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LET THE FIRE FALL

KATE WILHELM'S

EXPLOSIVE NEW NOVEL
OF SCIENCE FICTION

Earth, planet of
hatred, destroyed
the Star People...
and set loose the
gift of Revolution!

THE VOICE OF GOD

The first man to reach the spaceship was Obie Cox. Until then, Obie had been known only for the possession of one of the most beautiful male bodies in creation.

After the spaceship, Obie Cox became known throughout the world. Obie was touched by the hand of God, and that hand lay heavy on him. But he knew his duty was to carry the message placed in his hands to the world . . . the strong message, the truthful message . . . the message of hate!

LET THE FIRE FALL

KATE WILHELM

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LET THE FIRE FALL

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Chapter One

ON the Ohio River at the curve where Cincinnati, the Queen City, was allowed to sprawl up and down hills, and more specifically, on the Kentucky side, where Covington snaked along the one highway up the steep hill flanked by two-storied frame buildings with dirty windows and heterogeneous shops that ran together and merged: Whiskey by the drink; cleaners—while u wait; juvenile furniture; drugs and sundries; cafeteria; fish sandwiches; this is where it started.

There was Florence Waters, no more than a child, with the immense belly of one about to give birth. She had gained forty-two pounds, and her mother was having her weekly cry over the sin of the daughter. Florence had sneaked from the home for unwed mothers in order to take the bus across the bridge to spend the day with her mother because she was not allowed in the house when her father was there.

The father of the unborn bastard, Obie Cox, the Adonis of Covington, was at the same time trying his damnedest to knock up yet another of the town's young ladies. Nineteen, still described by the middle-aged women as a beautiful child, he had light blue eyes, and gorgeous silver blond hair that was too long, but which couldn't be faulted because it was such lovely hair, with just enough wave, a new curly beard that hid his acne scars, and teeth that were slightly out of line, so that those who might otherwise have been hostile to him because

of his good looks were instead sympathetic. Obie was still the prize catch for the girls under eighteen. Older than that, they were starting to look for other things than a beautiful body, things like stability and a solid future and a less fickle disposition, but those under eighteen were properly dazzled by his appearance.

Dee Dee MacLeish was less dazzled than she had been two months earlier; she was starting to act possessive, and beginning to talk about their future. Dee Dee's father was a gentle preacher who had been born a century, or at least half a century too late. He never should have survived to this time; he had not heard that God is dead, and so still preached of God's love and beneficence. Dee Dee sang in the choir and bought the Pill from a college friend. Dee Dee had read all of DeSade, had turned on twice with pot, smoked a pack a day, and could drink three martinis and still drive. She was pretty, as most eighteen-year-old girls are pretty, 35, 24, 35, which isn't at all bad, dark brown hair, and gray eyes, with a dimple in her left cheek, deepened consciously with the tip of a pencil held there for hours daily through all her classes. That it was a dirty dimple didn't matter, the black spot in the center accentuated it.

One more character before we get on with the event. Matthew Daniels, a rather young M.D., just thirty, with a general practice in Cincinnati, and a home in Elmwood Heights across the river, out four miles from Covington. Matt was tall and almost rigidly erect, not for anything romantic like an old war injury, or a football mishap, but simply because he was like that. He was intense, inside and out, and relaxing was what he had to work at hardest. He was married, loved his wife, Lisa, and the two children, Derek, four, and Lorna, thirteen months. Matt was baby-sitting along with his housekeeper, Mrs. Murray, a

Bible-belter born and bred. Lorna was the baby in question. Lisa and Derek had gone shopping and to see a movie in Cincinnati on his day off, while his patients griped that he had it easy, off Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays, spending all his time on the golf course. He had tried that, and had become so tense with the effort of trying to hit the blasted ball with the club that just wouldn't, with the ever present derisive grin on the face of the caddy, that he had realized he wasn't meant for the game. He took up gardening and motorcycles instead.

He was tending his tomatoes when the space ship screamed through the sky and landed in Busby's cornfield three miles from his house.

Too fast? A spaceship, outer-spaceship, not ours, unlike anything seen on Earth ever before, a big and silver and not terribly streamlined-looking thing, in fact, it looked a lot like a skinny pagoda, but very efficient-looking in spite of that, screamed through the perfect June sky, when if ever there come perfect days, they come then, and landed, came down with a decrease in the throbbing banshee scream, letting it fade out like an offstage witch being dragged farther and farther from the mike, landed right in the middle of Cal Busby's forty-five-and-one-half-acre cornfield in the bottomlands where the flood plain contained the richest soil in Kentucky, and where the corn was already knee high, and this in June, not July yet, forecasting a yield of two hundred fifty bushels per acre, scaring the hell out of the three-inch-long grasshoppers, or as Derek insisted, hopgrassers, sending them aloft with shirring yellow and brown wings as stiff as paper.

Matt Daniels with his almost new motorcycle under him, and him only three miles from the landing, was the first on the scene. Roaring on the highway, past a narrow,

overgrown dirt road, he had added a second trauma to the other more lasting one made by the ship, and Dee Dee screamed, "Cops!"

Obie was yanking on his jeans, paying no attention to her. "A by-God-real-live-spaceship," he said over and over.

Dee Dee dressed quickly. She didn't even like sex in the daylight; it was nothing to her if it hadn't been finished, but she didn't want cops to come upon them and give her that kind of a look. She hated Obie Cox then.

"You beat it back to your house," he said, not looking at her. "I'm going to see what Doc Daniels is up to."

She walked back up the secluded dusty road that dead-ended at the river, a dirt road long since abandoned, grown over with blackberry bushes, and she decided to kill Obie Cox someday. When he passed her in his old car that was all his, paid for and insured and inspected and everything, and raised a cloud of dust that stuck to her sweating body from the crown of her head to her insteps, she knew that she would have to kill him someday, just to be able to stand living with herself.

Matt had left his cycle and was climbing over a rail fence when Obie got to the scene. The silver ship was in the dead center of the field, and there was an open door, or hatch, or something. People were coming out. Doc Daniels was waving, and they were waving back and it was all like something out of a movie. If the contact had been permitted, with Obie witnessing it, and perhaps even participating in it, the event still would have changed history, but not as it was destined to do.

The contact was not permitted. A state trooper's car pulled up then and the troopers jumped out, one of them carrying a rifle. Obie heard a click as the safety was released. The astonishment and excitement he had been feeling changed to fear. Obie was like a weather puppy

that reflects by turning to pink or blue what the humidity is and the chance of rain or clear weather. He felt and reflected the emotions of those closest to him, and he felt fear then.

"Stop right there, Mac!" the man with the rifle yelled to Matt.

Matt was halfway to the ship. He was running when he heard the call, and he slowed down enough to turn to see what was happening. He saw the rifle, saw it being raised and leveled at his chest, and he stopped.

"Orders, Mac. No contact until the officials get here. They're on their way."

Matt turned to look at the aliens again, close enough this time to see their faces, see the smiles and the friendliness of their greetings. He stopped and held out his hands in a helpless gesture. One of them duplicated it and they returned to the interior of the ship. Then he turned and walked back to the road.

He didn't tell anyone then, or later, that high up on the ship, almost a hundred feet above the ground the first alien had stepped out, waving at him. The alien had stepped out on the air and had stood there, smiling and waving. When Matt had started to climb the fence, the alien had vanished into the ship, and the next time any of them appeared, it had been at ground level.

And so it came about that the area was sealed off, and no one was permitted in or out, except the officials, who took several days to get there, and who turned out to be U.N. personnel, and F.B.I. and C.I.A., and medical teams, and translators. And the people of the area, the part of Covington included in the security area, and Elmwood Heights, and the surrounding farms and subdivisions, the people came and blocked the roads, and lined the woods at the periphery of the field, and they experienced the expected feelings of panic and fear and exhilaration and dis-

belief, and some of them fainted, and one suffered a minor heart flutter that he thought was It. And because Matt was the only doctor within the sealed area, he was swamped by patients, and his house was filled with them. Two women in labor came and were delivered. Florence came and labored for twelve hours, stopped and slept for twelve, then started again. And Winifred Harvey came to Matt's house with her suitcase in hand and asked for a room.

"No room at the inn," she said.

Matt knew of her. Everyone knew of her. Winifred was forty, gray-haired, and beautiful, with poise, grace, charm, and understanding. Three times married, now single again, she was one of the world's foremost champions of causes and probably the best child psychiatrist living. Why she was included in the first batch of personnel to be sent to the scene was mysterious, except that experts in many fields were being sent, and she qualified. As it turned out, her presence was fortunate. She provided the link between Matt and the ship, and gave him news when there was no news being released at all.

Then the aliens started to die. Before official contact could be made. Winifred wept bitterly at the stupidity of man, and she railed at Matt for not taking advantage of the opportunity he had had in the beginning to get to know them, possibly help them. Four of them died, then three more the next day, and panic swelled among the people still clogging the roads and nearly got out of control several times, and more soldiers were sent in to handle them.

Obie sat with his rifle across his knees the afternoon he learned they were dying, and most of that night, hoping to get a shot at one of the monsters if they tried to run away from the ship and the plague they had brought with them. He came to realize during that time that what

he had been taking for a catastrophe was in actuality the opportunity of a lifetime for someone like him. His voyeuristic tendencies had taken him to the Daniels' windows hoping to see something between the lady doctor and Doc Daniels. Instead he had learned that the aliens were dying. Worth ten bucks as a news leak. But there had to be more than that in it for him. There had to be. A lousy ten bucks! The U.N. people would take everything away and the guys would stand around Midtown Drugs and talk about it, and then it would be all over. Obie listened to the tree frogs and the big bullfrogs in the Busby pond and it seemed to him that the frogs were jeering at him. "Jer-rk, jer-rk, jer-rk." Suddenly he smiled. He had received his inspiration. And this is the event that really changed the course of history, not the landing at all.

Obie preached his first sermon the next Sunday. Obie had been the school's best student in public speaking. He would have failed school entirely during his senior year if it hadn't been for basketball and public speaking, but he had excelled in both and had graduated.

Winifred was aboard the alien ship, along with two other doctors, when Obie preached. Matt was at home soothing Florence, who had become frightened at the off-again-on-again labor. Her parents were in the church, praying for her, but not confiding in one another that such was the case. Dee Dee, looking virginal in white robe, was in the choir, hoping that her father wouldn't fall asleep before it was time for him to stand up and introduce Obie, hoping that he wouldn't forget that he had promised her that he would introduce Obie. She kept her eyes off Obie, afraid the lurch in the depths of her stomach would be reflected on her face where others might see it and guess about her. She sang in a sweet soprano: "I will follow, follow all the way." She opened her mouth

for the high notes, but didn't try to reach them. Only the choirmaster suspected, and he never had been able to pin down the exact source of the reduced volume when the notes got up there.

There were half a dozen reporters among the congregation. They had got into the sealed area somehow, and found, with dismay, that they really were not being allowed back out. In lieu of any news from the officials, they attended church, hoping to pick up something there.

Obie's sermon is recorded elsewhere, but a few of his remarks follow. "Fear the stranger," was his text. The lectern had a simple flower arrangement of baby's breath and pink roses and the inevitable glass of water, and the crumbling Bible belonging to the Reverend MacLeish. Obie used no notes, but he had plugged in a tape recorder himself on his way to the dais. One of the visiting reporters had grinned cynically at that gesture of egoism, but his grin changed during the talk, and he knew he was seeing the birth of something big. He didn't know yet what it would lead to, but he made a note to follow it up from time to time.

"Brothers and sisters," Obie started, after looking them all over very deliberately, "I have sinned against the Lord and against my fellowman. I have broken all of the sacred commandments except the fifth, and I would have broken that one had not the Lord spoken to my heart in time." He was looking over their heads now, his eyes fastened on a point that no one else could see. The light coming through stained glass made his hair look more silver than blond, and some swore later that there had been a halo about his head during part of his sermon.

"I went to the woods hoping to kill the aliens," Obie went on. "I carried a rifle and I desired to murder. Then the Lord come unto me where I sat on the ground and I

heard Him. And the Lord said to me: 'Look upon the stranger with fear, for he will come again. Look upon the stranger with fear, for he will come again.' "

There was more, and it all spun off from that phrase, "for he will come again." One of the reporters wrote: "There was fear here, of course, but it had not been voiced until this new evangelist voiced it. He voiced it and gave it direction and gave it substance."

Another reporter compared him to a microwave relay station, mysteriously able to gather myriad weak, dying signals and weave them to form a powerful, directional beam.

Obie finished his sermon with a note of triumph, and a gamble. "And the Lord said unto me, 'I will slay the stranger among you that you may prepare your house.' "

Since the strangers were being slain, Obie was something of a prophet overnight.

Winifred called Matt from the Busby house. "Do you have extra slides, and test tubes?" she asked. "We are going to run out before our supplies get here, and we have to keep trying to isolate this thing, whatever it is."

He said he did, and he would bring them himself, on his bike. Mrs. Murray was caring for Lorna, and would be on hand for Florence, if she needed anything. Florence was sleeping again. Matt collected all that he had in his lab, and took them to the Busby farm. The ship hadn't changed, big and silver still, awkward-looking compared to the sleek projectiles one had grown to expect from the covers of science fiction magazines. Everywhere along the edge of the woods, along the roads on two sides of the field, people stood silently and watched and waited.

Matt wasn't allowed inside the farm entrance, but had his supplies taken from him by an army captain who wore the Medical Corps caduceus symbol. Matt stood staring at the ship for another moment, then remounted his bike

and started back home. Halfway back on the dirt road that led to the highway, there was a roar and wordless scream from the crowds. He turned to see something streak across the treetops. Two tiny crafts had left the mother ship, flashing through the sky in different directions; one toward the south and Elmwood Heights, where it landed and was found some time later, in a copse behind Matt's house; and the other to vanish not to be found at all, at least not by those who searched at that time.

Matt was crowded off the road by a people wave, and by the time he was allowed back on it, most of the watchers had gone, to search for the small boats. When he reached his house, and went straight to the infirmary to check on Florence, he saw that one of the small boats had brought him a visitor, a pregnant woman, as near delivery as Florence judging from her appearance.

He slammed the door and locked it, then bedded her down and examined her, and almost forgot that she was an alien, and that hundreds of frightened people were then scouring the woods and fields for her.

She was sick and weak and skim-milk white with gray lips, and Matt knew that she was dying. He put her tunic on a chair and something fell from it. She motioned that he was to keep it, and he dropped it into his pocket. It was a black disk, shiny and smooth on one side, dull on the other, half an inch thick, about two and a half inches in diameter. He thought it was a touchstone, and from time to time, he rubbed it and found that it was satisfying to touch. The woman was in second stage labor, almost ready, when the searchers burst into the house. Florence cried out then, and she too was suddenly ready. She woke up at the sound of the voices in the hall arguing with Mrs. Murray, who was trying to keep them from entering the infirmary.

Matt left his patients and confronted the men in the

hall, led by Obie, closely followed by Billy Warren Smith, Matt's next door neighbor.

They insisted that aliens had entered, and they demanded access to the infirmary, and while they argued about it, things happened inside the infirmary, and there was the first tentative wail of a newborn babe, and a silence during which none of the men moved. Obie pushed Matt aside then and went inside. And Florence sat up, holding a child against her breast, and smiled angelically at him and said, "I knew you'd come." She lay back down and fell asleep again, and Obie swayed like a man caught in a hurricane.

Obie never would have seen the other woman in the room, but one of the other men, one not touched by the turbulence of sudden fatherhood, did see her and he pushed into the room and stood over her. She was dead, and in the crook of her arm lay a second baby, and it too appeared to be dead. Everyone believed that Matt had delivered her, and he never told them otherwise.

The alien baby didn't die, of course. Matt labored over it, was relieved by specialists who took the child and did open heart surgery on it, and other things that saved its life. And the alien child became the ward of the United Nations.

Because Florence was sixteen and because Obie denied the child, it was decided, had been decided long ago when pregnancy had been determined, that she would give it up for adoption at birth. Matt took it from her flaccid arms and gave it to Mrs. Murray to care for, and in the end, didn't offer it to anyone, but talked his wife, whom he loved, and who loved him, into keeping it. Both babies had pale, almost white, hair, and both had the blue eyes of birth, and neither was any more or less human than the other. Staring at the child that had become his, Matt fingered the black touchstone and wondered.

And that is the last element, the prince and the pauper bit.

Chapter Two

BILLY WARREN SMITH was a fat lawyer. His wife was fat, and both of them detested other fat people. Neither considered himself to be in that category. Billy was thirty-five, pink, and afraid, because having lived half a lifetime, he was in debt, still had to work very hard simply to keep his cars running and his office rent paid, and lived in perpetual terror that the Internal Revenue Service would pull his file for an audit.

Had he been crooked in big ways, involving millions of dollars, and important people much could have been forgiven of him, but he wasn't. His thefts were of pennies, and his deals involved the manipulation of petty accident reports, and fixing an occasional ticket. If he had been taken into the law firm of a brilliant, imaginative attorney, he would have been successful, because he delighted in the detailed labor of searching for precedent, and locating little used loopholes and quirks. His talents had rested through the years, uncalled for, unsuspected, only because he didn't have the large vision by himself.

Billy poured gin and tonic for Obie and said, "You have quite a flair for speaking. Going to school?"

Obie shook his head. "I was about to, but I don't think I will."

"Oh," Billy said, and the one dream he had entertained that year faded. "You'll get drafted then."

"Don't think so, Mr. Smith. You see, I got the Call. And I aim to answer it. Yes siree, I aim to answer the Lord's Call." He held out his glass and Billy automatically took it and refilled it.

"A preacher? You going to be a preacher? That takes school, doesn't it?"

"An evangelist, Mr. Smith. Takes nothing but the Lord's Call, which I got. I'm going up the mountain to fast and meditate for a week and next Sunday I'll preach again, and the next and the next."

"What mountain? There aren't any mountains here."

"Robb's Hill will do fine." Obie slugged down the rest of his drink, and they both were silent for several minutes, and the interlude was filled with June night sounds; crickets, tree frogs, cicadas, a low-voiced bird.

"You could probably get some personal appearances, being the first man to see the aliens, and all," Billy's voice was subdued, as if he were deep in thought. As he was. He was trying to capture a dream that hadn't happened yet, and it was fuzzy and almost without features, without details, but very important.

Obie looked across the yard, across Matt Daniels' yard at the lighted windows and nodded. "He's been too busy to deny that I was there first, and by now it wouldn't matter what he said. They all know I was the first man on earth to lay eyes on the strangers."

"Billy's voice rose then and he leaned forward. "You could use a manager, Obie. A business manager to handle receipts and engagements and records. How about it?"

And so, although his purpose in inviting Obie Cox to his house that night had been in order to nudge Obie into law school with the promise of a job afterward, Billy found himself being hired instead, and thought it an equitable arrangement.

"You'll need a cache of food up there, and a blanket,

and clean clothes. You should come down looking hollow-eyed and hungry, but clean. We'll keep it quiet that I'm your manager for the time being, and I'll pass the word around that you're up there fasting and praying."

Obie grinned and poured straight gin into his glass.

Dr. Winifred Harvey was staring down at the child still hovering between giving up and making it, and she wondered if they should even try to keep it alive. Heart failure within the hour of birth, a complete transfusion during the surgery, possible brain damage. . . .

"Sure doesn't look human, does it?" said the nurse checking the incubator temperature.

"It looks human and sick," Winifred snapped. But it was a lie. The child didn't look human, but what newborn sick baby does? She left the helicopter outfitted as a hospital for the alien infant and stared at the spaceship. The doors were still closed. The ship stood dark and still, a dimly reflecting silver blob against the sky. She returned to Busby's house where Busby and his wife were treated like lepers, always in the way, faintly unclean, to be endured simply because in the beginning no one had thought to tell them to leave, and by the time the thought had occurred, it seemed a trifle pointless and would have made for bad publicity. Cal Busby and his wife whispered, and pointed at the U.N. people and the army personnel, and shrank back from the white-coated medics, but mostly it was their whispering that rasped. Heads together, a sibilant bss, bss forever issuing from the double-headed entity, they were an unknown quantum. To be trusted, or not to be trusted? That was the problem. Unanswerable, it was decided that they should be ignored. Voices would stop when either of them entered a room, and where conversation had been low-pitched, it became a whisper, and where it had been in

normal tones, it became low-pitched, so that the house was filled with murmuring voices and whispers and watchful eyes.

Winifred paused when she saw the Busby couple in the living room, but she went on through to the kitchen and drank vile coffee with a sergeant. Mrs. Busby insisted on making the coffee, and doing some of the cooking, for her and her man, she said, but turning out hundreds of biscuits that were soggy in the middle, and dozens of fried eggs, brown around the edges and tasting of lard, and iron kettles filled with green beans cooked to a dull olive color with no suggestion of the original shape left. She was being helpful, and no one could make her stop helping short of ordering her all the way out. Cal prodded her out of the way again and again to count the eggs and biscuits, then he made notations in a yellow pad. So he could bill the government.

The sergeant drinking coffee had bloodshot eyes and his hands shook. "You look like you could use some sleep," Winifred commented.

"I don't know, ma'am, but I don't feel so hot."

On the contrary, he did feel hot, very hot. Winifred touched his forehead and drew back quickly. She called for a medic and the sergeant was put to bed. Three others followed, all with symptoms of food poisoning. Winifred decided to go back to Matt's house and go to bed. Since she was one of the few to be allowed inside the ship, she was promised that if the aliens opened the doors again she would be called, no matter what the time.

Matt was pacing in his living room when she got there, and she filled him in with the latest. "They," she said, indicating the town to the left of them, "won't believe that miserable woman is poisoning the men with her cooking, but that's about the truth of it. Ugh."

She ate a sandwich, and helped Matt pace for the next

quarter of an hour. "How did that alien woman know the way to this house?" Matt asked. "Rhetorical. How did she know I could deliver a baby? Why me? They must have skilled doctors aboard."

"The last one's easy," Winifred said, meeting him in the center of the room where both stopped momentarily, then turned and walked back to the starting points. "They must have wanted the child born out of the ship for fear that whatever was killing them all was in the air, or at least they must have hoped that it could avoid contamination by getting itself born somewhere else. And it did, so they were right. But why in God's name would they have sent pregnant women on a space flight?"

"Conceived in space maybe?"

"No. There were others, in cold storage, all dead now. Babies dead also. They started out pregnant." This time when they met she looked at him accusingly. "Did you tell anyone that the aliens were dying?"

Matt shook his head violently. "You know I didn't."

"Okay, cool it, kid. But tell me, how did pretty little golden boy find out?"

Matt stared at her blankly, and she told him about the sermon. "Obie Cox! I don't believe it. He's a two-bit, fast-talking lothario, but that's all."

"Un-huh. He's the up and coming evangelist. So says Conan Woosley. In his column for today."

Winifred went to bed, and Obie left his listening post at the window and went home. Matt continued to pace for a while, waiting for the baby to wake up for a feeding. It didn't, and he finally fell asleep on the couch. The baby went on a four-meals-a-day schedule from the start, and at two months dropped one of those feedings. It cried only immediately before a feeding; other times it stared about at its crib and beyond, and listened to noises, and was very content.

Obie walked home slowly. He should vanish that night, simply drop out of sight for the coming week and let Billy handle the rumors for him. But if there was sickness . . . he stopped and narrowed his eyes and visualized himself before a congregation, all of them aware of the spread of the plague that the aliens had brought with them, all of them terrified, looking at him, the Lord's emissary, for guidance. He let himself go out to the meeting and he felt the fear coming into him from them, and the thin echoes of fear magnified and became strong, and he knew what he would do. Obie, faced with a problem, was full of tension, uncomfortable, restless, irritable. He groped for solutions with no particular rationale, but rather visualized alternatives and if one of the alternatives eased his tense body, he accepted it as right. He could explain little of what he did, but if it felt right, he didn't look for explanations.

When the people awakened the next day, it was to the sound of church bells, although it was a Monday morning. Church bells on Monday morning were almost blasphemous. They went on and on. And eventually, cursing a bit, the people made their way to the church to find out why.

The Reverend MacLeish, looking pale and senile and bewildered, stood behind the lectern, wishing he had had a son instead of Dee Dee with her imperious voice and her foot stamping and tears. He never held church on a Monday morning. Never. Once on a Thursday, after the fire that had destroyed the first Elmwood Baptist Church back in '32, or was it '23? But never on Monday. The bells were making his head hurt, and he wanted his breakfast. Never start a day without breakfast, he always said, and you'll live to ripen in the sun. . . . That didn't sound just right, but after all, he'd had no breakfast yet, not even coffee. The bells stopped, creating a very loud si-

lence, and there was Dee Dee looking ugly at him and hissing, and he remembered. He was supposed to pray when the bells stopped. He bowed his head, but not very much, because he hadn't really combed his hair that morning, had just run a comb through it while Dee Dee fumed and stormed about the time he was taking. He prayed briefly and inaudibly, and Dee Dee was motioning for him to get out from the pulpit. He blinked at her.

Then Obie was striding up from the congregation and he knew that Obie was going to preach again. Although many were called he'd never expected Obie to be among them, and having been called, to have answered. God's way was mysterious.

Obie felt the fear when the people realized that he had called the service. It grew and swelled and made palms suddenly moist, and bodies cold. He gathered it in and flung it back at them. He told of a vision that had come to him in the night, and in his vision the people he had loved since childhood were being taken sick, contaminated by the strangers. He had prayed to the Lord, and the Lord took off the curse, but said that those who aided the stranger would grow sick, and perhaps die. And the Lord slew the last of the strangers, all except the infant who was being left as a test of His people. If they could could put their house in order and teach the Word to the strange child, then, when the strangers returned, the Lord would aid His people. And as a sign that He was with them, that He was watching them, he would smite with the alien disease those who aided the strangers.

Then Obie prayed and the congregation prayed with him, and the terrible fear was lifted from them for a while.

The reporters smiled pityingly at him in their stories, but when they went to the Busby farm and saw the hospital units set up, and saw the whispering Busby couple,

drawn close together, bss, bss, and finally induced one corporal to talk to them, they weren't laughing. Two of them rewrote their articles, this time hinting at fraud and deception, and the third one, Conan Woosley, wrote it straight, not slanting it at all. It was the hardest article he had ever attempted.

The Busbys were finally escorted from their property, installed in a motel that was within the limited area, and there left to their own devices. They confirmed the story that there was sickness back on the farm, and Cal Busby said outright that the Lord had caused it. Else why didn't he and his wife get sick? They ate the same food as the soldiers, drank the same water. Why didn't they get sick too? Because the Lord knew they were good people, not helping the strangers who had come to their cornfield unasked, unwanted. The Lord spared them, which was more than the aliens did for his corn. As the day got on, Cal Busby was expanding, and by sundown, he had three of the soldiers dead and in secret graves, with many more, hundreds maybe, near death. But when the reporters got near them, and when the army men came to question them, the Busbys drew together again, and nothing but bss, bss came from them.

Most of the personnel at the farm didn't get sick, but some did, and the source was traced to contaminated water. "Thank God," Winifred said, "I just drank the bitch's coffee. And it boiled and boiled and boiled."

As the days dragged by with no new excitement, some of the people wished out loud that Obie would come down off the mountain and give them the word about what to expect next. Some laughed to exhaustion at the thought of Obie Cox praying up on Robb's Hill. And still others trekked up the hill to see if Obie really was there fasting and praying like he said, and they brought back the word that he really was, and there was slightly more

than a touch of awe in their voices when they said it, for none of them ever had seen a holy man fasting and praying only having heard of it in far-off places like India and Tibet. Obie looked real spiritual they said.

Billy's wife Wanda returned and demanded to know why he was all scratched up and sore, and he wouldn't tell her that it was from hauling a week's supply of food and clothing up Robb's Hill in the dead of night, sliding most of the way up and down in the middle of blackberry bushes. Also he had got chiggers, and he was one continuous itching hive.

Winifred left, promising to keep in touch with Matt, assuring him that she would get herself appointed to the special group assigned to the alien child. Lisa and Derek returned soon after her departure. Lisa wrinkled her nose and could have put markers on all the spots where Winifred had stood or sat or lain, but she didn't, because she loved her husband and trusted him. She commiserated with him instead over the influx of patients and the probability that none of them would pay him anything unless they had been his regular patients before the landing, figuring that their own doctors came first and this had been a special case. They hadn't wanted to go to him, but the government forced them. Let him bill the government. They discussed the landing for hours, and then got in the car, with Derek, who was four, and drove up Slater Hill to a point where they could look down on the ship and the heavy cordon of guards surrounding the field, and construction workers who were fencing it all in. Derek was properly impressed and argued bitterly when he was denied permission to go down and enter the ship. He swore that he would run away and do it by himself when everyone else was sleeping.

Still later Lisa held Lorna and listened intently while Lorna babbled and pried at her nose and tried to take off

her ears. Lorna had learned a new word, baby, and she said it again and again, adding it to her permanent, stable vocabulary that endured along with the babbling that changed from day to day. Lorna could say dadda, momma, Dek, bye-bye, and baby. Lisa didn't need a lot of talking into it after that. She seemed to assume, as Lorna did, that they had a new baby.

And the new baby stared at her and smiled slowly and, Matt thought with a touch of wonder, deliberately. They named him Blake.

INTERLUDE ONE

Selected from Winifred Harvey's Notes and Clippings

So says Conan Woosley—

Overhead planes with metal detection devices make a latticework pattern in the sky; in the dark woods men are stumbling and lurching and falling over each other as the search for the missing capsule continues. They are tired men, they have been searching for four days now. . . . And vituperation also continues. . . .

Excerpts from U.N. speeches, week of June 20. . . .

U.S.S.R.: . . . furthermore, this government must ponder the possibilities that the U.S., or one of the many branches of intelligence operating within the U.S., might have located the missing capsule, as suggested by the distinguished representative of the republic of France. . . .

France: . . . so in answer to the charge made against our great nation by the United States, our only possible reply can be to

abstain from future meetings of this august body until such time as the missing capsule has been found and restored to the joint scientific body as advocated.

Great Britain: To suggest that our esteemed friend and ally in this magnificent effort to achieve communication with the first aliens to reach the soil of this planet is to cast the success of this body into gloom so deep and impenetrable that it becomes difficult to see any end in sight. . . .

B.B.C. speech made by Prime Minister Lloyd June 29, 1972

. . . we must therefore assume that those charges are being leveled by those whose goal it is to breach the solid wall of friendship. . . . If the United States government has somehow located the missing capsule, it is undeniably an act of reasonableness in the face of the current mistrust that surrounds the entire issue. To doubt the motives of that great country is to place in jeopardy the alliance that has united us in common cause, and would serve only to risk material gains from trade and tourism that would continue to undermine our economy for a century. . . .

Reuters June 29

Reliable sources today made public a speech by Mao Tse Tung before a crowd estimated to number three hundred thousand in Red Square in Peking. In it he accused the imperialistic revisionist government of the Soviet Union of conspiring with the imperialistic oppressive forces of the United States to conceal the capsule from the rest of the peace-loving free world in order to obtain for themselves the extraterrestrial weapons and knowledge they have acquired. The plot to culminate in a full-scale war against the People's Republic of China, Mao promised, would be resisted to the last hundred million. . . .

Letter from Roald Lit (Chairman, U.N. Science Advisory Board) to his daughter

My dear Marguerita,

All the aliens have died! Such a waste, but then we do have all those cadavers to study, so perhaps we still shall be able

to salvage something. And there is the ship. No matter what happens to people, you know, math is math, and science is science, and universal laws are universal laws. So I continue optimistic.

We shall remain here for the next three to five days, to be certain there is no danger of contamination. I would like to be able to leave immediately, but I must be careful and not antagonize any of the local people more than has already been done. You know that they are accusing us of poisoning the well that contained the strep bacilli that infected many of our personnel. The local peasants were immune following long exposure, but they won't believe that, and so they say we must have put germs in the well.

Anyway, I shall be home next week, and am looking forward to seeing you and the children. . . .

your loving father
(signed) Daddy

March 2, 1973

Dear Matt,

This is probably illegal. I have been sworn to secrecy, but I think I'll interpret that as secrecy concerning the location of the estate where I live now. We have a twenty-man board in charge of the Star Child's Care and Development. I'm one of them. Also in residence at the estate-prison. A fantastic place: thirty-four-room house, hospital wing, nursery, staff's wing, barracks for the guards, several large guest houses. Swimming pool, tennis court, stables. . . . While the nutty debate goes on back at the U.N.—what to feed the baby, how to train him, all that, here he is established, and I guess that here he'll stay. I am so depressed that I could cry. Oh, for a shoulder! If I tried it with any of this group here I might short-circuit a snooper and electrocute the poor guy. Everybody's an agent here, except me, I think.

To get to the point of this breach of security. I have a vacation coming up in a couple of months, and I need to be with someone I can talk to, really talk to and scream and cry. May I come to your house?

Love to Lisa and the children.

(signed) Winifred

Dear Winifred,

Please do come here, whenever you can. No time now for writing. See you soon. M.

Please excuse Matt's scrawl, Winifred. He is working so hard and there doesn't seem to be much time any more. You know the government condemned our property to build a superhighway to the alien ship, so we had to move and now we're in a thing that looks like a wasp's nest. There are over two hundred houses all stacked up against a hillside. But we do have room and we are very eager to see you. The children are fine. Blake grows and grows. He has six teeth and is walking and even says a few things. Nine months!

Obie Cox returned from his tour of the states last week a rich man, according to the rumors. It must have paid well. He's planning to tour Europe starting in June, the first anniversary of the aliens' landing. I wish we could trace Blake's mother and make the adoption legal, but no luck so far. I hate to think of Obie as his father. What a motley crew. Dee Dee, Billy Warren Smith, a fat, mildly crooked little lawyer, and Everett Slocum, the ex-pharmacist, of whom it is said, don't send your small son to have a prescription filled by him. But enough for now. When you arrive we'll gossip properly. Do come when you can and stay as long as you like.

love,
(signed) Lisa

Chapter Three

THE world thought of him as the Star Child, although his name actually was Johannes Mann, chosen after a long debate in which once more shoes pounded tabletops, and delegations walked from the U.N. chamber, and Sunday

supplements exhausted the readership with explanations for the hot tempers. In the end each delegation had agreed to select three given names and three surnames and deposit them in two drums and Miss Universe, dazzling in a silver paper gown, had pulled out Johannes Mann had been on the third slip of paper to be pulled from the drum. The second had been someone's idea of a joke with Jesus Christ on it, and it was dismissed out of hand. He had been named Johannes Mann, but he was called Johnny, and was thought of as the Star Child.

There had been many fights during the first five years: how much permissiveness, how much discipline; what kind of a diet, the American baby diet of commercially strained foods and cereals, or fresh scraped meats and vegetables, cheeses and sour milk, goat's milk (lobbied for strenuously by the goat people), or cow's milk, or a wet nurse, and if a wet nurse, of what race and religion and nationality; schooling to start at two in the modern method, or at seven or even eight in the Slavic tradition; weaning at what age; bladder and bowel control when (as it turned out he was still a bed wetter at five, so it had become an academic question by then); playmates, whose children, and what sort of children should be permitted in his presence? And so on.

There was a sharp division regarding his abilities and his progress. Some held that his people probably attained maturation later than Earth people, claiming that such a pattern followed a higher degree of intelligence, and they cited authorities to prove this. The Star Child was maturing rather later than his peers: he still wet his bed; he sucked two fingers when tired, or ill, or restless, or frustrated in any way; he hadn't learned yet to write his name, or count, or give more than passive aid when being bathed and dressed. He cried often and easily and ate poorly and slept fitfully. He had been a colicky baby, and

still caught every bug that got into the grounds, was always with a runny nose, and seemed always to be getting over or starting a bout of diarrhea. He was the sort of child that if parents have him first they tend to practice birth control assiduously, many times limiting the number of children to one. He was not pretty, but he was sometimes cute and often beguiling, but only with those few of the many who attended him that he liked. Winifred was one of them, a Negro doctor was another, a Japanese music teacher was a third. One or two of the nurses rated a spontaneous smile, and that was about it.

The other group held that he was simply not too bright, not retarded, but not bright. They rated his IQ at 105 on his good days, and 90 to 95 on his bad. He hated their tests and seldom did well on them. His personality profile claimed he was dependent, suspicious, selfish, ill tempered, timid, introverted, humorless. When the testing psychologist gave the study to Winifred for comments, she scrawled on it: Wouldn't you be in his place?

Winifred reluctantly came to the conclusion that she agreed with the second group about his mental abilities. Johnny simply wasn't the brightest kid in the world, but he was sweet, and with her, at any rate, he was biddable. Emotionally he was as stable as could be expected considering the conditions under which he lived. In appearance he was as human as any of the children who were allowed in to play with him; the differences they had discovered in the inside plumbing of the aliens was so slight and meaningless that they could be dismissed as totally inconsequential. No appendixes, for example, and a slight alteration of the arrangement of the spleen and kidneys, and slightly enlarged lungs and heart. It was assumed that some of those things resulted from living in a different environment; the Star Child, as far as could be determined from external examinations, and interior examination with

barium and such had been forbidden, showed no real anomalies. Small, delicate, very blond with pale skin and almost white hair, light blue eyes, a natural clumsiness, and a slightly recessive chin, he could have passed for the son of any blond couple on Earth.

Winifred had packed her things for a vacation and was on her way to tell the Star Child good-by. He was having a swimming lesson then. She watched him floundering in the water, obviously afraid of it, and she knew that the decision she had been trying to reach had formed itself. She would quit here and go back to her practice in New York. The sense of relief was tempered by the knowledge that Johnny would miss her terribly. She would come back, she'd tell him. She'd come back every month or so and stay a week with him. If they'd let her. She bit her lip in vexation. She wouldn't tell him anything yet. There would be time, she'd have to hand in her resignation six weeks before she wanted out. There would be time.

Johnny was permitted to leave the water, stood shivering while he was dried off, and continued to shiver while he took his sunbath. Winifred sat down next to him and told him she was going away for two weeks.

"What's a vacation?" he asked. His lips were blue. Winifred rubbed his hands and pulled the heavy towel over his shoulders.

"It's a trip, this time anyway. I'll get in my car and drive across the country and visit friends. I'll rest and get a lot of sleep and read."

"Can I go with you?"

So Winifred was again where she had been before she made her decision; torn between wanting to get out of the mad security of the estate, and wanting to stay and protect one thin little boy who needed a friend. She kissed him and promised to bring presents back with her, but

she knew that when she walked away from him, tears had already welled up into those pale eyes, and two fingers were in his mouth.

The next day Winifred drove up to Matt Daniels' house in the new suburb of Cincinnati where she spent at least part of each vacation.

Matt and Lisa had been expecting her and were both delighted at her arrival. Lisa was a pretty thing, Winifred had decided at their first meeting, and she and Matt had something going for them. Considering herself a three-time loser in the marriage maze, Winifred was always astounded when two intelligent people could stand to live together more than a few months. It seemed perfectly natural to her that diversive influences would lead them apart after the first blaze was dampened by the rains of revelations that living together precipitated out of the rosy clouds of premarital bliss. She had written that to her third, no, her second, husband after filing suit, making him so angry that he gave all the linens, and her cutlery set, and blender to his mother and then filed a counter suit, charging her with unnatural cruelty. But the Daniels had managed to stay together and to give every appearance of happiness. With what was almost a sense of satisfaction followed swiftly by an analysis of the feeling, and the determination that it was the human and acceptable feeling of vindication of one's own belief, Winifred realized that the bubble had burst. Or at least some of the air had seeped from it. Lisa looked strained and Matt was jumpy. This was in the brief time of giving hellos and kisses and handing out presents to the children, and eyeing the new dog with suspicion. It was a mop of no discernible breed that weighed one hundred pounds, simply dog with much gray hair and a wagging tail that swept the room from wall to wall.

"Blake's dog," Lisa said and pointed sternly toward the door. The dog whined, hung its head and slouched outside, obviously wounded and offended.

Blake grinned at Winifred and she felt better about the dog. Blake was a handsome kid, she decided, realizing with a start that he was the perfect control for her studies of the Star Child. Born on the same day, growing up in a normal family, owner of a dirty dog, a boy in sneakers that would give out in a couple of days, grimy knuckles, and deep sunburn that made his blond hair look whiter, he was the obvious opposite of what the Star Child was growing into.

Dinner with the Matt Daniels' family was always an experience. The kids talked, Lisa talked, and Matt talked, and it was very nice if confusing. They all had things to say, down to Blake, who probably would have talked more than the others if allowed to.

Derek went to a special school for bright kids, and loved it, and had mountains of books with reports to be made, and special projects to complete, and field trips to plan and execute. His chief concern now was with fossils, and a trip to the fossil beds on the Ohio River in the Louisville area was his next project. Blake listened intently, and when Derek hesitated over a name, or classification, Blake supplied the right word. No one seemed to find this exceptional. When Lorna talked about her approaching piano recital and stumbled over Rachmaninoff, Blake murmured it, and Lorna continued at a whirlwind pace without a glance toward him. And Winifred felt a pang of jealousy that she examined minutely with great interest. How human of her, she thought, and how maternal! The Star Child was nothing to her, but here she was playing the role of a bitchy mother envying the three remarkable children of someone else, comparing

them to her own disappointingly average child. She thought it was amusing of herself to take the Star Child that seriously.

After dinner was over and the children were in bed, she asked point blank what the trouble was with Matt and Lisa. Matt glanced at his wife, who shrugged slightly and then said, "Obie's in town. He always makes us nervous when he shows up. And he was in the neighborhood last week."

"Oh. Have you told Blake yet?"

Lisa shook her head miserably. "I know," she said before Winifred could say anything. "I said soon, and I meant as soon as he was five or six. We're going to, but not until Obie is gone again. There's time."

Winifred frowned. "There's never as much time as you think," she said. "You should have done it as soon as he could understand what you were saying." She lighted a cigarette. "Where's the mother?"

Matt lifted his hands helplessly. "I wish I knew. That's what's really held us up on telling him. We wanted to make it all legal and air-tight first, but we haven't been able to find her. She left that summer, for Louisville, she said, to study at a beauty school. I had detectives trace her to Chicago, then she simply dropped out of sight, and that's it."

"Her family? Don't they know?"

"If they do, they aren't telling. They pretend that she never had a baby. Her father met me with a shotgun the last time I approached them and threatened to blow my head off if I didn't stop smearing his daughter."

Winifred blew smoke toward the ceiling and watched it. "It seems that you're safe enough, if she doesn't show up. Obie has no claim on him. Probably just curious. What's he up to these days?"

"You mean you haven't heard about him?" Lisa asked.

And they talked about Obie. "He preys on fear. It's contemptible the way he fingers people and drags out their nastiest, meanest faults and then exploits them."

