor, of course, there was the psychiatrist, but there were many suicidals at the hospital and Howard was not the dangerous kind. "I was insane for a moment, doctor, that's all. I don't want to die, I didn't want to die then, I'm all right now. You can send me home." And the psychiatrist let him go home. The bandaged his arm. They did not know that his real relief was that nowhere in the hospital did he see the small, naked, child-shaped creature. He had purged himself. He was free.

Howard was taken home in an ambulance, and they wheeled him into the house and lifted him

from the stretcher to the bed. Through it all Alice hardly said a word except to direct them to the bedroom. Howard lay still on the bed as she stood over him, the two of them alone for the first time since he had left the house a month ago.

"It was kind of you," Howard said softly, "to let me come back."

"They said there wasn't room enough to keep you, but you needed to be watched and taken care of for a few weeks. So lucky me, I get to watch you." Her voice was a low monotone, but the acid dripped from every word. It stung.

"You were right, Alice," Howard said.

"Right about what? That marrying you was the worst mistake of my life? No, Howard. *Meeting* you was my worst mistake."

Howard began to cry. Real tears that welled up from places in him that had once been deep but that now rested painfully close to the surface. "I've been a monster, Alice. I haven't had any control over myself. What I did to Rhiannon—Alice, I wanted to die, I wanted to die!"

Alice's face was twisted and bitter. "And I wanted you to, Howard. I have never been so disappointed as when the doctor called and said you'd be all right. You'll never be all right, Howard, you'll always be—"

"Let him be, mother."

Rhiannon stood in the doorway.

"Don't come in, Rhiannon," Alice said.

Rhiannon came in. "Daddy, it's all right."

"What she means," Alice said, "is that we've checked her and she isn't pregnant. No little

monster is going to be born."

Rhiannon didn't look at her mother, just gazed with wide eyes at her father. "You didn't need to—hurt yourself, daddy. I forgive you. People lose control sometimes. And it was as much my fault as yours, it really was, you don't need to feel bad, father."

It was too much for Howard. He cried out, shouted his confession, how he had manipulated her all her life, how he was an utterly selfish and rotten parent, and when it was over Rhiannon came to her father and laid her head on his chest and said softly, "Father, it's all right. We are who we are. We've done what we've done. But it's all right now. I forgive you."

When Rhiannon left, Alice said, "You don't deserve her."

I know.

"I was going to sleep on the couch, but that would be stupid. Wouldn't it, Howard?"

I deserve to be left alone, like a leper.

"You misunderstand, Howard. I need to stay here to make sure you don't do anything else. To yourself or to anyone."

Yes. Yes, please. I can't be trusted.

"Don't wallow in it, Howard. Don't enjoy it. Don't make yourself even more disgusting than you were before."

All right.

They were drifting off to sleep when Alice said, "Oh, when the doctor called he wondered if I knew what had caused those sores all over your arms and chest."

But Howard was asleep, and didn't hear her. Asleep with no dreams at all, the sleep of peace, the sleep of having been forgiven, of being clean. It hadn't taken that much, after all. Now that it was over, it was easy. He felt as if a great weight had been taken from him.

He felt as if something heavy was lying on his legs. He awoke, sweating even though the room was not hot. He heard breathing. And it was not Alice's low-pitched, slow breath, it was quick and high and hard, as if the breather had been exerting himself.

Itself.

Themselves.

One of them lay across his legs, the flippers plucking at the blanket. The other two lay on either side, their eyes wide and intent, creeping slowly toward where his face emerged from the sheets.

Howard was puzzled. "I thought you'd be gone," he said to the children. "You're supposed to be gone now."

Alice stirred at the sound of his voice, mumbled in her sleep.

He saw more of them stirring in the gloomy corners of the room, another writhing slowly along the top of the dresser, another inching up the wall toward the ceiling.

"I don't need you anymore," he said, his voice oddly high-pitched.

Alice started breathing irregularly, mumbling, "What? What?"

And Howard said nothing more, just lay there in the sheets, watching the creatures carefully but not daring to make a sound for fear Alice would wake

up. He was terribly afraid she would wake up and not see the creatures, which would prove, once and for all, that he had lost his mind.

He was even more afraid, however, that when she awoke she *would* see them. That was the one unbearable thought, yet he thought it continuously as they relentlessly approached with nothing at all in their eyes, not even hate, not even anger, not even contempt. We are with you, they seemed to be saying, we will be with you from now on. We will be with you, Howard, forever.

And Alice rolled over and opened her eyes.

GOOD NIGHT, THOU CHILD OF MY HEART

by

Alan Ryan

1

"Walk forward, please."

The voice was authoritative without being harsh.

The little girl, naked in the middle of the cold room, took one hesitant step forward. Her knees felt weak and soft. She stood still and squeezed her feet as close together as they would go in an effort to still the shivering of her body. She took a deep breath, then bit her lower lip.

"Come closer."

The child took three more short, trembling steps and stood still again. The brilliant white lights in

the ceiling seemed designed to reveal every inch of her body. The even light filled the room like a liquid, casting no shadows and bathing everything equally in its brilliance.

The almost blinding whiteness of the room had dazzled the child when she was led in. Now, seemingly in slow motion, the room began to come into focus. All around her, mirrors reflected her naked form from the walls. Without turning her head, she moved her eyes back and forth. She forced herself to keep from blinking. Mirrors. Herself. Naked. White light.

"Now turn around slowly."

Her feet seemed rooted to the smooth white surface of the floor. Very slowly, without moving her feet any farther apart than necessary, hardly moving them at all, she inched them sideways.

Her hands had been clenched tightly in front of her. Now she did not know what to do with them. Before, facing the voices that swam at her out of the dazzling whiteness, she had held them, clenched into fists, in front of her, covering her nakedness. Now, slowly turning around, she felt even more naked. Where could she put her hands? There was no way to cover herself. Her hands fluttered to her sides for a moment, then in front of her again. She felt the eyes watching her. Instinctively, she covered her crotch, although her back was now turned to the watchers. Her right hand clasped tightly at the fingers of her left hand. The mirrors shone from all four walls.

She stopped after making a full circle. She could see more clearly now. There were five of them

watching her. The one who had brought her in had apparently left by the same door. She felt their eyes moving over her naked body. Her heart pounded against her chest. Her chest. The thought made her nipples tighten and tingle.