"Vile," Winifred agreed, "but in the end he's relatively harmless. This church of his, the Voice of God Church . . . ?" Matt nodded and she swept it away with one hand. "It's one of thousands. He'll make a pile of money naturally, but so what? Lots of people do."

"I went to one of the revivals," Lisa said, unconvinced. "It's frightening to see how they respond to him."

"Relax, honey," Matt said. "It's all a negative thing. He doesn't have anything to offer. He's an echo. That's all. Now if he ever comes up with a new world plan, or a cosmological system, no matter how incoherent, or, even better, a self-help plan for health and/or sanity, then we'll all start to worry about him."

He did, and they did. But later.

INTERLUDE TWO

So Says Conan Woosley

Happy Anniversary! Five years ago this month the alien ship came from a blue sky, and changed the history of our world. What changes did it make? One, the war in Asia has become a memory. So the government went a bit left, but just a little bit. And besides, it's no concern of this nation if another country decides to go socialist. But the anomaly here is that we have more armed forces deployed on foreign soil than we did five years ago.

Change number two is the unification of major powers in a common cause. How picayune the penetration of a nation's

border for a few miles when the aliens penetrated millions on millions of miles of space. The common goal is space exploration. Or is it to prepare a defensive system in the event aliens return? Or could it be to prepare to meet extraterrestrials as equals, but just a touch of superiority here or there? Well, no matter, whatever the goal is, it's common.

Another change is the shoring-up of the U.N. Expeditionary Forces: UNEF. That most of UNEF's members speak American-English, are white, and use weapons made in the States is secondary. The primary purpose for their being is served daily whenever there is raised a grumbling voice of an insignificant government protesting the arbitrary methods being used to extract from its country its dwindling resources. Of course, no one may be allowed to stand in the way of the Cause, therefore UNEF.

Even more unprecedented is the new dichotomy of the people that is taking place at a faster and faster rate. There are the scientists, and there are the masses. Space agencies wear the purple today.

Today I revisited the ship. Many things there have changed also since my last visit to the site. There is a five-thousand-acre park there now, with a ten-lane highway leading to it, and parking space for fifty thousand cars. The land has been donated to the U.N. and is patrolled by a UNEF unit of thousands.

There is a torus-shaped building about the ship and daily thousands of tourists file into it. Inside there are murals and dioramas depicting our space programs, those of Russia and other countries, as well as a quickie course in astronomy. You make a circuit of the building before you enter the ship. And it is big, bigger than the old *Queen Elizabeth II*. After five years it still isn't known how the ship was propelled; where it came from; what the many pieces of equipment are for; what the crew ate; what they did for recreation. In short nothing has been learned that wasn't guessed when the ship first arrived. We haven't begun to decipher the alien language. We have found no Rosetta Stone for it.

One man alone has profited from the efforts of the corps of scientists who work day and night on the mystery of the alien ship. He is Emmanuel Curlew. Curlew has written a book that

is climbing high on the best seller lists of most countries. It is a book of international curses.

Chapter Four

OBIE looked over the coliseum carefully. "Up there." He pointed as he spoke, and Billy nodded and made a note on the pad he held.

"Twenty?"

"Yeah, that's enough from up there. And a dozen or so from the other side, half way up. Separated from each other." Obie turned, studying the mammoth hall with narrowed eyes. "You got two hundred lined up? For sure?"

"Sure, Obie. Ten bucks a head."

"Okay. About thirty scattered among the others in the first five rows directly in front of me. They're the first to move, right? And don't let them clump this time, Billy. Separate them."

"Right."

They finished spotting the converts throughout the audience, then retired to Obie's dressing room. It was an hour before show time. They both thought of it as show time. Dee Dee was already dressed in flowing white robes that contrasted nicely with her long dark hair, waiting for them in the room.

"Merton called," she said viciously. "You lousy liar.

You told me you were dropping it." Merton was the private detective Obie had hired.

"Shut up, Dee Dee. Where's the return number?"

"He said he'll call back. For God's sake, what're you going to do with the kid if you do get him? A kid, for crissake!"

Obie slapped her, not too hard, not hard enough to leave a mark that wouldn't fade away by show time, but enough to shut her up. Dee Dee reached for the bottle, and Billy moved it out of reach.

"Later, kid," he said. He turned to Obie with a worried pucker. Billy was fatter than he had been even last year. Each year he picked up three, four, or five pounds, and he couldn't lose them again. He perspired all the time, and he panted. "Obie, don't do anything rash about the child. Remember our talk about him. Remember what I told you. You can get by with a lot, but not with an illegitimate child. They wouldn't forgive you that. You want to lose it all?"

Obie swung around and smiled at Billy, his evangelical smile that held the power, and Billy swallowed hard. Obie said softly, "I want my kid, Billy. I'll make them take it. He's a genius, Billy. I got a feeling about him. Like that feeling I got five years ago, that feeling that put this whole show on the road. We play it my way, Billy. Every time. Don't you forget that."

Billy nodded. Obie's smile deepened. "Brother," he said softly, exultantly, "the Lord gave me a child. I confessed that I had sinned, that I had fornicated, but little did I know that out of my sin a child was born, and now revealed to me. The Lord said to me, 'Obie, retrieve your child from the hands of the nonbelievers and bring him unto the Lord, thy God. I will teach him many things, and through this child will the world be saved from damnation.' "

Billy stared at him for a long moment, then shook his head. "I don't think so, Obie. It won't wash that easily. Not this time."

Obie laughed. "Then another way. We'll get a marriage license and make it all legal as hell. Let me tell you something, Billyboy. I seen the kid teaching his mutt some tricks. He sat on the ground with that mutt standing in front of him, and he talked to that goddamn dog like he was a kid, like he could understand every word. And the dog turned around and went and got a stick and brought it back with him. The kid never moved, but the dog knew what he wanted. He sent him off again, and the mutt brought him a ball. Then he laid down and rolled over a couple of times, and the kid rassled with him and that was that." Obie stopped and half turned from Billy then and said, "Something else, Billyboy. The kid looked up at where I was standing and watching him, and I felt it coming out of him. The power. The way he looked at me, like he knew who I was, and what I was after, and if I washed my feet that morning. I never felt anything like it before, never. Soon's I get him on that stage and have him look over them people, they'll believe anything I tell them about him. Watch and see."

There was a light tap on the door; it opened slightly and Everett Slocum's face was there. "Ah, Brother Cox, any last instructions? The choir is gathering and waiting for you, Sister Diane." Dee Dee left without glancing again at Obie or Billy. Everett Slocum didn't enter the room; he never did unless he was directed to do so. His face was reverential as he continued to watch Obie for instructions.

Obie waved him away. "Just get the ministers down front, like always. And invite them for coffee after the sermon. They won't come, but invite them."

Everett bobbed his head and withdrew murmuring

prayers for the visiting ministers. They would be given Grace eventually, he knew. They would see the light, hear the word being spoken by Brother Cox, and they would be granted the rebirth of soul that would allow them to understand. They came to scorn now, but one day, one day . . .

"Beat it," Obie said to Billy after Everett was gone. "Place your stooges, and then get back here and be here when Merton calls. I want the address where that chick is hanging out, and I want it soon. Real soon."

The choir, one hundred voices strong, opened the show, followed by a solo in which Dee Dee's lip sync was perfectly in time with the recording; another group hymn with the congregation joining in the choruses; then a throbbing hum from the choir accompanied Obie's entrance, and there was a sudden dousing of all lights except the one spot that made his hair look almost like a halo, and made his beard gleam brilliantly.

Obie had a full house that night. His message was "Fear the Stranger, Prepare for Armageddon."

Obie prayed first, and as he spoke his prepared words, he began to feel the emotions of his audience. Wonder, awe, but most of all fear. These people had been living in the shadow of the ship for five years, and they were afraid of it and the strangers it had brought. They didn't like the antlike scurrying of the foreigners in their outlandish clothes; they didn't like having the UNEF swarming about. Obie felt strength gathering in him and his voice rose and commanded their attention, focused all their thoughts on him and his words, and it was as if the random thoughts had been channeled through a funnel, to concentrate on Obie and within him. He spoke of fear in his prayer, and there was an answer of fear from the audience. He came back to it again, then again, and each time it was amplified. By the time the prayer was over,

Obie was ready to launch into his sermon; the audience was ready to receive the sermon.

"In my Father's house there are many mansions," Obie said with great force, "and it is time now to bring together the mansions under one roof and join together those who fear God and know His way and prepare to meet the strangers who will return. The Lord said to me, 'They will return!' and I say to you, we must prepare now. We must make ready our house here on Earth. We must overcome the atheists and the agnostics and the faint-hearted who would deliver us and our children to the strangers. We must purify our own house before the stranger returns. We must deliver the Star Child from the hands of the godless and show him the way to the Lord, and only then will we be ready to meet the strangers when they return."

There was more of it, two hours more of it, but the gist without the histrionics, and the verbosities, and the playing on fear, striking points and counterpoints over and over, was simply that: the stranger would return; the Star Child must be wrenched from the hands of the godless and taught the true word; the Lord, a vengeful, wrathful, terrifyingly just Lord was judging man now and would continue to judge him through the coming years. The gentle ones, the meek, the cheek-turners had had their day, and had failed this God of vengeance. There had been a fair lasting trial two thousand years, and now the day of judgment, long promised and postponed, was indeed at hand, and the judging was even then taking place. And the dichotomy was the simplest one to be dreamed of by man; those who believed in the Lord and followed His word, opposed to those who did not believe who were doomed to be smitten. There was still time, but not for the timid, not for the fearful, not for the compromisers.

Then came the prophecies. Obie predicted floods and anguish on a scale never seen before since the days of The Flood. He predicted riots on the East Coast of the United States. He predicted a major airplane crash within the next two weeks in which over two hundred lives would be lost, and he added that he would pray for the Lord's intervention on behalf of the people involved here.

He demanded that the non-believers examine their hearts and their consciences and accept God's word as revealed by His spokesman. He demanded, exhorted, pleaded, wept with them to accept and be saved. And many did. Not counting the original two hundred converts, there were three hundred forty-two who came forward and received Obie's and God's blessing. And very soon afterward it was all over.

That was Saturday. On Sunday Winifred was planning to visit the ship once more. It was still an impenetrable mystery to all who worked on it. She had been there half a dozen times already, each time with no purpose in mind, hoping to find something that would give her an insight into the Star Child.

Sunday was bright and clear and cool, with heat expected later in the day. Winifred, in a sleeveless cotton dress that cost over one hundred dollars, straw hat and sandals, prepared to leave for her visit to the ship. Blake stared at her with a thoughtful expression and said, "I've been there. To look at the ship. The Christmas we came to this house."

"But you were only eighteen months old," Winifred said. "You still remember?"

He nodded. And looking at him Winifred believed him. "Well, if you think Obie will draw a crowd again this morning, I'd better be on my way," she said to Matt. "Hard to think of him as a drawing card, isn't it?"

Matt shrugged. "I'll take you over and drop you. You'll have to get a cab back, or have one of the official cars bring you."

Matt talked about the reason for the heavy traffic as he drove, stopping and starting in a line that was blocks long. The traffic was worse as they approached the bridge. "This is the semi-official Memorial Day service this morning," Matt said. "It doesn't matter when the thirtieth falls, they have this service on the first Sunday in June. All over this part of the country today is Decoratin' Day. The women decorate the graves, and there's a service in the open. They all bring lunches: hams, salads, beef roasts, pies. It's quite a spread, enough food to last the day. Old Mr. MacLeish will drone on and on for a couple of hours, and the kids will whisper and giggle and try to sneak punch—fruit punch, a specialty of Dom Winters, full of floating oranges and cherries, and really good. Then they will have the procession to the graves, just to the right of the tables incidentally. Most of the women make the flowers, or buy them from Mollie Doan or Sarah Tatum; they take a year to make the things, plastic, organdy, bits of feathers, quite pretty too, and durable. Another prayer over the graves, and the women cry a bit and the men shuffle their feet, then dinner. And afterward gossip. And the kids take to the bushes."

Winifred looked at him sharply and he grinned. "No one knows it, of course. All very unofficial and unacknowledged, but there it is. All the rites of spring."

They were silent then, crossing the Ohio River on the new bridge that soared gracefully, ten lanes wide, over the river. Matt turned from the highway on the other side. "I'll drive past the old church, not out of the way, just by back roads instead of this."

The congregation was gathered already; tables were laden with bowls, meat platters, flowers. Kids were playing tag, running in and out of the cemetery carelessly.

Winifred caught Matt's arm and motioned for him to slow down more. "Pretty little golden boy himself," she murmured. Obie was standing with his head bowed in the cemetery. Winifred noticed that his stage sense had directed him to a spot where the morning sun's rays slanting through the leaves of an old oak tree lighted up his silver blond head dramatically.

"His father's grave," Matt said. "Died a couple of years ago. Mother's in a home somewhere, half crazed, calls herself the Mother of God."

Winifred shivered. "Let's get out of here," she said. The more people I see the less kooky I think aliens, any aliens, are."

Obie was meditating on the problems presented by the kid and the Daniels. And the mutt. It was sure to bark, raise a rumpus. Could poison it. . . . He shook his head. Nothing ugly. A simple gathering-in of what was his, nothing ugly to look bad in court, if it came to that. Merton had the signature on the fake license, so as far as the law was concerned, he was safe. A wedding had been performed six years ago by Reverend MacLeish. If it hadn't been recorded properly, that wasn't Obie's fault. Florence wouldn't talk, not with ten thousand bucks in her jeans, a husband and two brats of her own now. That just left the actual possession of the kid.

He turned back toward the church grounds and his eye caught Wanda Smith as she fed her mouth. His eyes narrowed. Wanda was fat, looked maternal as hell, and liked kids. Other people's kids. She and Billy had none of their own. She'd be the one to make the snatch. It didn't occur to him that Wanda might object. In his entourage no one objected. Oh, they bitched now and then, but they all

went along with what he said. They knew where the shekels came from, Wanda knew. So while Reverend MacLeish preached that Sunday morning Obie planned. Two days later Wanda drove up to the corner of the subdivision where Blake was playing with three other small boys. She leaned out the window and called faintly. "Hey, boy, where is a doctor? I don't feel well. I think I'm having an attack."

Blake approached the car and studied her. He pointed silently but she shook her head. "Get in, tell me where to stop, will you?"

Blake hesitated and she made a gasping noise. He got in the car and Wanda drove him straight to the airport, where the private plane belonging to the Voice of God Church was warmed up and ready. Meeting the car was Everett, who was a pharmacist after all; he held a capsule under Blake's nose for a second and Blake drooped, half asleep, and they carried him aboard the plane.

An hour later Lisa opened her door to a Western Union boy and read the telegram he handed her with tears running down her cheeks. Matt left a partially undressed patient on a table and rushed home to read the same telegram. It had been dictated by Obie, smoothed out and made legal-sounding by Billy Warren Smith, and as Matt read it a second time, he knew it would stick.

It said, in effect, that Obie was claiming his legal son, whom Matt Daniels had kidnaped at birth. That if Matt Daniels fought this action, Obie would sue him and demand compensation and punishment of the culprits. A photostat of the wedding license would follow, as would a notarized statement from the mother of the child authorizing the father as the guardian, all duly witnessed and stamped. Obie had spent years and many thousands of dollars tracking down his son, and would fight through the courts for his right to keep the son with him. As an

atheist, probably a Communist, and a free thinker, Matt stood absolutely no chance of having a decision brought down in his favor, and the harm to the child of a long involved legal battle might well be irreparable.

Matt's attorney cursed fluently, at Matt as much as at Obie. They should have gone through the legal channels for adoption, etc.; Obie was a bastard who thought he could use the kid now, etc. But in the end the attorney agreed that Matt would not be able to sway a court, not in that section of the country. How many times had Matt taken the kid to church? To Sunday School? What was his own religious background? Lisa's?

"So you are atheists, and Obie's a heaven-inspired evangelist. I don't know where in hell you could fight it out in court and not lose on those grounds alone."

They tried to get an injunction to retain possession of the child while the case was pending, and they were refused. The judge said there was no case. The child was with his legal father where he belonged. There was no case.

Chapter Five

MATT and Lisa fought and met defeat down the line. They even tried to re-kidnap Blake, but Obie was one up on them here: he had provided himself with security forces and the attempt failed. So the first year passed, then the second and third, and Blake remained with his legal father.

Obie hired a tutor to satisfy the law, but he ordered

the bewildered man to leave Blake strictly alone. Blake was teaching himself faster than Obie liked as it was. He read the Bible once through and knew it, could quote from Jeremiah, or Luke, or Psalms, or anywhere else citing book and verse, choosing a quote suitable for any occasion. He could quote from Nietzsche with the same facility, or from Kierkegaard, or the Koran, or any other text that he had come across, but he seldom let it be known that he had read these volumes. Obie regarded anyone who read non-fiction for pleasure with great suspicion. Six months after being taken by Obie, Blake had run away, and had been caught ten miles from the town of Bevel, Texas, where Obie was preaching. His punishment had been swift and painful, a beating administered by Everett while Obie watched in tears, unable personally to wield the belt. He was locked in his room nightly for a month with nothing to read, no light, and no toys of any sort. He was ordered to meditate, and he did so. He had read accounts of hypnotism, Yoga, and other varieties of trance states, and he taught himself to induce trance during the weeks of solitary confinement. He also struggled with and mastered all the in-between states of trance and was able afterward to induce analgesia, or anesthesia, a subjective speed-up of time, a complete withdrawal of awareness, or attenuated sensibilities. He was almost regretful when the period of punishment was concluded.

Blake never mentioned his former life, Matt, Lisa, Derek, or Lorna. He never spoke of his dog, or his friends. He hardly spoke at all, unless Obie ordered him to, and then his answer was short to the point of rudeness, and direct with an honesty that was infuriating. Dee Dee asked him if he liked her hair down or up, and he said the question was silly. She was beautiful either way and knew it, but why did she always have to make someone else say it for her? Everett, desperately trying to make

up, asked him if he'd like to go to a circus and Blake said, no thank you, he didn't like the way Everett tried to pull him to his lap, and he didn't like Everett's soft hands on his arm or leg. And Obie said he'd kill Everett if he ever. Everett spent the night on his knees weeping and praying for strength, and the next day he vanished into the slum area of Dallas and didn't reappear for three days, and for months he avoided Blake. Wanda tried repeatedly to make him understand that she had been hired by Obie, that she was morally bound to carry out his directions, and that it hadn't been wrong for a father to want his child. Blake stared at her each time without answering, and when she finally pressed him for a reaction, he said, "Probably that's how the captains of the slave ships excused what they did. They were doing their jobs." Wanda blanched and launched into further explanation.

Dee Dee tried to talk to Obie about the kid and the effect he was having on them all. "Obie," she said, "send him back. I've been watching the way you look at him. You're scared to death of the kid."

"Shut up. Get lost."

"Sure. You had an itch and you didn't know how to scratch it. You thought the kid was the answer, but you still got the itch, Obie. Send him back."

"He's important. He's a part of it all."

"Yeah? For chrissakes, how? He's a troublemaker, that's what."

"Beat it, Dee Dee. I don't know how. If I knew I'd be using him. It'll come to me. Just shut up about him."

Dee Dee went to Billy. "See if you can talk sense into him, Billyboy."

"Won't do any good. Obie's a superstitious fool. He's his own most tied-up follower, and he doesn't know what it is he's following. From the first time he laid eyes on the

kid, it's been different. He never went after a chick like this. There've been plenty hot for a quick tumble in the sack with God's Voice, and he couldn't have cared less. But the kid . . . that's been different. Have you seen the way he watches him? He's scared shitless over the kid and he doesn't know why."

"I've seen," Dee Dee said. "I don't like all this, Billy. Something's happening to Obie, he's changing. I just don't like it."

Obie was changing. One day it all fell into place and there was no more mystery, no more tension in Obie's life, although the superstitious dread that they all had commented on was to remain with him, hidden, ready to pull him again whenever Blake was the issue. What happened at that time, though, was this: Obie found religion.

It came about this way: Dee Dee slammed a car door and caught three fingers of her left hand in it. She screamed with pain, and screamed again when she saw the bleeding bruised fingers. The fingernails would go, maybe she'd have stiff fingers now. She might need surgery. They were staying in a motel outside Detroit where Obie was holding a revival nightly for ten days. Obie had been practicing his sermon when her shrill screams sounded. By the time he got to her side, the others were already there, with Blake in the background watching with large, sober, gray eyes. He was staring at Dee Dee's ghastly face, not her hand. And still staring at her face, compelling her attention to himself, he went to her and took her hand, not looking at all at the blood and the mangled fingers.

"Dee Dee," he said softly. "It's all right. Don't cry." She gasped, swayed, and yanked her hand from his and stared at it.

"It doesn't hurt," she said. "It doesn't hurt!"

Billy broke the tableau after a moment. "Come on inside," he said. "Let's clean it up and have a look." Obie took Blake's arm and pulled him along when he started to hang back. Inside Billy's room Dee Dee let him wash her fingers and examine them closely. She was calm now and almost uninterested in her hand. Her eyes turned again and again to Blake, who avoided her gaze embarrassedly.

"They're cut good," Billy said, "turning black already. They're a mess."

Dee Dee said, "I don't want to lose the nails, Blake."

"You won't," Blake mumbled, trying to pull away from Obie.

Obie stared at him, sweat broke out on his forehead, and he started to shiver. He dropped his hand from Blake's arm and took a step backward; his face felt strangely numb, as if he were going to faint, or had just got up or something. They were all staring at Blake, and Wanda said it in a tone of awe and absolute belief, "A healer! My God, we've got a healer!" Obie staggered, was caught and steadied by Everett, and he stood weeping, open-mouthed, dizzy, and enlightened.

After that Blake appeared on stage with Obie. He did nothing, said nothing, but cures happened and he was blessed. Endowments were set up for him, in his name, some to be administered by trusts, others to be handled by Obie.

And three years after joining the group, seven months as an active participant in the services, Blake tried again to run away, and this time was successful. At a revival in Birmingham he managed to climb into the trunk of a '59 Ford and hide there until the owners drove off to their home twelve miles from the tent. When they stopped the car, he waited for an hour, got out and started to walk north, keeping to the woods and unpaved roads, liv-

ing on nuts and berries and stolen corn. He didn't know where he was going, didn't care, so long as it wasn't back with Obie and his gang. He knew he couldn't go back to Matt and Lisa. Obie would simply take him again, this time with lawyers and policemen. He would hide in the cities until he was grown up and no one could tell him what to do, and then he would be a doctor and work with his father.

Obie stamped up and down his hotel room muttering to himself. No one else in the room dared speak. Dee Dee studied her nails; Billy smoked and drank; Wanda sighed and heaved herself up and down in a chair trying to get comfortable; it was getting harder all the time to find a comfortable chair. Everett Slocum sat behind a temple of fingers and prayed inaudibly.

"I'll give him ten minutes longer," Obie said. "Then out." He was talking about Merton, the chief of his security forces. Merton was in his thirties, tall and very thin. He had bad vision that required thick lenses for correction. Unable to adjust to contacts, he wore massive black-framed glasses. His long straight hair was black also. He was an ex-F.B.I. agent. He had joined the Bureau after college with the intention of receiving training from it, and then quitting, and this he had done. His own agency had been getting along all right when Obie hired him four years ago, but since then Merton had flourished beyond all expectations. Privately he had decided that working on the side of the holies was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Obie needed a drink. For the first time in almost a year he realized that he wanted and needed a drink. He examined the thought, looked at Billy with his never empty glass, and shrugged. He couldn't remember when he had stopped drinking. And smoking. He had stopped smoking also, without being aware of it. Now he wanted

a cigarette and a drink. There was a knock on the door and he yanked it open.

"Well?" he demanded. Merton scowled and shrugged as he entered the room.

"Nothing. Daniels hasn't left home in the past week. His wife is there. They didn't snatch the kid. I told you he upped and walked out. Like he did before."

"And I told you to find him and bring him back."

"Yeah. Look, Obie, we need pictures in the paper, and local police help. I got twenty men on this, and that's not enough. One shot on TV could have him spotted in a day, but this way . . ."

"No publicity," Obie said. Merton poured a drink for himself and downed it in a gulp, then poured another. Obie's urge to have a drink was gone now, and he was feeling something else. His eyes narrowed as he tried to pin it down. Very slowly he said, "Supposing this was all planned. All determined. He comes and stays with us for a couple, three years, then vanishes again. He'll be back. We got to get things ready for his return." Wanda stirred and her eyes widened as she watched him. Dee Dee looked blank and half asleep. Billy studied the contents of his glass and finally nodded.

"That's how to play it," he said.

"Play it? Play it!" Obie swung around to glare at Billy and there was fire in his eyes. "I play no games, Billy. I had a vision. He'll be back when the time comes, but when he comes back this time he'll expect to find his house in order. This is Armageddon now. Here. We are the advance guards, the banner carriers. There are only two camps, Billy. The camp of the godly, and the camp of the unbelievers. The atheists, Communists, whatever you call them. The ones who will not be led into the light. Time has run out for them. It's our turn now. The

word has been spoken and the word is Now. He came to us to show us his powers, and he is gone now to study and to sharpen his powers. When he returns he will be in person the God that we saw through him."

He talked on, his voice exultant now, swept up in his own words, and Billy, watching him, looking at the others in the room who were carried along with him, thought: "Well, I'll be goddamned, he has swallowed his own line of crap."

INTERLUDE THREE

Special to the N.Y. *Times*

Crowds estimated to be well over one hundred fifty thousand filled the new Coliseum outside Detroit tonight. They came on crutches, in wheelchairs, accompanied by nurses and companions: thin unhappy-looking people, sick people, fat people. They filled the auditorium and when Blake Daniels Cox took his place alongside Obie Cox you could feel the tension in the atmosphere mount. The sermon was long, and during it Blake didn't move. He might have been asleep. Then Obie Cox prayed to God, beseeching Him to manifest Himself through Blake, and the boy looked at the people. He didn't make a motion; he didn't speak; he merely looked at the people. And the people responded magically. Headaches vanished; sight brightened; wobbly legs became strong; crutches were left behind; wheelchairs abandoned. . . .

Editorial from the Detroit *Daily News*

Articles on articles, speeches on speeches, where and when will

it all end? The Voice of God Church has grown from an idea in the head of a country boy to an organization that today numbers in the millions. The facts are these: Obie Cox has a magnetic personality and probably the greatest stage presence of any man in living memory. He has chosen his lieutenants with supreme care; they have functioned exactly as they should. When his church faltered, he introduced his son, who has even more charisma than the father. The church got over the hump that could have spelled its demise. Such unerring intuitive grasp of what his congregation will accept and believe is uncanny. We don't know if the boy is a genius. It doesn't matter if he heals; they believe he does. What does Cox actually give his believers? Permission to lie, cheat, hate. And prophecies of catastrophies. He hedges all bets, covers all angles, and gets converts. . . .

Testimony from the transcripts of the A.M.A. hearings regarding the "cures" credited to Blake Daniels Cox (cont.)

Q. Now, Mrs. Siddons, you were telling us yesterday about your spontaneous cure. . . .

A. Yessir. You see, my doctors always said that there wasn't much they could do about a case so advanced like I was. You know, appendicitis out, and gall bladder, and most of my stomach, and spleen and kidney. . . .

Q. You had surgery when, Mrs. Siddons?

A. All the time, yessir. And I says to my husband. John Siddons, that's my husband, you see. I says to him that since I'm most near dead anyways, I might as well go and see if that son of Obie Cox can do me any good, because sure as hellfire, he couldn't do me any harm, don't you see. And he looked. . . . Yessir?

Q. Who was your doctor, Mrs. Siddons?

A. Which one? I've had a passel of them.

Q. Who performed the surgery to remove your kidney?

A. Here's a list of doctors. I seen all of them from one time to another. I think Jones, or was it Harriman? But he'll know. You just ask him. After he was finished, he said— No, that was another time.

Q. Mrs. Siddons, you realize, don't you, that our examinations have shown you to be in excellent health, with an appendix, and both kidneys. . . .

A. That's what I'm telling you. Obie Cox's son done worked a real miracle on me!

Chapter Six

IT was raining in New York state, had been raining for three days now, and the wind was cold, the world dark and mist-shadowed. There were no edges on buildings, trees, rocks, anything. Rounded by fog and mist, the estate looked unreal, a double exposure used to illustrate a fantasy tale. Winifred turned from her window and paced her room some more. Turnover time again, she thought bitterly. Of all the initial team that had taken over the care of the Star Child, she was the only one remaining, and now they were being shuffled again. She kicked a hassock furiously. Her clock chimed four and she jerked the door open and marched down the heavily carpeted hallway to the conference room, where she expected to have her dismissal notice handed to her.

Colonel Wakeman was in charge now. A psychologist of the Watson school, he had no use for Winifred. He was a pansy, she thought with disgust. Just what Johnny needed. Wakeman was forty-two, athletic, sunburned, virile-looking, and a pansy, who knew that she knew and hated her for knowing.

At Wakeman's side was Dr. Felix Duprey, the new pediatrician assigned to Johnny. He had the thick folder of medical records tucked under his arm. A brush

moustache, sideburns, pot belly over long thin legs. She looked at the next of the new men. Leonard Mallard, who smiled and smiled, was in charge of security of the estate. Lenny had been there for almost a year before anyone had been let in on the secret that he was in charge. He had filled a vacancy in the lower echelons, ostensibly gathering information about the place and how it was run, and only in the past week had stepped up to his rightful position. And people had vanished overnight.

There were others that she had met briefly: the Russian teacher, a French physical activities coach, consultants in all fields from other nations. She nodded and walked around the conference table to her seat. They were still waiting for Rose Laskey, the art instructor, a tall girl, twenty-seven, with long fluttery hands that could work magic with paper, clay, paints, all the accoutrements of her profession. Winifred suspected that Rose was C.I.A. She wondered again, as she often did, if she was the only one present who wasn't holding down two positions.

She wondered even more why no one had ever approached her about taking on the second, even more important job. Probably thought she was undependable.

There were ten professionals on the estate, drawing salaries of fifty thousand to one hundred thousand dollars annually, plus whatever they drew that never was recorded for public disclosure. There were fifteen sub-professionals, the second-class professionals, the assistants to the first-class professionals, etc., and they made an average of sixteen thousand dollars per year. There were twelve sub-sub-professionals, clerks, cooks, and menials of various sorts, low in rank on the estate, probably very high in offices whose doors came wrapped in plain brown paper. They made from six thousand to nine thousand dollars a year. Openly. Then there was the cost of the up-

keep of this minor army. All told the bill came to over two million dollars every year. Quite a budget designated to the care and feeding of one skinny little boy.

Wakeman cleared his throat and the meeting was under way. It was like most of the consultation meetings where various members gave verbose reports about the boy's progress. Rose would produce art work; the doctors would read from their records and offer a prognosis for the coming months—always the same, colds, hay fever, asthma, prognosis favorable. Winifred's report consisted of his psychic development. A mother's baby book, one dollar over a ten-cent-store counter, conscientiously filled in, would have done the same job. Sometimes there was news of an impending visit by a dignitary, the president of the United States, or the premier of Russia, or a representative of this or that church, but nothing of that sort came up this time. After the meeting Wakeman turned to Winifred and asked if she could stay for a private talk.

She nodded. No one ever ordered anyone to do anything here, much too civilized for that. But she had been ordered, and she suspected, now it would come. Her pink slip. Did anyone ever actually get a pink slip? She never had seen one. Her mind followed the line of thought, pink slip, lingerie, Freudian slip . . .

"Dr. Harvey, as you know your own work here has been indispensable to those who have studied the Star Child throughout the years. When the clearance has been lifted and you can publish your studies, your name will be placed among the other giants in the field."

"My reward in heaven," Winifred murmured. Wakeman looked confused for a second, then cleared his throat and continued as if she hadn't spoken.

"After many long hours of consultation, however, the decision has been reached that the transference that

has been effected by your devoted care of the child is not to his best interests. We believe his growing dependence on you has added to the immaturity that is detrimental to his progress."

Winifred smiled and drummed her fingers on the polished surface of the table. Again Wakeman was discomfited for a second. Winifred turned to take in Lenny with her gaze. He was seated slightly to the rear and side of her so that she couldn't see both men at the same time. She addressed herself to Lenny.

"Have you read my latest report? The summary of three months ago?" Lenny nodded, smiling. "Okay, then tell him to knock off this pep talk and get down to basics. I say the kid is, to put it as bluntly as I know how, going crazy in this environment. He has shown signs of autistic behavior from infancy, and they are growing more pronounced. He is developing into a paranoid schizophrenic, and if you remove the one stable element in his environment, this development will hasten."

"Dr. Harvey, your report was given all consideration," Wakeman said frostily. "We feel that you have exaggerated the situation."

Winifred stood up, gathering her notebook and purse, keeping her gaze on Lenny. "Balls," she said. She started to leave the room, but Lenny's voice stopped her.

Very quietly he said, "Winifred, there is an alternative."

She swung around to stare at him.

"You are to be relieved of all official duties in regard to the boy. That's irrevocable. But you can stay and continue as his confidant."

She stiffened. Now they were making the offer. She waited.

"He needs someone he can talk to, and you are that someone. We all know that. You would work directly under my orders, however, not under the medical board's

auspices." He held up his hand before she could speak. "Not now. Think about it. I'll talk to you again."

Winifred walked back down the hall slowly. Wakeman and Lenny. Her side. The U.S.A. side. They didn't want her reports to go to the international board any longer. They wanted the inside information for themselves. Everyone believed something would come out eventually that would give one side or the other an edge. She entered her room still deep in thought, and jumped when Johnny said, "Are you leaving too?"

"How did you get in here? What are you doing out of your section?"

"Did you get fired? Are you going away too? If you do I'll kill myself!"

Looking at the frail boy who had learned to sneak from his room almost as soon as he had learned to walk, who had learned to lie with the facility of a veteran diplomat, who had learned to trust no one at all, probably including her, who had learned, God only knew how, that he was the world's most lavishly housed and protected-guarded prisoner, and had yet to learn why, she knew that she couldn't leave him. She told him so. She asked him how he had managed to get to the upper floor without being stopped, and he, wiser than she, put a finger to his lips and smiled.

"Johnny, I do want to talk to you sometime soon. Not now, not here. Outside, under the tree where we saw the squirrel fight. Remember?" He nodded and she added, "The first sunny day."

When they had their talk Winifred told the boy that she had been fired as his doctor, but that she would remain so that he would have a friend there, someone he could talk to when he wanted to talk. And she told him, after taking a deep breath and hoping the trees weren't bugged, that she wouldn't tell anyone what he had to say

to her, if he didn't want her to. She told him that no one else was likely to keep his secrets, and he nodded in agreement. Winifred stood up then to return to the house. Johnny stopped her.

"They don't like me, do they? They don't like you either. Everyone's afraid all the time. They wish I'd get sick and die. But I won't. And when I know they're afraid, when they see me looking at them, I make them more afraid. I'm a mirror. Nobody can see me, they just see themselves when they look."

Winifred sat down again and pulled him down at her side. "What do you mean? Why do you say they're afraid?"

"Look at them. Always sneaking around listening to me, watching what I do, even when I go to the bathroom. And when I eat. And when I had a cold last month I heard Dr. Clephorn say maybe this time. And I knew what he meant. They could all go away and do something else. . . . They don't like it here. It's too quiet and dull."

Oh, Lordy, Winifred thought, Lordy, Lordy.

Johnny jumped up. "He's coming," he said. He stared at Winifred hard. "Some day will you tell me who I am and why I have to stay here?"

Wakeman came into sight around the trees and Winifred also stood up, brushing her skirt, waving to him. "Yes," she said under her breath to Johnny, who wasn't even looking at her now, but was throwing stones at birds in a meadow off to their left. "I'll tell you everything," she said, promising, knowing her promise to be reckless, but knowing that he needed it.

She was told later that day not to take the boy away from the house to talk to him, and she realized what Johnny seemed already to know: the entire house was

bugged. Meekly she agreed, and reported what conversation had taken place between them out in the open. It was a truncated report of their talk.

During the summer when she had her three weeks' vacation she told most of it to Matt, who did record it. Matt and Lisa were the only two people she felt at all certain about any more, just as she was the only person Johnny felt certain about. And Matt and Lisa had each other. So it worked out.

Matt and Lisa had a shadow over them now, where there had been none. They seldom mentioned Blake, and his dog had vanished so there wasn't even that reminder. They had moved again, this time to a subdivision that had escaped urban renewal by incorporating itself into a village and passing a law against the renewal act. They had a large, slightly dilapidated frame house with a big yard that was fragrant with lilacs and peonies.

Winifred spent a week with them and they talked openly, the only place where she permitted herself this luxury.

Obie had clamped down on Blake's public appearances, she learned. The boy had not been exploited for the past six weeks or longer. Maybe Obie had him in a school somewhere; no one knew, and Obie turned away all questions, saying only that Blake would return to take his proper place among men.

Matt exclaimed over the Star Child's precocious grasp of the conditions at the estate, and Winifred shrugged it away. "He was bound to realize what was going on sooner or later. He's not stupid, and he has something that isn't bound by intelligence. He can sense much more than he can logically understand. And he trusts his intuition more than his logic. Most of the time he's right, incidentally. He has no reason to trust or believe anyone

around him. When I called him paranoid, it was a description of fact, but if the paranoiac is being watched and hounded, isn't his paranoia reasonable?"

"But why?" Lisa asked. "Why can't they simply let him grow up like other children? Why are they so afraid of him?"

"Are you kidding?" Winifred said. "So the aliens return and find that their kid has been allowed to run the streets and get himself hit by a truck and has had his neck broken? They turn on the big guns and that's it. Or what if he is taken by the Chinese. They're still screaming over him from time to time, you know. What if he is indoctrinated in some kookie philosophy that the aliens detest? What if he learns that the little bit of paradise he has come to expect doesn't represent the rest of the world and reports slum conditions, poverty, pandemic malnutrition on three-fourths of Earth, wars in Africa, and Asia, and South America, near slave conditions that exist in most areas of the world so that the U.N. space programs can proceed in all due haste? You see? If and when they come back, they will see that we treat him like a prince."

Matt was watching her closely and Winifred stopped.

"You think they'll ease you out anyway?" Matt asked a bit later.

"Sure. They'll find that they aren't getting enough from me to pay for my keep. And the kid will be growing up, you know. A young teen-ager soon, he'll turn from a woman confidant, and they'll supply an understanding male who will worm his way into the kid's life. They've been trying, just haven't found the right one, but in time they will. And then I'll go."

Winifred couldn't sleep that night, but sat on the Daniel's porch and listened to the crickets and the night birds, and when Matt joined her and offered a drink, she accepted it with a sigh. "I have to tell him, Matt. When they

give me my papers, there won't be any good-bys. That isn't how they operate, and God only knows when that time will come. I'll have to pick my own time and tell him everything."

Matt nodded, a blurry white shadow that moved slightly on the darkened porch.

Winifred continued, as if to herself, "He has to have an identity he can hang onto. He's got nothing.

Chapter Seven

BLAKE watched the kids playing ball for ten or fifteen minutes, then walked casually to the stand of bicycles and worked one out of the middle. A nondescript red standard bike. That's what he had decided on. He eased the bike out and pushed it a few feet, then got on and rode away slowly, not drawing any attention to himself. The ball game went on.

No one his age walked. All the kids under fourteen had bikes, and a boy walking drew glances. Lesson one. The other boys wore sneakers and jeans, and he was still dressed in the white shirt that Obie insisted on for the meetings. He stole proper clothes from a swimming pool locker room. Money was going to be one of the biggest problems, however. He scanned a newspaper left on a bench at a bus stop. At least Obie hadn't put his picture in the papers yet. Blake tossed the paper down and got back on the stolen bike. He had to go somewhere. He was tired, more tired than he'd ever been before. He had walked four days and most of four nights, sleeping only

when he knew he couldn't take another step. What he wanted most was a bed with clean sheets and a blanket and something hot to eat and a bath with soap and hot water. He blinked hard and started to pedal.

"Hey, kid!" A whistle and another shout. Blake turned and saw a man beckoning to him. "You! Com'ere."

A man by a delivery truck with a flat tire. A job. Blake went back, the tears forgotten now. "Yes?"

"Look, can you carry a sack on that bike? Want to make a buck?"

So Blake was hired. The house he sought was an old Southern three-floored mansion long since turned into apartments. The first floor was leased by the Misses Laidley. Miss Annabelle Laidley, fifteen years in a wheelchair following a throw from a horse; Miss Lucy Jo Laidley, nineteen years a fourth-grade teacher, now retired; Miss Jessica Sue Laidley, seventy, fierce, lean, a former designer of ladies' apparel; and last, the eldest of the Laidley girls, Miss Margaret Elizabeth Laidley, seventy-five, soft and yielding, but controller of the purse.

The Laidley girls took turns entertaining, each of them with different interests and a different circle of friends, overlapping here and there. Tonight it was Miss Lucy Jo's turn to have the living room for her group. Card tables were set up and a sideboard was already laid out with glasses, a decanter of gin, a bowl of ice, lemonade, sausages, thin slices of pumpernickel, cheeses. She was waiting impatiently for the delivery of chips and collins mix when Blake turned up at the back door, his nose hard against the screen, his eyes large and fascinated. There was an aviary on the back porch. Miss Margaret Elizabeth's birds lived there in a nylon net cage with miniature palm trees and orange trees, and forty-three potted geraniums and African violets. The birds were all screech-

ing at the delivery boy. Conkling-by-the-Sea, Margaret's ancient parrot watched the boy malevolently.

Miss Lucy Joe admitted him and checked the order against her list, added up the figures, nodded, and then held out the promised dollar. Only then did she really look at the child. And she gasped.

"Boy, how long since you had a bath? And a meal?"

Blake was still staring at the birds, however, and he didn't even see the proffered dollar bill. Miss Lucy poked him with a long slender finger and he started. "Yes, ma'am?" he said.

Miss Lucy Jo handed him the dollar. "You like the birds, don't you? You can go look, if you've a mind to. But don't put a hand in. They peck."

"Thank you, ma'am," Blake said.

Miss Lucy Jo watched him with a pucker on her smooth forehead. Miss Margaret Elizabeth entered the kitchen, rustling in brown moire skirts from another era, and Miss Lucy Jo put a finger to her lips and pointed. The boy was standing close to the nylon cage, and the birds and the boy were regarding each other. He whistled softly, a pale green and blue parakeet trilled in answer. The boy replied and a lemon yellow canary ruffled its feathers and sang a solo. Blake laughed aloud, then trilled back to the canary. Presently there were songs and chirping and warblings and it was impossible to tell which came from inside the cage and which from outside. Miss Margaret Elizabeth sat down staring at the scene. "I'll be damned," she said. The parrot said, "I'll be damned, I'll be damned."