"Put your hands down at your sides."

The thought was inarticulate as it whispered through her mind, but she knew that there was nothing left to conceal. They had seen her whole body. She let her hands drop to her sides. Her fingers felt cold.

"What is your name?"

The voice was still gentle, but it clearly demanded an answer. Didn't they know her name?

"Andrea," she whispered.

"Speak up."

"Andrea."

"Andrea what?"

"Andrea Banner."

"Do you know who we are, Andrea?"

She nodded.

A colder edge snapped into the voice: *"Yes, Sister."*

"Yes, Sister," Andrea repeated quickly. Her eyes opened a little wider.

"Who are we?" Gentle again.

Deep breath. "Virgers."

"That is not our proper name. What is our proper name?" Still gentle, but insistent.

"Sisters of the Virgin Birth," Andrea whispered. She felt her breath grow short as she got the words out.

"Yes. Sisters of the Virgin Birth. Do you know

what that means, Andrea?"

"Yes, Sister."

"Good. Now I want you to tell me what it means. As well as you can."

Andrea felt the sudden rush of heat into her face. She felt even more naked. She felt them staring at the vee between her legs.

"You have babies." The words seemed to fill her throat, cutting off her air.

But with that said, Andrea suddenly could see more clearly. The one who was speaking to her, asking the questions, telling her what to do, sat in the middle, with two more Sisters on each side of her. They were dressed all in white. Stiffly starched coifs cut sharply across their foreheads and hung down straight from their heads to their shoulders. Gleaming white framed their faces. White habits completely encased their bodies.

The speaker and three of the others sat leaning forward on the table, their hands joined loosely in front of them. The fifth, on Andrea's far left, finished writing something in a folder and looked up at her. They seemed to be waiting for her to say something else.

She did not know what to say. These Sisters were so different from the ones who taught her every day in school.

"What else do you know, Andrea?"

Andrea ransacked her brain for the right answer.

"You go out to the stations and have babies."

"That's right, Andrea. Go on. What else?"

"You stay out there."

A hint of a smile softened the line of the Sister's lips.

"Not always, Andrea. Some of us return here, as you see. We do sometimes return to Earth."

Andrea nodded, then hastily said, "Yes, Sister."

"What else do you know?"

Andrea bit her lip again before answering.

"You never get married."

She hoped it was the right answer. All the correct responses, so carefully drilled into her by her teachers and her mother, were beginning to come back to her mind. She hoped they would ask her the questions she had rehearsed.

The Sister in the middle looked at her without speaking for a moment. "We are married to the Lord and have His children," she said softly. A light, a warmth, seemed to glow in her eyes as she looked steadily at Andrea.

"Yes, Sister," Andrea said. This was more familiar. Now they were going to ask her all the questions she had been prepared for. She felt relief at being on surer ground.

The Sister raised her hands and joined her fingertips together, fingers spread wide apart. The tips of her index fingers lightly brushed her lower lip. She looked at Andrea thoughtfully.

"Would you like to do that, Andrea?"

"Yes, Sister."

"You would go to one of the space stations."

"Yes, Sister."

"You would never get married, not in the earthly sense. You would be married to the Lord and have His children. Would you like that, Andrea?"

"Yes, Sister."

"You might never come back to Earth."

Andrea nodded.

"You would never see your parents or any of your friends again. Do you understand that, Andrea?"

"Yes, Sister."

"Andrea. I want you to answer one very hard question. Why do you want to be a Sister of the Virgin Birth?"

At last. This question had been repeated to her over and over. The answer had long ago been memorized. Her mother and the teachers in school had helped her with it, helped her rehearse it many times. Her body lost some of its tension.

"I want to be a Sister of the Virgin Birth because it is the best way of showing my love for both God and man. There is no higher work I could ever do. I want to be married to the Lord and have many of His children. I want to help the Church bring love and peace to all the world and especially to space by living there and bearing the Lord's children to populate and fill the universe. I love God and I am happy to be healthy and strong so that when I grow up I can have many healthy children to do God's work. I pray that I will be accepted into the Order. Amen."

The words spilled out of her automatically, without conscious effort. Her heart fluttered when she heard herself saying, "Amen." That didn't belong there. It was not part of what she had memorized. But she was frightened and the word was triggered by the presence of the Sisters and the recitation. It was so much like a prayer.

The five Sisters sat watching her in silence. Again,

with a rush, Andrea felt embarrassment sweep through her naked body. She wished the Sister would say something. She had to go to the bathroom.

"Thank you, Andrea. You may go now." The Sister nodded her head at the door behind Andrea.

For a moment, Andrea stood still. Could she really leave? Then she turned and slowly walked toward the door. She saw another Sister, the same one who had brought her into the room, standing in the doorway.

Her bladder was aching. She hoped she would reach the bathroom in time. Oh God please don't let me wet the floor! Her knees felt almost too weak to carry her.

"Andrea!"

She froze in the doorway, her heart pounding. Somehow she managed to turn halfway round to face the five Sisters again. Despite the chill, she felt a drop of perspiration running down her side. She stared across the room.

The Sister in the middle had not changed her position. She sat watching Andrea standing in the doorway. Her fingertips were still joined together, index fingers touching her lip.

"Andrea," she said. "You are a very pretty girl."

2

"You're a rotten priest, you know, Dylan," the old bishop said, "but that doesn't mean you have to leave the priesthood."

The bishop settled back into his leather chair

with a great show of weariness. The chair creaked comfortably beneath him. From under his thick white eyebrows he watched Dylan Eliot for a reaction.

Dylan Eliot had known—or thought he had known—for some while now that he no longer wanted to be a priest. Part of the reason was men like the bishop. Dylan, thirty-four years old and nine of them a priest, had already begun watching himself for signs of encroaching “piety,” at least as it was practiced by his superiors. So far he had seen none, but that did not ease his worries. He still waited for the tell-tale facility with words, the psychological perception that could instantly and instinctively pinpoint a man’s latent guilts and growing worries, the mastery of the fine art of dissembling, of posing an innocent but lethal question, the actor’s art of modulating the voice, the politician’s art of producing as needed the words and the manners of sincerity.

The bishop, of course, had mastered the art years ago and obviously was using it on him now. It was the perfect thing to say. Insightful, challenging, direct. And possibly true. It was the possibility of truth in it that kept Dylan from responding at once, providing the bishop with the honest and naked reaction he was looking for. Say something, a voice urged him from deep inside, give him an answer, be done with it once and for all, for God’s sake. For God’s sake.

Instead of responding, Dylan carefully froze his face into a noncommittal expression, crossed one leg over the other, and leaned back into his chair.

He focused his eyes on the bishop's face, offering his own challenge in silence.

But it was already too late.

If he had been just a little surer of his vocation, or of his lack of a vocation, he would have answered by now. And Dylan knew that both he and the bishop knew that. So, without wanting to, he had in fact made his answer.

The bishop rearranged himself in the chair, making it creak again beneath his weight. He sighed, with elaborate weariness. He made his face warm and benevolent.

"What am I going to do with you, Dylan?"

Dylan squirmed inside. The bishop was using every trick he knew on him. Talking to him as if he were a child who required adult guidance. Which in a sense was true. Talking to him like his closest friend and confidant. Which was also true, there being no other. Who, after all, does a priest confide in?

"I don't know," Dylan said quietly, trying to keep any implications out of his tone of voice. No dissembling there, on his part, at least; the truth was, he didn't know.

The bishop sighed again, murmured, "All right, then," as if that closed a chapter in the conversation. Or the first round, Dylan thought. Then he leaned forward and rearranged his expression—Dylan watched him do it—into a businesslike, straight-forward look that suggested only a desire to get on with it.

"Dylan, we've been at this for months now," he said. "Let's get it settled, one way or the other. For

everybody's good."

Dylan nodded, but the bishop was looking off at a spot somewhere behind him. It occurred to Dylan that this role properly called for direct eye contact and he wondered why the bishop wasn't watching him more closely for reactions.

"I said you're a rotten priest, Dylan. Awful thing to say." He shook his head sadly, regretfully. "But you know what I meant when I said it. I meant it as, well, as a kind of challenge. Now perhaps you feel the same way, I don't really know. But . . . Well, my feeling is, knowing you all these years—and watching you, of course—that you are quite strong and sincere in your feelings. Therefore . . ."

The bishop was rambling, Dylan realized with surprise. Unusual for him, the experienced speaker, persuader, psychologist.

The old man coughed and began again. Dylan kept watching him. Still no eye contact.

"I want to offer you a test, Dylan. Now let's not play games with each other. It's a test of your faith, and I have too much respect for you to try and call it anything else. What do you say?"

What kind of a question was that? Dylan wondered. What choice did he have? Or want? All right, then, let it be settled one way or the other. For God's sake.

"What kind of a test?" he asked, startling himself with his own voice and the question it produced.

The bishop, he noted, was still avoiding his eyes.

"I have an assignment for you," the bishop said. His voice sounded flat, almost as if he had rehearsed these words. "It requires your accepting directives

without question. You'll . . ."

"Orders," Dylan said. Surprised again.

"Orders, yes, of course," the bishop said, the words coming quickly, as if he wanted to get past them himself and feared he might stumble over them if he lingered. "Nothing more than keeping your vow of obedience, remember, Dylan. Now this assignment . . ."

"I'm sorry," Dylan said. The bishop had just scored points—legitimate points—and Dylan could only assume that they both knew it. Obedience was the touchstone, the capstone, the handmaiden, the trusted servant, of faith. And it was the heart of Dylan's problem. If he could obey with a willing heart, then he could be a priest.

"I'm sorry. You're right. Of course. I . . . I want to know too if I belong here. I . . . I'll welcome . . . a test." He wanted suddenly to say more than that but nothing else would come out. At least he felt relief at having said that much. Please, father, he thought, help me solve this.

Through his own embarrassment, Dylan saw the bishop nod. But the older man still looked troubled, distracted.

"Good, good." He was leaning forward now on the desk but still avoiding Dylan's eyes. "All right, then. Here we are." He paused, cleared his throat, took a deep breath. As if returning to a prepared speech, Dylan thought for the second time, but a speech that wasn't easy to deliver.

"This is all confidential, Dylan, of course." The bishop's eyes flicked up to Dylan's face for an instant, then flicked away again.

Dylan nodded. Waited.

"I'm sure you're familiar with the Sisters of the Virgin Birth," the bishop said, and stopped.

Dylan nodded again, but his mind went racing ahead. If the test involves the Virgers, he thought, I fail. Of all things in the Church . . .

"They are . . . very holy women, Dylan, very holy women. Now, of course, I know that you are, let's say, inclined to disagree about that. I remember a conversation we once had on the subject. But I'm not interested in that." The bishop's right hand fluttered over the desk, dismissing any such idea. "Now, Dylan, you must put aside any personal feelings you may have in this matter. After all, that's the nature of obedience, isn't it?"

For God's sake, get on with it, Dylan thought.

"The Sisters of the Virgin Birth have a long history of devoted service to the Church. They . . . filled a need after the War. It was not enough that the War brought all the lost souls of the world into the Church. The Church, as it always must, continues to grow. The divine mission of the Church always carries it forward, along whatever paths this changing world opens."

I don't need a lesson in church history, Dylan thought. Or a sermon, for that matter. Then he willed himself to pay attention to the bishop's words, to *obey*, but his thoughts were distracted by the disorder of his own feelings about the sect. The bishop, he noted, was carefully avoiding calling them by their common name.

The War was still known simply as that, with no need to give it a number. Three continents had been

left in charred ruins. And afterward people had flocked to the Church. Dylan sometimes thought, when he read any history of the period following the War and the Church's growth during it, that sheer fright was perhaps not the best or most lasting call to the bosom of the Church, not the soundest basis for faith. But indeed, after the War, the Church, with the only remaining worldwide network, had come to rule what was left of the planet. Those few of the radical intelligentsia who could still conjure up anything even remotely resembling a healthy skepticism were wont to say that history had played right into the Church's hands. Dylan, through his own struggles with his elusive faith, was sometimes inclined to agree.