Miss Lucy Jo looked reprovingly at her and Margaret Elizabeth said, "I will though."

Conkling-by-the-Sea said, "Shut up, you foulmouthed moth lure."

They kept Blake with them for the next few days, at first trying to worm from him who he was and where he had come from, and getting only very polite refusals in return. When the end of the three days came about, the time they had agreed among themselves to permit him to stay and have some decent food and rest, they knew they couldn't turn him out. He turned so white at the suggestion that they should notify the authorities, that they abandoned the idea without any discussion. Miss Jessica Sue insisted on questioning him severely before they came to a decision about his future. Jessica Sue was tall and very straight and dressed in black with white at her throat. She had white hair, as did all the sisters, and she had gold-framed glasses, on a black silk string that she wore around her neck most of the time. She seated Blake in a straight chair and stood before him, her hands clasped in front of her.

"Blake, you say that you have no people? Is that right?"

"Yes ma'am."

"And you have never been to school? Nowhere?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yet you can read very well, and you can do sums, and you play the piano. Can you explain these things?"

"I watched my . . . a girl learning how to play the piano. I guess I picked it up from her. And I don't remember when I learned to read. Seems like I always could."

Miss Jessica Sue stared at him hard. "Have you been to church?"

Blake felt himself blushing furiously and he stood up. "I guess I'll be on my way, Miss Jessica," he said slowly. "I'd like to tell Miss Lucy Jo, and Miss Margaret Elizabeth, and Miss Annabelle good-by, if that's all right."

"Blake, you sit right back down in that chair. So you

came from a religious family? Is that it? You know we aren't very religious here. You think we'll hold that against you? Is that it?"

He stared at the floor. Miss Jessica pulled a chair close to his and sat down in it, reached for his chin and lifted his face. "Look at me, Blake. Tell me this, have you done anything you are ashamed of?"

He nodded. "But I didn't want to," he said. "Ob. . . . the man I was with made me go on a stage and I was ashamed of that."

Miss Jessica studied him intently, then nodded. "All right, Blake. Now tell me this. Where are you going if you leave us?"

"I don't know. I'm strong. I can work."

"Yes. Well, you have a job here in this house, if you want it. We need a strong boy here to carry groceries for us, and to take Annabelle for walks. Would you like the job?"

Blake grinned, then sobered again. "I can't stay with anybody," he said. "Someone would say why isn't that boy in school and you'd be in trouble."

"We have a teacher here in the house. Wouldn't be the first time she tutored private pupils either."

Blake stayed, and people did indeed say, why isn't that boy in school?, but Miss Lucy Jo swore that she tutored him, and that he was the son of a traveling businessman who preferred his child to be in a private home rather than in a boarding school. During the year, Miss Annabelle regained the use of her legs, and where at first he had wheeled her in the chair on daily walks, by the end of the year they could be seen each day strolling together, talking very seriously of poetry and music and art.

It was a calm year. Toward the end of it one night Miss Jessica Sue found Blake watching the television newscast

and turned it off in order to talk to him. The other sisters were all busy, or out, and they had an uninterrupted half hour together.

"Blake, I have a feeling that you might not want to stay with us very much longer. No, don't shake your head. Things change. Boys change. I remember how you came to us, hungry, dirty, no clothes. . . . If you ever feel that you have to leave here, Blake, I want you to know that you have our blessings. Here is some money, all in small bills so no one will question you about it. Three hundred dollars, enough for you to live on for a while. Eventually you will have to have identification papers, register with the data bank, get a social security card, credit card. I don't know how you'll manage it all, but I'm certain you will. The brown suitcase I brought home last week, that's yours. Pack it with things that you might need. And a coat. Don't forget a coat. Don't worry about needing the things. We'll replace them now, but I want you to have a bag packed and ready so if you have to leave in a hurry you won't feel that you're wasting time by packing. You understand?"

Blake was staring at her, not speaking. He nodded. Miss Jessica Sue stood up and ruffled his hair. Very softly she said, "Stay with us if you can, dear. But if you must leave, God bless you."

Long into the night Blake lay awake trying to understand. He could hear the sisters' voices in the living room and finally he went to his door and listened. Miss Annabelle was talking.

"I'm sure he was following us again. I really don't think we should let Blake out at all for the next week. This is the third time.

Blake crept back to bed and stared at the ceiling until the lights in the house were out and the sisters were quiet. Then he wrote a very brief good-by letter, and he took

his suitcase and left the house. It was July, and he was nine years old.

Blake pedaled north, keeping to back roads again, and by the time the sun was up, he was miles from the Laidley sisters' house. Two days later the sisters had a visitor, a gray-haired man with a briefcase and an official air about him. He demanded the boy they were harboring and was met with blank stares and an offer of tea. He returned with a search warrant, found no trace of a child in the house. He called the report in to Billy Warren Smith.

Billy hung up frowning. That damn kid, he thought. Everything was okay until the brat showed up. He stared at his secretary, a misshapen woman of indeterminate age who wore a brace on one leg and walked with a sideways slant, dragging the useless leg slightly, making a scruff-scruff sound everywhere she went. He motioned for her to leave and watched her slow progress across the spacious office; she left a trail of scuffed carpet behind her. Sometimes she left a trail that went to the picture of Obie and Blake and stopped there, then led back to the outer office. Billy was certain she prayed before the picture on the wall. He pushed the call button for Dee Dee's office and waited until her face showed on the interoffice comset. "It's another bitch," he said then. "If it was the kid, he's slipped out again."

Dee Dee shrugged. "You know the orders. Keep looking."

"Yeah, I know. Dee Dee, have lunch with me. I want to talk to you."

Dee Dee looked at him more intently then, paused, smiled slightly and said no. "Sorry, Billy. Obie doesn't like it when you bad mouth the kid. Besides I have a date for lunch already."

"Stay there. I have to talk to you. I'll be right in," Billy said.

He passed through the busy outer office where a staff of twelve was kept occupied all day. No one in the outer office was whole, healthy, and normally shaped. MacKee, the treasurer was a hunchback; Miss Llewelyn, his secretary, had suffered from a birth defect that had left her partially shriveled; Betty Odets, the bookkeeper, had a club foot, and so on. Billy walked among them feeling well and content with himself. They loved him, loved Dee Dee, loved Obie with a blind loyalty, loved each other. They were all convinced that when the time came Obie, or his miracle-working child, would heal them, and so they could smile and be happy waiting.

Dee Dee's office was no larger than his, but she had had a decorator fix it up for her, and it was like a page out of a travelogue extolling the beauty of a Polynesian paradise. There were plants with blooms and plants without, a jade fountain, and a pool with cool ivory steps leading to it. There was bamboo and wicker furniture. Dee Dee had learned about clothes during the past few years also, and she wore expensive, deceptively simple Asian-type silk dresses, high at the throat, sleeveless now in the summer, beltless, forever stylish, and eminently suitable for her slender figure. Her hair was pulled back from her face with a velvet band, and swung loosely down her back. Obie preached that women should not cut their hair, and Dee Dee advertised this point beautifully.

"Dee Dee, do you know where he is? They let the kid slip through. Who's going to tell him?"

"He's at Mount Laurel."

"No, he isn't. I tried there. What's he up to, Dee Dee?" Billy paced for a moment as Dee Dee studied her nails minutely. "Okay, you don't know either, do you?"

"Billy, calm down, okay? Obie needs a rest, that's all. He isn't 'up to' anything. He's resting and praying and

trying to decide what to do about Merton's suggestions. That's all there is to it."

"Merton!" Billy said the name bitterly. "Why's that crook suddenly holing up with Obie and issuing statements?"

"He's not a crook. He's converted, born again," Dee Dee murmured. Billy laughed. He sat down abruptly. "I don't like ten-year plans," he said sullenly. "And even less twenty-year plans. It's crazy. Merton is crazy and Obie listens to him. Why?"

Dee Dee looked up then and there was a look of pity and dislike on her face. "You don't learn anything, do you, Billy? None of this is for Obie, you fool. It's all for the kid, for Blake. When he comes back there will be an organization that'll make the Catholic Church look like a practice exercise. Blake will step into it a general, pope, king, commander, leader, what have you. It'll be his, complete with churches in every city and town, with lieutenants in every church, all of them just waiting for his return to finish the job that Christ couldn't do, make a heaven on earth." Dee Dee's voice was dispassionate, coolly distant, and she returned to her nails, twisting her hands to catch the light on the pale ivory gleam. "And, Billy, a little piece of advice, for old time's sake. Lay off Merton. He's what Obie wants now. He's in. You try slipping it to him, and that's all, friend."

"Yeah, Obie's gone nuts." Billy stared at the girl. She would stick, he knew. Hate-love would hold her, ready to jump in the sack with Obie, and equally ready to stick a knife between his ribs. Too, Dee Dee had somehow learned about financial advisers, and she relied on them to manage her private income and gifts, so that, although he didn't know, he felt certain that if Dee Dee should walk out that day, she would be a wealthy woman for the rest

of her life. Not so with him. Wanda's fault, not his. Wanda was a glutton, for food, for clothes, for houses, cars, jewels, furnishings. They had a bank account of less than five figures, and it didn't matter how he tried to manipulate their accounts so he could stash some of it away in stocks and bonds, she found out and bang they were in debt and he had to dip into the extra and bail them out.

"He's gone nuts," Billy repeated and heaved himself up from the chair. He started for the door, paused to say, "If you hear from him before I do, will you tell him I have to talk with him. Not Merton, but Obie." She nodded and he left her. Dee Dee waited a moment, then called Obie on the view phone. He was in the city that week talking with foreign emissaries.

She reported Billy's talk verbatim practically and Obie smiled gently and nodded. "Billy can't stand any confusion," he said simply. He closed his eyes when she told about the agent's report on the elusive boy, and when he opened them again, there was the sad smile on his face. "God's will," he murmured. "Come to lunch at noon. You'll want to meet some of these people."

Merton met her at the door of the apartment where Obie was living. It was a large, very plain apartment, rich, but simple. Merton briefed her on the guests: holy men from India, Taiwan, Hiroshima, Hanoi. . . . The conference was to discuss the affiliated Voice of God Church in their areas.

INTERLUDE FOUR

Pages from Diane MacLeish's Scrapbook

Tokyo, UPI, Sept. 3

HUNDREDS KILLED IN RIOTS

Riots continued over this Labor Day weekend as strikers from the Panmin Labor Association clashed with police in numbers estimated in the tens of thousands.

Labor Secretary Hideke Kurusu called out the military to control the strikers. Anti-riot foam was dispersed by helicopters.

Hachiro Nomura, Secretary of the Panmin Labor Association issued a statement which said in part: "We protest this mammoth expenditure in a venture that is doomed to fail. Only when the house of Earth is in order will the children of Earth be permitted to enter God's space. We predict a series of accidents at those places where such work is commencing. . . ."

Tokyo, UPI, Sept. 30

HEARINGS HELD IN TOKYO

Hearings started today to determine the causes of the recent tragic accidents that continue to plague the Panmin Corp. Charges made by the government that the Voice of God Church affiliate in Tokyo is directly to blame for the fires that have all but destroyed the Panmin Corp. here have been vigorously denied by Hachiro Nomura, Secretary of the Panmin Labor Association. He admitted readily that the Voice of God Church has initiated a program to feed and clothe the striking workers and their families. He refused to comment on the report of a 3 percent membership increase in the church among the strikers. He denied angrily the charges that the church has inaugurated training schools in acts of sabotage. . . .

Editorial from the Washington *Star*, June 12, 1982

The Voice of God Church is ten years old this month. There are few on the outside of its threshold who will wish it a happy birthday. Government gets no smaller, its classification system no less complex, and with the advent of universal credit cards taking cash almost completely out of the hands of the people and forcing registration and corrections in registrations as a weekly routine practically, the central data bank has become an actual necessity, no longer the gleam in the eyes of a few wild men. Chance is being replaced by computerized logic in every aspect of daily life, and there is no rebellion possible against these inevitable changes, because each is born of necessity created by earlier changes. The steps that follow like night the day are good in themselves.

But man's thoughts and imagination transcend his daily environment. In the most pious society man turns from the crucifix on the wall to mechanization, war, satanism. In the technological society now realized man doesn't want to see the technology, the computer banks, the array of circuitry in his electronic world. He turns to the mystical. Not the establishment churches that have become social organizations, but to those that exist to voice his hidden desires and fears, which the state mistakenly believes it has quieted with housing programs and poverty programs and training schools and mass planned vacations. The growth of the Voice of God Church is proof that those programs have failed the basic needs of the people. The church offers nothing, no social welfare, no aid for widows and orphans, no salvation through good works. It voices hatred and fear and despair in a country where the existence of those things has been denied. That is its success.

Kansas City *Enquirer*, August 16

Dr. Leo Marckland, President of the Congress of Christian Churches of America, today resigned his post in that organization. The Reverend Dr. Marckland denied that his resignation resulted from pressure brought by members who are dissatised with his firm stand opposing the Voice of God Church.

. . . Crandall M. Jennings, long a Cox supporter, accepted the position of pro-tem president following a heated debate

during which one-third of the members of the congress walked out. . . .

Editorial by John Lester Soupe, Jr., in *Monologue*, December 1984:

There is a story about two blind men who met an elephant in the jungle. One felt the elephant's leg and said, "It's a tree." The other felt the trunk and said, "It's a vine." Neither would listen to the other, so one sat around waiting for the coconuts to fall, and the other sat around waiting for the berries to ripen, until the elephant got tired of the whole thing and stepped on them both.

We, today, the people of Modern America, are blind men. In the valley where the first Ship from Space still stands, there is a temple devoted to the hatred of the race that crossed space only to die. The Priests of Religion won't look across the valley and see the ship. The Priests of Science, in the ship, won't look across the valley and see the temple.

When was the last time you read a science article in a national magazine? Two years ago? Three? Hmm . . . hard to remember, isn't it? Can you tell when the first space station was orbited and manned—or who manned it? Ask ten people about that, and you'll get nine blank looks. The news was in the daily fax—two inches, one column, right under the daily astrology forecast. It was announced on 3D—a spot announcement in between commercials for BOW ZOW GOODIES, and TOE JOY FOR YOUR CORNS. Twenty-one seconds it took to bring the greatest news of the decade to the public!

Remember when there were 37 magazines devoted to science fiction and science fact? Know how many there are today? One. You're reading it. *Monologue*. And we wouldn't exist, even in this mimeographed format, if our readers were not 94 and 99/100ths percent engineers and scientists.

Where are the thousands of fans who used to wait eagerly for the next serial by Doc Smith or Bob Heinlein? Gone—lost to philately, or numismatics, or the Voice of God Church. The Public never did care much about Science or Extrapolation, and they are being brainwashed today into believing that Science is Bad. Science brought the aliens, and the crash programs to compete with alien technology, which caused shortages of luxury items the public has come to expect and demand. Blame it on BAD SCIENCE!

I know a historian who has specialized so thoroughly that all he knows is the week of November 20, 1963. Period. He suspects something was going on in the world before then, and maybe afterward, but he isn't sure. Then there's a doctor in the newest medical building in Westchester who specializes also.

He treats the right eye. Go in there with an ailment in the left eye, and he'll say he's sorry, but he can refer you to a good man. . . .

What if you have something wrong with BOTH EYES? Do they consult? Or just exchange memoes?

What we need today is a man who can stand and look at the Temple of Religion and the Temple of Science, and see them BOTH! Science isn't Bad; Religion isn't Bad. But when each denies the existence of the other, they can both be made BAD!

Chapter Eight

JOHNNY watched the conference from outside the window by closing one eye and training the open eye on the slit in the center of the draperies where the two halves failed to close tightly. He listened intently through the earplug he had stolen from a careless guard two years ago. With a tap on the window and the plug in his ear he could hear every sound in the room down to the stomach noises being made by Wakeman. Wakeman had indigestion that night.

Johnny detested Wakeman but didn't fear him. He did fear Lenny Mallard. He didn't trust anyone who smiled all the time. Lenny turned toward the window and

Johnny almost fell from the ledge, but of course Lenny couldn't see him. There was also the new swim coach, Serge Dmitov. And the last man, a brand-new one, dark-haired and quick in his movements, with blue eyes and a grin that made him look very nice. Johnny decided he didn't like the new man with his nice grin when he saw Lenny pat him on the shoulder and wink at him.

"Cold turkey, that's the answer," Lenny said.

"I'm sorry it came down to this," Wakeman said, feeling his stomach carefully, then belching. "Sorry," he murmured. He looked relieved. "Yes, as I was saying, it will be traumatic for him. His reaction will be to reject overtures, food, everything for a few days, then sulk for another week, have a recurrence of asthma with nightly coughing and congestion, probably fever. That's when we'll introduce you, Peter. You know your role?"

Peter nodded. "Sure. Bored as hell at this assignment, bored to death with the kid and his bellyaches, full of mutinous ideas. . . . I know it all."

Wakeman nodded, patted his stomach again and waited, but this time nothing. "Now," he said, "about this other matter. When he is twelve, we'll have to set up a school here on the grounds. . . ."

Johnny left his post. He knew about the school. In his room he hid the tap carefully in a pocket he had fixed to the back of one of his drawers. Then he huddled on the bed and shivered looking at the sky that showed over the trees, very black, very distant and cold. He did what he did every night: he wished. Every child—every?—most children know sooner or later that they were found by these people masquerading as parents. Since there are so few kings any more, and none at all for the American child to revere, the fantasy father-figure dreamed of is often poorly defined, but is always someone else: a famous scientist perhaps, or a wealthy industrialist or a

Roman Catholic cardinal, or for the truly grandiose fulfillment, the pope, or the president. Winifred knew, must have known, the mental processes that would follow her disclosure to Johnny about his origins: the exhilaration and joy at learning that what he knew was true, for children know many things that are not true; the pride of accomplishment achieved by his people, but claimed by him; the fairyland life suddenly opened to him; feelings of grandeur mixed with fear and anxiety about his jailers. And the surge of superiority that made it almost impossible not to take command of the estate immediately.

They really shouldn't have taken Winifred away from him. Possibly she shouldn't have been so concerned by Johnny's lack of self-identity. She could have exaggerated the signs of disintegration she observed in him. But, in any event, having given him his heritage, she should not have been removed before he had a chance to assimilate his newly discovered self. Had she been on hand she could have unraveled the complex mechanics of what Johnny now went through. She could have educated him to the inner world where a vision can so possess a person that he emerges from it as one born again. The religious experience, drug induced, brought on by fasts, fear, fatigue, deliberately directed by hypnosis, electrodes, shocks, however it originates, can result in nearly instant transformation. As Johnny learned.

He concentrated as hard as he could on that patch of sky and called for his people to come and get him and take him away. He stared so hard and thought so hard that presently he forgot about his shivering body, and forgot about the men talking in the room on the top floor of the house, forgot about his only friend, Dr. Harvey, forgot everything and sat without moving, without awareness for minute after minute, cross-legged, hands on his knees, floating now, beyond contact, and in the patch of

dark sky a light blinked at him. He didn't move, couldn't move, and the light blinked again and took a form. A tall shining man in white smiled at him, and nodded. From the sky. Then was gone. Johnny stared and stared; until he fell over and slept with a smile on his face.

The next day Winifred didn't appear to have breakfast with him as had been the custom for the past six months. He didn't ask for her. He ate little, and there was a distant look on his thin face. He spoke to no one all morning, had his lessons from his teaching machine, and did reasonably well. Lunchtime and still no Winifred. His face was slightly more remote-looking, and still he asked nothing. Two or three bites were all he could manage. More lessons, swimming, horseback riding. Dinner, a television show, his favorite Western, bath, and bed. Throughout the day he had spoken only half a dozen words. He was watched closely that night, and the watcher reported that he had sat up looking out the window for an hour and a half, but nothing else. No tears. Nothing else. He had slept calmly.

And so on for the rest of the week. Wakeman had a bad time with his stomach that week, and on Saturday called for the boy for a talk. Johnny looked straight into his eyes and said, "I bet you'll die in six months." Wakeman had an instant pain in his lower intestines and terminated the conference without speaking a word. At the door the Star Child had turned and looked at him once more and said, "And I'll be glad. Everyone I hate will die."

They brought Peter in without going through the preliminary stages, simply because Johnny had failed them thoroughly. He didn't have tantrums, didn't develop asthma, didn't have a fever. He stayed remote and cool and unreachable, and, strangest of all, for him, thoughtful.

"How do you do," Johnny said formally and distantly

to Peter, much as a young prince might receive a new ambassador to his court. He ignored Peter after that, returning to the book he had been reading, dismissing him until further notice. Peter tried to introduce conversations, and was rebuffed with polite silence until he too fell silent. His report was dull that night. And the following nights. Wakeman was curious. With Winifred's departure the kid changed into someone entirely new and different, and he didn't know how to handle him. Johnny stared at and through him when they met now, and there was no trace of the dislike that Wakeman had seen on his face in the past. In his notebook Wakeman asked himself: Paranoia with delusions of grandeur? He didn't attempt to answer as yet. They would wait and see.

Wakeman didn't like the way Johnny was behaving; it wasn't according to his schedule, and there was no pre-set plan to bring to bear on him. Wakeman liked his experiments to be rigidly controlled in order to prove a hypothesis already accepted as true. Action, reaction as predicted leading to new action, and so on. But always as predicted. Action: remove Winifred. Reaction: neurotic behavior and illness, depression. New action: offer acceptable substitute. Reaction: wariness, suspicion, caution, full acceptance. And no more problems. So what had gone wrong? Wakeman didn't know and not knowing made him uneasy. It made his stomach ache and rumble and gurgle.

Johnny at eleven decided to take his schoolwork seriously, and while he had to plug away at it for hours, he mastered the lessons that had stymied him only a few weeks ago, and within a month he covered the work that he had been dragging back on for six months. He completed the lessons through methodical study for hours at a stretch, did his tests, getting high grades in every field, and asked for science courses. He was refused. It

was summer, vacation time, Peter said smiling hugely. He wanted to show him how to fly fish, and scuba dive.

Johnny stared at Peter and said, slowly and deliberately, "I want to learn everything, fishing, diving, and everything in books. If I can't have the books I want I won't leave my room and I won't talk to anyone."

Wakeman patted his stomach happily. This was more like his Johnny. He went to see him in person, with Johnny's medical chart displayed conspicuously under his arm. Johnny stared at him stonily and didn't speak.

"What's the problem, son?" Wakeman asked.

Johnny didn't speak then or throughout the half hour examination. He simply stared at Wakeman, and after ten minutes let his gaze drop to contemplate Wakeman's gurgling stomach. Wakeman felt an attack coming on and speeded up the interview.

Wakeman had been one of those who believed that the Star Child's apparent stupidity or, more kindly, his average mentality, would be replaced by a high degree of intelligence at a postponed date, due to the delayed maturation of his kind, and he was happy now to see that his expectations were being realized. Johnny's sudden interest in books and in studying with the subsequent high test grades was encouraging and he could overlook the accompanying reports of the time needed by Johnny to master his subjects. He failed to see the change in motivation that had occurred, and he had no idea that Johnny was preparing himself to join his own people.

Wakeman filed his report, the first optimistic one he had written since being on this assignment, with the general board that convened monthly to discuss the Star Child, and with the report his recommendation that the school proposed for a year from that fall be started instead in the coming September, with boys of higher than planned for IQ's.

Winifred, although no longer allowed on the estate, was still one of the board members, and was aghast at the conclusions reached by Wakeman. She bit her lip when she realized that she couldn't state reasons for demurring, and she knew she had to try to make them stick to the planned education. Poor Johnny might be totally discouraged if he suddenly had to compete with the kind of near genius they were talking about now. She tried to visualize Johnny and Derek, Matt's son, working on a problem together, and she shivered. It would be even worse if Johnny were exposed to someone like Blake, whose IQ no one had tested as far as she knew. Blake simply didn't think like other people, but made staggering leaps from point to point to arrive at a conclusion that was inevitably correct. Johnny would have to plod in and out of every sentence, around every period, up and over every letter, not miss a comma or a single step or be lost before he could hope to get to that same conclusion, and to know that another had reached it within seconds or minutes when he required hours or days might send him right back to the Dick and Jane series.

She argued for another year in which to observe the maturation of the Star Child and his mental abilities, argued for a series of new tests to prove Wakeman's claim of a startling mental leap, or disprove it. And in the end she won most of her arguments. Wakeman was to administer new tests, and if they confirmed his prediction of the sudden increase in IQ, the school would be started that same year, otherwise the plan was to remain unchanged.

Wakeman was to give the tests himself. But first he had to compromise with the Star Child. Johnny wouldn't speak to Wakeman at all now, but communicated to him through Peter, who was treated like a court servant. Johnny had upped the ante: he was to be allowed access

to the large library of the manor, no more to be offered a choice of a dozen pre-selected books. If he was not allowed this concession he would not take the tests. There was no discussion of the terms because he wouldn't discuss them. When Peter returned from Wakeman's office with a shrug and a muttered, "Sorry," Johnny smiled. And said nothing. And did nothing. Absolutely nothing. The tests were brought to the room used as a school, and he refused to go there. When Wakeman threatened to have him carried, he smiled. Wakeman brought the tests to his room and Johnny turned his back and stared out the window, and whistled softly. An early nurse had taught him how to whistle and it was one of the very few things he could do better than most others, and he whistled when Wakeman tried to reason with him about the tests. Finally Wakeman gave in and asked specifically what he wanted and Johnny said access to the library.

"You can't read most of the books in there," Wakeman said. "They're for adults. You wouldn't understand them." Secretly he exulted. This was brand new. It buoyed his hopes about Johnny's maturation process.

Johnny said, "I want to be able to read what I want to read, and I want to be allowed upstairs when I want to go up, by myself." The library was on the second floor.

Wakeman gave in finally and the tests were given, and Johnny's IQ registered at a 105 to 115 range. Wakeman accused him, through Peter, of cheating. Johnny simply looked at Peter when he brought up the results and Wakeman's accusation. After a while Johnny said, "Maybe they don't know how to test my IQ, or anything else."

Peter Wyett was not an evil young man, nor was he terribly ambitious, no more so than the average Harvard graduate, holder of a Phi Beta Kappa ring, on the Dean's list for three years, with impecunious relatives who had

good addresses and good marriages and good names in academic circles. Peter Wyett, son of a university president, nephew of three university presidents and one dean of law school, unmarried at twenty-seven, with a doctorate in psychology and a future as a department head, then a dean, then probably a president of a university, had decided that it was time to break the system. He had gone to the C.I.A. with hat in hand and asked for a job. He had gotten the Star Child as his first assignment. From boredom to boredom. Dreaming of adventures in foreign ports with lovely girls flanking him, he had found instead one skinny boy, not too bright, bad-tempered, spoiled, pampered, tormented, and frightened. That had been the first surprise of the assignment. The second surprise was that everyone was afraid of the Star Child. A skinny snot-nosed kid. Not of what he was now, of course, but what he could become, and what his people would do when they returned. Faced with this problem Peter would have voted to have the kid done away with a long time ago, when they had the opportunity; during the open heart surgery on the blue infant they should have squeezed one of the tiny vessels shut for a couple of minutes, then off with the gloves and masks, tsk, tsk, and on to something else. That's how it should have been handled, but having kept him alive then, they had to continue to keep him alive, and healthy, and reasonably happy. Of course, they failed in each department except the first, and there might be some question about that depending on who was asked. They watched him and tested him and examined him and probed into his mind and tried to see into his soul and they were afraid of him and what he might tell his people, and what he might do if he began to develop powers.

"Of course, he is human. As human as you are, or as I am, so how can he suddenly get 'powers'? That's Sunday

supplement junk. No one seriously believes stuff like that." So they said, but they believed it all right, and if one of them caught Johnny staring at him, he became cold and had pains that hadn't been there moments earlier. Headaches developed over nothing more than looking up to find those pale eyes locked in a stare at a person's head. Wakeman got those awful stomach aches over finding the kid staring at his stomach. One of the F.B.I. nurses had developed such a rash that she had been medically discharged and turned loose to scratch. No one knew when the first such case had been laid to Johnny; the first to appear in the official reports had been when he was seven, and it had been dismissed as irrelevant and ridiculous. One of the male nurses had struggled to undress Johnny for a physical examination and later had needed emergency surgery for appendicitis, peritonitis, and a hernia, none of which could have been brought on by a frail child. They seldom reported other suspicious illnesses and accidents officially, but everyone in the estate knew. Except possibly Johnny.

So when Johnny said innocently, "Maybe they don't know how to test my IQ, or anything else," Peter Wyett heard it echo through his head most of the night. He didn't report it immediately. He thought about it. He decided that Johnny had hit it dead center. They didn't know how to test him, what to look for, how to measure it if they found it. Whatever *it* might turn out to be. His people had come across space, light-years, in a craft that still defied all attempts to unravel its secrets. They had gadgets and machinery and equipment the use of which was guessed at, disputed, guessed at again, argued about, and so on, daily by the world's most renowned scientists of every country. No one had been able to decipher their language. They couldn't operate the tape recorders or the computers aboard, and couldn't play the tapes on any

Earth equipment; in fact, they weren't even certain that what they had found should be called tapes. They hadn't been able to duplicate the metal of the ship. Someone had said, facetiously perhaps, that in a vacuum at absolute zero, with one million pounds of pressure, perhaps they could turn out such an alloy. Peter didn't know anything about metallurgy; he knew that he wouldn't know how to go about turning a hunk of iron ore into finished steel, and he was an intelligent man, so it didn't surprise him that no one had solved the ship's puzzles yet. It didn't surprise him that the Star Child should test low on tests made for standards that were questioned here on Earth. Who knew what they were measuring?

So it was that Peter Wyett, scion of some of the intellectual giants of the century, wrote the first report suggesting that the Star Child did indeed have un-Earthly powers, powers that could and did affect those about him, influence them in ways hitherto unknown. He suggested that the Star Child was potentially more dangerous than the hydrogen bomb and biological warfare and chemical warfare all combined. When his powers were fully developed, it was suggested, the estate might no longer hold him, man might be reduced to slavery, he might indeed be the conquerer of Earth single-handed. Or, his people might have sent the ship with the expendable crew simply to get this one child to Earth, to prepare the way for others at some future date. How much of this Peter himself believed will never be known. He wrote his report in a straightforward manner, with proper punctuation and impeccable spelling and sentences that varied to avoid monotony. It made very fluid reading, and it was one of the smallest, neatest, coolest bombshells ever delivered by man to man. The board sat stunned when the report was read aloud to them at the monthly meeting.

Winifred gasped, the first sound heard in the meeting

room. The chairman, British, a don at Cambridge before this assignment, with protocol, propriety, and prodecure so deeply ingrained that he was forever enmeshed within the three-sided straitjacket, gave the report the very same attention that the medical reports received, and the financial reports, and the reports of the agents and the counter-agents and the counter-counteragents. The co-chairman, a Hungarian named Skatz, called the report hogwash, or so it was said afterward. He denied this and said the word he used was much stronger. Whether or not the board believed any part of the report is no longer relevant. They acted on it as if they believed in it. By the end of the summer there were only three familiar faces on the estate. Peter Wyett was one, Lenny Mallard another, and Yura Petrov, supplies coordinator, the third. This time there were leaks when the dismissals became effective, and there was a flurry of stories in all the media.

In his Mount Laurel retreat Obie Cox read all the reports as they came in and he was very distracted for a week or longer, during which time he prayed for long hours, and had many long talks with his newest lieutenant, Merton, the one-time F.B.I. agent, now number two in the growing hierarchy of the Voice of God Church. His black head and Obie's silver blond head were together most of the week. Obie announced his acceptance of the evil intentions of the aliens; he had known this from the beginning and had prayed for succor from the start. This was well documented. Now he prayed no longer. He demanded that the Star Child be turned over to a civilian board, which would examine it for its humanness, and if it was found lacking, prescribe a merciful death for it. This was no more and no less than was done routinely for animals. Those lacking the qualities of the breed were destroyed, not allowed to mingle with the pure strains and contaminate them. If a maverick stallion got into the

corral and terrorized the gentle mares, it would be shot. If a mad dog roamed, threatening people, it would be shot. If a diseased or imperfect specimen of any sort threatened God-given order, it was man's duty to destroy it. Let those who understood what made for humanness examine the alien and determine its fate.

Obie also said, but not for public consumption, that fate was arranging the future along the lines he had suggested when he first realized that his son had powers to heal. The alien could cause people to sicken and die, and his son could heal them. God is good. God is omniscient and provides the cure along with the complaint. Obie's eyes glowed when he spoke thus. He tripled the number of men searching for his son. Until he had the boy back he could not make public this, the greatest message ever given to man to deliver to God's people.

INTERLUDE FIVE

TRUTH MAGAZINE

What is the Star Child? Extraordinary alien with powers that are so dangerous to man as to warrant his immediate execution, or merely a child bewildered and frightened by the attention given to him by the world's leading scientists? For years we have been soothed by the numerous stories concerning his rather backward development, but finally the truth is leaking from that infamous stronghold where he remains a captive. One of the new staff members has been able to get word out to the public that indeed Earth does harbor a menace, more deadly than a radiation leak.

TRUTH brings you the Truth!

TRUTH! No one lives longer than three years in the presence of the Star Child!

TRUTH! The Star Child is in communication with his alien superiors!

TRUTH! The Star Child can see into YOUR mind! There are no secrets on Earth with this creature here and alive!

TRUTH! The alien has been imprinted with the knowledge of where the long missing capsule has been hidden. When the time comes, he will go to it and make use of the many deadly devices in it. To deal wholesale DESTRUCTION ON EARTH!

TRUTH! The alien is in actual command of the garrison where he is supposedly . . .

Do you believe that the Star Child is in communication with his people?

Yes	No	Undecided
48%	37%	15%

Do you believe the Star Child possesses extrasensory abilities?

49%	32%	19%

Chapter Nine

"STEP up! Step up! See the world's most daring drivers perform! See the Flying Cars! See Mindy and His Men in head-on collisions a hundred feet over your heads! See the world's fastest ground car! See the parade of the champions!"

Blake motioned to Sam the barker, who stepped up the pitch, now with a blare of music that hurt ears within two hundred feet of the speaker. There was a long line of willing spectators already, and Sam stopped to a blast of trumpets that left the air vibrating.

"Okay, kid. Inside. You finish those tires?"

"Sure." Blake looked over the crowd quickly and said, "Four thousand tonight. Not bad."

Sam the barker nodded. He had questioned Blake's audience count in the beginning but he no longer did. In fact, whatever Blake said, most of the crew accepted as true. Sam shoved Blake roughly toward the backdrop where Mindy and his men were revving up. "Tell 'em to make it snappy, kid. I want to get out of here before midnight tonight."

The rough shove didn't bother Blake. Sam liked him, and was afraid to like him too much. Blake didn't know why, and he knew he would never find out, for Sam hid so far back from others that most people never even met him at all, but saw the shell with quick rough hands, and a mean, brusque voice. Mindy was something else. A clown in a souped-up car, with the spirit of a bird that wanted only to fly. Mindy had something wrong with his ears; mastoiditis, he had told Blake early in their relationship, kept him out of the skies, but he could still fly. And he did. He was driving a '72 model Olds that had no trace of the original motor left in it. Under the hood chrome and stainless steel gleamed, and when he turned on the key there was a hum that sounded like it should have come from a super liner getting ready to fly around the world.

Blake listened to the motors and nodded to himself. They were all in good shape. He pulled a rag from his pocket and polished a newly painted spot on the Red Lady, Mindy's lead car, and when Mindy slouched over

to see what he was up to he motioned toward the ring. "He's ready." Mindy nodded. He jumped in the car and the show started. Blake watched from a corner of the backdrop.

The first act was a big precision driving number, where eight cars in the huge ring raced at eighty to one hundred miles an hour doing wheelies, about faces, right-angled turns, sudden stops and just as sudden accelerations, all in time to Sousa's *Stars and Stripes Forever.* It was always exciting and put the crowd in a good mood for the rest of the two-hour long show. During the last five minutes of the big number Mindy's wife Alison wandered absently about the ring, engrossed in a magazine, oblivious of the racing automobiles, each step she made as exquisitely timed as a ballet dancer's. It was a great finale. The crowd shrieked and screamed and sighed long-drawn-out Ohhhs, every time a car barely missed Alison, who never looked up, hesitated, or speeded her measured pace through the ring.

The ground effect cars were next. Blake didn't like this act as much as the others, and he hurried away from his position to fetch Alison a cup of coffee. She already had discarded the dress worn for her first act, and was now in tight pants and boots and a turtleneck pullover. Her crash helmet was at her elbow as she tied her brass-blond hair back with a ribbon.

"How'd it go over, honey?" she asked.

"Great, like always." Blake waited for her to sip the coffee, and for the drum roll to announce that it was time for her to make her second appearance. He carried her helmet for her to the car that she drove for this act, saw that her door was latched, then moved back and waved.

Alison's car rose. On the other side of the ring Mindy's car was doing the same. The music was a waltz. The two cars glided toward one another, away, dipped and swayed

rhythmically. The music changed to a jazz beat and the cars began to speed; their motions became jerkier and swifter. With each increase in tempo the two crazily dancing cars increased speed, and again timing was what made the act. Suddenly they hit in midair head on. There was a moment of stunned silence in the audience, then laughter. Part of the act. Mindy started to get out of his car, as did Alison. Each held to the door and leaned out swaying over the air. Mindy swung his leg over the hood and pulled himself to the front of the nearly circular vehicle and stood there, hands on hips, scolding Alison, blaming her for the collision. She climbed to the top of her car and wagged a finger in his face. The cars were very slowly settling to earth, so slowly that it was hardly noticeable. They came down, nose to nose, and landed finally so softly that no sound was heard from it. Mindy and Alison stepped off their cars, and arm in arm left them. The audience went mad.

While helpers were clearing the ring Blake was busy helping Mindy into a cerise satin costume. He saw Sam the barker watching him and he waved as he hurried past with Mindy's dirty clothes. Sam was still there when the next act got under way.

"Hey, kid. Hold it a sec. You in trouble or anything?"

Blake froze. He shook his head.

"Yeah. I didn't think so. Look, kid, I don't know from nothing about you, but I don't figure you're in trouble. So why're there three guys beating the bushes for a kid whose description fits you like a glove?"

Blake turned toward the trailer that he shared with Mindy and Alison, but Sam's hand on his arm stopped him. "How much dough you got?"

"Five, six hundred dollars."

"Yeah. Take this. It's a grand. You were due a raise. Buy some gear with the extra. And beat it now. Don't go

back to the trailer." Sam pushed Blake from him and turned away.

Blake stood for another minute watching the departing figure. "Sam," he called. "Sam, I'll come back some day and pay you back. I promise."

Sam turned and yelled furiously at him, "Get lost, you punk kid! Just get lost!"

Blake nodded and waved once, then left, walking among the empty cars to the shadows of the trailers. It was eleven-thirty. He couldn't stay out and be caught in the streets. There was the curfew. He'd end up in the clink and *they'd* find him there. For four months he had lived with Mindy and Alison, and they had been the happiest four months of his life since Wanda had stopped her car and asked how to get to a doctor. He walked slowly, a dark figure in jeans and black jersey, and he didn't know where to go. There was the drum roll for the ring of fire act, a chorus of ahs, screams, a crash of cymbals. . . . The show was playing three miles from downtown Cleveland. There was a zoo smell nearby, and the stench of industrial gases being blown in from the lakefront. The trouble was that they had brains, the searchers had brains. They always knew the sorts of places where he might turn up: circuses, carnivals, traveling shows where few questions would be asked as long as he worked, the zoo. They knew he could handle animals. They had found him in the small poorly kept menagerie at Scranton, and when he had approached the keeper of the lions in the Dayton zoo, the man had gone off to make a telephone call and Blake had left hurriedly. There had to be someplace where he could stay and not draw their attention for a couple of years, until he was not so conspicuously a kid.

That was his biggest handicap, being a kid. He looked older than eleven, a couple of years older, but still he was a kid. The last to get waited on in a diner, the first to be

questioned if there was a rumble anywhere, the first to draw stares if he turned up in a bus terminal, or, worse, in an airline terminal. No prospect of getting an International Travel ID Card, no jobs, always the chance of being jumped by a gang of older kids who'd rough him up and take his money and everything else he had on him. And that would land him in a juvenile jail answering questions, having the authorities hold him for his rightful guardians. . . . He walked on through the dark sidestreets, where there was little traffic, stopping when he heard the sound of a car slowing down nearby, hearing pursuers in every set of footsteps. He had to get off the streets.

He heard a car coming very slowly, too slowly. He melted back against a doorway and watched for a moment. It was at the far end of the block, shining spotlights along the sidewalks as it came, searching doorways, around parked cars. Other drivers passed it and vanished down the street. Blake ran to the corner and turned, ran another half block and ducked into an alley. They would comb the area. They must know that he was on foot, that he couldn't have gone far yet. He listened while he waited for his breath to come easily again. There were apartments all about him, some with open doors and lights on still, others darkened. Radios and televisions played and some kids were singing somewhere to his right. The alley was flanked by high board fences at this end, a couple of garages down farther, then it was lost in shadows. No good. No place there for him to hide. He studied the fences, but decided against that. Just yards and people. People who would yell cop if a strange kid dropped down inside their yards. He started to leave the alley when he heard something else. Voices whispering almost in stage whispers. He could sense excitement in the voices and fear maybe.

He edged along the fence, and at the same moment the car with the searchlights stopped at the alley entrance, sending the beams of light in both directions. The driver decided to turn left, across the street away from Blake. Blake moved again, following the whispers. Now that he had fastened on them the other louder noises dimmed in his ears and became background. He pulled himself up a board fence and looked over into the yard beyond. A dirt yard with a three-car garage. There was a '79 General parked there. The apartment was completely dark. Three boys stood about the General peering into the engine while one of them held a flash, shielding its light, and another poked about trying to get the motor running.

"You _____ liar. You can start one with a hairpin. You _____"

"_____ you. If you can do better, _____ it yourself."

Blake heard an approaching car and looking over his shoulder saw the searchlights coming his way again. He pulled himself over the fence and dropped down into the yard. One of the boys there straightened and there was the glint of a knife in his hand.

"Come here, cutie pie," he said softly. "Come to Papa, you _____ _____"

"I can start the car," Blake said softly. "If I start it, will you let me leave here with you. On the back seat, out of sight."

"Come to Papa, _____ _____" The boy with the knife sidled toward him.

"Listen!" one of the other two hissed.

"You _____ _____ _____ brought the _____ creepies here!"

"No! My old man. He wants me, that's all. Let me start the car."