And when the planet recovered from its injuries and ordinary life resumed, the Virgers (Dylan had a hard time even thinking of them by their formal name) had arisen to carry the faith out beyond Earth. No reliance on tenuous conversion or sheer fright for them. They would *breed* their own faithful. With the frozen seed of unnamed men. Holy men, no doubt. With the Church's blessings and the help of God. But not that of Dylan Eliot, no matter what his vows required. He had, certainly, never done, or even said in public, anything to oppose the Virgers, and he knew the danger of the sin of pride in setting his mind against the will of the Church. But the Virgers were a blind spot for him. It couldn't be right to do what they did. Fortunately, his work in the Church had so far not brought him in contact with them. And now, suddenly, his faith and his future were somehow linked to them. These

holy women.

"...in secrecy," the bishop was saying, apparently not aware that Dylan's attention had wandered. "Accept it, Dylan, just accept it. What concerns you is a specific task."

What? What? Not wanting to know.

The bishop had dropped his eyes to the desk in front of him, watching his fingers slide back and forth on the green blotter. Dylan could not see his face.

"They raise the children themselves, Dylan. Girls. Young girls. Raise them at the stations. Breed them." The bishop's voice sounded husky, choked. "Now please don't ask, Dylan, because I can't tell you anything about this. Or any of the reasons. Please don't ask, Dylan." The hand fluttered again over the desk, more weakly this time. "They have a new child. Among new members. They'll be going out next week. I don't know just which day the ship goes. But next week. One of the girls..."

Dylan felt the stiffness of his own body as he listened to the bishop's stumbling words.

"Her name is Andrea Banner. Andrea. Banner. Now, Dylan, pay attention."

What? What?

"You are to get her out. Out of there. She... doesn't belong there. That's all. That's what I want you to do. Get her out. Dylan."

The silence lasted so long that the bishop finally raised his head and looked into Dylan's face. Their eyes met. Each tried to read the other's expression. The long silence continued, grew painful, before Dylan could manage to speak.

"What can I ask?"

The bishop looked away again. Shook his head. "Nothing," he said. "Do what you have to do. Just get her out."

"What I have to do," Dylan said. He didn't know he said it out loud.

"Just get her out, Dylan, for God's sake," the bishop said. His voice was now barely audible. "For God's sake."

The silence hung again in the air.

Dylan's mind floundered in a sea of half-formed questions.

The bishop stirred, raised his head. He leaned forward, stretching one hand across the desk toward Dylan. Before he was conscious of his own movement, Dylan had reached out and taken hold of the bishop's hand.

"Do it, Dylan," the bishop said.

With a start, Dylan realized their hands were joined. He was not used to holding a man's hand, or a woman's. Not used to the touch of another person. He tried to identify the feeling it stirred in him, but failed. Still, the intimacy moved him.

"I know," the bishop said, his voice so gentle now, all artifice banished by the touch of their hands. "It isn't easy being a good priest."

His hand squeezed Dylan's.

"It isn't easy being a bad one, either," Dylan said softly.

It was two days before Dylan Eliot did anything

about the Virgers or the girl, Andrea Banner. For the first day, he didn't know if he wanted to do anything. For the second day, he didn't know what to do first, and spent part of the time regretting the loss of the first day.

He went to see his pastor and excused himself from his regular duties, only to find that the bishop had already been in touch to do that for him. The pastor asked no questions.

Dylan spent most of that first day mired in confusion. He tried praying for guidance but the words sounded hollow and ineffectual and he soon gave it up. The answer to this problem couldn't come from God. He would have to figure it out for himself.

The questions tumbled over each other like grinning, black-robed clowns. First of all, what was the bishop doing? How could he give him a "test" like this? It didn't make sense unless . . . But it didn't seem possible that the bishop—and certainly not the Church itself—shared his feelings about the Virgers. Not possible. Not . . . Unless the bishop had a personal interest in the child? No. That wasn't possible, either. Or else . . . Still . . .

It took most of the day for Dylan to decide that none of these questions had anything to do with the nature of the test. These were the questions the bishop had told him he couldn't ask, not even of himself. No, the answers had nothing to do with the test, nothing at all. The only question was whether or not he could prove his worthiness and will to be a priest.

By the time he finally fell asleep, he had

glimpsed, as he had years before, the idea that faith was, in the end, a very simple matter. He wasn't sure if he was glad of that or not. But with the help of God—if God were willing—he would do what he had to do.

Then, on the second day, he had to figure out how to do it, how to begin. Despite the difficulty of the problem, it seemed easier to concentrate on how he would get the girl “out of there” than to reason out why he was doing it.

It was evening before he had worked out a plan, or at least the beginning of one. He began to feel mildly exhilarated at the adventure, despite moments of cold fright at what he was doing and its implications. But at least it was something to *do*. He got over the panicky chills by concentrating on the details of the plan until everything began to fade into badly needed sleep. Still, questions lingered, like tendrils of fog drifting behind his closed eyes.

He ate a quick breakfast the next morning and, before the previous day's doubts had a chance to build up again, he went to work.

Somehow he had to get inside the Virgers' headquarters—he couldn't quite bring himself to think of it as a convent—and get an idea of the layout and, if possible, some indication of where the girl herself might be. He resolutely kept from his thoughts the notion of “casing the joint.” The added note of melodrama was too distasteful.

He made a few calls to the holo networks and, within half an hour, had gathered the information and the names he needed. He had anticipated that

this part would take much longer. Now he had no excuse for putting off the final call, and one to Sister Beata, the Prefect of the Order.

That took some preparation. He would have to turn on the phone viewer for that, he thought, lest she suspect something was wrong. And if she were going to see him, he would have to look right. Him and his office both. It took two hours to get himself and what he was now thinking of as his "set" ready for the call.

He made one final check, punching a button to show him the picture that would be transmitted by his own phone. It looked good. He looked good himself, he decided, and the casual clothes seemed right for the character he was playing. He forced himself to keep thinking of it in those terms. This was only a role, an acting job. Now who in hell was the patron saint of actors? Judging from this experience, they certainly needed one.

His hands were starting to sweat. They felt clammy. He wiped them on his pants. Maybe he should write down what he was going to say? Maybe not, though. He had earlier rejected the idea, afraid that he would not sound spontaneous enough. No, he would do it without notes. Just do it. Do it.

He took a deep breath, expelled the air slowly, and punched the numbers for the Convent of the Sisters of the Virgin Birth. The screen in front of him lit up, flickered with jagged multi-colored lines, then snapped into sharp focus on the face of a young Sister. The starched coif cut a hard line across her forehead.

"May I help you?" she said. Her face showed no expression.

"Sister Beata, please," Dylan said brusquely. He tapped the desk in front of him with a pen, as he had planned, to show his impatience. A busy man.

"Ralph Donald, NBC," he said, trying to convey the impression that he was just a little surprised at not being recognized immediately.

The young Sister hesitated and a frown line creased her forehead just below the hard line of the coif.

"I'll see if she's in," she said. He saw her reach toward the phone panel. The screen went blank and the sound was turned off.

Dylan spent the next few seconds concentrating on his role, rather than letting his fear build up.

He was looking at his watch—he guessed it had taken about a minute—when the screen snapped to life again. Sister Beata's face looked out at him, a thin professional smile looking cold and businesslike against her otherwise impassive features.

"Ah, Sister Beata," Dylan said quickly.

"Mr. Donald?" She inclined her head slightly toward him.

God be with me, he thought. He swallowed quickly, and began. To his amazement, the words came.

"I'll get right to the point, Sister Beata. We're both busy people. We're starting work on a new *Pathways* program I'm producing for NBC. It's about your Order, which, I hasten to add, I've always had a great admiration for." Was he talking too fast? "We expect to broadcast it in"—he waved

a hand—"oh, a month or two. Now, what I'd like to do is arrange an interview with you, nothing very elaborate or time-consuming, just enough to get your views on a few things." He smiled. "We want to be sure to do this right." Keep moving, he thought, don't lose momentum now. "When would it be convenient for you to see me?" Here, excited by the way he was carrying it off, he glanced at his watch, implying that he assumed the meeting would take place within hours, rather than days.

"Well, I don't..." Sister Beata said, glancing down at some papers Dylan could just make out on her desk.

But Dylan suddenly felt himself in control. Maybe he could beat her, after all. He pretended to look at something, an appointment book, perhaps, out of the camera's range.

"Would two o'clock be all right," he said smoothly, "or would a little later in the day be better for you? It won't take long." He looked expectantly into the camera lens and reached for a pen.

Sister Beata hesitated.

"I'm certain you'll be pleased with the piece we're doing," he said, smiling again.

"Well, perhaps from four to four-thirty," Sister Beata said.

"Fine," Dylan said quickly. "I'll just have a few questions. Just to get some comments from you on the best way to show the Order." Know when to shut up, he reminded himself. "You know," he added. That sounded right. "Thanks very much."

When the screen faded to black a moment later, he sat back in his chair and let the feeling of relief

and elation wash over him. Dear God, thank you. Brought it off beautifully. The bishop himself couldn't have done it better.

And that thought made him more nervous than his actual confrontation with the Virgers.

4

The building itself was threatening, an immense cube of white marble, its surface smooth, unbroken by windows. As Dylan crossed a broad plaza toward the entrance, he made a conscious effort to walk briskly, with his head held up. In case they were watching. The rational part of his mind knew it wasn't so but that didn't keep him from wondering. God works in crooked ways, he thought. This was, he had no choice but to believe, the work of God he was doing. It didn't help his state of mind to think that Sister Beata was likewise satisfied that she was doing the work of God. Like a war, he thought unhappily, where each of the sworn enemies has God on his side.

He was hoping for a few minutes to gather his thoughts and work up his courage, but within minutes he was sitting in Sister Beata's office. She offered him coffee. He declined.

"What kind of a program were you planning, Mr. Donald?"

"Oh, the usual sort of thing," he said casually, suggesting that explanations were hardly necessary. "A documentary. About the Order. Your work here is so . . . so important, that we'd like to keep the public informed about it. You can't report on this

sort of thing too much, I'm sure you'll agree." That sounded weak, but Sister Beata nodded in agreement. "And of course I wouldn't want to do the piece without consulting with you. In the interests of accuracy." He rearranged his face into what he hoped was a bland expression. "I should maintain a certain . . . well, objectivity, you understand. As a newsman. But I . . ."—his stomach flopped over at his own daring—"I have a daughter of my own and . . ." He looked away from her face. "My wife and I would . . . perhaps someday . . ." No, he'd gone too far. He looked up, confused.

Sister Beata was smiling, genuinely, or so Dylan thought.

"Perhaps the Lord will bless her with a vocation," she said. "I shall remember her in my prayers."

Maybe she did believe it. Maybe he was on safe ground now.

Before he lost his advantage, he plunged into the questions he had prepared. He asked about the founding of the Order by Blessed Elizabeth, its history, its size, scope, all the standard questions, until he sensed from her tone of voice that Sister Beata had begun to grow impatient. After all, this was material he could have simply looked up, and presumably had. He switched to what he thought of as the next level of questions.

"Sister, what do you see as the future of the Order?"

Sister Beata gazed into his face for a few moments. When she spoke, her voice had a soft quality that surprised him, coming from this tough-

minded woman.

"Mr. Donald, I see something very beautiful. I see a world in which every human being, every man, woman, and child, truly lives at one with the Lord. A world of love. A world that fulfills the divine mission of the Church, to bring all of humanity into the bosom of the Lord. A world free of doubt and fear, a world in which the only ruler is God Himself. That is what I see, Mr. Donald. That is what we are working toward. A world of true peace, peace in unity with God, a world of total faith. Oh, I don't suppose that I'll live to see it myself. But it's coming, it's coming. That is why the Order exists. That is what the Sisters of the Virgin Birth are working for."

Dylan controlled his voice. "Does the Order continue to grow, Sister?"

"It continues to grow, yes, of course, Mr. Donald, how could it not?"

An arrow of cynicism slashed through Dylan's mind. Business is always good, he thought.

"Of course," he said out loud. "And what would be the size of the Order now? I couldn't turn up a recent figure?"

"I'm sorry," Sister Beata said, "it's not our policy to discuss that."

"Well, then, is it in excess of, say . . ."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, recruitment, then," Dylan persisted. "If I'm using the proper word. That continues, of course."

"Why, certainly. Yes, naturally, our doors are always open to a holy woman or girl who wants to

serve her Lord, Mr. Donald." The smile had returned to her lips.

"Do you have to turn many away?"

"I am sorry. There are some matters . . ."

"I understand, Sister. Yes, of course."

He was losing the thread of his own questions. He had to get her talking—if he could—about new members. Somehow.