They all became silent as the car neared the other side

of the fence. The searchlight showed through cracks in the planks, then was gone. "He's squaring," the kid said, still trying to get the engine going. "Come here, kid. If you can't start it, you're Harry's baby. He'll cut off your _____ and stuff it up your _____"

The General was the fastest of the electric cars produced. It would do one hundred miles an hour on straightaways, cruise for five hundred miles without recharging, and was virtually noiseless. Blake couldn't reach inside the engine and he had to hoist himself up and cling by his arms as he manipulated the wires. The General had half a dozen safety features that were advertised as making it steal-proof. Blake unhooked wires and refastened them quickly. Harold touched him in the ribs with the knife and Blake spoke in asterisks as fluently and forcefully as Sam himself could have done. Harold grinned and moved back a step.

The kid who had been trying to start it was watching Blake with concentration, and the third one was acting now as the lookout. He said, "Pst," and they all froze. The searchlight was back, on the street, probing driveways now. Harold watched it with narrowed eyes. "No _____ _____ creepies," he said. "But that makes two cars so far. Who's after you, cutie pie?"

The car came to life then. There was no noise, only a vibration that they could feel. Harold chuckled and slipped the knife into his jeans. "Okay, kid. You earned a ride. Hop in."

They rode around until four in the morning. They wouldn't let Blake out before then and eventually he fell asleep on the back seat. Harold woke him.

"Where you want to go, kid?"

"Out of the city. I don't care where."

"Come on. Let's get some sleep." Harold pulled him out of the car, which left again, and he was walked up ten

flights of stairs, stumbling over people on the landings and in the halls.

Blake couldn't see anything inside the room where Harold took him, but he was pushed down on the floor on a thin mat that smelled old and mildewed and he fell asleep there. The next day Harold left Blake in the room for a couple of hours and when he came back he had a bag of hamburgers and milk. "The _____ creepies ain't after you, but someone is. They're watching the buses and the trains. What'd you do?"

Blake told the fourth or fifth version of the basic story that he had decided to give in answer to that question. He said, "It's my father. My stepmother talked him into putting me in a _____ fancy school with _____ uniforms and marching every morning and all that _____ I ran away, and now he's trying to find me and take me back. She's got money and there's not much he can do except what she tells him, but he hired those _____ goons and they stick."

Harold didn't believe all of it, but enough to accept Blake without further questioning. He had seen the men himself in the bus station, and he knew they were private detectives, and that was enough. The kid had been on the bum long enough to work up some muscle and break his fingernails back to the quick and get them black with dirt and oil. His hands were hard and callused, and he knew how to jump a General. That was enough.

Blake became part of the gang, the Erie Waves. This section of the city had been industrialized fifty years in the past, and industry had since moved out to escape the mountains of filthy, unusable refuse it had created. Instant Rehab had moved in following the exodus and had filled the warehouse shells with walls, floors, bathrooms, kitchens, and had rented them out at low, subsidized rent rates. After ruling the development for ten years or

so, Instant Rehab had been abandoned when graft and plain sticky fingers brought in a full-scale investigation. No one had stepped in to fill the vacancy left, and the newly created apartments became something else again. Where a four-room apartment had been specified for a family of no more than four, it now held six, ten, twenty, however many wanted to live there. There were no inspectors. The warehouse where Harold lived had been planned to house twenty families in twenty units. It held close to a thousand people in units that had lost their unity. Rooms became apartments. Bathrooms went with the room occupied by the strongest, or the meanest, or the quickest with a knife or lead pipe. The building smelled of urine, sweat, mold, garbage, beer, booze, weed, excrement. There were no mice; the rats killed them. Harold had taken a room on the top floor and had held it for two years now, ever since his fourteenth birthday when he presented himself with freedom.

Blake lived in the room with him that fall and winter. The worst problem he faced was with the money Sam the barker had given him. He knew he couldn't leave it in the apartment, nor could he keep it with him. He worried about it for three days, then went to a ten-cent store and bought stationery and a pen and studied the newspapers for another two days, finally picking out an investment firm. He wrote directly to the president in these words: "Dear Sir, This is extremely eccentric of me, but I am an eccentric person. I wish to have you invest the enclosed money, one thousand dollars, $1,000, in the following companies. Five hundred dollars, $500, in common stock of the LCSA, Laser Communications Systems of America; three hundred dollars, $300, in preferred stock of OSMC, Off Shore Mining Corporation; and the remainder, after your fee, in stock of your choosing. Please send a receipt of this transaction to Mr. J. M. Black

in care of Heffleman's News Store, 16890 Huron Avenue."

So J. M. Black was born, and Blake became his errand boy. He haunted Heffleman's store until the receipt arrived, with a request to call at the office to fill out necessary papers, tax forms, social security forms, etc., signed sincerely, Robert L. Kaufman. He gave a false social security number, and advised Robert L. Kaufman to take care of the tax for him until further notice. Then he severed the communications by not answering any of the later notes.

Harold liked Blake, was infinitely amused at his vocabulary, awed by his repertoire of swear words, and astounded by his knowledge of cars and motors. He never did believe the story of the father searching for his son, but he didn't care. Blake was okay, and legit, really on the lam from something. He was the only whitey who'd call Harold a _____ spade and get a grin out of him instead of a blade. He told Blake how to stay out of sight during the school session on weekdays. Told him where kids his age could go and not be picked up for loitering and on suspicion, which places to steer clear of, which men, and women, to avoid like plague, which guys would be good for a pad, or a bite at a minute's notice. He brought grocery bags of stolen books for him. In return Blake stole a car whenever Harold needed or wanted one. Harold never kept the cars, or resold them, he simply used them. A loan, he would say grinning. Harold was a good friend to have; he could use the knife, and he had had sixteen years' training in the alleys of Cleveland, knew every creepie three blocks away, could identify every prowl car the day after it took to the streets, and knew exactly when the heat was too high to be out at all. He taught everything he knew to Blake. They were busy months. Harold ran bets for Heffleman, picked up

hot credit cards and delivered them, brought an occasional girl home and shoved Blake out, brought the guys around for beer, or stolen whisky, and cards now and then. And there were the rumbles that never really ended. They would ebb and surge, but never die.

And so, time is swift and to detail the various modes of life sampled by Blake Daniels would be tedious. Enough to say he survived them, sometimes quite respectably, more often less so, learning the slums of the land, and the wilderness areas—he discovered that he could live off the land in the summer more comfortably than he could manage in the cities, and he could avoid the endless bloody riots and the ever present possibility of being picked up for questioning. He learned the museums and the libraries. Especially the libraries. He read everything and remembered everything he read. He discovered drama, and he wondered if French drama lost much in translation, so he learned French. He learned Russian and Spanish and Italian, and when he came across Haiku in the original, he started in on Asian languages. When he was fifteen he could pass for eighteen and his identification problems were solved for him. He bought a forged draft card and ID cards, credit cards, and so felt safe unless a thorough investigation should be made. He listed Chillicothe, Ohio, as his hometown because he thought it was a funny name. By sixteen he no longer feared being forced to stay with Obie, but he didn't want to go through the court battles that he knew Obie could arrange. He planned to return to Matt and Lisa when he was eighteen.

Chapter Ten

HERE are some of the things Lisa Daniels never told Matt:

1. She had to do all the shopping in downtown Cincinnati. The village grocery refused to trade with short hairs.
2. There were seven new Listener's Booths between the market and the bus stop.
3. A long-haired bitch pushed her off the sidewalk and into the gutter.
4. She had to walk four miles and shop six stores to find the things she needed for Derek's birthday party.
5. Someone in a cab (a long—short hairs were never picked up now) had thrown an apple core and hit her right between the shoulders.
6. Every time she left the house during the day someone scrawled obscenities all over the first-floor windows.

Matt was still straight and stiffly erect, graying slightly, and she thought, much better-looking than he had been when younger. They talked occasionally of moving far away, of going to one of the spots where the long hairs were either non-existent, or in a very small minority, but they didn't go. And wouldn't, unless forced out. There were too few doctors who would treat patients from the ranks of the short hairs for any one of them to give up and leave now. Eventually, Matt said forcefully, the maniacs would come to their senses and everything would get

back to normal. Meanwhile they'd just have to be careful.

Lisa made dinner while Matt showered and she hummed thinking about the birthday party for Derek, and about Lorna's first visit home since leaving for college almost a year ago. In the middle of dinner the view phone chimed and it was the chief surgeon at Matt's hospital. He was bald and perspiring heavily. He was wearing his surgeon's paper gown, paper mask dangling about his neck.

"Another of those nights, Matt. Can you come back?"

"Good God!" Matt said, but in resignation.

The two words shook the surgeon, who glanced about quickly. "You'd better come in your copter. I wouldn't want to drive anywhere in town tonight."

"Right," Matt said. "National Guards out?"

"Not yet, but any minute."

Lisa unclenched her hands before Matt turned to her. She smiled briefly. "Be careful, darling." She would *not* start an argument. It was too hot. They would both get upset, she'd end up with a headache, and the weekend was too important to spoil that way.

As soon as he was gone she turned on the news, but as usual they were not giving any riot facts while the riot was taking place. She turned the sound down and washed the few dishes, slamming them about until she broke a glass. Then she relaxed a little. The water pressure was too low to run the dishwasher. She read for a while, conscious of the flickering three dimensional figures across the room from her, apparently enacting in pantomime a tragic love affair. At eleven the Savers clustered at the gate to the Daniels' yard and sang: *The Lord is My Strength; the Lord is My Power* and *Find a Refuge in the House of the Lord.* The tambourine was terrible, the

bass fiddle had a loose string, the trumpeter must have been yanked from some junior high school Band 1 class, and the ensemble as a whole caricatured an old Salvation Army group. Lisa recited a list of curses, then stifled a laugh that sounded suspiciously like a sob, and checked her doors and windows. All locked. They never tried to get in, as far as she knew, but they might. They had an electronic hookup that brought the voice of the young Messenger inside the house, putting it at her elbow. He said: "There is no salvation outside the Church. There is no life outside the Church. All outside the Church are dead already. Accept salvation now and forever. Come to the Voice of God Church and be born again in the strength and the power and the might of the Lord."

Some people were so terrified at the sound of the voice so close, so intimate that it seemed almost to originate within them, that they opened their doors and invited the Savers inside and were converted on the spot, or they joined the roving band with fanatical zeal and henceforth became Savers also. Lisa held her hands over her ears until silence returned.

She was left alone then until Matt returned. The riot had started, he told her, when one long hair pulled a handful of hair from another long hair in the mistaken belief that it was a wig. The rumor had started that the meeting at which this happened was crawling with ringers, women wearing wigs pretending to be believers. A hair-pulling fray ensued that erupted into the street and enmeshed twelve city blocks before the Guards arrived with anti-mob foam bombs and dispersed the rioters. Lisa sighed. It didn't matter how it started, it always ended the same, with Matt being called to the hospital to treat short hairs who got the worst of it, and they always did.

Derek arrived at noon the next day. He had become a six-footer, with broad shoulders, dark like his father, and

as straight, but not giving the same impression of rigidity. He was doing his doctorate work in astrophysics that year, and his proudest possession, which he pulled from his pocket as soon as the kisses had been finished with, was his pass to gain him admittance to the spaceship whenever he chose that summer.

Lisa hung back as Derek and Matt talked. She brushed tears away angrily as she stared at her tall son, and again and again she tore her gaze from him and tried to banish the smile she knew must be foolish-looking. Matt grinned at her sympathetically and didn't comment.

Lisa was thinking: my son will be in the convertible air car, skimming along the street flanked by honor guards, preceded by a mounted guard, with confetti and ticker tape and bands, five, ten bands, foreign dignitaries, the king of England, the Russian premier, our president. We'll be on the review stand, next to the president, and the photographers will tell him please to move aside just a little, don't obstruct the clear view of the doctor and his wife, if you don't mind. The Nobel Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, the Einstein Medal, the U. N. Distinguished Gold Cup. . . .

"What?" she said to Matt, who had closed his hand over hers.

"I said, are you doing anything about lunch?"

She left to prepare lunch, thinking: there isn't room any longer for so many of us, so different, the ones who don't really care about going into space, and who don't want to have anything to do with the Voice of God Church. No middle ground, and what's left over anyway now? You have to belong to one or the other group, and we don't. I don't.

Thinking: will Obie Cox stop Derek and the others? Day and night they keep pushing to learn the ship, and they don't learn it, but there is so much they are doing

now. Soon Derek says we'll really be a space-sailing world. Soon? Will Obie Cox be sooner?

She looked up as an air cab beat the air outside the garden and she shrieked to Matt and Derek, "Lorna! She's here!"

They rushed out to meet Lorna, who was still digging coins from a purse for a tip. The taxi driver was holding her credit card patiently. Lorna completed the transaction and he released the door so she could step out. Her bags had already been slid from the compartment ramp. Lorna was a blur of pink dress and golden hair as she sped to her mother and father, talking, laughing, kissing them and Derek.

"You all look great. It's so good to be home again! Let me tell you about school. I got A's in everything! Everything! Can you believe it! And my job. I love it. I'm counselor to thirty girls, all under thirteen. It's a great big camp up in the mountains, with laurel forests that smell divine in April, and are so dark and mysterious and cool. And there's a waterfall where—"

"Good God," Matt broke in. "You haven't changed a bit, Lorna! Chatter, chatter. Under this broiling sun. Get! Inside with you."

Lorna laughed and kissed him quickly, then looped her arm through Lisa's and they walked together ahead of Matt and Derek. Derek was grinning broadly. "Boy, she's worse if anything."

Suddenly Matt stopped, and her suitcase dropped from his hand. Quickly he grasped it again and continued before anyone even noticed. He had just realized what he was looking at: Lorna's hair. Beautiful golden hair that caught the sun and reflected it in a thousand bursts of fiery red light, hair that bounced and was brilliant and loose and half way down her back.

Chapter Eleven

"WHY do you care what I believe? It's none of your business!" That was Derek, to Lorna.

"It's everyone's business now. When the aliens return we have to present them with a solid front. We have to be united in our own beliefs. We have to be prepared to destroy them all before they have a chance to overcome Earth." Lorna to Derek.

"You've gone right off your nut! You talk like a series of posters!"

"What about the Star Child? What about him?"

"What about him? I don't know what you're talking about. You hop around like a hungry flea in a litter of pups."

"We were warned that he had to be given a religious education, taught about our God, our beliefs, and what have we done? We have given him to the U.N., a bunch of Communists and atheists. We were warned and we did nothing!"

"By whom? Your bearded illiterate? Good God, Lorna. . . ."

She gasped and blanched and quickly clamped her hand over her own mouth as if to deny the words.

"Now what?" Derek was leaning across the dinner table staring at her, unmindful of the chicken and mushrooms in white wine sauce, unheeding of the salad bowl heaped with mixed greens and dotted lavishly with blue cheese.

"You mustn't say that. It's blasphemy. If anyone hears you they'll beat you. . . ."

"Good God! Good God! Good God! Good God. . . ."

Lorna fled, her food untasted on her plate. Derek pushed his own plate back and stared after her. "She's gone crazy. What did they do to her?"

Lisa, looking at the food that she had struggled so hard to find and bring home, concentrated on not weeping.

"Young man, you go fetch your sister back to the table and if either of you starts on the Voice of God Church again, I'll do the beating. Now scat!"

Lorna allowed herself to be brought back, but she refused to look at Derek, and she was silent through the main course. They talked of the weather, and Lorna started to speak, but bit her lips instead and picked at her salad. Obie had predicted another year of drought.

"They've known for twenty years or more that the cities have caused the weather changes," Derek said. "The cloud cover, seeding with dust particles, the great heat output of the cities, that's what it takes, you know. Everything gets sucked up and dumped out again over the cooler oceans. It isn't a question of how to alleviate it, but rather why don't they take the steps."

"Break up the cities?" Lisa murmured.

"What else?"

"There was a time when we could do that, but now? I don't think so," Matt said. "No water inland, all crops, no industry. . . ."

"Brother Cox says—"

"Oh, shut up," Derek interrupted.

The talk turned to the world situation and the heavy demands of the draft to maintain the forces throughout South America, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Matt was bitter about it, Derek resigned, and again Lorna looked as if she would like to explain, or comment,

and again she didn't. Obie had predicted an ever increasing need for men to patrol the world in order to keep the raw materials flowing into the bottomless pit that the space programs had created, and to keep the people from whose country they flowed quiet if not happy. Obie predicted also that it was futile, that those people were God-fearing people and the day was at hand when they would rise up and slay the non-believers stripping their lands for a project foredoomed to fail. The Voice of God Church sponsored, outfitted, and supplied guerrilla missionaries all over the world; outlawed by most governments, refused travel cards and credit cards, the Church provided its own credit, its own travel facilities, and no one knew how many of the zealots it had sent out, or where they had gone.

"The trouble is," Lisa had complained once to Matt, "that if you believe in anything that Obie had condoned, you are forced to doubt your own beliefs. Can I really believe in anything that the Voice of God Church believes in? It doesn't seem possible."

They had cake and champagne, there were two bottles, so they all got rather giddy and happy and took their glasses to the living room where they laughed at old times and made elaborate toasts to Derek. It turned into a birthday party after all. Until the Savers arrived at eleven.

Lorna wanted to let them in, to prove to her family that they weren't monsters. When she was refused, she said she would go out and join them, and Matt assumed the role that he had used only once or twice in his life, that of the heavy-handed father, lord, master of the house. He wouldn't permit her to leave. Lorna stood up and started for the door, and he got in front of it. She stopped and stared at him with unbelieving eyes.

"You always said that we had to decide for ourselves.

I decided. I believe in Brother Cox and what he is doing. I am a member of the Voice of God Church, I am working for it this summer and I'll go to its school in the fall. Let me go out. They don't know someone is inside who belongs. They'll go away when they know your daughter is a member of the Church."

"Wait," Matt said. "Listen first."

The hymn ended and the voice of the Messenger was there in the room with them. "There is no salvation outside the Church. There is no life outside the Church. All outside the Church are dead already. Accept salvation now and forever. Come to the Voice of God Church and be born again in the strength and the power and the might of the Lord."

Lorna's head was cocked slightly to the left as she listened raptly with her eyes half closed. She smiled at Matt when the voice ceased. "Isn't it exciting!" she said. "The Voice of God can go anywhere, be heard through any walls, over anything else. Brother Cox heard the Voice of God years ago, and now the gift has been given to all the members. We can hear the Voice of God anytime."

Derek snorted. "Gift! You pay an electronics expert enough and you too can become the Voice of God. Gift!"

Lorna drifted away from the door. The Savers were gone now, there was no longer any issue of going out or staying in. She said, very serenely, "People like you always scoff. You can't accept the transcendent. If you can't weigh and measure it, tear it apart and put it together again, reproduce it at will, you refuse to accept it no matter how many witnesses there are. Like when Blake was with Brother Cox healing. . . ." She stopped and looked quickly at Lisa, who had become very pale.

"Have you seen him?"

"No. I don't know where he is. No one will say. But

they have films and photographs, and there is a Blake Daniels Cox Meditation Room at the headquarters in Mount Laurel, where I work now. He is a healer, Dad. I saw the films and talked to some of the people he healed. They aren't mistaken."

Matt shook his head. Ten years ago he thought this issue had been settled. But Lorna had been a child, eight, nine years old. She must remember the discussions they had had about this very thing. She and Derek had laughed at the idea of Blake's having healing powers then. What had happened?

He said, "It's nearly midnight, honey. Let's get some sleep. I have to be at my office by eight in the morning, but I'll be home from noon on and I'm off the next day, and there'll be time to talk. Okay?"

In bed, not touching because of the heat; the electricity shortage wouldn't permit them to run the air conditioners in all of the rooms (they had turned on the ones in Lorna's and in Derek's rooms, and the children didn't know theirs was turned off), Lisa said wistfully, "I used to think that the problems would end when they were grown, you know, no more measles and scraped knees, no more school plays to agonize over, no more pajama parties that would keep everyone awake until morning. . . . I wish those days were back again."

"I'm worried about her, Lisa. Listen, tomorrow after Derek leaves for the ship and you two are alone, try to find out what you can about this crazy conversion, will you?"

"This must be how Paul's family felt about it all. When he left home he was Saul, when he returned he was a fiery-eyed Paul."

"If she had a religious experience anything like that I'd like to know under what conditions. . . ."

"You think he would use LSD, or SNO, or anything

like that on youngsters?" Lisa sat straight up in the bed, naked, suddenly shivering in the heat of the room.

"I don't think so. I think Billy Warren Smith is too cagey to let him try that, but they might have something similar, or . . . I just don't know. Get what you can from her."

Lorna had a copy of an essay she had done about her experience for a writing course, and she gave it to Lisa smiling. "I will turn it over to the Church in the fall. They like testimonials, firsthand reports, and such. I meant to before I left Chicago, but I couldn't find it. I had packed it away already." She finished canned peaches, long hoarded for such an occasion, and started on poached eggs and toast. She ate like a field laborer, and weighed a sleek one hundred ten pounds. Since Lisa topped that by only three pounds, there was no envy in her glance, just amusement.

"Don't they feed you at the mountain camp?"

"Have you ever known any institutional food to be worth eating, Mother? Seriously? The cook is a tall, heavy woman, not fat, just big, broad shoulders and muscles, like that. She has orange hair and it is as straight and hard as . . . as the string of taffy you get from a spoon when it's done. You know? It's brittle. So every morning she has to wrestle with it, get it up and under a cook's hat somehow. Within an hour it is out again, sticking out this way and that, short sharp ends of hair like a porcupine bristling. Back to the mirror to get it pinned up again. She uses a bushel of hairpins in it, and it won't stay. So she never has time really to cook. And it's a shame because the food itself is too good to be wasted by her. Potatoes not quite done, peas soft and mushy, steaks crisp, pork still pink, salad limp and either without dressing, or with something forgotten from the dressing. One day she left out the oil, another time she forgot the

vinegar. Or salt. She has a real amnesiac strain when it comes to salt. Either she forgets that she used it already, or she just forgets to add any at all. Anyway we stock up on cheese and apples and things like that for eating in the dorms, and it isn't too bad."

But things like that would have had Lorna writing home for rescue as short a time as six months ago, Lisa thought. And here she was cheerful, laughing about it, accepting it happily. Lisa poured coffee for both and sat down to read Lorna's report of her conversion. Lorna picked up the morning facsimile news and glanced over it without reading. She turned on the kitchen 3D and switched channels for several minutes, again not paying much attention, not interested. Suddenly she asked, "Is my old scooter still in the garage?"

"Of course, why?"

"Maybe I'll get it out and tinker with it later, go for a ride to see some of the old sights. . . ."

Lisa nodded; she knew Lorna would ride over to visit the temple. She returned to reading the report. She was impressed by Lorna's writing ability, unsuspected in the past.

"This should be called the Universe-city," the essay started. "A walled town where we are imprisoned and submitted to daily tortures until we become hollow, ready to be pumped full again. By daily injections of the deadly—through boredom—vaccine of education administered by non-entities, in a shotgun blast at the classes of three hundred, five hundred, one thousand, we become immunized against diseases such as admiration of Yeats, fondness for drama, an eye for art, a natural bent for math or science. Sicknesses all. Education is a duty. Education is a chore that modern youth must face up to for the good of the world. Our world will be saved

only through the education of its young. Well, ho, and hum.

"One professor remains to me Professor Blur. I sit so far from the lecture stand that he is only a pale blur atop a dark suit and white shirt neatly split down the front by a black tie that is like a crack in a white board fence. I try sometimes very hard to see through the crack, to see what is on the other side, but I think there is nothing there.

"Another professor is Dr. Arms. He waves them constantly. I close my eyes and bet with myself where they will be when I look again. I seldom win. His arm motions are completely random, there is no pattern. He teaches the Overview of Philosophy class, and his voice has found its level and never rises above, or sinks below it. Philosophy has killed him, only his arms won't die. I think he has two eyes and a nose and a mouth, but I am not certain.

"And so it goes. I attend class or not. There are tapes of all lectures, of course. If everyone attended class there would be bedlam, and no seats.

"We are not allowed beyond the walls of the city. Out there there are wolves. A wilderness where little girls go forth and are never seen again. There is only authorized traffic on the streets; the wolf packs are on foot, howling up and down the streets from dark until dawn, thirsting for blood from innocents. We are the innocents. But such wise innocents, such experienced innocents. Everything is allowed at Universe-city. All drugs that have been accepted as harmless, all forms of deviation from sexual mores, the attire that strikes one's fancy. There is no place to rebel, nothing to rebel about. Anarchist? Permission for the stand from three until four on the ninth of the coming month. And is that satisfactory? Communist?

Same stand from one until two on the third. Adherents for everything imaginable are permitted to speak freely, and there is no trouble. Chromosomal manipulation to produce workers? When would you like the stand, sir? The recipe for abortion cocktail has been given out so often that no one even attends those meetings now. We sit up until all hours just trying to find a subject that would be denied so we will have a cause. There isn't any.

"Of course I attended no church. I never did. I learned the patterns of the walls at the museums and libraries, and I counted the grains of sand at the sponsored beaches. We have movies and dances and the monthly psychedelic reverie to look forward to. But what's it all for?

"For the first three months I floated high on the excitement. What freedom, what courage all about me, unhampered, unquestioned, the first totally permissive environment I had known. I floated. Then fell with a dull thud. Freedom can be confining. Everything is there for the taking, already paid for, ours to be used, squirreled away, consumed, wasted. It doesn't matter what we do with it, it's ours. So we don't even have the thrill of petty thefts that could relieve the sameness and the boredom.

"The walls that lock the mad world out, and us in, ensuring freedom and safety became the prison walls. We plotted escape. Not only escape, but safe passage through the miles of wolf country. The joy and exhilaration of getting out and through the slums to the Loop! There is nothing to compare to it. The older, more experienced among us told us what to wear, how to talk if we got caught, but best of all, don't get caught. Girls would get raped repeatedly, maybe cut up a little bit, for boys it would be even worse. Especially if they happened to get caught by a gang of she-wolves.

"I had my hair to my shoulders then, nothing significant in it at all. It was the length at the time. I saw on my first excursion out into wolf country that it was a giveaway. Either very long, to the waist if possible, or else very short, bobbed even, but not in between. I decided to let it grow long, and meanwhile I got a wig. I stole it from a shop where the salesman never took his eyes off our group. Seven of us scattered in all directions covering the shop, making him stay very busy. He knew we planned to steal something, but I suppose he had his mind on his jewelry more than on the wigs. I got a black one made of something that burned like a Ping-Pong ball. I learned that later, much later. Betsy McCormack had about five hundred dollars with her, in cash. All of us had credit cards that he demanded to see before he even let us in; he knew we didn't plan to use them. But the sight of all that cash floored him. I guess he never had seen so much in one little hand before. So while Betsy haggled with him over an imitation plastic raincoat, I got the wig on, tied my own ribbon around it, and smeared a little vaseline on it to make it look like dirty hair. The shopkeeper never gave it a second look although we stayed in the shop long enough for two other girls to do the same thing. I still wonder if he ever found out what we had taken.

"The clothes in wolf-country were wild. Plastic pants and shirts, covered with plastic coats. Nothing under it. You had to be shaved clean, and the nipples had to be bright red, with white, green, blue lines radiating out from them, like war paint. The navel was colored too, usually red, but this was not arbitrary. The plastic clothes were tinted, yellow, blue, whatever, and they were almost as clear as glass. It wasn't as if you could really see the body, just almost see it. Also, the plastic had a refraction quality so that the lines wavered when we moved.

"Well, that was in January. We would go out once a week usually, hiding in the buses that brought kids back from visits here or there; sneaking rides in the delivery trucks; sneaking out through the personnel gates. Most of the time we stayed within five or ten blocks of the university, seeing the sex movies, or smoking pot in one of the caves, or watching one of the brawls that always turned into a riot. When they started we always got out of the thick of it, ducked into a store, or the movie, or someplace like that when the thing started to get too rough and the National Guards were called in. It was after one of those fights that I found out the wig I'd stolen would burn.

"We were watching a bunch of the short-haired girls force a grocery truck to the curb and proceeded to rifle its contents, taking great sacks of groceries while the driver was sat on by some of the gang members. We were long hairs, so we stayed as far away as we could and not miss it altogether. The boys came then, and we couldn't tell which side they were on. They started to roughhouse it with the girls, and suddenly the street was filled with people all screaming, fighting, smashing everything. We turned to go back to school. We knew that the guards would be there in a few minutes and if any of us ever got caught out in one of the riots, we'd be suspended and sent home. The damn fools set fire to the truck though, started it and sent it down the street in our direction. It cracked up half a block up from us and the building that stopped it burst into flames as if it had been waiting a lifetime for such a chance. And before we could get out of there the whole section seemed to be burning. We ran through alleys, climbed fences, ran some more, but the fire was spreading faster than we could outdistance it. And we were turned back again and again

by firemen and guards and short hairs with clubs and pipes.

"I was getting so exhausted that I felt like just giving up and letting the fire have me, but every time I stumbled and staggered against a building, or against someone, the thought of being sent home in disgrace put life back in me and I kept going. Then suddenly there were four boys, about fourteen to seventeen, and they wanted me. They were fanning out the way they do. They had plastic clubs, the kind that don't usually kill or break bones, but hurt like the devil. The fire was at my back. I'd been running in circles for an hour. Sparks fell on me through the plastic as if it wasn't even there, and at that moment my wig caught and blazed. I snatched it off before I was actually burned, but the boys were scared and ran. They thought I was on fire. I threw the wig down. I ran into a secondhand clothing store and grabbed a coat and threw it around me. With my own hair and a cloth coat on I got through the cordon of guards who were picking up every slum kid that came streaming out of the fired area. I couldn't get back to the university however, and I didn't know where to go, or what to do. I had no money with me, no ID, no credit cards, nothing. I kept walking. I didn't know what had happened to the other girls I had been with. We had been separated early in the fracas and I hadn't seen them since. I was hoping they had got back inside the school grounds and that they would cover for me. I didn't believe I would be able to get back that night.

"They were keeping the riot and the fire pretty much confined to the area near the university, so I walked the other way. I walked and walked; the excitement going on behind me gave me protection. No one had time to pick up one solitary girl right then, and the place was

alive with police, National Guards, detectives. Then I saw a window poster advertising the mammoth revival meeting being held at the downtown Municipal Auditorium. I remembered that a number of students had been permitted to attend, they were mostly from psychology classes studying mass hysteria, mob psychology, mass conversion, and such. I thought I could get back with them.

"The meeting had started already, a guest speaker was talking briefly of the advances being made in Brazil, his native country. I was directed to a seat, down front, not with the school group, by an usher with a lighted taper of some sort, electric I guess, but it looked different, as if a dancing flame were enclosed in the tiny pointed bulb that was tinted pink. I kept craning my neck to try to pick out any of the kids I knew, but there was such a crowd there. The ushers were spaced throughout the auditorium, up and down the steps, at the doors, forming lighted lines along the aisles between rows of seats. It was very effective, beautiful, awesome even. The small lights radiated out from the speakers' platform like arms of a starfish glowing in the otherwise darkened auditorium.

"I was so tired, and I had been so frightened, and here it was warm and safe. Gradually my heart calmed again and my breath wasn't coming in gasps, and I could observe and listen to the speaker. I didn't think much of him. Short, dark, with a heavy accent, he was talking about things I didn't understand, and I found him very boring, much like the professors at school. Then he was finished. The choir sang a hymn. I didn't know it. It was one of the new ones published by the Church a few years ago. There was something about it, though. . . . I analyzed what it was and decided that the composer had

deliberately copied the style of Ravel's *Bolero*, the same insistence, the same hypnotic building up to a smashing climax. Later I knew I was wrong about that, but then I was feeling smug and superior, and almost sorry for the poor innocent ones there who didn't have the background to see what was being done. The hymn ended, and when the lights went down that had illuminated the choir, Brother Cox was standing on the dais. As if by magic. I had been watching critically and I hadn't seen him enter. I still don't know how he does that.

"There was a yellow light on him. I was close enough to see how bronzed he was, how healthy-looking, how alive. His hair and beard gleamed, his eyes shone as if he were giving off light. I was wishing that I had a notebook to make notes on it all. I was fascinated and repelled. But when he began to speak. . . . And here is the mystery: I had heard the same things from other people who had been converted, and I had read of him, and of course, in my home, we had discussed the Church and all it implied, but when I heard Brother Cox talk about it, explain the real reasons for his faith, explain the significance of the Church and what it was doing and what it stood for, I knew he was right. It was that simple. I was still able to observe the cleverness of the organization in the lighting, and the buildup to this moment, but even with this objective consideration of the mechanics of the proceedings, I knew that what he had to say warranted any means of gaining attention long enough for the people to undertand it all.

"All about me the lights were flickering like fireflies, and there was no sound in the auditorium except for his voice, and his voice was in my ears. In the ears of everyone there. I know it is an acoustical trick done with electronics, but it has a purpose: it symbolizes how

Brother Cox receives his messages from God. It is the Voice of God speaking to each one of us through this chosen man.

"I can't repeat what Brother Cox said that night. It is all documented, all on record, and for me to add to that record would be redundant. The non-believers won't accept the truth of his words, and the believers don't need further proof. Instead, I will try to explain my own feeling that night. I had been stumbling about in wolf country, daring fate, tempting evil to myself. I had had no religious training as a child. I didn't believe in God, any God. I didn't see that He was necessary, or even possible. If I had been tempted to believe in Him, I would have despised Him for all the evil He allowed to exist. God was an invention of man, used to excuse man his weaknesses, used as magic to bring about the unobtainable, used as a scapegoat to be blamed for the wickedness of man to man. I didn't need such a God. I rejected him and relied on reason and humanism, as my parents did before me. I don't blame them. They had rejected the same false god that I had cast from my life. They didn't know that Brother Cox is invoking, not that false god, but the true God that the churchmen and scholars and secular interests had taken from mankind. They knew nothing about the space travel that would become a reality in this century; they had grown up in an age where other worlds, travel between suns, other people were fantasies of writers who were published in cheap pulps. They could not visualize or conceptualize a God of the Universe, the entire universe, not just this poor planet Earth. Not an anthropomorphic God, but a God who is so vast, so unimaginable, so unlike anything dreamed up by the poets and the prophets that to speak of Him in the same breath as the Biblical god of the ancients is to blaspheme. And this God is locked in immor-

tal battle with Forces of Evil that are as vast as He is. This is the message of Brother Cox. A drop of water is not the ocean, yet who can believe in the ocean until he has witnessed it? A grain of sand is not the beach. But a blind man can be led to the beach and walk for miles on it, feeling the presence of the sea, feeling the stir within himself that proclaims this to be the ocean and the beach and come to believe in them without ever having seen them with his eyes. And once he has accepted their existence, the drop of water and the grain of sand can symbolize the boundless ocean and the endless beach. This is how I have come to accept this vast, unimaginable God. I have felt His Presence, have been stirred by the currents from within myself yearning for Him. I know He is. I can't prove it, but I don't have the need to prove it. Just as the blind man can deny the existence of the ocean and the beach by withholding himself from it, so can the non-believers continue to deny His existence. But the ocean is, nevertheless. The beach is. God is.

"The answer to those non-believers who claim that the Church threatens their lives is an answer I recall from my own childhood. My father, one of the most tolerant of men, a man of ethics so Godlike that I must believe him, said that any religion must be permitted just so long as it does not threaten mankind. The Catholic Church at the time, he said, was threatening mankind, all of mankind, with its policy on birth control. It was no longer enough for them to acknowledge the rights of others to practice birth control if they so chose, they were threatening mankind by their own adherence to dogma. So we see today that the non-believers are threatening mankind by their acceptance of the atheistic dogma that the Star Child is property belonging to the U.N. By refusing to accept God's word that He will come to the aid of mankind only if His house, this Earth, is in order, the

atheists are threatening to open Earth to the strangers when they return full of wrath and seeking vengeance. Today universal birth control is a fact although the Catholic Church was virtually destroyed in the battle to establish it. Mankind was saved, the Church was lost. Again mankind must be saved. At whatever the cost."

That ended the essay.

INTERLUDE SIX

Time Magazine, March 1990

In Dayton's Coliseum, angry short-haired Christians stormed the latest three-ring-circus service of Halleluja Shouter Obie Cox. After the two-hour brawl, 250 were treated for bloody noses, broken ribs, and assorted injuries. Firemen put out a blaze in the robing rooms, but not before flames had destroyed the street costumes of Cox's all girl Heavenly Choir. Later in the week, charging Dayton's finest with negligence, Cox's strong-arm man, Robert Merton, announced the Voice of God Church would form its own private good squad, the Militant Millenniumists. Showing newsmen an artist's sketch of their uniform (dove gray, with black belts, black boots, armbands), Merton said the MM will be trained and equipped like the U.S. Army, will recruit its members from among white, VofG churchgoers, aged 20-40, 5'11" to 6'6", weighing 175-230.

Governor Lyman Purdy of Kentucky, long a devoted Coxman, said he saw nothing wrong in the formation of such a private army. Justice Department head Elmore Freed, away on a fishing trip with Coxbacker William S. Jones, was unavailable for comment.

Excerpts from a speech given by Dr. Thomas Otto Brunwick before the Society of Psychologists and Philosophers

As I have shown in developing the history of matrist societies in the past, when the degree of permissiveness exceeds that which can be allowed while still maintaining the security of the society, collapse follows. And the succeeding generation inaugurates the rigorous patrist society, in a twinkling, as it were. So we see that under the matrist society we have sexual liberation to the point of license; we have disorganization within the government to the point of anarchy; we have emancipation for our women, never however equalling that of men, but at times approaching it; we have a burst of creativity, with new ideas, new methods, new arts even being invented, much too much to be assimilated within a lifetime. The very freedom that ushers in a matrist reign is also its downfall.

With the reversal that inevitably follows, we see an authoritarian governing body, whether it be secular or religious or familial, or any combination of the three. Morals become the concern of the government and are restricted to the most conservative ideals of the most conservative committees. Authority again demands obedience and punishes those who do not recognize its claim. Punitive measures are severe and swift, and so on.

In the present situation, however, we find a curious mixture of both kinds of societies, and while anthropologists are agreed that only with a mixture of the two types can a stable society emerge, the combination that we see now is of the worst aspects of the two general societal organizations that I have outlined. We have the license of the most advanced matrist society, and at the same time we have the restrictions and the punitive qualities that have always characterized the worst of the patrist governments. What must be acknowledged, however, is the fact that where there is a combination of the two societies, there is also the inclination, no, stronger than an inclination, the propensity of this organization to be self-perpetuating. . . .

Chapter Twelve

IN September Obie finally was granted an audience with the Star Child, scheduled for October 15, six weeks away. The reason the interview was approved was simply that in the most recent poll taken by the official Automatic Data Bank Computer Pollster, 49 percent of the people indicated that the Star Child must be examined by a man of God, namely Obie Cox; 17 percent said that he should be left alone, and the others were divided, some saying that an objective interview should be arranged, others saying that the whole thing was nonsense, that he should be turned loose to earn a living like other young men his age.

Obie paced and tried to arrange his thoughts about the impending interview. Dee Dee helped. She lay stretched out on the twenty-foot-long couch and made appropriate comments from time to time.

"What if he turns the evil eye on you and you develop stomach cancer like that fat fool Wakeman did?"

"I am protected," Obie said, scowling at her.

"Of course. What if he produces a miracle in your presence that you can't duplicate, or explain?"

The Star Child worked miracles from time to time, it was said. He could appear in, or vanish from any room of the estate that housed him. No locks could bar his passage. He could hear thoughts, whispers, conversations, no matter how far removed from the speakers. He had prescience and clairvoyance. He was in constant tele-

pathic communication with his people. And of course, those in contact with him still became ill, or had strange accidents. Those who denied it were paid off, or lied, or were deceived.

Obie glowered at Dee Dee and told her to pull her skirt down. She smiled at nothing in particular and raised her leg, studying it intently. "Take me with you, Obie. I want to see the Star Child too."

"No."

"Yes." Dee Dee narrowed her eyes, staring at the ceiling. "I have a feeling, Obie. A hunch." She knew that Obie had faith in hunches, ever since his hunch concerning Blake had proven so true, since his original hunch about becoming an evangelist had succeeded beyond anyone's expectations. He believed that everyone had hunches as strong as his own, and that they demanded the right to fulfillment. He looked at her suspiciously and Dee Dee smiled.

"Tell me about it," Obie said after a long wait.

"Nothing to tell, Obie dear. I have a feeling that I will go with you and that I should go with you. I see us standing with the Star Child, side by side. That's all." She laughed inwardly at the lines of indecision that appeared on his face. If she had made it too detailed he wouldn't have believed her, but leaving it hazy like that, he was forced to buy. He did.

"Okay, Dee Dee." Obie continued to look at her, and Dee Dee continued to swing her leg.

In the beginning Obie had voiced the fundamentalist views that he was familiar with, felt comfortable with. But then, needing Dee Dee, knowing of her promiscuity, there had been a subtle change in his views, and very gradually in the messages he taught. When they'd bailed Everett out of trouble for the third time over a twelve-year-old boy, the change had speeded up, until now Obie

was preaching that there was nothing wrong in itself with sexual promiscuity, that only when children were produced that were destined to be fatherless, or homeless, or unwanted was such behavior against the will of God. This was much easier to live with. Everett blessed him again and again, and rewrote his will naming Obie as the sole beneficiary. He had known salvation lay with Obie and he had been proven right and was delirious with joy at being cleansed of sin.

With a lazy motion Dee Dee unzipped the gown that had slipped up around her hips, and she stretched, reaching both hands over her head. Obie moved toward her automatically and when he lay on her, panting, hot, heavy, her smile was even wider.

Later in bed with Merton she told him that she was going to see the Star Child.

"What for?" he said, tickling her thigh with the tips of his fingers. She shivered obligingly.

"Curiosity. Boredom. Christ, those endless sermons, those endless lines of goons, those endless moronic hymns. . . . That's nice. Do it again."

Obie found that he couldn't plan what he would say to the Star Child, what he would demand from him. The Star Child was an unknown factor. Most of the people on Earth hated and feared him and what he represented, and there were the rumors concerning his powers, denied, of course, but still enough to make the Star Child eerie. Obie thought and thought about him and what to say to him and came up with nothing.

October, hot and dry, brought forest fires and thick hazy air that was laden with dust, ashes, smoke. Stream beds cracked, leaves fell prematurely, browned and twisted, lacking the splendor of fall's magic. Migratory birds flew early, and a severe winter was predicted. Obie and Dee Dee were picked up at the airstrip at Mount

Laurel and flown to the estate where the Star Child was held. Accompanying them was the senator from their state, Calvin Taylor Dinwiddie.

The vertical take-off plane was heavily draped so that they couldn't see out, and it flew for nine hours before landing at eleven that night, and they had no way of knowing if it had flown directly to their destination, or if it had circled any of the time. They were as much in the dark as before about the location of the estate. They were shown to rooms in a private house on the property. They would be received by the director at ten in the morning, and meanwhile if they desired anything at all, there were phones in both rooms connecting with the switchboard, the kitchen, etc. They were shown to adjoining, but not connecting, rooms, and as soon as the guard-servant left them Dee Dee went to Obie's room. They had decided previously that the rooms probably were bugged, and probably were filmed during the stay of any visitor. Dee Dee leaned against the door and said, "I suppose we can order some supper?"

Obie shrugged and lifted the phone. Behind Dee Dee the door moved slightly and she stepped away from it, allowing it to open. Obie stared past her at the new arrival. Dee Dee turned then to look also. She stared for a moment, stifled a scream, and fainted.

Chapter Thirteen

SISTER Diane had a little fainting spell," Obie said, trying to shove the senator from the room. Calvin Taylor

Dinwiddie stared from Obie to Dee Dee, who was lying on a couch, ashen-faced, sipping a drink. He could hardly see her for the other men in the room. Security guards in the guise of cooks, gardeners, teachers, they were all there. Senator Dinwiddie resisted the push toward the door.

"Now, Brother Cox, you just relax and take it easy now. Sister Diane is in good hands." He gave ground, sidestepping slightly to go to the side of the door instead of through the doorway. "Sister Diane," he called. "If you want me to get these people out of here, you just say the word."

Dee Dee didn't say anything. Obie gave up with the senator and announced generally, "If you gentlemen will kindly leave now. I'm sure Sister Diane is feeling better. If you will kindly leave us now and let us pray together. . . ."

No one was paying any attention.

"Miss, did Johnny touch you?"

"Did he say anything to you?"

"Has he been in touch with you before?"

Lenny Mallard stood slightly behind the others watching Dee Dee closely. When she appeared to be regaining her composure somewhat, he said with authority, "I think that Miss MacLeish should be allowed to rest now. We can talk to her in the morning." The others looked from her to Lenny, then one by one left the room. Lenny was the last to leave.

"You started to order some supper," he said at the door. "Why don't you go ahead and do that. You two must want to be alone. Things to talk about. I'll see you at breakfast."

Dee Dee sat up suddenly. "I want to go home," she said.

Obie crossed the room swiftly to kneel at the couch

and take her hand. "It's all right now, Dee Dee," he said. "There's nothing here."

She pulled loose and sat up. She looked at Lenny. "I won't stay. I want to go home now. Tonight."

"I'm afraid that's impossible, Miss MacLeish," Lenny said smoothly. "There's no transportation out of here tonight."

"The plane is still here. I'll pay whatever it costs to fly it out of here."

"It's out of the question," Lenny said, less smoothly, but smiling still.

"I won't stay here tonight! I won't!"

"What happened?" Lenny reentered the room all the way closing the door after him. "You tell me now what happened and I'll see to it that you go home."

"Tonight?"

"Yes."

Dee Dee held out her glass and Lenny took it from her and refilled it from a decanter on a side table. She drank deeply, then said, "You won't believe it. None of you will. I've read about your denials of his power."

Very patiently Lenny said, "Try me."

"All right," Dee Dee said, sipping now, watching the gin and ice. "I came in to ask Obie, Brother Cox, about supper. I was standing at the door. Suddenly I felt strange, not myself. I was terrified all at once. I pulled the door open and he appeared there, just appeared out of nothing. And I felt him trying to get my mind, my brain. He was there, but he was inside me too. It was so horrible! I couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't do anything. It seemed to last for an eternity. Minutes, hours, I don't know how long. Then I felt him shift, and I was able to move and scream. That's all I know."

Lenny continued to watch her without speaking. Dee

Dee returned his gaze, her face smooth, untroubled, her eyes very clear. "So that's to be the story?" he said finally.

"But that's exactly what happened. I said you wouldn't believe me."

"Well you were right about that. I don't."

Dee Dee shrugged. "Perhaps you could explain it all a different way?"

Lenny started toward the door again. "No, I can't explain it. I believe you planned the whole thing. I don't think you really want to leave. I think this is the opening act of a charade that you plan to continue through the next two days, your planned stay with us. So, I will follow our agreement. I'll call the pilot back. Be ready to leave within half an hour, please."

"Please don't throw me in that ole briar patch," Dee Dee murmured.

Lenny's expression didn't change a fraction. He left them. Obie, still on his knees at Dee Dee's side said, "What did happen to you? Are you all right now? You look strange."

"I told him and you what happened, Obie. I was a perfect receiver for the Star Child. Obviously you aren't, or you would have felt it too. I really can't stay, because he'll be successful the next time, and such a power isn't confined by walls or time. But you must stay and go through your interview with him as you planned."

Dee Dee wouldn't add a word to that, and half an hour later, her bags still packed, never even opened, she left the estate as she had arrived there, by vertical take-off craft, heavily draped. This time she was the only passenger.

It was noon when Dee Dee watched the plane vanish into the blazing sky the next day. Several people were running toward her from the control shack. She left her suitcases on the ground and started to walk toward the

men who managed the airstrip. Crisply she said, "Call the house and tell Merton I want to see him immediately. Tell him to drop everything and get up here. And get me a copter right now."

Merton was there by the time she arrived. "Come on," she said, leading him toward her suite in the mansion that topped the mountain. It was a three-storied house, with tall columns, wide porches, high ceilings, thick Persian carpets and antiques. Her suite, three rooms, office, bedroom, and sitting room, was all in jade and ivory with flaming pink pillows and draperies. She told Louise, her maid, that she wanted a bath, clean clothes, and lunch, all very fast. Louise nodded silently and vanished. Dee Dee started to discard the clothes she was wearing and Merton sat down and waited for her to begin the story.

But Dee Dee remained silent until the maid said the bath was ready. "I'll call you if I need you," Dee Dee said. Louise nodded and left the suite.

"Now?" Merton said.

"They might have slipped me a bug," she said.

Merton's eyebrows peaked. He examined her clothing, purse, and suitcases very carefully, then shook his head.

Dee Dee motioned for him to follow her. She had pulled a flowing robe about her and she dropped it on her way to the bath. She caught up her long hair with a scarf twisting it all about her head, then stepped into the sunken bath of black and white ivory. Only then did she say, "The Star Child is Obie's bastard."

Merton sat down hard on an ornate bench before a dressing mirror. He stared at Dee Dee, visible from the neck up, the rest of her body hidden by rainbow-hued bubbles. Dee Dee was busy soaping herself, not watching his reaction at all. She turned on the spray then, and water spouted from dragons' mouths on two sides of the tub, rinsing her as she stood up. Automatically Merton handed

her a large towel that wrapped about her completely. His gaze was on her, but seeing nothing, as she let the towel drop, powdered herself, and left the bathroom to start dressing in the bedroom. Presently Merton followed. Dee Dee was brushing out her hair by then. She was wearing a white silk sari-like garment held at the shoulder by a cluster of pink rosebuds fashioned around a diamond pin.

"You're sure?" Merton asked, as she led the way into the sitting room.

Dee Dee opened the draperies, revealing a window wall with a view of the mountains stretching to the horizon. Neither of them saw the autumn vista, which looked as unreal as a *Saturday Evening Post* cover. She nodded. "I couldn't be more certain. I fainted when I saw him." She poured coffee for both of them, and sipping hers, lifted the tops from various silver bowls and serving dishes. She told Merton what had happened.

"Okay, you covered it pretty well. But how about Obie? Does he know?"

"Of course not. I wouldn't have left him there if he had seen it. The kid is exactly like Obie was in high school. It's uncanny. But Obie has looked at that beard and all that hair for so long that he doesn't know what he looked like before. No one else does either. Except possibly his mother, and she's as crazy as a loon."

Merton said nothing for several minutes and Dee Dee served herself stuffed mushrooms, asparagus vinaigrette, Boston lettuce with crab salad and tomato wedges, tiny hot rolls crisped on the outside, steamy and fragrant when she broke them open.

"You know what that means?" Merton said finally. "Blake is the alien. And he's vanished. We've got to find him."

"I know," Dee Dee said, between bites. "He's the only one who can blow the whistle now."

"And we've got to get the Star . . . the kid out of that place. . . ."

"I thought of that, but why? Let them keep him under wraps for us. It's Blake I'm worried about. What if he wakes up one day and says, 'By golly, I think I'm an alien?' " She licked a drop of butter from her finger and her eyes were drawn to the fingers that had been mashed in the car door ten years ago. There was no scar, no trace of the accident. She said, "We know that Blake has something, power, whatever you want to call it. He's got it. I wonder what else he has by now. He was a damn good-looking kid."

"I'll have to kill him," Merton said.

"I know. More coffee?"

So they decided to renew the search for Blake Daniels Co. . . . No, just Blake Daniels. Merton was a scowling man when he left Dee Dee. How to find a person who had vanished nine years ago without a trace in a world of nearly four billion, with over three hundred and seventy million of them in this one country? If Blake had gone to a doctor in the past three years his file would be in the medical computers. If he'd been in legal trouble in the past five years, the information would be in the legal computers. If ever he had registered for a credit card, or for a travel ID card, or for college, or military service, they would find him. It would mean money and a lot of it to buy such information, but it could be had. A new thought struck Merton and he stopped in his tracks. All that money! Grateful people, healed by Blake, had set up trusts, had made outright gifts, had donated money for his education. Untouched for more than ten years now it had grown, doubled, then doubled

again. . . . A couple of million dollars? Billy knew. It must be a couple of million by now. Some of it could be collected any time by Blake, and the rest would be his at twenty-one.

He'd never see twenty-one, Merton promised himself. If he'd had a moustache he would have twirled it then, but he didn't. He was smooth-faced, a hawk-faced man, with dark skin and straight black hair, probably Amerindian in his background. He couldn't trace his lineage back beyond his mother. So he never knew his heritage.

He went to his office and made a list of those people he could contact, people he knew enough about to be able to rely on them for help. Suddenly he thought of the bastard's mother. He couldn't remember her name. He had found her once, and he would again. But then what? Was she a real threat? If the U.N. Science Advisory Board suddenly started to flash the kid's picture around would she recognize him as Obie Cox's son, and her own? He gnawed on his finger and pondered it. He added her name to the list of things he had to do.

He had to erase all evidence that could link Johnny to Obie Cox. He had to find Blake Daniels and erase him. Florence? That was her name, and she had married some jerk of a mechanic. . . . Peters? He didn't know. But that was the simple part. He thought for another half hour then began calling people. He made many appointments for that night and the following day, so that by the time Obie returned from his conference with the Star Child, the wheels were in top speed, rolling soundlessly throughout the states, hopping oceans, covering other continents.

Obie returned with a distracted air. Expecting to find a devil he had found a boy filled with hatred, with dreams and fantasies, with insufferable egotism, the nimble fin-

gers of a pickpocket, an avocation he practiced daily, with all the play skills known to man practically—swimming, skiing, skating, all forms of ball playing, chess, cards, skin diving, fishing. . . . He had been taught them all and liked none of them. Obie sat at table on the first night home and said almost unbelievingly, "I think he is converted! He couldn't learn enough about the Church and my message."

"What about him, the kid himself?" Wanda asked. "You like him?" She was unbelievably gross, and her fat was distributed equally on her frame so that she was no less fat through her shoulders than through her hips, so her stomach and her immense breasts were balanced, her arms and her legs were of a kind. She had to have all her clothes made for her, even her stockings and gloves, and that was the advantage of being rich and fat: she could have what she needed made to order. For all her fat there was no soft place on her, no sag, no loose muscles, her stride was brisk and purposeful, her hands quick. With her ropes of hair piled high on her head adding six inches to her height, she appeared to be the queen of Amazons. She thought she was rather magnificent.

Obie was thinking about the question. Did he like the Star Child? Finally he shrugged. He really didn't know how to express what he felt; what he could do was express what others felt. His emotions were mixed concerning the kid. He had liked him very much at first, then had wanted to shake him, or worse, thrash him, then had liked him better than in the beginning. And so on. It hadn't stopped on like or dislike but had skittered from one to the other again and again.

Merton was going through Obie's bags carefully and he grunted and began to work out a button that was wafer thin, stuck to the lining of the three-suiter. He got

it loose and put it on the table before Obie, worked it open to show a tiny transmitter. Very carefully he detached wires, then cracked the "button" down the middle. No one in the room spoke. He flipped it a couple of times thoughtfully, then tossed it into the fireplace where logs were burning quietly. It got very cool in the mountains after dark. Presently there was a blue flame of copper; white smoke spiraled up, turned yellow-gray as a hissing sound of plastic boiling was heard, and finally the logs resumed burning quietly.

Dee Dee said, "Did you go through them all?"

"One more."

She nodded and leaned back again, not willing to talk until Merton said it was clear. Wanda said, "Are you going back to see the Star Child again?"

"He wants me to. He has this number, and he is allowed to make approved calls. We'll see."

Merton found another transmitter, this time an eraser had been replaced in a pencil, stuck in Obie's shirt pocket along with two other pencils and pens. Merton fixed it also, then nodded. All clear.

"Obie," Dee Dee said then, "I want to show you something." She rose and crossed the room to a cabinet, opened it and removed a slender book. It opened to the middle and there were pictures of teen-agers. She had covered one page so that nothing was visible except for the picture of one boy, very blond with light eyes. Obie looked at it without touching it, then reached for the book. Dee Dee backed up a step. "Familiar?"

"You know it. Me. School book. So?"

"Un-huh, Obie. Look again." She handed him the book and crossed the room again, this time to mix a drink. She heard his strangled gasp and came back, holding out the glass to him. Obie took it and drank deeply.

"It's that kid. Our class book," he said. He turned accusingly to Merton. "Did you fix this?"

"Didn't touch it," Merton said.

Dee Dee took the glass and refilled it. Obie drank again. His hand was shaking. The scotch hit him hard. He hadn't had a drink in ten years. "That lousy goddamn horse doctor! He switched them! Blake . . ." He drank again.

"Blake is the alien," Dee Dee said complacently. "We have to find him and kill him, Obie."

"My kid up there with all them atheists, with them U.N. monkeys, locked in day and night, year after year, hating them all, wanting out. And Blake . . . running around free, laughing, happy, getting rich. . . . Them trust? All that money in his name?" He turned furiously to Billy Warren Smith, who was drinking steadily. "He can't have it!"

"I don't know, Obie. It is in his name, you know. He never claimed to be your son. He denied it, as a matter of fact. If it comes to a court case . . . I just don't know."

"Shut up," Merton said then. "This isn't going to come to a court case. Obie's the boy's legal guardian. If he dies, Obie inherits. I think he's already dead, we can put in a claim. Seven years without a trace of him should be enough to satisfy a court. . . ."

"We can't do that," Obie said. "I've hinted too often that he is studying and that we are in touch. I can't come up now and say that he's been dead all these years."

"Use your head, Merton," Dee Dee said smoothly. "What Obie really needs is a martyr. Blake's young, beautiful, undefiled body to exhibit, to have come to life, ascend to heaven, issue proclamations to Obie, to the masses. You know the bit."

Obie stared at her with narrowed eyes, nodding slightly. He smiled.

A new phase in the Voice of God Church was begun. Obie was relieved. He could drink again. He no longer feared his own kid, and he faced it now, he had been afraid of him. When Blake had looked directly at him, he had felt himself shrink, and had remembered how little he had read, and how little he knew about most things. He didn't know where Aukland was, for example, once when Wanda had asked while doing a crossword puzzle. Blake had waited for him to supply the answer and when he couldn't Obie had felt put down because the kid knew it. And him only six or seven then. A goddamn smart aleck. That's what he'd been. Laughing at Obie for believing he was the father of the real alien, while his own boy, the boy of his flesh, with his hair and his eyes, was tortured daily by the athiests. Then when Blake had started to heal. . . . Obie shuddered. That had scared him. He had believed that he really was a God-child, and he, Obie, the father of God. That was a bad time. He thought of his mother, locked up in the sanatorium, calling herself the mother of God, screeching for him to come and make a miracle so the attendants would believe her, writing her weekly letters full of prayers, and wishes, and demands. The letters always started the same, addressed to him, headed, To My Son, God. Dee Dee laughed at them, but they made Obie very uneasy. What, he had wondered, if the old bat was right? Secretly at night, in his room with the door locked, he had tried to make a miracle sometimes. But he never had succeeded. The ashtray that he tried to float simply sat there. The window he tried to close or raise without touching it didn't budge. When he tried to summon Dee Dee to him, she resisted. What was the good in being God if he couldn't do simple things like that? So he had been forced

to go along with the opinions of the doctors who said it was a psychotic delusion that his mother suffered. And when he had come to believe the same thing about his son that she had believed about him, he had worried. He had visions of being put in the same sanatorium along with her, and having her point him out to visitors: "See, my son God! Do a miracle, son God! Make a miracle!"

All this and much more passed through Obie's mind very quickly that night when he learned that his son was only human after all. A thin adolescent, slow to mature, not terribly bright, afraid and feared, but human. He got very drunk that night.

"Find me the kid," he said to Merton, waving his glass, sloshing Scotch all over the thick Persian rug, and the antique couch. "Bring him up here to me and let's see him heal hisself. Physician heal thyself, that's what we'll say to the little bastard. And we'll write our own passion play. Thass it, passion play. He has the passion and we have the play. 'N we'll spring my kid out of that fancy prison. My poor little boy in prison all his life." He wept noisily, was sick noisily, drank some more and finally took Dee Dee to bed, where he did things with her that he hadn't done for years. Not being God or the father of God any longer made a difference.

When Obie finally fell asleep Dee Dee crept from his bed, aching, bruised, and happy, and made her way to her own room again. Merton was waiting for her. She said, "You've gotta be kidding!"

"Relax, honey. I want to know one thing only. Is the old Obie back with us for good?"

Dee Dee simply nodded. Merton grinned. "Okay, baby. See you in the morning. This changes everything, kid. But everything." He opened the door and stopped

to look back at her appraisingly. "Boy, that sure must have been a ball!"

Dee Dee looked at herself in the full-length mirror. She was a mess. Her loins ached. Her back ached. Her breasts were sore, her jaws ached. There were red marks from pinches and bites, and a bruise on her thigh, and another on her shoulder. When her gaze reached her face she was startled; she never had looked prettier.

She soaked in a tub of sudsy water and gradually the aches faded. She started to think of Merton's remark that everything was changed now. It was true. Obie had been his own convert, and now he was a backslider. She didn't know how that would affect the movement. She found that she didn't really care right then.

Actually the movement was not to be affected very much at all. During the time that it mattered, while it was being formed, the leader had been a believer, and that is necessary for a successful movement. He had been a high-powered salesman who believed in his product. After selling the customer it doesn't matter if the seller loses faith. The payments are not his concern. The machinery was set up, operant, swelling day by day; this was the concern for the administration now; the buyers would bring in others without his help. If he stopped all public appearances immediately the movement would continue to grow through its great momentum, and through the machinations of the businessmen who were the actual organizers. A man of spiritual mien is the needed ingredient at the beginning of a spiritual movement, but after it is under way, his mysticism and fuzzy thinking are a hindrance. It's fine to produce wine and bread for the masses in the beginning, but as a daily occurrence it is better to organize tithing and bank accounts and the purchase of tax free bonds and real estate, and rules governing the official hierarchy and its exercise of power.

It is wise to provide a martyr now and then. Let the people concentrate on him and they are less likely to try to see behind him to the organization of the business called religion.

The nearest to a martyr the Church had produced as yet was in the person of a young draft dodger back in the beginnings. He had been a drug user: LSD, pot, tobacco, bennies. . . . He had tried everything. He had given Everett Slocum the formula for RUT, the first psychedelic aphrodisiac that never failed to produce the desired effects, and shortly after this the FDA had closed in on him and he had leaped from his tenth-floor window, flying all the way down, to end in a landing that was less than perfect. His martyrdom was short-lived because it was found that the ingredient that made RUT different from other psychedelics was the bacteria that swarmed on the hands and under the black nails of the young alchemist. It wasn't the staph so much as the antibodies he produced against staph, and this was such a personal, unique product that with his solo flight the secret was lost.

So the Church was ripe for a martyr. And that fall Merton put into operation the largest manhunt in the history of any group outside the federal government, the search for the candidate most likely to succeed in martyrdom: Blake Daniels.

INTERLUDE SEVEN

Macon, Oct. 23

Today the Council of Southern Protestant Churches extended

full membership to the recently organized Southern branch of the Voice of God Church. . . .

Macon, Feb. 3

Inauguration ceremonies for the new officers of the Council of Southern Churches (formerly the Council of Southern Protestant Churches), were disrupted when a small group of protestors demonstrated in the aisles, forcing the postponement of the swearing-in of Fred Smiley as the organization's new president. Mr. Smiley later was sworn in in a private ceremony in the anteroom of the Voice of God Church on the corners of Hall and Seventh Streets. Mr. Smiley issued a statement following the ceremonies that intimated that his first business as president of the organization would be to rid its ranks of troublemakers. . . .

Atlanta, Apr. 16

In the past six months twenty-seven Georgia ministers have resigned their pulpits and churches, and a number estimated to be triple that figure are said to be waiting for the recognition of resignations already tendered. . . .

Atlanta *Courier*, Editorial, May 1

Four separate communities of central Georgia were hit by renewed terrorist raids during the night. In the town of Americus the small whitewashed Methodist church was burned to the ground, and two men who tried to put out the flames were severely beaten, one of them remaining in critical condition today. They have asked that their names be withheld in fear of retaliation to their families.

In the community of Fitzgerald the Church of Our Lady of Tranquility was fire-bombed and two sisters were burned as they fought to remove sacred objects. In Cedar Hills the Cedar Hills Baptist Church was burned to the ground and masked men prevented the volunteer firemen from entering the area to extinguish the flames. The pastor of the church is missing today. And in Douglas another Baptist church was put to the torch.

No arrests have been made, and no witnesses have come forward to identify any of the arsonists involved. Investigations are under way in each of the communities, and it is hoped that

an outraged citizenry will demand that the current investigations be more fruitful than those in the recent past. Such violence aimed at the religious community cannot be tolerated in a free society.

Chicago *Sun-Times*, Apr. 2

In the trial of the decade, the *State of Illinois vs. Monsignor Bellamy*, opening testimony was heard today. The State's first witnesses were self-confessed sadists, arsonists, butchers. . . .

Chicago *Sun-Times*, Apr. 3

Transcript from the testimony taken at today's session of the *State vs. Monsignor Bellamy*. Continuing on the stand following his testimony for the State yesterday is Harry Scallopini, under cross-examination by the defense attorney, Timothy Jackson.

Mr. Jackson: Now, Mr. Scallopini, you said yesterday that you personally witnessed several of these, uh, operations, but that you took no actual part in them. Is that right?

Scallopini: Yeah, that's right.

Mr. Jackson: Mr. Scallopini, have you served time in prison?

Mr. Lloyd: Object.

Mr. Jackson: Retract. Mr. Scallopini, did you know the deceased?

Scallopini: Who?

Mr. Jackson: John Krebs. The dead man.

Scallopini: Oh, him. Yeah. I seen him around.

Mr. Jackson: And what was he doing when you saw him?

Scallopini: Nothin'. Just talkin' to nuts who'd stop and listen.

Mr. Jackson: Did you stop to listen?

Scallopini: Yeah, sometimes I'd listen to him.

Mr. Jackson: And did you approve of what he had to say?

Scallopini: Me? Naw. I thought he was some kind of nut.

Mr. Jackson: Was he talking about the Voice of God Church?

Lloyd: Object. That's irrelevant.

Judge Bledsoe: Sustained.

Mr. Jackson: Are you a member of the Voice of God Church?

Scallopini: Yeah. . . .

Summary of the day's testimony:

Through long and arduous cross-examination repeatedly interrupted by the prosecutor, Mr. Jackson today tried to establish

that those men charged with the murder of three and the castration of thirteen members of the Voice of God Church had in fact nothing to do with the inception of the crimes, or the execution of them. At no time did Mr. Jackson mention the defendants, but concentrated instead on the character of those who did the actual operations in alleyways and in basements of the lower South Side. In spite of his efforts to shake the story given yesterday by Harry Scallopini, the witness for the State continued to maintain that the idea had been hatched in the basement of the Church of the Sacred Heart, that all of the men who participated were at that time practicing Catholics, and that he became converted to the Voice of God Church only six weeks ago.

Tomorrow the State will present its third star witness, a self-confessed participant in the castrations that resulted in death for three. And so the grisly story continues to unwind. . . .

Transcript from a tape made of the news flash that interrupted the 3D program *Rainbow's End:*

We interrupt this program to bring you the following special report. Tonight Monsignor Bellamy succumbed to what his doctors call a massive heart failure. Monsignor Bellamy was found by his housekeeper, Mrs. Louella Day, who could make no immediate statement due to what doctors call a condition of deep shock. Mrs. Day has been hospitalized at Sts. Mary's and Magdalene's Hospital where she is under sedation. . . .

Chapter Fourteen

HIGH on a mountain in Pennsylvania Blake inspected the hunter's shack that he had appropriated for his own

use. He didn't want it to look inhabited. Not that it mattered. There hadn't been any game in this area for twenty years or longer, and the shack hadn't been used for fifteen. Once a dirt road had wound up the mountain to the rough building, but it was covered now with new growth and fallen trees and shale slides so that the only way up was on foot, horse, or by air. Blake used all three on occasion. The gray frame three-room house leaned crazily against the stone of the mountain behind it, dependent on the stone for support apparently, but only apparently. Blake had done things to the shack. Still unpainted splintery wood on the outside, there was a thin layer of insulation on the inside that served as a practical building material, conserving heat in the winter, keeping it out in the summer, and was in itself very nice to look at, soft, with a deep finish that changed from blue to a warm rosy yellow depending on the temperature. Too, the view through the windows of the shack was deceptive. All one could see from outside was shadowy interior filled with cobwebs and dirt, and no one ever suspected that the view was in the window only. Actually the inside was a quite large, very neat and well-stocked laboratory-house. Blake lived in one of the rooms and worked in the other two. For his work he needed quantities of electricity and running water, and he provided both from the land beyond his doors. There was a small brook that fell through a mountain gorge twenty feet away and it served admirably as a power source, even though nothing showed to a casual observer.

For a year and a half Blake had been working in the shack sporadically. He had come across it accidentally, and he had returned with equipment in his copter, some of it stolen, some bought and paid for, all of it necessary. That year he had invented a filter that would pass only pure H_2O through a permeable membrane, regardless of

the source of the water. Equally interesting to him had been the idea of the direct manufacture of electricity from the molecular excitation of various alloys spun out into wires. He had accomplished this also. At the bottom of the swift brook there were half a dozen long wires being whipped continually. Anchored upstream the loose ends danced against a plate with a feeder line that vanished into an insulated cable in a tree trunk that housed a storage battery; the wires shimmied and twisted and made electricity. But he hadn't finished with this yet. The wires wore out too fast.

There had been other things that he had tried, some he had been able to bring off, some would take more hard work, some probably never could be done. His work was taking him into all fields of science, and he had many ideas drawn up ready for patenting. He had been biding his time until he knew Obie Cox couldn't touch him again, but when that time had come around, he had been busy, and had forgotten to pack up until he realized that the leaves had fallen and the air had the bite of frost and the smell of snow. So he packed his copter with notebooks and sketches and schematics of those things that he knew were ready for a patent search, and he locked up all else in the shack. He knew that barring a landslide that would bury the shack completely, it was impervious to any outside interference. The material he had lined it with would withstand flames and heat up to four thousand degrees, and would deflect any kind of explosives. The snows would come and cover it for him, hiding it until his return. He left in his single-seater copter and headed south.

Blake was a fugitive on several accounts. His copter was stolen. In a credit card economy anyone without a proper credit card is automatically suspect, and it is illegal to sell a copter or plane, or hovercraft, or under-

water craft, or spacecraft or the atomic engine, or turbine motor, or jet pack, or rocket cluster to run any of the foregoing to a minor. Although Blake had several different sets of papers, all forged, none of them would have stood up for the sort of investigation that buying a copter entailed. So he had stolen one several years ago. Too, most of the big equipment he had in the shack was stolen, for much the same reasons. He could have paid cash for anything he had wanted or needed, had tried hard to buy equipment with cash, but it had drawn unwanted attention to him, so he had been forced to steal. Also, there were a lot of policemen scattered from city to city who remembered the golden-haired boy who could jump a General, or goose a vehicle of any make into running. He was something of a legend in those cities. Never booked, never picked up for anything, never identified in any way, except as the well-built blond boy with the books, he was suspected of being the gang leader in any town where he showed up. None of those who got to know him ever put the finger on him, but there were others, the ones on the fringes who knew him by sight only, and they were the ones who added to the myth of the boy with the golden hair. He could leap from building to building; he could outrun a cop car; he could make people do things they didn't want to do, and he could do things to them from a distance; he could heal. . . .

This last was the elusive spoor that Merton's men kept running across and following. Those who got fixed up by him never talked about it, so that it was hard to track them down. But there were the rumors that were like ripples on a pond; everyone knew someone who knew someone who had been taken care of by the kid.

Blake grinned at the reports and never denied anything or admitted anything. He flew low over the mountain,

under the Air Patrol radar. He didn't want to be challenged. It always upset the Air Patrol to challenge his craft and see it elude them. The copter he had stolen over two years ago had undergone radical changes, so that although it looked much the same, it was not. Near Harrisburg the challenge came. Blake sighed. He hadn't really expected to be allowed to fly from upper Pennsylvania all the way to Cincinnati without being hailed. Any unauthorized craft was a menace to air traffic, theoretically, and there could be no exceptions.

"Aircraft of E designation, heading west, number 927-083, proceed immediately to Air Patrol strip A-27. You will be escorted by an Air Patrol craft."

Blake looked at his instruments, setting his course, then looked for the A.P. craft. It was a hovercraft outfitted with a booster jet. It dipped at him, turned slightly to the left, slowing down somewhat for him to follow. He maintained his course. They were passing north of Harrisburg, well out of the traffic lanes. The voice repeated the message, this time more stridently. They were now west of Harrisburg. The designated field was changed from A-27, to C-33. The hovercraft drew in closer and Blake could see the cop making a hand signal for him to turn to. He thumbed his nose and pressed his acceleration stud. The copter lifted vertically, shooting up like a rocket. At two thousand feet he leveled and, still accelerating, streaked westward. There was a moment of leeway while the cop got over his stunned surprise, then he used his booster and came after Blake. The copter dropped as suddenly as it had risen, dropped and reduced speed so that the hovercraft overshot it and lost it before the pilot could make a turn. Blake hugged the ground and headed for the nearest wooded area, half a mile away, folding his blades as he went. When he entered the woods the craft was a ground effect vehicle.

The cop searched the area for half an hour before giving up.

When Blake got near Cincinnati, he crossed the river to approach from the Kentucky side. It was less heavily populated here, and the hills that lined the river made better cover than the myriad subdivisions where the houses stood window to window, matched up like dominoes over the flatter Ohio land. It was a dark, frosty night, no moon, no stars either, hidden as they were by the dense layers of smoke, smog, and airborne wastes of all sorts. The copter made the only noise, and not wanting to attract more attention, Blake converted it again to a ground effect vehicle and skimmed over the black earth. Excitement and anticipation were rising in him.

He took a wide detour around the U.N. area of the spaceship, and his new direction took him within two blocks of the Voice of God Memorial Temple erected as near the spot as had been possible where Obie first communicated with God. Blake saw the roadblocks in time to turn again; every road leading to the river was blocked off. He stopped at the side of the woods and considered his next move. He didn't know what was happening in the area, but he did know that he didn't want to get mixed up in anything at all, not now, not when home was within hailing distance practically. The sky was being patrolled by police copters and hovercraft, so he didn't even consider taking to the air. He knew his little craft would get through the woods without any trouble, but there was the river after that, and he was certain that if there was an official net out, the river would be heavily patrolled. While he was sitting there quietly trying to decide what to do, he heard a distant rumble as indistinct and rolling as summer thunder. He cocked his head. He knew the sound. Here? Out in the middle of the woods?

He lifted the craft from the roadbed so he could get a

better view and he saw them coming. People, thousands of people, carrying electric torches, kerosene torches, flares. Over them the police craft hovered, spotlights blazing down on the masses. Blake couldn't hear the message being directed at them, but he suspected that they were being ordered to turn back. The police craft dipped and swayed, and others joined it. A line of ground cars was across the road, and there were more police manning that barricade. Blake shook his head. There were thousands of marchers. And four, five hovercraft. Where were the National Guards? Why didn't the cops release anti-mob gas? His eyes narrowed. They wanted them to get through. The cops were going through the motions only. He watched the oncoming mob for another moment, then turned into the woods, keeping high enough to see them. They stretched across the road, coming in like a tidal wave, chanting, yelling, screaming, roaring. The hovercraft over them simply lighted their way, and now and again Blake could catch snatches of the messages being sent down: ". . . turn back . . . arrest . . . anti-mob gas . . ."

It meant nothing. If they had wanted to stop the mob they would have done so already. If they made a move now, with so many people packed along the road, there would be a stampede. Thousands would be trampled. Blake had thought at first that they were heading toward the U.N. area and the spaceship; now he realized that they should have turned left. They were still coming directly toward him. The temple! They were attacking the Voice of God temple.

Very cautiously he retreated, keeping in the woods, invisible against the black of the trees, until he had a view of the temple. The long hairs were there. Not as many as the gang marching down the road, but ready for them. He nodded then. It was as predictable as a slum

war when the short hairs and long hairs mixed it up on Saturday night. Predictable if bigger than any slum war he had seen. He was too far from either group to see what their weapons were. He knew he should leave before the battle started. He had no desire to enter into it on either side. He retreated the way he had come, was stopped again by the instruments on his control panel. Interference ahead. He directed his scanners to probe the source and his mouth tightened. The defenders had set up ambushes, probably throughout the woods to pick off those that decided to run. He crept cautiously to his left until he spotted another patrol. They were taking up positions up and down the woods paralleling the road.

The advancing mob was much louder when he realized that he was not going to be allowed to leave. He began to search for a place to sit it out, and brought his craft to a stop high in a gigantic spruce tree that was thick and black all the way to its peak, over one hundred feet above the ground. The short hairs coming up the road made such a din now that the trees trembled. Blake sealed off his craft and opened his oxygen supply to escape the noise. He trained his receiver toward the park where the temple stood, adjusted the volume so that the oncoming roar was bearable, then waited.

When the mob got within a hundred feet of the park, brilliant lights suddenly came on on both sides of the road. The scraggly hordes were illuminated and blinded. There were screams and a milling about as of hens terrorized in an enclosed barnyard by the unexpected incursion of a drooling fox. From his position high over it all Blake could see clearly the panic on the faces, the fear of instant death. He expected to hear the soft stutter of stun guns, but there was nothing. Only the glare of spotlights. Those farther back on the road were pushing on, an irresistible force that would have overrun those who had

halted had they not moved ahead. The mob became tighter, body against body, flares and torches and electric lights now hanging down unused, unusable. The noise lessened. Those approaching the park were silent and very afraid. From off to the right there came three quick explosions, not very loud, leaving a deeper stillness afterward. There was one more explosion, then silence. Blake turned his gaze to the park and studied the encircling woods. A movement had caught his eye. He saw it again. The short hairs had split off from the main crowd and were gathering at the edge of the clearing. He couldn't tell how many of them there were. The masses below him were being pushed reluctantly toward the clearing and the approach to the temple grounds now.

Suddenly there was singing, a chorus of children's voices, incredibly sweet and compelling. The mob stopped again in confusion. The chorus was singing a paean to their leader, calling on all to adore him, to hear his words, to obey his commands. The hymn ended on a high note, a note of hallelujah, and after a silence of no more than five seconds, Obie's voice was in the air, everywhere:

"And the Lord spake unto me, and the Lord said, 'This ground shall evermore be sacred. Let no man desecrate this ground whereon I walk. Build here a temple that all men might come and worship and see the glory of the Lord.' Come, come. Come see the glory of the temple of the Lord. Feel the presence of the Most Holy. I shall show you the power and the might of the Lord. Walk forward, drop your weapons on the side of the road. Walk forward and approach the temple of the Lord. 'Come unto Me,' saith the Lord. Walk forward, drop your weapons and walk forward. Come forward slowly, with downcast eyes that you may not be blinded by the

Radiant Light of the Lord. Fall on your knees and open your hearts to the presence of the Lord. . . ."

Blake watched as the mob surged into the clearing, dropping clubs, knives, guns, torches, everything. They were obeying the voice that was everywhere. He turned his gaze to the smaller group at the edge of the woods across the park. He couldn't make out any details of that group yet. There was a flash and a phut, and the light that had been directed generally toward that area went out. The men rushed forward at the same instant. Then he could see them, perhaps fifty or sixty of them. They were met in the park by long hairs armed with stun guns. The battle started among the trees and shrubbery of the park, but slowly worked its way toward the temple. More long hairs emerged from the temple, circling the fighting men, trying to get behind the attackers. Another dozen or more short hairs ran out from the woods and engaged them. Blake nodded. The cleared area, carefully planted with specimen trees and shrubbery was being filled with the now kneeling short hairs who were being stumbled over by the newcomers to the temple park. And those on the road, beyond the lights and the voice were shouting and roaring and pushing to get to the temple.

In the frosty air Blake could see vapor where the lights were focused on the road; it also hung like mist over the park, settling very slowly while new layers formed, hung, then sank. On the side where the fighting was taking place there was no such effect.

"Form a line and come to the temple," the voice said, everywhere. "Come to the temple with downcast eyes, and feel the presence of the Lord. Let the Voice of God soothe you and comfort you. Form a line and come to the temple."

Again, as before, there was the repetition, the strong voice that was everywhere and sourceless. There was an incredible scene below Blake then. On the road the people were being told to drop their arms and enter the park where they were to kneel. In the park they were being told to make a line and come into the temple. The voice carried over the choir, which continued to sing. And still around the side of the park a fierce battle was being waged, with stuttering stun guns, and blue arcing electric clubs that could deliver a range of hits from mild shock to electrocution. There was hand to hand fighting with no weapons, and this was the most brutal of all. The people in the park, and those on the road still appeared oblivious to the fighting.

A third wave of attackers appeared from the dark woods and swarmed into the grounds, and this time their force was visibly driving the defenders back, up the incline toward the temple. At the edge of the woods three men worked over a piece of equipment, a portable mortar. They got it set up and aimed it at one of the many terraces that led to the temple. When the mortar exploded there were many screams of terror, and one of the bright lights went out. The men aimed again and scored a hit on another of the lights, and with the diminution of light, it seemed that some of the people entering the grounds were strengthened; they didn't fall to the ground to make obeisance to the ubiquitous voice, but charged blindly over the kneeling figures to take cover within the shrubbery.

Some of them were going to make it inside the temple. The original band of fighters was now midway up the incline, fighting on the second terrace. The temple was on raised ground approached by tiers of broad steps and wide terraces with recessed lights set in them. The temple was of gleaming white marble, with black marble

floors along a colonnade that ran around the entire structure. The columns were polished, snow white, and completely unadorned. It had been designed by Straton-Rubichek, and a replica of it was on display in the Museum of Modern Art. It was very beautiful. The mortar picked off another light. Suddenly appearing between the columns of the colonnade were figures, each holding a massive candle, girls, women, children. They came out of the temple singing, the same hymn that had so startled the short hairs earlier. There were hundreds of the figures, and now Blake could see that most of them were teen-aged girls; all were dressed in long white robes. The scene became a tableau, and even the mortar was quieted.

"The crazy fools!" Blake muttered, watching the descending figures. He raised binoculars and studied them; all seemed unaware of the fighting, unaware of the hordes of maddened people on the road and lurking behind bushes and trees. They sang triumphantly, looking neither to right nor left and the breeze hardly stirred the flames of the candles they carried. Each face was lighted; and all of the faces appeared entranced. Suddenly Blake gasped.

"Lisa!"

He knew almost immediately that it couldn't be Lisa. It was Lisa as he remembered her from years ago. He was looking at Lorna. He kept the binoculars on her as she went down the steps to stop on the bottom tier. One of the damaged lights came on again. There was frenzy among the mob not yet on the grounds. They could hear the singing and were enraged beyond endurance by it. They shoved harder and some of these in the front were knocked down and trampled.

The mortar came to life again. It was a very good shot, not hitting any of the choir members, but knocking them

down by the shock in spite of that. The others continued to stand unmoving, singing.

Then the band of attackers broke through the long hairs defending the temple and raced up the steps, knocking the girls out of their way as they went. Most of the short hairs fell on the steps, not shot, not hit by anything that Blake could see. A few others made it to the top and vanished inside. Blake had grown more and more tense since the choir had appeared, and now he found himself starting the engine of his copter and leaving the branch it had rested on to hover free of the tree. He couldn't leave Lorna standing down there unprotected like a somnambulist.

Among the invaders there must have been some who were familiar with the temple interior. In a very short time the lights went out and the area was in total darkness relieved only by the candles of the choir, and these now seemed pitiably weak. The mob coming in by road swelled and swept over those on the ground as if released by magic from magic.

Blake swooped down also. He aimed toward Lorna. At the same moment he saw the National Guard aircraft coming in finally. The fighting at the temple had increased in intensity, there were hundreds or perhaps thousands from each side engaged in hand to hand battle now, and the choir was being swept aside, their candles smashed. Blake landed left of the temple, two hundred yards from Lorna. There was very little activity here; most of it was at the front where the temple faced the road, and at the side where the attackers had launched the flanking move. The lights came on suddenly, and went off again. There was a momentary lull in the fighting when they came on. The tempo picked up as soon as darkness returned. Blake pushed and fought his way through fighting men and women, indiscriminately

hitting out, or using his own stun gun on them. He finally got to the steps where he had last seen Lorna. She was not there. Her candle was flattened, as if by a heavy boot. Blake searched the grass and bushes for her and he saw a team of men setting up a portable laser, aiming it at the columns. They were going to cut through them, collapse the roof of the temple. He yelled for Lorna. He had worked his way to the top of the incline, looking at white-robed bodies, alive and dead, that littered the stairs all the way up. There were some of them going inside the temple at that moment and he raced for the group and spun the last one around.

"Lorna? Where is she?"

A glassy-eyed pre-adolescent pointed wordlessly, wrenched away from him and entered the temple.

Blake ran inside and yanked the arm of a long-haired girl. She turned and he breathed in relief. "Come on! I'm getting you out of here!"