"Well," he said, "I think I have a good idea of your feelings now, Sister, and I'm very grateful for your time. I think this will be a big help in putting the program together. Very often with something like this, it's the feelings that matter more than the facts and figures."

She inclined her head very slightly in his direction.

"There is one other thing, however, that I'd like to ask your cooperation on," he said quickly. Before he lost his nerve.

"I'll be glad to help you if I can."

Too late to back up now. Dylan tried to keep his voice from trembling.

"What I'd like to do is show on the program one of your young members. I think . . ."

"Oh, no, that's not possible!" Sister Beata's smile had vanished.

"Please," he said quickly. "I understand your feelings, Sister, and perhaps you would judge that it's not the best thing. And, of course, I'll be guided by your feelings." Keep going, keep going. "But I think it would make a huge difference in the . . . the impact of the program, if you see what I mean. After all, what could be more . . . how can I put

this? . . . more . . . well, inspiring, I suppose, is the right word? One of the younger girls, just admitted to the Order. I think if parents all over the world could see . . .”

“Mr. Donald, we do not . . .”

He nodded vigorously. “I know, Sister, but, please, won’t you just consider it for a moment. A lovely young child, dedicating her life to the service of the Order.”

“The service of the *Lord*, Mr. Donald.”

And he had her.

“Exactly. Think of it, Sister, and I think you’ll see it as I do.” A good salesman, he reminded himself, knows when to keep quiet and let the prospect—the pigeon—sell himself.

Timing would be everything here, he knew. He kept silent, waiting until he sensed the right moment.

“I was thinking of Andrea Banner, Sister.”

Her eyes flew open. The smooth clear skin of her face tightened over suddenly taut muscles.

Careful, now. Be careful. This is winner take all. Sister Beata opened her mouth, closed it again.

“We’ve done our research, Sister,” he said quietly.

Careful. Time this properly.

“We have holotapes of her as an infant. It’ll make quite a story. I would want to talk with her first, of course. To see how she’d be on camera. If she works right—and there’s no reason to think she wouldn’t—we’ll be back with a crew to tape, oh, say, two or three minutes of conversation with her. Or even, if you preferred, perhaps just a shot of

her, say, at prayer in the chapel. In fact, whatever you would think most effective, Sister."

Let her wonder just how powerful and influential a holovision network could be.

"I really don't know, Mr. Donald. I . . . I'll have to think about it."

"Of course, Sister. But please bear in mind that we do have our deadlines. When you've thought about it, give me a call." He pulled a notebook from a pocket and scribbled quickly on it. "I'll be at this number this evening. It's a private number. Please get back to me as soon as possible. If we can work everything out, I'd like to see the child tomorrow, so we can get to work on the rest of it. Sister, I want to see this program on the air. Talking with you has me even more excited about it than I was."

And he was on his feet.

And in another moment he was gone.

He went directly back to his room at the rectory, checked his "set" again, skipped dinner, and sat at the desk waiting for her to call.

He was alternately in pain at the clumsiness of his performance and elated at the degree of success he had managed.

Almost five hours later, the phone buzzed. He jumped, then froze, letting it buzz three more times. But his mind was still alert and he stood to punch the button to accept the call, hoping she would think he was called away from some urgent business to answer it.

It wasn't her. He thought the young Sister whose face appeared on the screen was the same one who

had taken his call that morning. He couldn't be sure; the coif erased too many individual features. Which, he realized vaguely, was probably part of its purpose.

She had a message. Yes, he could be accommodated, she said. Dylan instantly realized that the young Sister had no idea what the message was about. Would eleven o'clock the next morning be convenient?

When he switched off the phone, Dylan sat back limp in the chair. So he had done it. So far. The bishop would be . . . What? Proud of him? Was he proud of himself? The questions came whirling back into his mind. How could this prove his worthiness to be a priest? The bishop must feel as he did about the Virgers. *Somebody* must feel as he did. Why else want to get the girl, Andrea Banner, "out of there"? Why else?

Obedience is an act of faith, he told himself several times.

Still, he was, in a sense, proud of himself. Quite a performance. But then, had it really, at least so far, been his own doing? Or had Sister Beata's zeal for her own mission convinced her even more than he had? That thought immediately banished one nagging fear that had been bothering him. He suddenly knew that Sister Beata had not inquired—and would not inquire—at the holo network about the legitimacy of his so-called program. She believed him. Because she wanted to. *Because she believed.* All he had done was play on her own beliefs, her faith in her mission. And the bishop himself couldn't have . . .

... couldn't have done it better.
Much later, Dylan finally fell asleep.

5

There were seven other girls, Andrea learned, all about her own age. She had seen them in the chapel. The old Sister who accompanied her had not permitted her to speak to them. And each of them had been shepherded by a Sister. They had all eyed each other eagerly. In silence. But Andrea was glad to know they were there.

The Sister brought her back to her room. A cell, she called it. It wasn't cold, but its bare walls looked chilly. The Sister left her with a book about the Order to study. Andrea would have to answer questions about it in the afternoon, the Sister told her.

She felt drowsy and had read only five pages when the Sister returned. So soon? But she didn't know the answers yet.

*"Someone is coming to see you," the Sister said.
My mother?*

"He will ask you some questions."

He? A stranger, then. Who?

"You must prepare yourself, Andrea," the Sister said. She reached out toward Andrea's face. The cold fingers touched her cheek for an instant, then fluttered away.

"I want you to pray with me."

"Yes, Sister."

They knelt together, side by side.

"Repeat the words after me, Andrea. Please, God,

guide me . . ."

"Please, God, guide me . . ."

"In all my words and deeds . . ."

"In all my words and deeds . . ."

6

"I'm seeing her in an hour," Dylan said.

The bishop's face on the screen looked tired, but it became animated at Dylan's words.

"Can you get her out?"

"No, not yet. I saw Sister Beata yesterday. It went very well." Dylan watched the bishop's face for a change of expression, but there was none. "I'm seeing the girl at eleven o'clock but, so far, that's all I know. Right now, I don't even know what the child looks like. I'll know more after this morning. I'm pretending to . . ."

The bishop's hand flew up. "I don't want to know," he said sharply. "No." He shook his head. "When can you get her out?"

Wrong. Something was wrong. Dylan knew it.

"Your Excellency," Dylan said, making it into a statement. Of what? Obedience? "I'm doing this because you've asked me to do it. Because I *want* to do it, or at least see if I *can* do it. Apparently I can, which presumably is what we both wanted in the first place. But I really don't understand what . . ."

"You don't need to understand, Dylan. Don't you see? That's part of the test, Dylan. Don't you see that?" The bishop, Dylan could almost believe, sounded as if he were pleading.

Dylan, doubting his own sincerity in the action, but committed now to doing the right thing, bowed his head to the bishop's words and will.

"Dylan, when do you think you can have it done?" Still, the note of urgency in the bishop's voice bothered him.

"I don't know yet. As I said. I'll know better after I see the child, and see more of the building. I still have to learn my way around there, and that won't be easy to do. Assuming I'm actually supposed to steal the child away from there. Physically, I mean." And was he? Was he? Could he actually have gone this far in the scheme without knowing the final step? Was he really going to steal her right out of the building? Didn't civilized people have other methods at their disposal? Weren't they supposed to?

"Report back to me as soon as you work out a plan," the bishop said. He seemed in a hurry now. "I'll pray for you, Dylan. Remember, report back to me."

It was just as well that Dylan had to leave right away to keep his appointment. Otherwise, he would have sat there for a long time, staring at the silent, blank screen of the phone. So the bishop would pray for him. He had assumed, he hoped not vainly, that the bishop was praying for him anyway. But this was the first time the old man had remembered to say it to him. He was glad of that. So even if God was on the Virgers' side, He was on his side, too. It was something, at least. Surely, God was great enough to be shared. Even by enemies.

It was the bishop's last words that bothered him.

Somehow, that urgent request—order?—to “report back” didn’t seem to fit with the image of a man offering to pray for him.

7

He met Andrea in a small room that reminded him of a visiting area in a prison. A counter divided the room in half from wall to wall. A glass panel ran down the middle of the counter and reached up to within half a meter of the ceiling. The entire room was white, walls, ceiling, floor. The child was seated at the other side of the counter when he was shown in. An elderly Sister stood erect behind her, eyes trained like camera lenses on his face. The child and the Sister were both dressed in white.

Andrea looked so tiny.

Dylan couldn’t get over it. How could a child look so small, so fragile, so . . . And something else.

There was a chair on his side of the counter. He pulled it out and sat down opposite the child.

Peaceful. She looked peaceful. His mind immediately fetched up the image from a dozen paintings of the Madonna. Not the child. The mother. Just as quickly, he rejected the image. It seemed too obvious, too easy. And too troubling, freighted with too much meaning.

“Hello, Andrea,” he said.

“Hello.”

Her voice was soft, almost hushed, like the gentle hue of a bright color. It was perfect to complete the whole picture: fair skin, pale blue eyes open wide, corn-yellow hair. Her hands were joined on

the counter in front of her. He let his eyes rest on her hands. The fingers were milky white, almost transparent. Like her face, he thought.

He would have prayed, but for the setting. The hands invited prayer.

It was hard to look into her eyes but he forced himself to face her.

"Andrea, you're going to be a Sister of the Virgin Birth."

Her response came quickly. "Yes." A hint of a smile accompanied the single word. Not on her lips, he saw, but in her eyes. In her eyes. A look he had seen before. Now he tried to move his gaze away from her face, but found that he couldn't.

"Why do you want to be a Sister of the Virgin Birth, Andrea?"

This time she hesitated, shifted her body slightly, as if she were going to look up and seek guidance from the Sister who stood behind her. Then she sat still again.

"I always wanted to be a...a Sister of the Virgin Birth," she said. "Ever since I can remember." She had dropped her eyes. Dylan followed her gaze to where it rested on her hands, still joined in front of her. He thought her fingers looked even whiter than before, if that were possible, as if they were being pressed painfully together. Knotted, rather than joined.

"Why, Andrea? I'd like you to tell me why?"

"Because I love God," she said. Her voice had faded to a whisper, a shadow of sound, and a moment later Dylan was wondering if she had actually said it or if he had imagined the whispered words.

Then she lifted her head a fraction of an angle and looked directly at him again. Her chin was thrust forward in an image of childish defiance, but her eyes, the watery pale blue eyes, seemed to be . . . Pleading, he thought. Or, dear God, was he imagining that too? Because he wanted to see it. But if they were pleading, what, dear God, were they pleading *for*? And what did he want them to be pleading for? Dear God.

Dear . . .

His hand touched the glass that separated them. The cold against the palm of his hand startled him. He saw his hand pressed flat against the glass. Everything moved slowly. The Sister behind Andrea was leaning forward. Andrea reached out toward him, her hand extended. He thought he could see through the palm of her hand. She was smiling. Her eyes. She was blessing him. Her palm touched the glass where his hand was pressed to it. Dylan looked at their hands, joined palm to palm but for the coldness of the glass between them.

"Mr. Donald!"

He jumped, withdrew his hand. Swung around.

Sister Beata stood in the doorway behind him. Her face looked gray against the whiteness that surrounded her head. Her lips were a single thin line.

"I'm sorry," she said. Her voice sounded constricted. "That's all the time we can give you." She stood aside in the doorway, urging him out quickly.

His head was whirling and he couldn't see clearly but somehow he mumbled something and managed to keep from stumbling in the doorway. He didn't

remember leaving the building.

Outside the front entrance, he walked quickly across the plaza, conscious only of the dazzling heat reflected from the marble at his feet. And the cold glassy touch of the child's palm as it blessed him.

8

He sat shivering on the edge of his bed. Several times he thought he was going to be sick and welcomed the nausea in the hope it would bring some relief. Nothing happened.

He tried to see the child's eyes again; there had been something comforting in them. As if the child had come to rescue him, rather than he to rescue the child.

But did the child want to be rescued? When that thought wormed across his consciousness, he had to wrestle the picture of the child's eyes out of his mind.

Rescue her.

How?

And why?

Dear God.

The thoughts flitted, blinking and disappearing, through his mind, like candle flames in the dark.

So this was the test. Wasn't it? Wasn't it?

He covered his face with his hands and leaned forward, elbows balanced on knees. Against his face he felt the cold of the glass that had touched his palms, as if the chill of the glass had embedded itself there. And behind the chill, the warmth of the child's eyes. Her smile and her blessing.

He sat on the edge of the bed for most of the night and somewhere in the darkness, with the child's face before him, he found the words to pray.