She shook her head, tried to pull free, and he clipped her once gently at the side of her neck. He caught her when she fell, swung her over his shoulder, and headed for the door through which he had entered. It was crowded now with short hairs. They tried to snatch Lorna from him, hands yanking at her hair, and her robes. He turned and ran to his left. As he ran through the temple the sounds of battle grew nearer. He darted out the first door he came to, continued to run along the colonnade until he spotted his copter and he groaned. The short hairs and long hairs were fighting over it. They had pulled out all the boxes of plans and notes. He stopped, resting Lorna's weight against a wall, and adjusted the force of his gun. He went on then and when he got within range of the copter he sprayed a charge over everyone in the area. It was too weak to kill, but they fell back before it, those who were able to walk. He

pushed Lorna inside, dumping her unceremoniously on the floor where the boxes had been. The National Guard copters were starting to spray the area with anti-mob gas. Behind them there was an explosion within the temple and a geyser of smoke and rubble climbed into the sky. A roar came from the crowd. Blake started the engine and had to pause long enough to spray the area once more. He took off, straight up. A National Guard copter came down to intercept him and he accelerated, shooting off northeast into the darkness.

In the headquarters communications room on Mount Laurel Obie watched the scene with Dee Dee and Billy Warren Smith. Six cameras covered all of the battle from different vantage points, and the engineers continually switched from one to another so that the viewers were shown more of the action than they would have been able to see on the spot. There was only one clear shot of Blake, and none of them recognized him.

Merton returned after a lengthy view phone conversation with the governor of Kentucky. He looked grim. "The bastard couldn't be reached in time to activate the Guards earlier," he said. "I say the time for a showdown is now."

Obie nodded. Now. Merton left again to contact the lieutenant governor, one of their men, and they knew that by morning there would be a new administration in Kentucky.

"Somebody talked," Obie said then. "They knew about the lights and the gas. They went straight for it, using the mobs out front as decoys."

Dee Dee's face was thoughtful. "But, by God, it was effective until they got to it! I never would have believed it."

They talked on into the night, with Merton appearing and disappearing again and again, tallying the wounded

and dead, receiving reports, and finally leaving to inspect the damage personally. He returned within two hours and got Obie out of bed. He had been given the box of plans and drawings abandoned by Blake.

"Where did they come from?" Obie asked. His face was swollen and ugly with sleep and he hated Merton intensely then, as he did every so often.

"No one seems to know. Simpson gathered them up after the mob was dispersed, and he had enough sense to realize their importance."

During the next three days the plans were analyzed and recognized as the work of genius. On the fourth day Merton had found the tape with Blake's appearance on it, and his rescue of one of the temple girls. By the fifth day they knew that Blake had been there and was gone again. Also on the fifth day they had found the card belonging to Lorna Daniels among the computer membership cards. She had been home on vacation for Thanksgiving and a pilgrimage to the temple, but was now back at the Voice of Unity College, where she was a sophomore. Obie called for another council of war.

They studied a map of the neighborhood where the Daniels' house was a speck in a sea of believers. Surrounded by members or supporters of the Voice of God Church, each one marked by an X so that the entire area looked like a diagonally hashed cross-stitched pattern transfer, the one very small white speck looked totally indefensible, as it was.

Billy smirked fatly. His face was all but vanishing in the folds of fat, as if his features were dwindling while everything else swelled. "Looks simple enough," he said. "How about a fire?"

Dee Dee said sharply, "Don't be a fool! We have to have Blake alive for a year or longer, alive and under control."

Billy looked blank and Merton said patiently, "It's going to take time for the buildup, and then we have to stage his death very carefully. Dee Dee's right, we've got to grab him. He vanished once, he can again until we're ready to spring him."

"In the hospital," Obie said slowly. "I'd like that."

The hospital was a heavily guarded building on the property on Mount Laurel, three miles from the main house. Occasionally a new minister to the Church reacted violently to the indoctrination process, and in the beginning this had caused such a stir of interest among research psychologists that Merton had suggested providing for them on the same grounds where they rounded the bend too abruptly. Some of them recovered, most did not, and the hospital did a lively business. It was every bit as secure as the estate where the Star Child, Obie's son, was being held. And it had the added advantage of being nearby so that Obie could observe personally this stranger on Earth. They agreed that it was the place.

"Another thing," Merton said, "I think we should patent those things in your name, Obie. And you announce that you were inspired by telepathic communication with the kid, Johnny."

And that is what they did. They didn't capture Blake at that time because when the special group of Savers appeared at the Daniels' residence he was already gone again, but they did begin to apply for patents on the purification process, and the manufacture of electricity from wires in water, and several other things that threatened to revolutionize the world, all admittedly the original ideas of the alien, all controlled by Obie Cox.

And Obie preached the sermon that broke completely with the past and started a new era for the Church and for the world.

INTERLUDE EIGHT

From Winifred Harvey's memoirs

I'm in the one place on earth that I think is truly safe. My office in the Cold Sleep Institute. This material is accumulating at a fantastic rate. One day an attendant will mistakenly open the door marked 09-TRI-274-A, and he will gasp with amazement at finding the box full of papers, scrapbooks, diaries, clippings. I'm putting everything on ice until some day. . . .

I am so restless, and tired, and apprehensive. What is Obie planning? There is an ominous smell in the air that I have to attribute to his insanity. You smell it when you see a group of long hairs together, you feel it when a group of short hairs gather. I went to study Obie last week, again. He was playing at the Garden again, to a full house, like always.

He is so goddamned clever. Not intelligent, but slick. He does by instinct what we in the business have to concede was exactly right every time. He gets immense crowds, uses lights so dramatically that it makes a good director want to cry. Then those damnable tapers that give strobe effects. Do they emit a vapor that is a hypnotic? Do they? *DO THEY?* Why doesn't someone find out and publish results? He builds tension on tension as if he were stacking blocks; he leads the congregation higher and higher into fear and wild expectations, and then knocks away their props and lets them flounder, and then offers a hand. They can't resist it. They need a hand by then. It's madness but it is so goddamned effective! Not only does he get the sheep, he holds them, and they get more. Civilization had laid down such a thin veneer over that desire to be allowed to hate freely, effectively, and Obie Cox has peeled the veneer away. May he drop dead of suffocation suffered from slipping and sinking in his own mountains of word-excreta!

I am afraid.

There I said it. What has happened this winter is enough to

make anyone afraid. That bastard has started a civil war. Dress rehearsal for civil war. Let the government call it demonstrations, and the papers call it riots, but what it is is the prelude to civil war.

Just last week he stood in that goddamn light and glowed. He said: 1. He is in touch telepathically with the Star Child. Lie!; 2. The Star Child is responsible for the patents he has taken out. Lie! Johnny?; 3. The Star Child is a convert to the Church and wants to tell through it about the plot of his people directed against Earth! JOHNNY? My Johnny? I could cry and gnash teeth.

Why don't they let Johnny refute him?

And that idiot book! *Armaggedon Now.* Illiterate. Drivel. Childish. Nonsense. A school boy's dream of getting even. The philosophy of a nine-year-old. Insurrection of a street gang. I'll put the book on ice also and someone someday will read it and think what a marvelous sense of humor Americans had back in their dark ages after all.

So why do the idiot people respond to him?

That's why I am afraid. They are fighting everywhere right now. Long hairs who believe in Obie Cox, the pretty little golden boy!, versus the short hairs. Take a scissors to them and then what would happen? Ah, the sweet smells of civilization: burning cities, riot gases, stench bombs. . . .

I must put down that scene from 3D, as well as I can remember it:

> A rally, speaker on a platform, dressed in gray, tapers everywhere.
>
> "Do you believe in God?"
>
> "I believe!" From a thousand throats, from fifty thousand, from hundreds of thousands. They hold tapers. A choir sings hymns of praise to Obie Cox. They scream: "I believe! I believe! I believe!"
>
> "The Earth is the Lord's, and the fullness therein. I shall deliver My Children from the stranger! I shall deliver the believers from the stranger who would smite them down. Do you believe?"
>
> "I believe! I believe! I believe!"

But you can see how it goes. For hours the rallies continue and when they end the crowds are turned into mobs with madness in their eyes, burned by an unquenchable fire to save Earth from the fearsome strangers, wrench it from the hands of the atheists, and the agnostics, and the fainthearted who profess belief and do not act on it.

Obie Cox, please drop dead. Please!

And the president. That fatheaded slob of a president. We never had it so good. The future belongs to us now. Progress has created wealth beyond the wildest dreams. You fool! They are burning down your country, and your progress, and your material wealth. There is no food in Detroit, no food in Denver. . . . But he's afraid he'll go in the history books as the president who started a religious war, and so he does nothing.

Tomorrow perhaps I can get home again. I wonder if I have an apartment left. Getting so used to the floor here that I'll miss it.

Chapter Fifteen

MATT and Lisa turned up at Winifred's apartment at dusk in mid-January. Lisa was as gray as the sky, and Matt had an accumulation of beard and dirt that didn't quite hide the bruises and cuts that covered his face. He supported Lisa with one hand and banged on Winifred's door with the other. When she opened it, on a chain, he almost collapsed inward.

"Oh, my God!" Winifred said, softly. She hurried them inside and bolted the door again.

Matt told the story while Lisa bathed and washed her hair and dressed in one of Winifred's robes. Only after this would she have even a cup of coffee.

"We saw how it was going to be and left home," Matt said, sipping his third cup of coffee, savoring it this time. He had not tasted any of the food, but had gulped it down, forgetting even to chew. "Before Christmas we went into town and got a room in a hotel. I was near the

hospital and it was all right for a short time. We couldn't afford it long. Two weeks ago, when things seemed quiet again we went back. *They* were there. We got all the way inside the house before we realized it. They had a Listener's Booth set up in the living room, and they shoved Lisa inside it." Winifred looked at her quickly and Lisa ducked her head, a scarlet flush coloring her cheeks, fading swiftly leaving them whiter than before.

"They wouldn't let her out until she confessed."

"Confessed?" Winifred poured more coffee, trying to forget that she had only two more pounds hoarded.

"I don't know what they wanted," Lisa said. "I didn't care what I told them. I could hear them beating Matt outside and I kept talking, hoping to hit the right thing so they would let us go." She looked ashamed.

There was silence and Lisa toyed with her spoon, not looking at Winifred or Matt. Winifred said, "Then what?"

"They stripped us," Matt said slowly. "They took us to the bedroom and forced us to do . . . things. They had cameras."

"Blackmail?" Winifred asked, mystified.

"More than that," Matt said. "There are laws in forty-seven of the states forbidding what we did. The cure is pre-frontal lobotomy for the woman, castration and pre-frontal for the man. We're wanted now."

Winifred stared at him unbelievingly. "But why . . . ?"

"We don't know why we did it," Lisa said then. "We did what they told us to do. Like that. We don't know why." That wasn't what Winifred had started to ask, but at the sound of Lisa's voice, she turned and examined her carefully. Too tight, too determined not to break.

Winifred shrugged her question aside and stood up. "Okay. That's enough for now. Off to bed with you."

She pushed them, protesting all the way into the bedroom. She paced the small living room afterward for hours before she finally lay down on the couch and fell into an uneasy sleep, dream-filled and horrendous.

Matt finished the story the following morning, leaving Lisa asleep in the bed, joining Winifred for coffee and eggs. There hadn't been bacon in New York City for three years.

"I don't know why they turned us loose after it was over," he said. "They could have held us there in the house while they filed a complaint, and waited for the authorities to take over. But they ordered us to get dressed and told us to get what we could carry in two paper bags, and then shoved us out the door. Finis. We expected the arrival of a copter and arrest any minute. We had friends, but we were afraid to implicate them and we decided to come here. There's some money in the bank, and a good general practitioner won't be out of work very long."

He was wrong about that. The secretary of the county medical association checked his credentials and told him frankly that they couldn't use him. "In fact," the man said, a flushed faced, harried, nervous, middle-aged Irishman, "before I leave today I'll have to file a report on you and probably someone will call the authorities. . . ."

He was holding the information card between his forefinger and thumb, as if offering it to Matt, who took it and tore it into small pieces. The secretary looked relieved. "It'll be in the data bank, but someone will have to ask a direct question now," he said, mopping his face. "I don't remember a thing." He went back to paper work on his desk and didn't look up when Matt left.

Lisa said they should move to France until the madness subsided, but they knew they would be refused travel cards. There was no state from which they couldn't be

extradited, if the long hairs decided to make that move against them. After an all-night talk, they realized that they had no more than two alternatives. They could go to Florida and try to buy their way to the Bahamas, or they could permit Winifred to register them into the private hospital where she was a consultant and administer the cold sleep. The cold sleep made Lisa tremble, but they had to discuss it.

"You would be a number only," Winifred said. "The security regarding who is being kept that way is extremely tight. I can promise you that no one would find you. And in your file, in the computer for automatic restimulation, would be all the necessary data about when to awaken you. You would be safe."

"We'd be safe in the Bahamas," Lisa said.

"Not if this mania continued to spread throughout England at the rate it is now," Matt said thoughtfully. That didn't concern him as much as financing the trip to the Bahamas. He knew, everyone knew, of the mass exodus taking place, and it was a good bet that few of those fleeing had proper identification and permits. The going rate of passage probably was more than his meager bank balance would bear. "But whatever we decide to do," he said, "we have to do it soon. And we have to get out of Winifred's apartment now."

Very dryly Winifred said, "Too late. I'm already your accessory. The place has a man posted. He turned up when you did. The super tipped me off."

Lisa looked miserable and Winifred grinned at her. "Honey, my name has been on that list for a long time. I was very close to Johnny, remember? Obie isn't going to want any of us who knew the kid to be out running free when he gets his hands on the Star Child. What he'll want is lots and lots of confirmation about the kid's pow-

ers, about his telepathic tie to his people, and his link to Obie. Probably he'll start producing miracles that'll make his purification process look like primer stuff, and when that starts, he won't want an elderly psychiatrist loose who might throw an IQ score into the works." She lighted a contraband cigarette with real tobacco, payment from a grateful patient, and blew out clouds of smoke, then said, "I don't think the kid invented anything at all. Not so goddamned clever."

"It's Blake's work," Matt said. He told about the rescue of Lorna. "As soon as Blake realized that they had his plans, he vanished again. Since then there's been a better process for extracting water from rocks, patented by a J. M. Black. That's his—" Suddenly he stopped and he stared ahead at nothing in particular. "That's it! Of course! They want us to lead them to Blake!"

Lisa knocked over her cup. Fortunately it was empty. Coffee was too hard to find any longer to let it be spilled on a tabletop. For a long time she and Matt stared at one another, and finally Lisa said faintly, "We'll have to do it. Take the cold sleep." She looked at Winifred sharply, "Are you certain that they won't find us, that no one can restimulate us before the time chosen?"

Winifred nodded. "It's foolproof."

Matt's hand was hard on Lisa's. Her hand was very steady now, no trace of the trembling the idea had brought about before.

"How long?" Winifred asked.

Matt thought, then said, "Ten years. The turn of the year, the millennium will have passed by then. Either Obie will be a memory, or so firmly entrenched that it won't matter any longer."

They agreed on the ten-year period of cold sleep and Winifred promised to make the arrangements on the fol-

lowing day. "We'll have to give your tail the slip, but that shouldn't be too hard. This is my territory here. I could lose my own shadow if I had to."

After Lisa was sleeping Matt remembered the black disk the alien woman had given to him in his office. He had it in the paper bag that he had brought out of the house with him. He got it out and rubbed his fingers over the smooth side of it again, for the first time in many years. It should go to Blake, he decided. Derek would see that he got it. Blake had said he would be in touch with Derek eventually. Matt put the touchstone and a brief note together in an envelope and wrote Blake's name on it. That was all he could do. Winifred would have to pass it on to Derek, who, sooner or later, would see Blake and hand it to him.

Two days later Matt and Lisa entered the low building where the cold sleep would protect them for the next ten years. The psychiatric division complex was almost a mile long, added to wing by wing as needed. There was a waiting list for admission of the hopeless whose relatives or doctors believed that in the future cures would be found for them. Because of her position in the hospital Winifred had been able to bypass the waiting list.

Winifred processed them personally, and when it was over, eight hours later, she wept quietly. She didn't believe she would ever see either of them again. Obie would send his goons for her, and she would be waiting. There was no one else involved in her case, no Blake to lead them to, only herself. And just maybe, a chance so remote that she knew it was like trying to reap enough silk from one spider to make a gown, just maybe when Obie sent for her she would get to see Johnny. And maybe he would remember her, the only friend he had had for such a long time. And maybe there would be some of the old influence left, just maybe.

INTERLUDE NINE

Armaggedon Now by Obediah Cox; Cox Foundation Press, 640 pp.; $9.95

Obie Cox has gathered together under these covers all the revelations he has been granted and has added to them his understanding of the miracles thus revealed to him directly. Starting with his conversion and his acceptance of the call he heard from God, he has with great care and courage detailed each of the subsequent visitations he has been privileged to have. The book is a wealth of detail in chronological order which shows his growth as a man of God. . . .

Armaggedon Now, Cox, Obediah; Cox Foundation Press, 640 pp.; $9.95

This book is important, psychiatrically speaking, because in it one can trace the spread of a pathological condition, first suffered by one man, Obie Cox, and through him transmitted to thousands, or even millions, of other people. A system of delusional grandeur emerges in the first chapter when Obie Cox suffered his first "blackout" and wakened believing he had heard the voice of God. From there it is a more and more hysterical recounting of other "visions," intermixed with prophecies said to be documented, but it should be noted that when this reader tried to substantiate the documentation, it was found that referents cited did not in fact confirm those statements attributed to them. . . . offers a wealth of material for a graduate student of mental pathology. . . .

Armaggedon Now, Cox, Obediah; Cox Foundation Press, 640 pp.; $9.95

" 'Armaggedon is now,' so saith the Lord to me. I sat in the dark woods with my trusty gun across my legs and I knew I had to kill the aliens that were bringing sickness to my loved ones, and fouling the air of this fair earth. And I heard the

Lord speaking to me just like a man hears his wife across the table, or his partner across his desk." This is how the testimony begins in this remarkable new book, and it doesn't get any better as Obie Cox warms to his subject. It is a chaotic mish-mash of half truths; illiterate constructions, misused words, fractured sentences, tortured syntax. The main thesis of the book appears to be, and I use this phrase advisedly because it is not a simple matter to separate the gibberish from the message, that there is an immense battle going on in the universe. A scale so enormous that man cannot conceive of its dimensions. I always say that if it is inconceivable, then don't try to make me understand, but Cox tries. So there is this battle taking place now. That's what the title refers to, he would have us believe. God is forcing the battle with Evil; it is taking place throughout the entire universe, one of Cox's favorite words, and one awfully hard to disprove in the connection in which he uses it. It may well be that there is a battle taking place in the "entire, endless, infinite, unimaginable stretch of God's universe." But to get on, Earth is one of the major battlefields. Cox is presumably a general in this battle. Cox says: "And only by waging unrelentless [sic] war with this vast enemy, the Evil that has taken up dwellings in our fellow-men, and by winning that war with that enemy inside our fellow Earthmen, can His house, this Earth, be made safe for the believers in God and Good, who will prevail forever after that, and be ready to face the aliens, who are controlled by the Evil and who will return with poisonous germs and sweep over this house, this Earth." Oh, I say now. . . .

Armaggedon Now goes into seventeenth printing!

Chapter Sixteen

ALMOST a year after the visit of Matt and Lisa, Winifred had another visitor. Derek. He was thin; he looked haunted.

"Harvard has gone over," he said. "We weren't surprised. None of the universities will be able to hold out."

He looked like he wanted to cry, very much like a little boy who has had his laboratory dismantled by an angry parent after one too many vile odors penetrated to the living quarters of the house. Winifred resisted the impulse to hug him and tell him it would be all right. She wasn't at all sure that it would be.

"I think the apartment is bugged," she said clearly. "So don't say anything now." Later she took him to the hospital where she had a room that she knew was safe, and she told him the details of why Matt and Lisa had taken the cold sleep. Winifred had written him a note saying only that they were safe and out of touch. He turned very pale at her words now. "Blake will get in touch with you somehow, sometime," she said. "This is for him when he does."

Derek examined the envelope, then stuffed it into his pocket. "It would be safer with you, probably," he said.

"I don't think so. They've been patient, but I don't think it will last. Have you read of those new patents that are in direct competition with Obie's tricks? Blake's work certainly. I think the Church will become more

and more harassed and begin to haul in those who might lead them to him."

"That means me too," Derek said.

"You've got to keep out of their hands," Winifred said simply. "I don't know how, but you have to."

"I could write to him in care of the name he uses for the patents, send it to the brokerage firm that handles his affairs," Derek said after a long pause. "He must have a method worked out so he can keep in touch with the world."

He wrote the note, and Winifred put it through her personal tube. The note was whisked to the central sorter department, dropped into another tube, and was sucked to the Wall Street division of the Post Office, where it was sorted from other mail once more, and put into the tube that led to the firm of Watkins Brokerage. Robert L. Kaufman pursed his lips when he saw the envelope. All letters addressed to his mysterious client, J. M. Black, were sent directly to him. No one else in the firm knew what he did with them, and he had resisted offers of bribes and threats alike to keep the secret that he had sworn to keep. He readdressed the envelope, sent it to Heffleman's News Store in Cleveland, and leaned back wondering what was in it, how it was picked up at the other end, and most of all, who J. M. Black really was. He was a multi-millionaire, that was for sure, but who was he?

A few weeks later a black-haired young man in slovenly, baggy pants, a coat salvaged from a rag pile, shoes that didn't match but were whole, slouched along East 23rd Street in New York City. No one paid any attention to him as he elbowed his way through others who were dressed much as he was. No one raised his eyes high enough to see the steady gray eyes that were bright and

inquisitive and not at all dulled by hunger and hopelessness.

It was Blake of course. He had learned that his golden mop of hair was a dead giveaway when he didn't want to be recognized, and as good as a banner on a staff when he did. He chose on this trip to remain unrecognized. He knew that Obie was after him seriously now. Heffleman's was under surveillance suddenly. He had eluded three men staked out there, but there had been a fight, and two of them would no longer be of any use to the MM's. That had been a surprise. They must be covering every place that he had been in the past. If they had been certain of his appearance at Heffleman's they would have had a dozen men there, not the three who had been as startled as he was when the confrontation took place. He shuffled along, grinning at the sidewalk, remembering the fight. It had been a good one, the first one he'd had in three or four years. He was still in shape.

At the corner he paused and glanced at the store across the street, a used clothing store. The meeting place. A tall thin man was standing in front of it, trying to look at home here in the slums, and failing. Blake grinned again. Derek was Matt made over. He crossed the street, to all appearances oblivious of the official traffic, but getting through it unscathed, so obviously his unconcern was not real. The traffic was made up of taxis, buses, trucks, no private cars at all, and the professional drivers were mean, considering pedestrians their natural enemy, to be cancelled out whenever the opportunity arose.

Blake was pushed roughly by three boys under fourteen, who were sizing up Derek. He snarled at them under his breath and made a hand sign that no kid in the slum who wanted to stay alive failed to learn by the time he was six. The boys held their ground for less than a

second, then turned and shoved their way through the crowds, mouthing asterisks. Blake waited fifteen feet from Derek, examining the crowds carefully for the sign of a tail. There was none, he was certain. Give Derek credit for that anyway. Blake knew the shadows could be posted in any of the buildings about them, using scopes and telltale devices to keep Derek in check, but unless they were down on the streets, they could be shaken easily enough.

It was a cold day, drizzly, not quite freezing, but so near that the fine mist glazed what it touched before it melted away. People were out, as they always were, day and night, in order to line up for food rations, for water, for unemployment benefits, for medical care, simply to get out of the cramped rooms where eight or more of them lived together in the crumbling tenements. Many of the rooms were occupied on a staggered basis. A family could have the room for half of the day only, departing when the other family arrived for its occupancy. So they were on the streets. Mothers wrapped in blankets, holding squirming babies; kids who were old enough to walk were out walking; school-age kids were, thankfully, out of sight, packed into the schools where little learning took place, but where there was heat and free lunch consisting of meal and water, and fish crackers. They were the lucky ones. By fourteen, or twelve, if the kid looked older, they were allowed to drop out, and they were on the streets after that.

Derek looked frozen, he had been waiting for an hour, and had almost given up hope when the unkempt youth touched his arm roughly and muttered. "Start walking, Dek, I'll tag along."

Derek didn't look at the stranger a second time, but jerked away from the building front and got into the masses shuffling up the street. He didn't see Blake again

for almost half an hour. Then he was there at his side, his hand hard on Derek's arm, guiding him down an alley. It was worse here because of the people sleeping on and under newspapers and rags. Derek shivered not this time from the cold, and Blake hurried him on. They entered a basement and stopped.

"Strip," Blake said. He put a small light on the floor. It was blue and made his lips look purple.

Derek looked around. "Why?"

"Just do it," Blake said.

Derek stared at him for a moment, then very slowly started to take off his clothes. Blake examined each item, then Derek got dressed again. Blake looked at the envelope with his name on it curiously, but didn't open it yet. He put it in an inside pocket.

"I came prepared to take you with me, if you want to."

Derek hesitated only a moment, then nodded. They picked their way through the darkness to a door on the other side of the basement. For the next half hour this was the pattern. Blake knew his way through the basements and the alleys like a rat finding his way through a familiar maze. Suddenly they were at the riverfront.

Derek looked about quickly. The wind coming off the fetid water was cold and evil-smelling and constant. There was a black warehouse looming behind them, on both sides of them, and the river before them. Nothing else. They had lost the mobs, and might have been alone in the city.

Derek was bitterly cold. The mist here at the river was freezing, coating everything with dirty ice. Blake left him, felt around one of the lower boards of the warehouse, withdrew a thin pencil-shaped object. He put it to his lips and blew once, then put it in his pocket. He motioned to Derek to follow him and went down to the

edge of the pier and waited. After a moment there was a stir in the black water. A homing device, Derek realized. He had an ultra-sonic homing device to bring his boat to him when he whistled. The craft broke through the water and floated easily alongside the pier. It was shaped generally like a ground effect car, circular, disklike, but it was black and featureless. Blake ran his hand over the thing and a hatch opened. He went inside with Derek following. A few seconds later they were sinking down into the water again.

"We'll take off from the bay," Blake said. "Less risky there."

Derek was warming up now and he studied the interior of the craft with interest. Blake had modified it until all traces of the original vehicle had been erased. It was roomy inside, and warm, with a simple-looking dash-control board that housed a four-inch-square screen which now was showing the river and its banks in a continuous sweep. The strangeness Derek felt for this Blake persisted and he remained silent. Blake also was silent, giving his attention to the screen and the controls he operated. They were in the bay. There were National Guards craft, and some navy ships, several tugs, a pleasure cruise ship at anchor.

"Wouldn't it be safer to wait until dark?" Derek asked.

"Don't think so. They'll rely on instruments after dark, but now they'll sight us visually. Much easier to fool their eyes than their instruments." Blake grinned then, and all at once the stranger was gone, and they were kids playing together in a tree house again. Derek grinned back.

They shot up from the water like a flying fish, climbing straight up through the cloud cover to three thousand feet before Blake leveled their flight and headed west. Below them there was excitement as instruments

and men clashed over what had happened. Radar was turned to scan the sky, but by then Blake had dropped to skim over the treetops and so escaped the magic eye.

And that was how Derek Daniels joined Blake and became his partner.

Half expecting to feel jealousy, he felt only admiration and loyalty to this unschooled boy-man changeling. Blake read Matt's note twice, then handed it to Derek and walked outside the cabin high in the Pennsylvania hills handling the black disk that was his heritage.

The note was as follows:

"Dear Blake, I should have found time to talk to you when you were with us the last time, when you brought Lorna home to us. I didn't realize how short the visit was to be, I thought there was time. We always think there is enough time, and there never is. I can only hope that this will reach you soon, I can't know for certain that it will. I have to gamble on it and say here what I didn't say before.

"When the ship came, I was the first one to see the aliens. I have to start with that. Obie has lied about it and the lie is believed now, but I was there first. I stood at the side of the road and looked down on the ship, feeling awe, unlimited excitement, joy. . . . High on the ship a panel, or door, opened, and one of the aliens stepped out. He had no platform there, nothing. He simply stepped out on air and stood there. I started to climb over the fence and when I looked again, the panel was closed, and the door-hatch that we all got to know was opening at ground level.

"That is the first thing.

"When the alien woman arrived at the office some days later, Florence was already in labor. I was not there when they both delivered. I believe the alien delivered Florence, then herself.

"One baby was dying, the other was well and healthy. I knew how it would be with the alien child, the suspicion, fear, extraordinary precautions that would imprison him. I don't think I made a conscious decision. The alien had made the switch, if a switch had indeed been made. I let it stick. One dead baby to add to the many dead aliens, one live and healthy baby to be raised in a normal family as an Earth child, as my child.

"I had only that first minute in which to decide. After that it was out of my hands. No one would have believed me later even if I had decided to voice my suspicions. I didn't decide to do that, of course, but later, when Obie took you, I was tempted. If Winifred hadn't told us about the prison conditions surrounding Johnny I probably would have talked. But I couldn't risk exposing you to that.

"I don't know what the disc is, what it does, why she gave it to me. When I took her tunic, the disc fell from it. She indicated that I should keep it. I can only hand it on and say, this may be from your mother. Love, Matt."

Derek, like Blake, read it twice, the second time very slowly, stopping often, gazing into space, thinking furiously. He put it down numbly and paced in the cabin, not seeing anything there. It all fell into place now. And Obie knew. They had found out somehow. He remembered reading of the proposed visit by Obie Cox to the estate where the Star Child was kept. He shuddered; that might have been Blake, locked up on an estate somewhere all his life. So, Obie saw the Star Child and guessed that he was the father. If the Star Child was that much like him, why didn't anyone else see it? And what of the stories of his great powers, which were only now being manifested? All lies? The longer he thought of it, the more confused Derek became. Hours passed before Blake returned.

He had washed the black from his hair, and it was the blond that Derek remembered. He was tall and broad-shouldered, very handsomely built, with the self-assurance that had been part of him ever since Derek could remember. There was a new thoughtfulness, a new maturity perhaps, a more distant attitude, a new curiosity. . . . Derek couldn't put a finger on it, couldn't put the concept into words at all, but felt it nonetheless.

Blake handed the black disk to him wordlessly. Derek turned it over and over, and could find nothing to it that suggested what it was. A black disk, shiny on one side, dull on the other. It fit his palm nicely, was slightly warm, but then Blake had been handling it and could have warmed it. Finally he handed it back with a shrug.

"I have to go to the ship," Blake said. "This has to be a key of some sort." He flipped the disk into the air and caught it a couple of times, and when he turned again to look at Derek there was an unholy gleam in his eyes. "It's a damn shame the ship is in the shadow of the temple," he said, grinning. "I just may have to be converted in order to get close enough to it to get inside."

They knew that Obie had a round-the-clock guard at the ship, complementing the UNEF there already, who were mystified at this new development. Everyone who went into the ship was scrutinized, photographed, had his retinas checked. Weekly there were incidents in which men were summarily seized and taken to the temple, put inside a room there and left for five minutes, only to be released without a word about what had been done, why they had been taken, or what was expected. Many of them were believers and didn't complain, but the non-believers complained bitterly to the authorities. Each time this happened the official temple security chief apologized and promised that it wouldn't happen again.

The same thing was going on at the airports, and at the docks where the exodus was the most pronounced.

For the next several weeks Derek and Blake worked together in the cabin, and Derek was happier than he had been for a long time. During this period of time Blake changed. Before Derek's eyes he changed. His hair became mud-colored, and his eyes adapted to contacts that made them brown and smaller-looking. His cheeks became sunken, and his chin seemed to recede slightly, the result of the way he held his head, half ducked so that he peered up from lowered eyes. A new expression of obsequious servility intermixed with repressed brutality changed him even more. He shuffled his left foot when he walked now, not enough to bring a close study, but enough to change his walk from that of a young man to that of a man in his mid years, tired and despairing. Very carefully he planted hair in his ears, and in the midst of the dirt and earwax was a transmitter and a receiver. He and Derek would be in touch.

As soon as it all was in place he started to mutter. He left the cabin muttering to himself, and Derek turned on his receiver and listened to the snatches of filthy verse, strings of curses, bits of . . . so I says and he says . . . narratives, ruminations about the good old days, and so on. Derek burst out laughing. The shuffling man looked about wildly and muttered darkly about voices from the sky.

His role was finished with that touch. His name would be James Teague until further notice. And he left Derek alone in the mountain cabin, alone, but not lonely.

Several days later, in the middle of a spring that was cold and dry, promising another year of drought to a land already worn out with dryness and the despair of no crops worth harvesting, there appeared in Des Moines a derelict muttering about the weather, about the lack of

work, about the rottenness of the system, about the old days when a man could get a drink. . . . He shuffled about the city for weeks, getting in the way here and there, sleeping in doorways, getting rolled once or twice, but left undamaged; aimless, harmless, penniless, hungry, he quickly became a fixture, recognized by the cops and the inhabitants alike, accepted by them all. He wasn't in the way any more than the thousands like him were in the way, and if his muttering became wearisome after a time, the listener could leave him without another thought. Eventually he turned up in a Listener's Booth and stood fumbling a shapeless hat for several minutes saying nothing, but muttering furiously, until he turned and left without confessing anything. The following week he was back, and this time he talked haltingly. "M'name's Teague," he said. "James Teague, that's it." This time also, he raised his gaze from the filthy hat and looked about him in darting, suspicious glances. There was little enough to see. The room was small, ten by ten feet, heavily draperied and comfortable at 72 degrees. The air was clean and fresh-smelling, regardless of the condition of the confessors who appeared there. And there was the voice there. It whispered and murmured encouragement to the confessor, and welcomed him to return when he was ready. It understood, no matter what he said, the listener understood. On his fourth visit Teague confessed to murder, of his wife and their three children. In a trembling voice, with much hesitation, many pauses, in a fashion of almost total incoherency he confessed to having chopped them to pieces with an ax and having buried them in a common grave in the Missouri Hills. He said that she had mocked him for the voice he heard.

"I didn't want to do it, I really didn't want to, but the voice, it said that I had to and I couldn't see no other way

out but to go ahead and do it and get it done with. She warn't no bad woman, but she never heard the voice like I did and she mocked at it all the time and told the children to mock at it and to laugh it outa my head, 'James Teague, you're a crazy old man,' she said, and the voice said I gotta make them all stop, so I did it."

That week a card was given to him. It came out of nowhere to appear on the table in front of him, and the card told him to go to the Voice of God Church three blocks away and talk to the Reverend Huston Avery there. He read it aloud, like a child mastering his first primer, and then he read it again, and when he left he was muttering to himself about not going to see no Reverend Avery and it didn't matter what the card told him to do, he wasn't about to tell nobody about what he done, and it had been a mistake to go to the booth. . . .

That night he showed up at the church, still very suspicious, uncommunicative. He spoke to no one. He handled the card all the time however. He returned to the church half a dozen times before the Reverend Huston Avery approached him and took him to an interior office where he talked seriously to him about the call of God.

"Sometimes God has us do things which would horrify our neighbors and arouse the wrath of the non-believers. It is a test for us. I see by the card that you are holding that you are one of the chosen. One of the many Hands of God, chosen to do His will, spoken to directly by Him. Is this not true?"

The old man nodded without speaking.

"Yes. I suspected that it was so. And you feel that by obeying God's call you have committed a crime for which the authorities will punish you. Is that not so?"

"Warn't no crime. Just done what I had to do."

"Yes, brother. The Voice of God spoke to you and you obeyed. That makes you one of the chosen ones."

Reverend Avery was in his thirties, open-faced, beaming at the derelict happily. He was a good-looking man, and very kind. "How old are you, sir?"

"Forty-two, forty-three, don't rightly remember exactly."

"Would you like a job? We have work you can do."

So James Teague started to work for the Voice of God Church. He did handyman labor at first, but gradually came to be trusted enough to hang out with the MM's who stood guard during the services and who accompanied the Reverend Avery when he held rallies. James Teague didn't join the MM's because he was too old to be eligible, but in spirit he was one of them and recognized as such. After six months of dutiful labor, spending his wages each week on booze and women, he became converted himself. It happened spontaneously. He had a cot in the Church dorm, where many of the MM's stayed. Nightly the Voice talked to them, praising their work, extolling them to greater efforts in the service of God. Teague never had paid much attention to the Voice before, but continued his almost inaudible monologue while the Voice spoke, but this time he cocked his head suddenly and started to listen hard, even after the Voice had stopped speaking. He nodded, listened, nodded again. He sat silently then for half an hour, again assumed his listening attitude, this time rising to his feet and leaving the room as one who walks in his sleep. The MM corporal who was on duty alerted Reverend Avery, who intercepted Teague in the hall leading to the street.

"Where are you going, James?"

Teague stopped, but didn't focus his eyes on Avery. He said nothing.

"James, can you hear me?"

Teague saw him then. "You gotta let me go, I gotta go

outside. Gotta get away from it. Keeps on and on. On and on all the time now."

"What is it saying to you, James? You can tell me."

"Says that I gotta go to the temple and go into service there. I don't know nothing about no temple. I don't know."

"James, come into the office with me." Reverend Avery led him into the small, very private office where he seated the man and left him. After a moment Teague raised his head again and listened. This time there was a Voice there.

"James, you must go to the temple and offer yourself for service to the Lord. The Lord is calling you, James. You must answer His call."

Teague listened closely and when the voice stopped, he clutched his head hard, looked about wildly for an escape and found only the door Avery had left by. It was locked. The Voice started again in a moment, and this time while it was speaking Teague sank to his knees and put his head down low between his hands. "Yes, yes, I'll do it. I'll do it! What do you want?"

When Avery returned he found Teague still on his knees, muttering incoherent prayers, promising obedience. Avery informed him that he was to be sent to the temple at Covington. Teague nodded dumbly.

INTERLUDE TEN

Transcript from the Joe Escrow Show, March 9, 1982

Joe: Dr. Bevins, you say that the Listener's Booths will be the most successful part of the Church. Would you care to elaborate on that?

Bevins: Sure, Joe. It's simple. You see, they give new converts an appointment for the first time in the booths, and at that time there is a real listener. That's all his job is, to listen. Not comment, not make notes, not censure, or praise. He listens. The poor guy might not say much the first time, but he is hooked anyway because he can have the attention of another human being for a whole hour without fear of interruption. He can spill his guts and not be afraid of being arrested later. It's a good gimmick.

Joe: You agree, Bishop O'Brien?

O'Brien: Of course not. It's a fad, like the rest of it. Besides, most of the people don't talk for an hour, or any part of it. They go in, five minutes later they are out. Auricular confession, to be successful, must have two participants. There must be a judgment. . . .

Bevins: Exactly my point. After the person is hooked there is no need for a listener, and there is none after that. The booth is empty. They still go and unload, and they seem to benefit from it. . . .

O'Brien: Seem, my dear Dr. Bevins. You surprise me. It is well recognized that man yearns to confess his sins and atone for them. It is not enough to relate them to an inanimate object; atonement must follow.

Bevins: The philosophy of the Voice of God Church is that man does not have this need and the success of the Listener's Booths and the incidence of repeaters attests—

O'Brien: Like so much that this church has done, this is a truncated version of a practice that was beneficial to man. Just what good can it do to sit in an empty room and relate your aggressions, give voice to your transgressions? Without atonement there is no forgiveness.

Bevins: From whom? Obviously the God that Obie Cox calls upon doesn't care if pensioners count beads or if they don't count beads. Just as obviously the people accept this much grander concept with ease. You must admit that this bigger god is more awesome than one who watches to see that a penitent doesn't miss a Hail Mary. . . .

O'Brien: Dr. Bevins, you are twisting my words. . . .

Bevins: I'm telling you it's time to see why the booths work, why the people go back week after week, what they gain. . . .

O'Brien: In the end they will have gained only hell. . . .

Joe: Gentlemen, let me ask you another question here. Dr. Bevins,

something you said earlier has been nagging at me. You said the people are hooked after a visit or two. Exactly what do you mean by that? Addicted, as with drugs?

Bevins: Yes. I think so. Let's trace the history of the Listener's Booths a bit, shall we? At first there weren't many of them. Cox preached that his converts should go to them and unburden themselves. Of course this was a ruse. He simply didn't have the staff at that time to hear all the people who came forward. No doubt he was thinking it terms of what Bishop O'Brien represents. A place with a priest to hear confessions and to advise afterward. But priests are expensive. He improvised. Did you know that in the beginning he paid absolutely nothing for the services of the Listeners? Most of the booths were donated also. He scrambled his Listeners so that those from Boston heard people in southern California; people from Florida manned the Washington booths, like that. And it worked. They didn't have to be trained, and they were free. Converts themselves, eager to serve the church. We ran some experiments in the Arlington area when the booths opened there. We sent in some of our bright young psychology majors and instructed them to relate rather bizarre behavior. No reaction on the part of the listeners. The accounts became more and more loaded, actual criminal activities were recounted, and no reaction. After the testing period ended, questioning the subjects disclosed that they had begun to look forward to the sessions, that they were reluctant to discontinue them. Several of the subjects guessed that a subtle hypnosis had been used on them to make them want to return. One suggested a gas, but the containers we sent in with them showed nothing but plain air. Of course, this was in the early period when there were still listeners. Later, after they began to use empty booths we did the same experiment, and found that the subjects were even more drawn to the confessionals. We had come up with new and better sample units to obtain air samples, but again could find nothing that could account for the effect. Several theories were advanced to explain this behavior. Very briefly I'll sum them. . . .

O'Brien: Please remember, Joe, that Dr. Bevins said theories. None of this has been proven, and his own tests have been almost completely invalidated by the revelation that some of the subjects he used in the experiments were either at the time of the experiments, or shortly afterward, members of the

Voice of God Church. One wonders about their observations, how much objectivity they showed, and so on.

Joe: Is that right, Dr. Bevins?

Bevins: Not just like that, Joe. That's coloring it a bit. Now the theories—

O'Brien: What do you mean, I colored it. Were some of the subjects members?

Bevins: Let me get on with—

Joe: Why not answer the question first? Were they?

Bevins: In any sample of the population you will find that a certain percent of those being tested belong to certain religious organizations. . . .

Joe: Were they members of the Voice of God Church?

Bevins: Some of them later joined. Now about the—

Joe: When did they join? How many of them joined?

Bevins: Are you more interested in the conversion of a few students or in the theories proposed by eminent scientists to account for the curious effects of the Listener's Booths on those who visit them?

Joe: Were the theories advanced on the basis of information garnered from any of the students who were members of the Voice of God Church? Just yes or no, if you will, Doctor. It's a simple question.

Bevins: Well, yes, but to explain—

Joe: Wouldn't you say that that fact invalidates whatever theories you might—

Bevins: (Crackle, crackle) it! There's no other way to investigate the (crackle crackle) Booths! A certain number of the investigators always become converted!

O'Brien: You see, Joe, it all goes back to the innate need of man to unburden himself and then to atone for his transgressions. Unfortunately, with Listener's Booths only the first half of that need is satisfied. . . .

Bevins: Wait a minute! Have you gone to one of the booths, Bishop O'Brien?

O'Brien: Of course not!

Bevins: Well, I have, and I know that some sort of gas is used there, or some subliminal suggestion to return that is almost too strong to resist. . . .

Joe: You want to go back, Dr. Bevins?

Bevins: (Crackle, crackle, crackle) I do! But I'm able to resist it because I can understand. . . .

Joe: I see, Dr. Bevins. Wouldn't you say, Bishop O'Brien, that a new look should be given to the work that has been done by the doctor and his students. . . .

Chapter Seventeen

BLAKE-TEAGUE arrived in Covington by special Church plane in October. The countryside was dull brown. The leaves had fallen, brittle and lifeless, ahead of season for lack of water. Only at the temple was the grass still green, the ornamental trees still luxurious-looking, and chrysanthemums in full bloom. The grounds with the precisely measured terraces, the geometry of hundreds of white marble steps, the shrubs, bushes, flowers arranged mathematically to perfection looked like a postcard. The plane came straight down so that the temple grew from a tiny glare of white to a structure that filled the horizon when the plane finally touched ground. There were seventy-five initiates aboard, some of them Teague's age, some younger, some much older. All of them were awed. The initiates were lined up and led to the dorm where the new arrivals were kept until the lengthy testing program was concluded.

Blake-Teague knew that this would be the tricky part of it. As the weeding-out process advanced and the numbers were lessened, the chances of successfuly maintaining his masquerade diminished. He had very carefully established James Teague as a registered person with the data bank; he would pass a routine retina check, but not

a fingerprint check, so if they went too far back, Blake Daniels would fall out in their laps. He muttered and mumbled and hoped they wouldn't get that thorough with anyone as subordinate as he was. He counted on their being less suspicious here in the inner sanctum than they were at the ship entrance. He knew that he came highly recommended. He passed their IQ tests, no higher than 100, and the aptitude tests that proved he was fit to farm and run machinery but had no aptitude for any of the arts or sciences. His personality profile would show a man ready to bully or to submit to bullying. And throughout it all, he showed a streak now and then of a psychopathic personality that was ready to emerge at any time. At the end of the testing period he was given an assignment, and there was no time for him to escape and visit the ship before he was sent from the temple. As an accepted member now, he would be allowed to make the pilgrimage back whenever he was free to do so.

The day that James Teague-Blake Daniels left the temple to fulfill his first task for the Church, Winifred Harvey was taken to the headquarters building on Mount Laurel. Winifred looked about curiously as she deplaned. There was the airstrip, and the control building at the side of it, completely encircled by magnificent hardwood trees: brick red and brown oaks, blazing maples, yellow birches. The plateau on the side of the mountain had one road leading from it, a narrow unpaved road that forked with one branch leading downward through the forest, the other part winding upward toward the summit. Along the road scarlet sassafras trees and shiny green honeysuckle and mountain laurel made a dense mass that appeared impenetrable. It was very lovely, and very lonely-looking.

Obie met her personally. "Dr. Harvey, it is nice to see you again. It's many, many years since our first meeting."

"We never met, Obie Cox, and you know it. You simply eavesdropped on me and Matt when you had the chance."

Obie smiled genially and led her inside the colonial house. "I think you'll find our accommodations adequate, Doctor. If you desire anything, please don't hesitate to let us know. We wish you to be entirely comfortable during your visit."

"You realize that I plan to charge you with kidnaping," Winifred said pleasantly, following Obie into a long, dim, cool room that had couches and comfortable chairs in it. There were two men in the room. They both stood when she entered.

"Dr. Harvey, may I present my colleagues, Mr. Merton and Dr. Mueller."

"Robbie Mueller!" Winifred ignored the outstretched hand of the other psychiatrist. She looked him up and down. "So this is what happened to you? I wondered. Deacon in charge of the brainwashing division?"

Rober Mueller had been her pupil twenty years ago, a brilliant, exciting, original intellect, mixed with emotional immaturity that had been a constant source of irritation. He was forty, good-looking now, and poised, where he had been rawboned and gauche, fresh from the back country of Minnesota, awkward and unsure of his manners, ignorant of the niceties of what to order in restaurants, what the different drinks contained, what to wear, how to comb his hair. None of that showed now.

"Dr. Harvey, a pleasure," he murmured at her. She grinned at him suddenly, and laughed aloud when a flush spread across his cheeks and his face suddenly looked heavy, and he was very out of place in the expensively furnished room of antiques.

Winifred turned to Obie and said, "Okay, you can get

from me what you want, but you'll be disappointed. I don't know from nothing."

"We'll see," the third man said then. Merton, he'd been introduced as Mr. Merton. Winifred studied him briefly. He was the organizer here, she decided quickly. This was his baby.

"Winifred. . . . May I?" Robbie Mueller looked at her and waited for her shrug before he continued. "You do know certain things that we need to know. I won't harm you. I think you know that I can find out what we want without doing you any damage at all, but if you are recalcitrant, then there are things I can do to you. . . . We really do want your cooperation."

She simply waited.

"One, Blake Daniels. We want to find him. And Derek too. We know about Matt and Lisa, that you put them to sleep, but we'd like to know for how long and what their official numbers are so that we can check what you tell us."

"One," she said, "I don't know. Two, I don't know. Three, ten years. Four, I don't know. Okay? Now I can go?"

So they took her to the hospital on the grounds and Robbie Mueller apologized as he administered the injection personally, and after several days, or weeks, she never did find out how long it was, she woke up in a wide, luxuriant bed, to see soft cream-colored drapes rippling in the breeze dimming the sunlight, and a slender girl sitting by the bed watching her anxiously. The girl had large brown eyes that were like the eyes of a fawn, Winifred thought as she struggled to wake up completely. The girl arose and came to her.

"Would you like to get up now?" she asked. "May I help you?"

Winifred found that she needed help. A tray was

brought in and she had coffee, the first she'd had in months, and a cigarette with good tobacco, and when she finished with both, there was food, and a bath and fresh clothing. The girl smiled charmingly when she asked what day it was. When Winifred was dressed once more the girl led her from the room to an office where Mueller was waiting for her.

He looked tired, Winifred thought, and she smiled. It was harder on the one doing it than the one to whom it was done. "And so?" she prompted when he hesitated.

"You know," he said. "You know what you had to tell us. So we keep looking." He toyed with a pen. "We can't let you go, you know."

"I suspected," she said dryly.

"We would like to enlist your help," Robbie said after another pause. "You talked about Johnny, the Star Child, you know. I was curious about how you felt about him. About your relationship with him."

"Robbie, come out with it. What do you want?"

"You have a choice. You can voluntarily help us with Johnny. Or you can enter the hospital as a patient." He said it fast, glanced about guiltily, and put a finger to his lips. "I know from what you told me that you are very fond of him, and that he trusts you implicitly. Probably you are the only person he does trust. He's coming here soon, and I believe it would be good for him to find you here ready to greet him, make him feel at home."

Winifred remained silent thinking furiously. Robbie was feeling pangs of guilt. Why? What had he done? Or was this it? Did they know that it was she who had told Johnny, falsely, that he was the Star Child, the alien? Did it matter? She put a hand to her forehead and Robbie leaned forward.

"Are you ill? Put your head down. . . ."

She took the out he offered and in a few moments was

being led from the office by the solicitous girl, and was taken back to her room where she lay down and tried to decide what she should do. Not that she had much choice actually, and wasn't this what she had counted on when she realized Obie's men were closing in on her? But why was Robbie Mueller looking guilty as hell about it? What was the catch? She was tired then, but sleep eluded her, and as she drifted half awake, half asleep, she knew the answer. This was a reprieve only. As soon as they had Johnny ensconced and feeling safe through her efforts, then she would be . . . sent to the hospital, whatever it was that they planned for her. The thought resolved her indecision and she fell asleep. The next day she accepted the offer and started to plot her escape.

No one could make it down the mountain through the forests, this was accepted as true, perhaps was true. No one lived in the forests, and there was wild life there: bears, snakes, wild boars. There were bogs of quicksand, but more than that, there was no food, no trail, no way to find civilization once more if one became lost in the gloomy depths. They all believed it, and acted on their belief. There were no men posted to keep anyone out of the forests. The road that wound back down the mountain was heavily guarded, with electronic monitoring equipment spaced along its entire length. Winifred didn't press the point but she did wonder how they knew that no one could make it out through the woods. Or was it a myth, like the myth told to children that the floor around the bed was covered with monsters that would grab them if they didn't stay under the covers. That one usually worked too. Were the monsters now in the woods? She found it a curious thought, one that she reflected on at length.

Or, and it seemed more probable that this was the real reason for the lack of concern about the forests, were all

the towns on the edges of the forest in the hands of the faithful? If that were so, then there was no escape possible. It made her angry to think of the smirks on their faces: after pushing through the woods for weeks, sore, muddy, gaunt, to be picked up in the first town and brought back, exhibited as proof of the simple words: no escape.

Her duties were light. She was not allowed inside the hospital at all, but occasionally she was consulted by Robbie Mueller, and it was he who passed on the instructions to her from Obie, or more likely, Merton. Winifred got the impression more and more strongly that it was Merton who was running the show, and another curious fact that she stored for future consideration was that none of the people around her seemed to realize this.

Her instructions were simple. She was to write a full report of the years she had spent with the Star Child. Period. Busy work? She wasn't sure. Silently she started it.

In his office in the same building where Winifred labored over the long account of her daily life with Johnny, Obie was kicking his desk. "God damn it! We've gotta get him through a miracle!"

Merton slouched lazily, contemplating his fingers. "You have any idea of the security precautions they have set up there?"

"Okay, okay. I believe you. So what? Think, dammit, think!"

Billy was there also, panting, perspiring in the middle of January, uneasy as usual about anything that threatened to shake the boat that he thought of as eternally on the verge of sinking. He puffed and said, "Obie, be reasonable. He can make his own demands, and if they turn him down, we can send in a squadron for him. Like we planned in the beginning."

"In the beginning that seemed good enough," Obie

said. He was growing thick around the middle, and his face was getting heavy in the jowls. His neck had grown an inch in the past two years. He was forty, and feeling depressed about it, wanting things to come to a head now, while he was still in command. He looked on the years ahead as going downhill only; after forty there was nothing but old age to look forward to, and he wanted this to be finished, this year. He didn't want to have to keep fighting for the Church until he was a tottering old fool like Everett. He kept Everett around in order to look at him from time to time, firming his resolve each time he studied the senile fool. Not to him. That wasn't going to happen to him!

He paced for several minutes in the silence of the room, then he turned to Merton and said, "We've got almost six months to get something organized. You got the men with brains, let them come up with something. I want to lift him with such a blaze of glory that it will set the whole world on fire. You get that for me."

Merton pushed himself up from the chair. "Sure, Obie, I see the point, and I think it's a good one, but the execution? I just don't know."

In upper New York State Johnny stared at Lenny Mallard. Lenny said, for the third time, "You are going to address them, Johnny. We are going to put a stop to all the rumors now." Lenny was smiling.

Johnny hadn't been afraid of anyone for a long time, not since his shining man in the sky first nodded and smiled at him, but he felt a chill then. Lenny didn't believe in him. "I won't do it, Mr. Mallard," Johnny said stubbornly, for the third time also.

They were in Lenny's office, where he had turned off the recorder for this interview. Lenny smiled more broadly and stood up. He came around his desk and put his arm about Johnny's shoulder companionably. "Son,

you know and I know that all this is a frost. Right? If you could kill, I'd be dead now. Let me tell you something, Johnny. Ever since man began to talk, he's been at war with other men. Fact. They fought over land, over trade routes, over insults, over game. . . . You name it, it's been fought for. But none of the wars ever fought for all these things was half as bloody as war over religion. If it got to be a religious war, there was nothing either side could do that was so bad it gave anyone insomnia.

"As soon as you convince yourself that you're fighting God's war, anything goes. Follow me, so far?" Johnny nodded. "Good. Now, religion's a funny thing, Johnny. It's an idea in the head of men. That's all. If you're fighting a war for a river, once you defeat the enemy you can seize control of the river and the war's over. Not with ideas. The only way that sort of a war can be ended really is through the eradication of the idea wherever it exists and that means the eradication of the enemy, and the complete destruction of all the writings that include the idea. Simple?" Again Johnny nodded.

"Now, as soon as a man, any man, comes along with a full-blown idea of what God is and what His purpose is, other men start to pick it to pieces. They find the inevitable contradictions and errors and point them out in a reasonable manner. They become the enemy of that particular religion. Every religion ever born has its enemies. Every last one. By the very nature of the subject matter there is no room for more than one religion in any given area. If the God of the Catholic Church is the real God, then the others are false, see? And those who worship false gods are a menace. If Buddha is God, then the other gods are false gods. And so on. Historically the gods have been warlike. but not in more recent years. Through the spread of Christianity the gods became loving and forgiving and although a few people have raised the cry of

Anti-Christ from time to time during war, there hasn't been a truly religious war for almost a thousand years. But one is brewing.

"Obie Cox is going to start such a war within the next five years, if he isn't stopped soon. You can stop him."

Johnny hadn't seen Obie Cox since his weekend visit three years ago or more. He had promised to call him from time to time, but hadn't done so. There was always trouble locating him when Johnny thought of it, or someone came to see Johnny, or something happened to postpone the call. Johnny had no idea that Obie claimed him as the inventor of the revolutionary products that were being offered to believers through the Church. He had found Obie interesting, but he found everyone from outside interesting. He couldn't remember what they had talked about. It didn't surprise him to hear that he was the only one who could stop a war brewing on Earth. As the months went on, his power would come to be realized more and more by Earthmen, and they would turn to him often for help and advice. He said, "How could addressing the United Nations General Assembly stop this one man and his ideas?"

Lenny hesitated only a fraction of a second, coming to the tricky part now, not really knowing exactly how aware Johnny was of what was happening in the world beyond the walls of the estate. He suspected that the answer was nothing, except for what his occasional visitor told him, and that was carefully monitored at all times. He didn't appear to pause at all. "Obie Cox has made certain claims about you. He says that you have appealed to him as your savior, that you have pleaded with him to rescue you from the U.N. personnel who torture you daily. Things like that. He also has claimed that your people are wicked and plan to conquer Earth when they return, and that you are in communication with them

and plan to aid them in their endeavor. He will make war with them too, if they return."

He stopped, not knowing if he had gone too far or not. Johnny's face changed subtly during this recitation of Obie's claims, he had become more distant, more thoughtful. Well, it was done. Now he would wait for the reaction. Johnny was thinking about Obie. He hadn't appeared very brilliant, so how had he guessed about Johnny and his almost daily communication with his people? Why did he think Johnny's people would want to conquer Earth? And didn't he realize, if he knew that much, that Johnny was the one preselected to lead the attack, destined to reign forever? Johnny felt the beginnings of a headache and there was a stir of excitement that he always felt when it was time for the shining man to come to him and tell him what to do. He stood up.

"I'll think about it," he said, starting toward the door.

"There's nothing to think about," Lenny started, but when Johnny turned to him, his eyes were glassy-looking, and his face as composed as a sleepwalker's. Lenny had seen Johnny fall asleep on his feet before, and it always made him queasy. He said hurriedly, "Yes, think about it, Johnny. I'll talk to you later."

In his room Johnny let himself open to the inner vision and he listened intently to the voices that instructed him daily.

Afterward he knew that he would help Obie Cox in his war all that he could. If that would halve the population, when his people returned it would be simple to finish the rest of the job, the other half. Johnny never had seen more than fifty or sixty people at one time in his life. To him the idea of four billion people was incomprehensible; that was somewhat over five thousand, but how much over he had no concept. So he could consider

reducing that by half with ease since it was meaningless to him to begin with.

He would let Lenny's speech writers prepare whatever they wanted him to say, and meanwhile he would be writing the speech that he actually would make. The shining man would tell him what to say in it.

INTERLUDE ELEVEN

(From Diane MacLeish's notes)

Special to the New York *Times* Oct. 3

Today the Works of Man Museum unveiled its newest acquisition amidst a stormy protest of the nation's most eminent art critics, who revile the statue with one voice. Palizzo's nude, entitled, St. Diane, they say is pornographic, vile, hideous, has no redeeming merits, is crassly commercial, a return to the stultifying conformism the early Catholic Church demanded of artists over a thousand years ago. The statue is that of a nude woman straddling a relief map of the United States. One of her hands clutches her genital area, the other is pressed against her breast, and while improbably long hair obscures both hands, the rapture on her face and the pose in general are suggestive. . . .

Oct. 30

An uneasy silence lies over the Works of Man Museum tonight following the worst riots witnessed in New York City in over a decade. Slowly the pieces are starting to fall into places as the laborious task of sorting rumor from fact continues. Dr. Wilford Depuy, Director of the Bureau for Maintaining Serenity and Peaceful Coexistence among the inhabitants of the city, states

that the cause of the riots now appears to be rooted in the effect of the "miracle" that three women claimed to have witnessed at the "shrine" of St. Diane. The women claim that they were visited by St. Diane in the spirit as they neared the statue, after waiting in line for over six hours. The visitation afflicted them with hysterical catatonia. As with most hysterical manifestations, this was contaglous, and people started to collapse in the museum, then in the street as they waited to gain entrance. The rumor spread rapidly then that the MSPC forces were using riot gas on the people without cause, and there was panic that spread throughout the night and into the following day. . . .

Oct. 31

Replicas of St. Diane are being offered throughout the city, throughout the nation in all sizes, for all prices. Some of them are gold-plated, others cast in the crudest plaster, but all are selling. Again and again "miracles" are being reported by the owners of the statuettes, and in churches where large copies have been installed, doctors are on round-the-clock duty to minister to the stricken. . . .

Rome, UPI Dec. 17

Italian longshoremen continue to picket the docks here and violence mounts as the nine-day-old strike spreads. Leaving their jobs today were the public transportation unions, the telephone company employees, and the garbage collectors. It is an open secret in Rome that the strikers are being encouraged by the Vatican, and nightly long lines form at various churches and cathedrals where the workers are fed, and receive allotments of food to take home to their families. It is rumored that martial law will be declared within two days if the workers refuse to return to their jobs. The dock area is already a malodorous health hazard, officials report, and with the garbage collection halted, and the worsening conditions brought on by the prolonged drought and summer heat, all Rome will be endangered by disease and fire.

The strike originated when it was learned that aboard the U.S.S. *Conover* there were fifteen million replicas of the infamous Palizzo, St. Diane. . . .

Chapter Eighteen

"HERE they come," Merton said, watching the parade on a screen no bigger than a postage stamp. The usual cloud cover hung over the city, dirty cumulus clouds forming in the midst of the blanket of smog that never dispersed, so that there were columns of deeper yellow-gray than the background, as if a mad architect had decided to hold up the smog ceiling with these whirling unstable materials.

The parade was being watched by millions in the city, and hundreds of millions on the entire planet. Many of the viewers didn't believe in the Star Child at all. It was a myth that the U.N. had created for its own reasons. Others believed exactly what Obie had said about the Star Child: originally damned, he had been converted and was the agent through which Earth could be saved. Most of them had no opinion, but were curious, or watching the 3D sets because that was what one did.

The parade was long, with each nation represented in national costumes, with national bands and marching corps. Overhead the sky was filled with U.N. ships of every description, taking the extraordinary precautions that had been deemed necessary for this event.

Lenny had been horrified when he learned that Johnny was to address the assembly in person. From the start they had agreed that he would remain in his hideaway to make the worldwide telecast, but arguments had arisen. He could be a ringer. Anyone could be put before

the cameras and the world wouldn't know the difference. He had to appear in person.

The parade was on Fifth Avenue when the clouds began to descend. Leading off had been the Amsterdam dancers, then the Angola band, followed by the Australian aborigines in native costume, and in the middle was the bubble that shielded Johnny from the crowds, but exposed him to view. He looked frightened, as he was by the claustrophobic effect of the buildings and the millions on millions of people. Such numbers had never been real before, but here they were, all touching, packed together in a mass that was a blur of flesh colors and gaudy plastics. He should have refused. He wouldn't be able to say a word. He felt like crying then, or fainting. A heart attack. He could manage a heart attack and be taken back to the quiet of the estate. He could make his debut more slowly, not like this, not with millions all at once. . . . Lightning suddenly sparkled, crackling and snapping, between the towers and peaks of the buildings, and there was a roll of thunder that shook the bubble in which he rode. He shivered. He was very pale, but managed to lose more color.

Lightning streaked again, and in the U.S. Meteorology Building a weatherman frowned and pressed his communicator button. Thirty seconds later he was talking with his chief forecaster, who was reading information as it came from the computer.

The meteorologist then put through a priority call to the chief of security in charge of the parade and informed him that the storm that was then turning day into night was artificial.

The cloud that was sinking hovered over the bubble, casting it into deep shadows. More lightning, and then the cloud swooped and when it rose again, there was no bubble to be seen. The cloud began to rise fast. Hover-

craft darted at it and fell to the ground, creating panic among the people. A voice was in the air then, Obie's voice, everywhere.

"I am the Voice, the Power, the Strength of God. I am the Voice that God has chosen to use. You who believe in God's power, fall to your knees so that God will not strike you down." There was a moment of almost complete silence before the bedlam was raised again. People were trying to run away, but they couldn't move. The parade had come to a halt with the lowering of the cloud and the attack of the hovercraft on it. Throughout the world people were watching the scene on 3D or conventional, outmoded televisions, and there was stunned disbelief everywhere. Fighters were scrambled, and they too fell back to the ground. Then the windows started to break. Everywhere in the area of the parade windows exploded with cracks of noise, or bangs, or soft popping tinkles. Half the people were on their knees protecting their heads. and those left standing were being knocked down, or pulled down by others. The UNEF were hemmed in so tightly that they couldn't move, and they hacked their way through the bodies as if they were a dense jungle.

The cloud continued to ascend straight up into the sky, now carrying its cargo of the bubble ground effect car as well as its passenger. At fifteen thousand feet it turned west, and it was tracked on radar all the way to Mount Laurel where it was lost from sight as it landed gently.

Obie had had his miracle. Few on Earth now doubted that he had been in touch with the Star Child, as he had claimed, and few of the people who had seen the miraculous cloud sent by God to do Obie's bidding doubted that he was in truth the Voice of God.

Chapter Nineteen

THE Star Child made no actual personal appearances, although they had been promised. The Star Child had gone around the bend.

Winifred was the only person he recognized, and only sporadically. When he did know her, he was a child again, back in New York, looking to her for protection.

Obie swore for twenty-four hours at this development, blaming it all on Winifred and Robbie Mueller, but occasionally letting some of the abuse boil over to include Merton.

"You and that goddamned cloud!" he said over and over, gradually tapering off so that he said it no more than five or six times a day after the initial shock.

Winifred said, after her first interview with Johnny, "He has had a hallucination at one time or another. It isn't at all clear. In the vision a man descended from heaven and lifted him up and took him away with him. He thought that was happening when the cloud was lowered. . . ."

And Johnny? Miserable, sniffling, spied up, put upon, mistreated, captive? He blossomed.

Johnny was happy finally. The tall silver man was as kind as he had known he would be. The world that he now lived in was heaven with music always in the air, and perfumed breezes, and food that was the nectar that the books had hinted at. Sometimes he talked for hours at a stretch with the silver man, who was his father, and it

was how he had dreamed it would be. There was love and warmth and humor and respect for him. His father listened to him intently when he talked. Sometimes he could hear others clamoring at the doors, but his father refused to allow them to enter, so they didn't intrude. Only Dr. Harvey was admitted once in a while. Not often. Even she was an intruder now.

"Can you cure him?" Obie demanded. "I thought you could fix any kind of a breakdown."

Mueller nodded. "We can cure him," he said. "But it takes time. We don't know about our drugs with the alien chemistry. . . ."

"He isn't an alien, you fool! He's human. Like you, like me."

Mueller looked confused, then disbelieving. "Mr. Cox," he said, "I can appreciate your impatience, but it won't do you or him any good to pretend that he is human. I believe that human forces have driven him to this schism, but that he is human . . ."

"Get out! Get out!" Obie tore at his beard in distraction and was calmed by Dee Dee's hand on his arm. "What are we going to do, Dee Dee? He's gone nuts and we can't find Blake. My kid . . . crazy, the other bastard missing. . . . Why does this have to happen to me? All my plans . . ."

"Obie, cut the crap!" Dee Dee said. "stop your bawling. You have to put Winifred in charge of the kid. She can pull him out of it if anyone can. . . ."

"That bitch!"

"You bet that bitch. She's a good doctor, and she knows all about this. All about it, Obie. Maybe even more than you know."

Obie calmed down and looked at Dee Dee with new interest. "Why do you say that?"

"Figure it out, Obie. She was with Matt Daniels from

the start, probably knew about the switch from the beginning. She worked her way into the U.N. so she could watch the kid, maybe even protected him. She's the one who might be able to draw Blake back to us, or Derek. I think we'll find that the Daniels' family and Dr. Harvey will end up being our biggest allies in the end."

Merton came in then and said, "Obie, this isn't the time for you to go soft, too. You have speeches lined up for the next six months that will be the most important of your life. Now, damn it, leave this to the doctors, and you take care of that end."

"You think it's safe to go ahead?" Billy asked. He had followed Merton into the room.

"Sure. There's a lot of talk and there's bound to be more, but they aren't going to do anything. The kid's here, he's happy, patents are flowing out, miracles . . . Who's going to start anything now? Remember that the people, those great glorious masses of people are on our side, on the side of the Star Child. They won't let anyone start anything now."

Billy puffed and panted. He looked frightened. "France has mobilized," he said. "They've ordered all our people to report to public buildings by noon tomorrow. They're locking them up. . . ."

"So? England has come over to our side. You lose one, you gain one. This country won't permit that kind of nonsense. No U.S. government is going to move against a religion. Don't forget that, Billyboy. We're on the side of the angels." He turned to Obie and said, "You know all that. You're disappointed right now. We all are. But we got a plan. The worst thing you could do now is soften up, back down."

So Obie made his speeches, or preached his sermons, as you will.

"And God spake unto me. And God said, 'I will send

down my cloud and remove the stranger from the hands of the non-believers and deliver him to you.' " Obie's face glowed with the remembered rapture of that moment when the world had witnessed the power of God, Who could order the clouds at will. "And there will be those of evil who will speak with lying tongues and offer up reasons and explanations of this thing that I will cause to happen. They must be smitten, their lies must be stilled. From Psalm 109: Hold not thy peace, O God of my praise; For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of the deceitful are opened against me: they have spoken against me with a lying tongue. They compassed me about also with words of hatred; and fought against me without a cause. . . . Set Thou a wicked man over him; and let Satan stand at his right hand. When he shall be judged, let him be condemned; and let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few; and let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. Let his children be continually vagabonds, and beg: let them seek their bread also out of desolate places." Obie paused there, then went on in a strong whispering voice that sent chills through those in the rows and rows of seats, lighted only by the flickering tapers. " 'The Lord at thy right hand shall strike through kings in the day of His wrath. He shall judge among the heathen, He shall fill the places with the dead bodies; He shall wound the heads over many countries.' *He shall wound the heads over many countries!*" This was shouted in a voice of thunder. "The leaders shall fall, never to rise again. The heathen shall fall, never to rise again. The house of the Lord shall be put in order. And the Voice spoke to me and said, 'Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth.' And I looked and beheld a white cloud, and upon the cloud one sat like unto the Son of man, having on his head a golden crown, and in his hand

a sharp sickle. 'For the time is come for thee to reap; for the harvest of the earth is ripe.' The time is ripe. The harvest waits. Armaggedon is now!"

Obie spoke in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and then was threatened by a mob that overran the MM's who surrounded him in his public appearances. The mob was made up of middle-class, middle-aged people for the most part, but sprinkled with youths. "Anti-Christ!" they screamed. "Satan!" An MM rocket-boosted hovercraft appeared over them spraying them with gas, and the panic that had been there already was increased geometrically. The hallucinogenic gas was illegal, of course, and it turned the mob of seven hundred thousand maddened citizens into a mob of that many schizophrenics. When the dead, of fright, heart attacks, suicides, assaults, etc., were counted the total came to 1,074. The MM's were accused of the gas attack, which they didn't deny, but no arrests were made. Although sixteen of the dead were policemen, authority continued to avoid, trembling, a direct confrontation with religion. Obie's tour was not slowed by even one day.

At Mount Laurel, where the laurel woods were dense and deeply shadowed, a seldom-used path led down a steep slope where a creek plunged over rocks in a frenzy of white water, fell over ledges, formed a deep, green pool, surface still but busy underneath, and continued to splash and fall down the mountain to the piedmont country below. The path was an old deer trail that had almost been overgrown when it was rediscovered by Lorna on her first visit to the camp. She picked her way along it carefully, conscious of the loose rocks, and of the dark woods where she knew snakes lurked.

It was worth the risk once the pool was reached and the falls that formed the pool drowned out the rest of the world with a roar. No one had ever told her not to wan-

der off alone, but it was implied that a true believer didn't need solitude, didn't seek out the lonely places, didn't feel the call of the unspoiled spots like the falls and the pool. Group participation, team games, controlled hikes through the woods, the scheduled S&S (stimulation by drugs and sex) nights, those were the accepted means of working off the energies of the young. She felt vaguely that she should resist the desire to seek out the unfrequented places, but decided that it was harmless if she yielded only occasionally. So she picked her way on the trail that the laurel and grapevines were reclaiming, and she was totally unprepared for the voice that broke the silence of the woods.

"My God! Lorna Daniels."

Lorna jumped. A woman stepped out of the shadows staring at her. The roar of the falls was too loud to hear what she said next, something muttered in a low voice. Lorna recognized her: Dr. Harvey. They stood looking at each other for several seconds, Winifred taking in the flowing hair, the look of stunned surprise on the girl's face, the hesitation. Lorna didn't know how to evaluate her, Winifred decided. Lorna didn't know if she should be greeted as another believer, or as an enemy in the camp. She laughed shortly and started down the trail after motioning for Lorna to follow.

Lorna hung back, strangely excited, yet frightened. Dr. Harvey might know about her parents, and Derek. She must be all right, or she wouldn't be here.

Winifred led the way to the pool, then halfway around it to a spot where there was a great slab of granite. She sat down and stared at the water. When Lorna approached, she said, "You're a camp counselor? Is that the reason for the uniform?" The uniform was gray, the soft gray of the MM's; slim pants, belted with a black leather belt, short-sleeved shirt gray like the pants, and an insig-

nia on the sleeve, a ring with a sword sticking through it, and under that a narrow black crescent.

Lorna nodded and sat down also.

"Your mother told me you had become an active member, but somehow it was hard to believe." She smiled gently at Lorna. "Lisa showed me a copy of your essay on your conversion."

Lorna blushed. "I was younger then," she said. "I said a lot of things that must have sounded silly."

Winifred shook her head. "No. It made sense for an eighteen-year-old." She lighted a cigarette and smoked silently, no longer looking at Lorna.

"Where are they, Dr. Harvey? My parents. Are they all right? I know they don't want to have anything to do with me any more, but—"

"Honey pot, they are fine. I put them to sleep personally. . . ."

"Why? That's . . . that's monstrous. . . ."

"At their request." Winifred finished the sentence matter-of-factly.

"My father wouldn't request something like that."

"He did. So did your mother. It was her idea."

"I don't believe you." Lorna stood up and started to walk away angrily.

"Why don't you ask me why they requested it?" Winifred said musingly. "Or do you know why?"

Lorna stopped, but didn't turn around. "I don't know why. I don't believe they did."

"Lorna, listen a minute, then stamp away mad. I don't believe in Obie Cox. He's the world's biggest phony. I don't believe in his mission. I don't believe in his miracles. I don't believe in the Star Child's miracles. I think Obie is going to set up a theocratic society where he, or Merton more likely, will be dictator. I know he would have had your parents picked up and tortured to get

from them what he wanted. They knew it too. I know he wants to kill Blake on sight. I know he is using a hypnotic gas to influence his audiences. I know he uses the Listening Booths as his feedback, so that there are no secrets any longer. He echoes what he hears from the booths, and the people think he is a prophet. He has used you in this way, and probably hopes to use you to guide him to your brother, whom he will have killed, and to Blake, who is his mortal enemy. I know that Obie . . ."

But Lorna was gone. Winifred sat smoking quietly; Lorna didn't come back. Four days later she did come back. There were dark circles under her eyes, and she looked angrier than she had when she had fled with her hands over her ears.

"Why are you here if you are so skeptical? What are you doing here?"

Winifred shrugged. "I was kidnaped and brought here," she said. Lorna snorted in disbelief. "That is very unbecoming, young lady," Winifred said mildly. "The rest of the statement should read: I was brought here to treat the Star Child, who is as mad as a hatter."

"That's a lie!" Lorna stood up again and started to turn. "I saw his laboratory, saw the things he has done already, and you call him mad." She looked vastly relieved.

"Do you remember one night at the temple where there was a big hoopla with the short hairs and the long hairs mixing it up. A real brannigan. And young Lochinvar came from out of the west, or east, as it happened to be actually, and rescued the maiden fair?" Lorna blushed. Winifred continued to talk for the next forty-five minutes, and during that time Lorna sat down again and made no further motions to leave. At the end she shook her head.

"I have to go back. I only have a couple of hours every day. . . . Dr. Harvey . . ."

"Call me Winifred, honey. Everybody does."

"I think you believe all this, about my mother and father, and Derek being in danger, and Blake, but I can't accept it. Why Blake? He helped Obie Cox back in the beginning. Why Derek? He's never done anything to anyone. You see? There's no reason for any of this kind of plotting and counter-plotting. It's all too comic-bookish."

"I've told you only the facts, Lorna. Only the facts. You have to mull them over for reasons and conclusions. But what I have told you is true." Winifred stood up also. "I have to get back too. Time for Johnny's afternoon session. He probably won't know me. But we go through the motions. His is a delusional system that has been built up over a long period; Obie wants instant results, but it's going to take time. A shot in the arm to wake him up, talk, another shot in the arm to put him back to sleep to assimilate the talk. Eventually we'll come up with results, but not this week."

Lorna was smiling slightly, patronizingly. She shrugged, not believing a word of it. "I guess we shouldn't appear together," she said.

Winifred smiled also and said nothing, and much later that night Lorna realized that she had given tacit agreement to the conspiracy that now seemed to link her with Winifred Harvey. She had agreed to say nothing about their meeting and their talk. She lay quietly on her narrow bed, knowing that a restless person was reported and interviewed as a potential source of trouble for others. And as she lay unmoving, fighting off impulses to jerk her legs, which developed itches and aches suddenly, she remembered that night at the temple, and Blake's sudden appearance out of nowhere. She had little to remember of the fight. It was all hazy, but she did remember the sudden clip to her neck. She put her hand on the spot,

and as she thought about it, she realized that she should have more memories of what had gone up to the time that she was actually unconscious. But it seemed that she had very few memories of the past few years. There was so little of any of her life from the time she had left the university until now. . . . She stared at the black above her, listening to the breathing of the other counselors, and tried desperately to reconstruct her life since joining the Church. It all seemed so dreamlike, so distant, as if she were an old, old woman trying to recall her childhood. Misty and unreal images swam, refused to be resolved, faded, or merged with other just as hard-to-focus images. Nothing lasted; it all dissolved when she tried to bring it closer, to make it realer. She fell asleep toward dawn, and was wakened by the bells promptly at six-thirty, very tired and very depressed. She didn't return to the glen and the pool that week, but late Saturday night she wrote herself a note. It said, in part: "Tomorrow I have my turn in the Listener's Booth. If Winifred Harvey is right, I have been conditioned by now to withhold nothing. I will betray her, and our talks. I don't believe it. I won't mention it at all." But she did. For ten minutes she sat silent, twisting her fingers together nervously. The Booth was cool and dim and the perpetual taper wavered and held her attention. She tore her gaze from it again and again. Her tension increased until suddenly she blurted out the details of the meetings at the pools and the nonsense Winifred had told her. Immediately she felt relieved and comforted, the way it always happened when one told the truth. She wept as suddenly as she had blabbed, and felt better than before. When she left the Booth she was glowing with new resolve. She had been tested and found not wanting. Obie had said there would be many such tests, all of them difficult, but once mastered, worth experiencing. She

wouldn't tell anyone, of course, but she felt that she had accomplished a major feat, all alone.

They knew.

Wanda called for a meeting that night, and it was attended by Merton and Dee Dee and Everett, the only members of the higher echelons present at Mount Laurel that weekend.

Fat Wanda, as the new girls called her, showed the film with the sound track and they listened intently. Merton grinned afterward. "Some chick," he said.

"She's just a green kid," Dee Dee said.

"Could have fooled me. She's ready. You start the ball, Wanda."

"I thought so. We'll give her the buildup, then put her down in New York and wait. Okay? You have your men ready?"

He nodded. He had started the film again and was watching her silently this time.

On Monday Lorna was summoned to Wanda's office, where she was told that accusations had been made by three different girls charging her with heresy. Lorna looked blankly at Wanda, who sat back and regarded her.

"But . . . what do they say I did, or said? Who made the charges?"

"You will be suspended from all duties while an investigation is being made of the charges brought against you."

"How can I prove that I didn't do or say anything . . . ?" She stopped in confusion. "I don't even know what the charges are!"

"Have you ever questioned Brother Obie's call?"

"No!"

"Have you ever said that Brother Obie doesn't speak with God?"

"Never!"

"Have you anything else to say?"

"If I knew who had told such a monstrous story. . . . Maybe I hurt one of the girls, maybe I criticized when I should have tried harder to understand a mistake. . . . I don't know why anyone would have said such a thing!"

"Very well. Dismissed. You will remain in your dormitory, speaking to no one, until a decision has been reached. You will be notified."

"But . . . is that all? Isn't there any way I can find out who said those things, find out why they said them? They must need help. Have you questioned them thoroughly?"

"That is all, Lorna. Dismissed." Wanda was reading through one of the papers on her desk, and didn't look up again. Lorna turned and went to the door. She felt very near tears, and there was a tightening in her throat that made her afraid that if she tried to speak again, she would sob. She left with her head bowed, hurt and humiliated and bewildered.

She waited the rest of the day, and all of the next, and on Wednesday morning she was again called. This time she was led to the larger office in the main building, and Merton was there with Wanda. There was a high-backed chair there also, and she was directed to it. She sat down gratefully. She had not slept much for the past week, and the strain of waiting had her shaky. She pressed her legs tightly to hide the quiver in her knees that betrayed her.

Merton went to Wanda's desk and pressed a button. In a moment the outer office door opened and a woman entered carrying a covered tray. She put it down behind Lorna. The girl sat stiffly, looking ahead. No one said anything. She could hear movements behind her, and she jerked when a cloth was whipped out before her and fastened around her neck.

"No!" She screamed then and tried to rise. Merton slapped her hard and she knew the reason for the high-

back chair. She was pressed back to it, and the cloth about her was fastened, pinioning her arms, clamping her to the chair. She closed her eyes and tears squeezed through her eyelids and ran down her cheeks. The woman cutting her hair was fast; it was not a glamor cut, was not meant to be such, but Lorna's hair was curly, like her mother's, and she really looked better with the very short, curly mass of gold than she had with it hanging free. Wanda said angrily to the woman with the scissors, "Shorter, you fool!" More was taken off and by then Lorna had a very boyish haircut. Her cheekbones were high and wide, her nose very straight and fine, and her mouth firm and beautifully shaped. She looked like an idealized Joan when they finished with her. She felt the cloth being removed and she sat without moving while the sounds indicated that the woman was gathering her equipment.

"Stand up." Merton's voice, very tight, cold.

"Strip." Wanda's voice, angry, vengeful, petulant. She didn't like the way Lorna kept improving under their punishment.

Lorna began fumbling with the buttons and the belt. She removed the shirt, then her shoes, the pants, and stood before them in her bra and underpants. "All of it," Merton said, still very cold.

Lorna finished. She didn't open her eyes until she was naked. She looked then at fat Wanda, and from her to cold Merton, and she shivered under their eyes. She made no motion to cover herself, but stood straight, with dignity. "I didn't do anything," she said. "You know I didn't, both of you." She was told to turn around and march. They took her out the wide double doors of the mansion, and lining the walk, stretching out of sight between trees, were the campers, boys and girls alike, each holding a small handmade broom of wire grass. When

they saw her the youngsters started shouting and screaming: "Blasphemer! Heretic! Betrayer! Non-believer! Short hair!"

They whipped her. The same afternoon they took her away from Mount Laurel, dressed in a sack made of unbleached muslin, and flew her to the edge of the many towns and villages that made up metropolitan New York. The Militant Millenniumist who put her off the hovercraft handed her a credit and ID card. "Not that you have any credit," he said coolly and spat on her, spun around, and got back on the craft and left her.

That night she made the 3D newscast. The entire sequence had been filmed, and it was shown, all of it. In the mountain cabin in Pennsylvania Derek saw it, and in Louisiana where Blake-Teague had his assignment, he watched it. Blake understood at once why it had been done, what they meant to accomplish, but Derek was slower. He was shutting down the cabin before he realized that Blake was trying to get through to him.

"But, goddamn it, Blake, she's my sister! What do you think will happen to her in the city now?"

"She's a tough cookie. She'll survive. I tell you, she's a plant. They want us. You and me."

"I don't believe that. They would use her, but not like that. Not with the whipping and all that. That's no plant."

"Sit tight, Derek. Let me handle it. I can get in and out without anyone's knowing it. You stand out like a slumming playboy."

That night crazy Teague mumbled and muttered until his partner kicked him out of their apartment. They were assigned Basin Street sector, where Catholicism was putting up a strong fight against the Church, and where nightly there were riots and vandalism that was slowly destroying that section of the city. There was no Catho-

lic Church for forty miles that was still a complete edifice. Blake-Teague was a good man for the cause. He was devious and loved his work. He had had only good marks so far in his career as a believer.

That night, after being kicked out of the apartment, he vanished. His partner was afraid to report it, for fear of bringing down the wrath of the official who had given him this assignment. They all knew that Teague was crazy, but he was useful and valued.

Blake turned up in the city the following day, this time as a dark-haired young man whose shoes didn't match, whose coat looked like it had been found in the dump, and whose pants had come from someone two sizes larger than he was.

Blake didn't want to divert his attention from the problem he felt was due highest priority, that of gaining enough trust to allow him access to the ship, but neither did he want to lose Derek, who would be picked up and would talk under the care and treatment of the Church.