9

The next morning he went to see the bishop.

With words grown weak and lame, he told the bishop about his plan and his visit to the convent. The bishop said nothing until he was finished. It didn't take long.

When he was done, he sat back exhausted, sweating, and waited for the bishop to speak. His last words were: "I can't do it."

The bishop was silent for a long time. Dylan, afraid to face him and what he knew this meant, kept his head down. The bishop's chair creaked. It sounded loud in the silence.

"What did you see there, Dylan?" the bishop said. Dylan thought, in confusion, that his voice sounded oddly gentle. Forgiving. Well, the Church had always been fond of forgiving its wayward . . . children. Remember the Prodigal Son. And Christ's words on the cross. He felt dizzy.

"What did you see there, Dylan?"

"A child," he just managed to say.

"What sort of a child?"

"A . . . A little girl." He looked up suddenly into the bishop's eyes. "She can't be more than eleven years old!"

The bishop nodded. "Eleven," he said. "Or so I believe." He was smiling.

"A child, but . . . in her eyes . . . reminded

me . . .” He felt his throat closing, about to choke him, calling for tears and sobs to clear a passage so he could speak.

“Yes?”

Dylan shook his head dumbly. He was choking. “I . . . I can’t . . . do it. I’m . . . sorry . . . so sorry . . .” And at last the tears came and washed his eyes clean. He looked up at the bishop’s face, swimming at him through the magnifying tears, and saw that the old man was smiling.

“You don’t have to,” the bishop said. “You don’t have to.” His smile broadened. “Here, Dylan,” he said, and reached out toward him across the desk. Dylan clutched at the old man’s hand, put his wet cheek against it.

“You’ve passed the test, Dylan. You’ve understood obedience, and what a very simple thing it is. The child, of course, belongs there, just as you belong here. Dylan, please remain with us. You can, you know.”

Dylan held the old man’s hand tighter, pressed it against his cheek, but the tears wouldn’t stop. He marveled at the gentleness of the old man’s voice, a gentleness he had never been able to hear before.

“You’ve done well. Your faith is safe and intact in your heart, Dylan. You’ll be a fine priest now.”
So.

Dylan struggled and won control over his tears. He looked up into his savior’s face, seeking the proper words for thanks.

“And, Dylan, I might add,” the bishop said, still smiling, “that as for the little plan you worked out, and all that difficult business of facing the Sisters,

well, I must say, Dylan, frankly, I couldn't have done it better myself."

10

Andrea knew she loved God.

She must. She had said it to herself so many times. She had said it out loud so many times. She had said it to the Sisters so many times. She had said it, she had said it. She loved God. Yes, she loved God, she loved God.

She lay in the hammock, encased but floating. Her legs felt numb. She wondered how long she had been in it. It felt like . . . A word or phrase drifted upward in her mind, seeking the surface of thought. It felt like . . . No, she couldn't retrieve the phrase, the word. Maybe she had never known whatever the thing was that the hammock was like. She couldn't get a grip on the word. It felt like . . . No, it was no use, she couldn't get it.

Beside her, something clicked. The door. She was suddenly confused. Hadn't the door been above her before? Hadn't it?

A triangle of white floated toward her out of the grayness. She turned her head and saw that it was the old Sister, the one who had brought her here, to this hammock, to this . . . room? There was something different about her now. Andrea blinked, tried to see more clearly, realized without knowing the words that she was drifting back into consciousness. She could feel her body again, moving sluggishly inside the sealed material of the hammock. It felt like . . . Still the word wouldn't come.

Now she could see what was different. The coif was gone, with its sword-like slash across the old woman's forehead. In its place was a cloth that shone with whiteness, but soft, graceful, wrapped around the Sister's head, joined beneath her chin. The woman's form looked softer, smaller. Andrea thought she could see the swelling of breasts beneath the tunic. And pants, the woman was wearing pants. That meant . . . So they were really . . .

Andrea shook her head, tried to clear it, reached for words she had never known, frightening words and ideas.

"God be with you, child," the Sister whispered above her. Andrea felt hands moving over her body. No, not her body, but groping, fumbling at the hammock that still held her. What were they going to do to her now? Were they going to let her out?

Something came loose at her side. Andrea lay very still, suddenly afraid of falling. Which meant that she was no longer floating. Which meant—she struggled to remember clearly what they had told her—which meant they were . . . in space.

She closed her eyes and waited. Her legs still felt numb. No, not numb, they felt heavy. Her arms felt prickly. She wished she could get out of the hammock. It felt like . . .

"There, now," the Sister said, and straightened up.

Andrea watched her face for a signal, afraid to move without being told. She waited, while the shape of the room—if it was a room—took form around her. Yes, she remembered it now.

"You can stand up," the Sister said. Andrea

thought the woman was smiling. She sounded as if she were smiling.

The child moved, sensations groping within her body for the right muscles. Everything felt so heavy. The hammock swayed beneath her. She gripped at its material—it was cushioned inside, she could feel it with her fingers, she remembered that now—and the movement located the muscles. She could feel her own weight, she could move now.

She felt air against her body, freedom. She leaned to one side and the hammock moved beneath her. The Sister came closer, arms outstretched to help. Andrea felt the hands take her by her arms, supporting her. The hammock swung away. The Sister was holding her, keeping her from falling.

She was standing. The floor was cold, hard. Her knees were weak, loose, like cold water. She suddenly wanted to cry, it was so good to be out of the hammock, it had felt like . . . felt . . . like . . .

It had felt . . . the way a body bag must feel.

She gasped, thought she had gasped, wasn't sure. She flung her arms around the woman's body, buried her face in the whiteness of the Sister's breasts, sobbed, sobbed again.

"You'll be all right now," the Sister said above her. "You'll be all right. Now, Andrea, I'd like you to pray with me."

The child moved slowly away from her, stood up straight.

"Yes, Sister," she said.

The old woman lowered herself carefully to her knees. Andrea knelt beside her.

"Repeat the prayer after me, Andrea. Please,

God, guide me . . ."

"Please, God, guide me . . ."

"In all my words and deeds . . ."

"In all my words and deeds . . ."

"Throughout my life . . ."

"Throughout my life . . ."

"Wherever Your will leads . . ."

"Wherever Your will leads . . ."



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