Probably he would have gone to find Lorna anyway. He remembered her as a brat and alternately as a very lovely young woman in his arms, dependent on him. He knew it would be very easy to fall in love with Lorna, who was so like her mother in appearance, and so like her father in determination and independence.

Anyway, Blake had taken on the job of finding her, and this he would do, in a city of thirty million people.

Chapter Twenty

NEW Year's Eve in Times Square. Twenty million people within an area of no more then ten city blocks. Snow that comes down black, and falls like bits of metal, straight down, no swirling about, just down. Cold people, miserable people, looking for something from the New Year, something that had been absent in the old one, in the old ones of all the years gone by.

Blake has found Lorna. He has spotted the watchers, all but one of them anyway, and he is being careful, knowing that there may be others. Tonight there will be real trouble in Times Square. Everyone gathered knows this. They have come anyway. For the trouble perhaps. Obie has said that tonight the short hairs will be driven from the city, that the city will greet the new year cleansed of the filth of the non-believers. At least some say that Obie has predicted this. No one knows any longer when he has made a prediction, or when others have made it for him, in his name. False prophets, the long hairs call those others, trying to belittle the accomplishments of the leader. Hedging his bets, the skeptics say with as much certainty. If it pans out, he said it sho-nuff, and if it doesn't happen, then he never even said it would. No one knows where the truth is any longer. No one really cares. They have come to Times Square in spite of the rumors, or because of the rumors. Lorna has come. Looking for something that she lost. She won't find it again, and she knows this, too. But she has to look,

or give up everything. She has a job of sorts. In a bar where short-hair Irishmen gather and talk about what they will do to the long hairs when the time comes. She serves their drinks—they don't trust the automated bars, believe they get cheaper booze there, watered down more than in the bars where they can watch the mixing. They may be right. Everyone knows the automatic places of all sorts are programed to cheat the customer, less food per serving, less alcohol per drink, less time per book, less everything. Lorna is in Times Square, hugging a coat that is too thin to her shoulders, which are also too thin. She is hungry. Most of the time she is hungry, and always cold. She can remember being warm enough, that is more than most of the people she is pushing and pushed by can remember. Few of them have ever been warm in the winter. Lorna's hair is growing out again, curling about her ears. She doesn't suspect that she has not had a moment alone since being put out of the hovercraft three months ago. She has felt alone. Loneliness has matured her in a way that age couldn't, and her eyes are patient now and the look of hurt has been replaced by a look of sadness. She doesn't like most of the people in the square, but she sympathizes with them. They all, long hairs and short hairs, share the hunger and the cold, and the hopes that the new year will be different. No one really knows how to specify what sort of difference he wants, but everyone knows it has to be different or he doesn't want to stay around for the next New Year's Eve. Most of them thought this way last year, and the year before that, and on backward in time to a distant past that is so faded in the memory that perhaps it is only a dream. Lorna never felt this before. She doesn't know that people can live with this hopelessness for a normal life span. She wouldn't believe it if she were told repeatedly that it is so.

It is nearing twelve. There is excitement, anticipation, and hands in pockets clutch rocks and bottles, and bricks and clubs, and even guns. Cocktails have been lovingly prepared, for the celebration. There is booze, God only knows from what source, from what ingredients. Probably lethal. There are the pills and the needles and the bits of sugared gum that can be chewed, stored, or shared, and chewed again, each time guaranteed to remove one from reality for a while.

Blake doesn't let the crowds separate him from Lorna now. Tonight he and Derek plan to pick her up and take her to the mountain cabin. Derek is waiting for his signal. Derek is nearby with the ship that is as much at home under the bay as in the air. Nearby and waiting for the signal. Blake moves closer to the girl. Hell's door bursts open at midnight, and Blake moves toward Lorna. There is a pitched battle going on all at once. Bricks are thrown, bottles, jagged and mean, are flashing, there are explosions here and there, and tramplings. Why frail people are always in such a crowd is a mystery that should be investigated. Suicides lacking the imagination to work out details? They are there, and they are trampled. Blake swings Lorna around and she recognizes him immediately in spite of the black hair and the clothes that are of the slums. The watchers pay little attention to the dark young man. They have been instructed to leave her strictly alone, not reveal that they were watching regardless of what happens, unless she is threatened with death. So they would have paid no attention at all to him, had not a pipe flashed out and laid open the side of his head. Blake is not immune to a pipe on the side of the head. He falls heavily bleeding, unconscious. Lorna drops to her knees instantly and it is this action that draws the attention of the watchers. She knows him! She is pushed back as they move in, and seconds later they

know him also. Lorna and Blake are lifted, she is also unconscious now, her head swelling from a fistful of coins brought down just so, Blake still bleeding, very dead-looking.

Derek, waiting, hears nothing, and continues to wait. An hour later he does hear a voice, not Blake's voice, and he knows Blake has been taken. The voice says, jubilantly, "My God, finally! Now we finish everything!" The voice belongs to Obie Cox.

Chapter Twenty-one

ANYONE can be conditioned to do anything," Obie said. "I've read a lot about conditioning."

In the large living room of the mansion perched atop Mount Laurel he held the meeting with his lieutenants. Merton sat moving the objects that they had taken from Blake. There was a curious stone, opal-like, but not an opal. It was shot through with fire, was teardrop shaped, and had a blue background with rose lights. There were keys, five of them. Some coins from Malasia, from New Zealand, from Morocco. An almost flat black disk. A plastic notebook that had curious markings in it; the markings faded out when he opened the pages, and he snapped it shut cursing. That was for the lab boys to handle. He paid no more attention to the disk than to any of the other objects, perhaps less. The opal-like stone and the notebook held his attention longest.

Obie had been going on about Blake and his plans for the kid for an hour and Merton was getting bored. Muel-

ler merely sat and stared at his hands. Finally Merton said, "What do you think, Dr. Mueller? How long will it take?"

Mueller shrugged. "I know nothing about the patient. The preliminary tests and evaluations will take a week, at the least. I have to discover his personality structure, his defense mechanisms, his ego manifestations . . ."

"Shit," Obie said. "March 10, that's when I want him to be ready to go on stage with me. You hear that. Mueller? March 10."

Mueller looked pained but said nothing.

Blake woke up in a narrow bed, in a narrow room without windows. He lay unmoving, remembering the events that had led to this. He had been cleaned up and bandaged. He could feel the absence of the hairs and the radio parts from his ears, so he didn't even try to feel for them. Probably his every move would be filmed for study. He hoped they hadn't found Derek, too. And he wondered about Lorna. She hadn't been a willing plant, he was certain. The shock in her eyes and the pallor that had spread over her face on seeing him had been proof enough of her innocence. He hoped she was still alive. He closed his eyes and returned to sleep.

For the next week Mueller was the only person Blake saw. He cooperated willingly with the tests, faking every answer, but subtly, so that it would take many weeks of computer comparisons before the fakery was discovered. Blake agreed to cooperate with Obie as he had long ago, in exchange for laboratory privileges. Obie was buoyed, Merton was suspicious. Dee Dee was fascinated by the blond boy, and if her interest in him was sexual, she concealed the fact, sublimated it successfully into a maternal solicitude that fooled everyone but Blake and Winifred.

Winifred was not permitted to see Blake at all. He never asked about Lorna.

Lorna was confined to a room in the hospital, a carrot on a stick, Obie said when he ordered her held there, ready to be dangled again, if they needed her.

Blake was almost pathetically happy to have his notebook returned. He paid little attention to any of the other pieces that had been taken from his pockets. Merton questioned him about the transmitter and receiver and about the notebook and Blake answered openly. Derek was at the other end of the radio, high in the Andes mountains. Blake repeated that story while conscious, and under drugs, so they had to believe him, although no trace of any cabin was found in the Andes at the coordinates he gave. He said Derek must have moved. Nothing more. Mueller assured Merton that the drugs were infallible. No one had ever been known to sustain a falsification under the influence. It was never learned how Blake managed this, but he told Winifred much later that in his auto-hypnosis training he had developed such absolute control of himself that his instructions overruled anything coming in from the outside. Also he had hypnotized Mueller rather easily, and there was some doubt what Mueller actually got into him in the way of drugs. About the notebook, Blake said, pointing to the various jottings, here were his preliminary thoughts about an anti-gravity device; here a system for transmission of energy; that was for a laser consisting of glass of any sort, old Coke bottles, for example. If Blake's eyes twinkled as he detailed the many projects he had in mind, it didn't show. Since most of his notes had been destroyed when Merton opened the notebook there was no way to prove or disprove what he said. Obie's scientists muttered and drew their heads together over the salvaged portions,

then vanished for the next few days, only to reappear in order to announce that everything in it was impossible, it all contradicted known laws, etc., etc. Merton scowled at them and ordered them to return to their consultations. Meanwhile Blake had gone to work in the lab, in a tiny office where he paced, sketched, scowled, made notations for hours at a time, went back to pacing, and finally leaned back with a happy smile on his face. If he was getting results using only his mind, the scientists with the best, most expensive equipment in the world could damn well get results also.

Merton was not happy during those weeks. He was nervous, and his sleep was interrupted by dreams of monsters chasing him, eating him up, coughing him out again so that he could run some more. It would have been better if he had remained swallowed; to be coughed up again and again was disgusting. He began taking pills to help him sleep. He didn't believe Blake was cooperating. He thought the kid planned to escape, to make monkeys out of all of them, him especially, and it made him uneasy that he hadn't the slightest inkling as to how Blake would manage it. The guards were doubled, then tripled. Blake was calm, smiling, busy. He asked no questions, didn't pry. . . . Merton couldn't grasp that. Blake should be full of questions. . . . Unless he knew the answers already.

Merton shivered. He didn't want to think about that possibility.

About this time Merton and Dee Dee had a brief violent argument. She found him pacing furiously in her room late one night. She stopped at the door for a moment, then swept past him toward her office. Merton caught her arm and swung her around.

"Where've you been?"

"What's that to you? If you don't mind, I have work to do."

"You've been with him! The kid! Haven't you?"

Dee Dee pulled free and stepped back from him. "You pulling the old squatter's rights routine on me, for chrissakes! Get lost, Merton. Beat it, will you. What if I was?"

"He's dangerous, Dee Dee. Keep away from him."

"Dangerous! A kid, for chrissakes! What's the matter with you? Jealous of a kid? Scared of him is more like it, isn't it? You're scared to death of him. You and Obie and Billy. Jesus, you men are all scared right down to your balls over this one kid." Mockingly she started to pass him again, laughing, "Afraid it's different, better with an alien, Merton darling?"

"Bitch!" Merton slapped her, and when she tried to hit back he caught her arm and forced it behind her back, twisting her wrist. She moaned. "What have you told him? What've you been up to?"

"Nothing," she gasped. He jerked her hand and she screamed. "I wanted to lay him . . . he wouldn't. That's all. Stop! St—" Merton let go and she fell to the floor.

He sat down hard on a lounge. After a minute or two he asked, "Are you okay?"

Dee Dee had stopped gasping. She pulled herself up without looking at him.

"Did he try to get anything out of you?" Merton asked, almost pleading now.

"I told you," she said dully. "I told you. Now get out of here and leave me alone."

"You were gone over an hour," Merton said. "What were you doing all that time, talking over old times?"

"Yeah," she said tiredly. "Talking over old times." She didn't look at him. She was afraid that he would twist her arm again, and she knew that she still wouldn't be able to

tell him anything more than she had. She didn't know what they had talked about for more than an hour; she hadn't known she'd been with him that long.

The next day Merton was surprised when she didn't seem angry with him. She acted, in fact, as if she had forgotten the whole thing.

A few days later Blake demonstrated to Merton his first miracle for Obie. He produced a clear plastic liner compound that, mixed with water, formed wine, or near enough to fool anyone but a connoisseur. He played with it for a few days, laughed when Merton, who hung about him like a loyal dog, inquired about it and tossed the thing to the detective. A toy, he said. A parlor trick.

He showed Merton how he could fit it into a container, glass, paper cup, plastic glass, anything, add water from the tap, wait a second or two, and have ruby wine. Merton looked at it suspiciously. Blake laughed again and took it and drank it.

"You have any more of those things?"

"Sure. Over there." Blake waved toward his desk and paid no more attention when Merton picked up a handful of the plastic disks and left with them. The chemists analyzed the substance and came up with a formula that did produce winelike liquid when mixed with water. It was harmless, although in quantities it could be intoxicating. Obie had his miracle.

Blake had a reprieve from some of the suspicion that had attached to him.

Four nights later he led an escape from the mountain citadel.

It was raining, a cold merciless rain that was steady for hour after hour. Blake went first to Obie's office, where he ran his hands over the door, finding and disconnecting the alarm before he entered. Blake knew where the safe was, an old-fashioned one that used a combination of

voice tones and finger pressure. He said, in Obie's voice, "Three, ninety-four, eleven, and open now." The door swung open soundlessly. He picked up his disk, the stone with the rose fire, and his coins. He touched nothing else.

The unrelenting rain was a black curtain through which he moved, heading back toward the hospital area, three miles away. Behind the main building was a cluster of small houses, one of which was Winifred's. He opened the door and whispered her name. Winifred gasped just once, asked no questions, threw a mackintosh around her shoulders, and left with him.

"Lorna's room," he said and led the way. Lorna was more reluctant, but she too remained silent and followed. Blake led them past the guards who were huddled inside a building at the edge of the forest. He motioned for them to bend low now and again, and Winifred assumed that there were electronic devices of various sorts spotted throughout the property. When they were deep in the woods they had to hold hands; it was too dark to see each other. Blake let them stop to rest three times between midnight and dawn, but stopping was more miserable than continuing. The cold was penetrating when the motion ceased. Walking, slipping, sliding over the rough mountainside kept them warm.

When the sky paled, Blake stopped them again, this time in the shelter of a low spreading pine tree where the ground was relatively dry, and no rain beat down.

Lorna sank to the ground and her head on her arms folded across her knees. Winifred leaned back against the tree too tired to move or to speak even. Blake vanished and was gone for half an hour, then was back, with a rabbit and a small bag of nuts. He built a tiny fire in the shelter of the tree and roasted the rabbit and they ate it, and the nuts. Nothing had ever tasted so good before to Winifred.

"We won't make it, Blake, but bless you for trying. I thought . . . I didn't know what to think when you acted so compliant."

He grinned at her. "I had to find out who was there, where we were, where Lorna was, all that."

Lorna hadn't said anything at all yet, but now she lifted her head and stared at him. "Why did you bring me out with you?"

"A precaution," Blake said. "You keep getting me in trouble, so I decided to put you where you'd be quiet for a while."

She stiffened and turned away from him. She looked very unhappy.

They rested for three hours, then started to walk again. They were walking north. Blake didn't intend to lead them out of the mountains at all, but stay in them until they were clear of Obie's domain. Winifred shuddered at the thought. She didn't think she would last that long, but she knew that if they did descend, they'd surely be found in the lowlands that were virtually owned by Obie.

The days and nights became dreamlike. They walked. Blake produced food, or sometimes didn't produce food; they ate or fasted, drank cold clear water from streams, and walked some more. They slept under pine trees whose branches swept the ground. They walked some more. They talked when they stopped to rest. Lorna said very little. Winifred and Blake talked a good deal.

"There's a particular mentality permeating the land now," Blake said once to Winifred. "The people don't consider the land as theirs any longer. They have crowded together along the coasts, and they line the rivers, and all in between is a wilderness, except for the great stretches of cultivated fields. And they are a wilderness of another sort. You can fly over them for

hours and hours and see nothing but fields. The roads have been obliterated, the towns razed, the farms vanished completely. The tractors roll day and night, controlled from the underground headquarters where they are dots moving in well-ordered lines. We aren't likely to see anyone at all in the woods. Most people don't believe anyone could live in the woods for more than a couple of days. They think the game is all gone, the streams polluted. Many of them are, but high as we will be staying the water is good. The only meat most people have seen has been canned, and mixed with other things. If they have seen vegetables at all, it's been in packages of so many ounces, not growing out under the sun." He tossed a walnut and caught it. "I bet not one in twenty has ever seen a nut."

"God knows they flock to the woods in droves during vacations," Winifred said. "Those who can afford it anyway."

"Sure. They go to cities that are on the edge of the woods, with paved trails weaving in and out of the trees, with nothing growing along the trails on the floor of the woods because they have picked it all clean. Turn one of them loose fifty miles from his city, and he would probably die."

Lorna looked at him then and said bitterly, "Are you pretending that we aren't going to die in the woods?"

"We might," Blake said easily. "I guarantee nothing. But everyone dies sooner or later, somewhere. Why not here in the woods rather than back in the camp?"

Lorna shivered. "I'm freezing. At least back there I was warm and full. Why don't you ask me if I knew they were using me to lead them to you? Why don't you ask if I still believe in Obie Cox and his Voice of God Church?"

Winifred sighed in satisfaction.

Blake laughed. "Lorna, I remember you as a pretty bratty kid, always talking, talking, full of importance, demanding attention. I thought you had reformed."

It was teasing, but with such good humor that even Lorna grinned. "I give," she said suddenly. "I'm sorry, Blake. I was stupid, stubborn. I should have known what the whole act was about, but I didn't. When I saw you on New Year's Eve . . . I never had been so surprised in my life. Then they were there and I understood all of it all at once. I was so miserable. I wished they would simply shoot me, or hit me harder than they did, or something."

"And the Church?" Winifred asked.

"Oh, you know. You told me all about it. I didn't believe you. I went to the Listener's Booth and found myself spilling everything. I didn't want to. I really thought I wouldn't, but there it all came. . . ."

"Honey, I told you, they use a hypnotic gas in those damn tapers of theirs. You couldn't help it."

Blake laughed again, a happy, boyish sound. "Wait until they use the fake wine along with the tapers," he said finally. "It's an antidote."

They all laughed almost hysterically, and afterward Lorna cracked nuts with gusto. They slept close together for warmth, and when Lorna awakened once during the night listening to a strange noise, she found that Blake's arms were about her, her cheek against his chest. She fell asleep again instantly.

Blake paced them and demanded more of them than they would have thought they could give. But they were happy, and the days continued fairly mild. They had no more rain until the ninth day. They spent the entire day under a rock that formed a ledge over their heads. Winifred caught Blake eyeing her several times, and each time, she straightened up consciously, only to slump again as soon as he looked away. He had her lie down

and he ran his hands over her back later in the day, pressing gently here and there. She relaxed under his hands and the pain that had tormented her was eased, but she knew that she could not hike through the mountains for the next six or eight weeks, the time he said it would take to get to a cabin in Pennsylvania.

That night Blake left them. Lorna woke to find him gone. She touched Winifred lightly on the arm and two women sat shivering for the next two hours until they heard the snort of a horse close by. Lorna screamed.

"It's all right," Blake's voice called softly.

They could see nothing, but presently he was there with them again. "I thought we were fairly near a Cherokee village that I visited once," he said. "I paid a visit to the chief and he loaned me a couple of horses. I'm going to leave you both with his people. They'll take care of you."

Over the morning fire Lorna protested. "I won't stay," she said. "I know I've been nothing but trouble, but I won't stay here. I want to help you, Blake. You said Derek is with you, let me come too."

Blake looked at her hard, then shrugged. He got the women up on the horses and led them through the trees. Lorna never had been on a horse before, and by the end of the first hour she was too sore to move.

"How did you get way over here in the middle of the night?" she asked Blake some time later. They were pausing briefly on a bluff, and in the distance they could see the gleam of white birch tents.

Blake shrugged. Winifred remembered the enlarged lungs and hearts of his people and knew that accounted for his stamina. She wished she shared it. She felt faint with fatigue.

They bypassed the tent village. Blake grinned and said, "That's for the tourists. Show only. They don't live like

that." He continued to lead their horses, and finally they started down the cliffs. Suddenly, rounding a bend, they came within sight of the village. It was so well hidden that the appearance of the two dozen small cottages was almost like a conjurer's trick. There were neat fields, not plowed yet, standing green with a winter wheat crop, and a windmill, and a group of children playing with a ball. It was a scene of timeless simplicity.

Chief Whitehorse met them. A tall strong man dressed in Levis and a plaid shirt, he greeted them warmly. "Dr. Harvey, you are welcome to be our guest as long as you like. We are very happy to receive you." He clasped her hand. His knowing gaze passed from Lorna to Blake and there was a smile crinkling the skin about his eyes. "Miss Daniels, if you change your mind, please accept our hospitality, such as it is."

Breakfast was ready, he told them. Coffee, eggs, bacon, fried potatoes, corn bread, wild honey. . . . Over coffee he explained that no outsider had stumbled across their village for forty years. Winifred asked mildly how Blake had found them, and he smiled and said that Blake was their brother. "We adopted him in order to keep our record clean," the chief said.

The next day Blake and Lorna left again, this time on horseback, accompanied by one of Chief Whitehorse's sons, who would ride with them for two days, and bring back the horses then.

Winifred watched them out of sight with tears on her cheeks. The chief stood silently by her side until she turned toward him. Then he said, "He has friends, many, many friends. If he has need of them they will materialize everywhere around him. He is a great chief among men and beasts." His sharp eyes held hers and he added, "He is the alien, isn't he?" Winifred nodded. "Yes, I suspected as much years ago when he came to us as a boy.

Come now, Dr. Harvey, and let me explain to you the psychology of the tourists who want to believe that dried corn silk glued to pigskin and enclosed in duralite blocks are actually scalp locks for which they are willing to give much, much money."

INTERLUDE TWELVE

Winifred Harvey's Diary, cont.

Bookworld, Nov. 1993

Today the N. Y. Supreme Court upheld the decision handed down by the lower court granting the Voice of God Church an injunction against the North American Publishing Corporation, its president, Orson Beamish, and writer Newell Oates, who are ordered to cease and desist the distribution of Oates's latest book, *The Paranoid Church*. Meanwhile the plunder and arson of those bookstores and department stores where the book has been on display continue. . . .

Washington *Post*, Nov. 1994

Today the CDL, Committee for Decent Literature, received the official recognition and official status that it has been seeking for over a quarter of a century. Miss Grace Livingstone, retired in 1973 after teaching high school literature for twenty years, was named director of the department, which will operate under the auspices of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Miss Livingstone said that her department immediately will start a review of all materials in public schools, libraries, for sale in public places, or advertised in any media that is easily accessible to the public as a whole. A board of review, already formed, will then examine any questionable material and decide whether or not it is in the public interest to permit it to

remain where it is accessible to young, developing minds, she stated.

HUAC Reactivated

Special to the New York *Times*

Today the N. Y. Supreme Court upheld the decision handed down by the once-defunct House Un-American Activities Committee, known as HUAC. HUAC has been granted an appropriation of $785,000, and the mandate to investigate the activities of "certain people and groups of people who seek to perpetuate works of atheistic views in order to undermine the freedom of religion established under the Constitution of our country."

Crandall Worth, committee chairman, announced following the vote that the committee would hold its first hearings next Wednesday in New York City. Mr. Worth denied that there was, or could possibly be, a conflict between the freedom granted in the First Amendment and the freedom of religion amendment which he has sworn to uphold. He said, further, that those members of the House who had seen fit to vote against the motion might well find themselves in the witness chair when his meetings get under way. Citing the recent reversals of the Supreme Court, overthrowing decisions made in the sixties, Mr. Worth thanked those House members who had voted with him in reestablishing the committee. His concluding statement was, "If our committee finds evidence that any religion is being vilified, then those persons guilty of such a transgression of God-given law will face due process of law. We are a nation under God, let us not forget that. Our founding fathers were men inspired by God, and today we have among us yet another man so inspired who is God's hand now in this time of mortal peril. Those who would question this fact will have to answer to our committee."

Chapter Twenty-two

DEREK was not at the cabin, and judging from the condition of the food stocks, had not been there for months. Lorna looked at Blake, her eyes dark with apprehension and dismay. "Obie . . . ?" she said.

"Possibly, but I don't think so. He left things in order." Blake looked over the equipment carefully. Derek had taken the tiny radio. Tentatively he tried to call him; the channel was open, but there was no response. "We'll keep trying. He must have anchored it somewhere safe, where he can be in touch with it at some time during the day."

Blake prepared a meal from the cans of food, and after they ate, they went outside to bathe in the cold pool. Lorna was as hard as he was almost, and she had acquired a rich although spotty tan during the trek that had taken them nearly three months. All afternoon they made love, dozed, bathed again, ate again. It was the happiest day of her life.

Late that night they got an answer from Derek.

He was an active member of the group known as the Barbers. Nightly they raided the churches across the country and gave free haircuts to unwilling patrons. They were an immense success, wanted by members and non-members alike, although for different reasons, not always friendly. They had found hundreds of ways to sneak scissors into meetings. Also they had completed and were using one of Blake's unfinished projects, an

electronic distorter that scrambled Obie's magnificent voice when he used it to surround his believers. It created a noise like a fingernail on a blackboard that was most disconcerting, and it never failed to break up the most serious gathering before the end of the opening invocation.

Obie was due to hold his annual memorial service at Covington in a week, Derek said, and they were planning a reception for him then.

"Call me back in an hour or so, Dek," Blake said. "I want to think about this. There must be a way to combine our efforts. . . ."

After the connection was broken Lorna said, "Blake, wait a minute. I don't think you and Derek should try anything at that particular time. You don't know about it at all."

Blake leaned back and said, "tell me what I don't know."

"It's a weekend thing, this memorial service, the reenactment of the meeting Obie says took place between him and God in the woods. He goes off alone and everyone prays that God will speak to him again, and there are more services, and all the while everyone is fasting, for three days. On the night of the third day the psychedelic drug they call XPT is given out on small round crackers, and now that they have your magic wine, I guess they'll use that, too. Anything that impressive they would use. There are only the tapers for this rite, and after the last person has had his cracker with the drug, the candles are extinguished. Obie's voice, or, as he says, God's voice manifested through him, is there recalling the rapture of their first meeting, and describing the ecstasy of it, and a procession of young girls starts. They come in with robes on and their hair done up on their heads. One by one they go forward on the stage where Obie is standing in

the middle of a small circle that is lighted. The girl enters the circle and he removes her robe, and lets down her hair. That's all. He doesn't touch her other than that. He sends her down into the congregation with her hair down her back. All the while there is the voice everywhere, and the drug is taking effect more and more. By the time the last girl has entered the circle everyone is . . . strange. Obie undresses then. He has a robe on too, and there in the circle of light he takes the last girl, or starts to, and the light goes out." Lorna kept her eyes on Blake as she described the ritual. There was no embarrassment on her face, just the earnestness of one trying to make another understand something that is alien. "You must think it's beastly and ugly. A real orgy. But it isn't anything like that. With the drugs and the tapers, and the voice saying this is how life is, this is what rapture and ecstasy are like, this is the consummation of human desire. . . . You accept all of it, and it is rapture."

"It sounds like that might be the ideal time to make a raid, while everyone is so preoccupied. . . ."

"No! You don't understand. Think of the precautions they take for those ceremonies, no outsider is allowed in at all. Only those they are very certain of. Have you ever heard these rites described?" He shook his head. "Rumors, only rumors. No one who has participated has spoken out. They take pictures, of course, and I heard once that they use them for blackmail, if someone does want out of the Church, but I don't think that's true. Those who participate come away believing they have participated in some way with the union of God and Obie Cox, that they have experienced a touch of what happened then."

"The other rumors one hears, the homosexual groups, the lesbians, all that true?"

She nodded. "Obie preaches that there is nothing in sex

that can be evil, no perversions exist. The Church permits, condones, sponsors every known aberration ceremoniously."

"I wonder who was smart enough to figure that out for him," Blake said. "The Church forbids only those things that other established churches exhort one to accept: pity, mercy, charity, love." He made the contact then with Derek and said, "I'm delivering your sister to the group. Listen to her explain the memorial service before you decide anything. I'm going to take up where I left off in New Orleans."

"I won't go back there," Lorna said, interrupting him.

"You can't stay here, and you can't go with me, so there doesn't seem to be much choice. Talk it over with Derek." He handed her the receiver, which she put to her ear. After listening for several moments she nodded reluctantly.

"Okay," she said with bad temper. "I might put you in danger again. I don't care where I go."

"Fine," Blake said grinning. He finished his conversation with Derek, and the next morning he and Lorna left the cabin. This time they were in his small hovercraft. He left her with Derek in Massachusetts, fifty miles from Boston, and he turned south.

Lorna watched him out of sight, then smiled briefly at Derek, and at the same moment burst into tears. "For crying out loud!" Derek said helplessly. He put his arm about her awkwardly, then waited, not knowing what else to do.

"Dek, what'll I do?"

"What do you mean, what will you do?"

"I love him and he's not even human! He's a monster from outer space, a stranger, an alien. And I love him!"

"Yeah, well if he has to keep rescuing you every month or two, he's going to love you too, like poison ivy,

or the mumps, or something. Come on, we've got work to do."

That night James Teague stumbled into the one-room apartment he shared with Will Thomlinson.

"Teague! Jesus, man, where you been?"

Teague looked blank and mumbled and shuffled his feet and looked greedily at the can of fish'n'beans that Thomlinson was eating from. He mumbled on and on and Thomlinson caught every tenth word or so, enough to know that Teague had been locked up somewhere, that he hadn't been fed, that he had no idea of how long he had been gone, or where he had been. Mostly the incoherent chatter concerned his stomach.

Thomlinson shoved the can and the spoon toward him and watched him wolf down the rest of the mess. He felt justified in not reporting his absence. At first he had been afraid he would be blamed, then more afraid of punishment for not making the report immediately, and so he never had made it. He beamed at his partner and even opened a second can of the fish mixture and pushed it toward him.

Teague belched three times, curled up on the floor, and muttering softly to himself, fell asleep. The next morning he said they had to go back to the temple.

"We ain't got no orders to go back. They want us here, doing the work they assigned to us."

". . . mumble, buzz, called back . . . worship . . . mumble, mumble . . . every year renew faith . . . mumble, mumble . . . and she says, that ain't god you fool that's noise in your ears and I takes up the ax and I cuts even her fingers apart at every joint and the kids say that ain't god's voice you old fool and I take up the ax and I cuts them up like sausages and God says you gotta go back to the temple and he says we got no orders mumble mumble and I takes up the ax mumble mumble . . ."

"Look, Teague, I'll see if I can get us passes. We been out six months or more. You take it easy, you hear? Get some sleep. I'll bring some fresh fish back with me if I can find some. You sleep a little bit, Teague. You hear? Don't you go out now."

". . . 'n he says don't got no orders and I says gotta go back to the temple and listen to God again. God's at the temple. I heard Him at the temple. . . ."

Thomlinson left, locking the door after him, and he went straight to the church office where he made his weekly reports. The clerk on duty checked the record and said, "Fifteen fires, twenty-two beatings, three conversions. . . . He do all that?" Thomlinson nodded fearfully. He had falsified the report every week, splitting it right down the middle, crediting Teague with exactly half of all he did. The clerk nodded and made a notation on the memo he had written. "I'll see what I can do, Mr. Thomlinson. I'll let you know tomorrow."

"Look, uh . . . sir, I don't know if I can keep him in until tomorrow. You look at his file again, will you. He's crazy, takes it by spells, then he's as normal as you or me. But right now he is crazy as a bedbug. Talking about taking up an ax, stuff like that. He aims to go back to the temple, and I don't reckon I want to try to stop him none."

So they were given passes to return to the temple for a pilgrimage, to start immediately, go by monorail, and report back to the New Orleans branch in ten days.

Teague accepted it as if he had done it all himself. That night they boarded the monorail and headed north and east, and Teague never stopped muttering and mumbling. Thomlinson was driven to sleep on the floor at the far end of the car, abandoning his seat to a thin woman whose short hair and fanatical eyes made her fair game for Teague. The car was jammed to overflowing. It

smelled foul, and there was no air conditioning: it had broken down and had not been repaired. The windows were sealed. Also the trip was slow. Designed to travel one hundred and fifty miles an hour, the monotrain averaged less than forty because of the uncertainty of the condition of the rail all along the route. Several times it stopped completely while men on foot inspected a suspicious stretch of rail, and once they had to replace a length that was rusted through. When the line had been built many contractors had become very rich, and had not used up much of the steel allotted to the project so that they continued to get rich by using the same stock several times before it was depleted. There had been some arrests, and some sentences passed, but no jail terms had been served since the last of the appeals had not yet been heard. When the courts went over to computers, it was estimated that the ensuing jam of back cases would take a century to clear up. The estimates proved to be low. The new justice did guarantee the same sentence now for similar crimes no matter where committed, so that was a bonus, it was argued. The trouble was that no human being could now understand the laws at all, and it was felt that the old guarantors of justice with mercy were dead. What computer could understand that eating an apple from a neighbor's tree was not in the same category as taking at gun point the neighbor's ration of meat? In the case of the monorail scandal the two words steal and steel had proven too much for the computers and the engineers had been called back in and the semanticists, and the case was pending. Meanwhile the train crawled along and men inspected the line for breaks and soft spots and the people inside sweated and hated each other thoroughly.

They stayed near enough the Mississippi for the first part of the trip not to leave civilization behind, but when

the train headed east, the towns became ghost towns. Mile after mile of soybeans grew here, interplanted with corn, the two staples of the diet. Farther west wheat was the crop that stretched for hundreds of miles.

The thin woman next to Teague looked past him out the window and talked, and talked, and talked. "Beat us right back, it did, like they said it would; can't tame wild land, can't live on it, beats you back to the ocean, then drives you in the ocean and it wins every time." She was thirty, she said later, and look at her. Tried to make a living in New Orleans, honest work, that's all she ever wanted, and there warn't no honest work left, only for engineers and scientists and teachers of engineers and scientists.

"My strength is in Jesus Christ," she said later after darkness lay over the land that she hated so passionately. "Sweet Jesus Christ, our redeemer and savior. And the meek shall inherit the earth, but they don't want it. Scratch for corn, scratch for wheat, and a storm comes down and there it all goes and the stomach just gets flatter and the teeth fall out. Sweet Jesus, when will it end?" She sobbed noisily and finally fell asleep. Teague stopped his muttering and closed his eyes.

With a whimper, he thought. A self-pitying whimper.

All over the world the same thing. The people left the land for the cities and came to fear that which they had left behind. Technology fed the bellies, insufficiently, but that was a human fault, not a technological one. There were too many people in too small an area, pressing against each other, competing for jobs for half their number, and all going hungry most of the time. But even if technology could feed them all adequately, if they could all afford to eat well, they would be empty still. If only they could start over, take the people up like dots from material and distribute them again, spacing them

out, giving them elbow-room, letting them see trees growing and flowers and stretches of grass and corn and blackberry bushes. Blake-Teague mused on this for the rest of the night.

The next night Blake-Teague and Thomlinson slept in the temple dorm. They both lined up for tattooing the morning after that, and during the day the population at the temple swelled as pilgrims came from all parts of the country to celebrate the ceremony of the arrival of the alien ship and Obie's subsequent meeting with God.

Teague was avoided by everyone who spent a minute in his presence. He didn't stink, but he looked as if he might, and his constant muttering and mumbling was maddening. He was permitted to wander the grounds alone, and he would be seen first here then there, all the while holding his endless monologues, all the while alone. He roamed at night also, and presently no one noticed him at all. He was another figure among many who were accepted and no longer seen.

The ship was guarded heavily, a large contingent of UNEF was on duty on the grounds at all times, reinforced by security guards of various dignitaries who arrived unannounced from time to time. The rigorous inspection made by the Militant Millenniumists continued now that Blake was at large again. They still expected him to turn up at the ship sooner or later, and they were right. What they didn't expect was that he would go through the temple grounds and get to the ship from the rear.

On the night of the final ceremony of the unveiling of the initiates Teague was among the audience when the crackers were handed out with the invisible drop of XPT on them. He didn't take his, but resumed his seat and kept his eyes on the source of the crackers. Presently he left the auditorium, his eyes half closed, a wide smile on

his face. The MM at the door grinned and moved aside for him. He wandered about outside for a minute, then went straight to the back of the auditorium, where a passage led to the rooms used for serving meals. Here three MM's were preparing the crackers, which were taken from cartons, spread out on the table, and dosed by one of the MM's using an eyedropper. It all seemed very mundane now. Teague-Blake watched for a moment. There was a flask of clear liquid that was a duplicate of the flask being used by the MM with the eyedropper. Teague began to sing, the hallelujah song of Obie that was so stirring. The MM's looked up in annoyance and one of them approached him and grabbed his arm.

"Come on, old man. Out. You're not permitted in here."

"I heard the Voice, brother. The Voice. . . ." Teague clutched him and forced him back, behind the table, looking into his face earnestly, babbling nonsense, but with a grip that was viselike. The MM was taken by surprise He knew the stuff could affect them in strange ways, but this was too much to put up with. He pulled back his fist to strike and another of the three MM's came up and tried to pull Teague away.

"Leave him alone. He doesn't know what he's doing." The second one pulled Teague hard, and he let himself be turned and started for the door. In his pocket there was an eyedropper filled with the drug. He started to sing again and he kissed the MM on both cheeks, tried to envelop him with both arms and was finally put out and the door closed and locked. He could hear laughter in the room, and he walked away singing in a cracked hideous voice.

He collected a sack of provisions he had stolen, added a drop of XPT to each of ten pieces of candied fruit in a box, and then went to the back gates where guards were

on duty, singing as he walked, staggering and falling and rising again, but always singing. The guards waved him back and paid little more attention to him. He sat down on the grass and pulled the box of sweets from the sack. He pretended to eat one of them.

"What do you have, old man?"

"A present," he said, cackling. "A present from God. He took me by the hand and said, James, behind that door you will find the sweetness of the Earth that I have saved for you, and I looked and there was this here box of goodies and I knowed it was meant for me to take them because God Himself told me so and I brought them out and they are good, like He said they would be, and if that was stealing may He send lightning down right this minute. . . ."

He went on and one of the guards whistled and said laughingly, "Boy, wait 'til he wakes up in the morning and knows what's been happening. They'll have his hide."

"We might as well have some too," the other guard said. He turned off the current in the fence and came over to Teague and picked up a candied cherry. Teague snatched the box back and covered it with his arm. "One's enough," he said. "It's mine. God said it's mine." The other guard came up and Teague allowed him to take one of the sweets. The guards laughed and one of them feinted an attack while the other one tried to snatch away the box. Teague called, "Help, help, robbers!" And the guards left him alone.

He waited ten minutes then called them. He called them in a voice they hadn't heard before, and they came obediently. He told them there was a fountain of fire off to the left, that they were to go and watch it so that it would not burn down the temple, which they were to guard with their lives, if necessary. They both saw the

fountain of fire and they left him, running in order to watch and prevent the fire's spread to the temple. Teague-Blake went through the gate, across the strip of grass that separated the temple grounds from the U.N. grounds, and followed it to the rear gate of the U.N. land, a gate used only by the military personnel. It was guarded also.

He fed the U.N. men pieces of the fruit and then sent them to inspect the open temple gate, through which, he said, long hairs were streaming by the thousands. They trotted off. He approached the ship from the rear, and he changed as he neared it. His limp vanished. He pulled a dark green tunic from his pack and put it on, discarding the shabby coat he had worn. He smoothed the pack and folded it so that at a casual glance it looked more like a case than like a cloth bag. He tucked it under his arm. But most of the change came about in his manner of walking and the way he held his head. He looked like one of the bright young scientists who prowled about in the ship day and night.

He walked in front of small clusters of men talking, past a man at a desk who didn't even look up, past men dressed in UNEF uniforms, with sidearms. No one paid any attention to him. As he went up the ramp to the ship he turned for one last look about, still no one was looking at him questioningly, and he boarded the alien vessel, prepared to stay at least a week, or longer if he had to. No one knew he was there; he had food with him; the men he had duped at the two gates would have no memories of him, he had stressed that. He was probably the first man to board the ship with a key of any sort; perhaps, he thought, he would be the first one to come off it with some of the answers they had all sought for so many years.

What he didn't know was that three cameras worked night and day, photographing the ship and its entrance. The cameras were known to exist only by three people: Merton, who had ordered them, the expert who had installed them (one in the temple itself, high in the tower that afforded a view of the ship over the treetops), and Dee Dee, to whom Merton had confided. "Obie's scared shitless by the kid," he had said that night, "but I'm not. He'll turn up at the ship one day and I'll get him again. And the next time, I handle it my own way, right down the line." An hour after Blake had entered the ship, his presence there was revealed to Merton, who examined the film carefully.

"How in hell did he get that far without anyone's seeing him?" He ran through the film that was taken of the main gate and it showed no Blake Daniels. There were other approaches to the ship, but only through temple grounds, and he didn't believe even Blake would have tried to get through that way. He had the guards questioned the next morning and they reported that no one had gone through the temple exits. Besides there would have been U.N. men to buy or bribe or force, and that had been tried too many times by his own men to permit him to believe anyone else could do it.

He played the film over and over and in the end became resigned that Blake's entrance was a mystery. But one that he would resolve in due time. In due time, he promised himself, there would be no more mysteries regarding Blake Daniels. He called special forces together and gave them their orders.

"Take Blake Daniels when he leaves the U.N. grounds. By any methods that are necessary, but take him. Alive would be best, but any way that you can, get him."

Merton then went to bed, believing that within

twenty-four hours this phase would be over. Blake would be under lock and key, or dead. And they could start phase three.

Chapter Twenty-three

AFTER four days Blake still had found no way to use the disk he had received from Matt. There were no clues as to the origin of the aliens, their purpose, the propulsion system used in the ship, or their language. He lay on a bed, what he assumed was a bed, and thought about the ship again. He was tired; he had allowed himself only four hours' sleep each night since boarding, and it was beginning to affect him. He fingered the disk and tried to imagine the purpose of it, where it could be made to fit.

The ship was too big for one man to explore thoroughly and at the same time be alert for the officials who kept trooping through her. Although there were not the great numbers of scientists now that there had been in the beginning, there were still fifteen or twenty almost every day popping up all over the ship. Hiding places hadn't been hard to find, but it did limit the time that the main rooms could be examined. The public tours lasted from eight in the morning until nine at night, and then the scientists worked intermittently until two or three in the morning.

The aliens had used black trim for many of the rooms, and the trim was plastic, or metal, carved in scallops, curves, diminishing circles within circles. The disk

would fit in anywhere without being obtrusive. Blake fingered the disk and made a mental floor plan for the ship. It simply wasn't right. There were curious anomalies: Anti-gravity, but the scream of entry pointed to conventional propulsion methods. The rows of coffin-like boxes—beds for the cold sleep for the passengers, but pregnant women! Why? The design of the ship, while not streamlined and bullet-shaped, was such that it suggested a fast ascent through atmosphere and a fast descent, with heat deflectors to protect the occupants; and the great exhaust openings from what had to be engine rooms confirmed rocket power of some sort as the propulsion, ion rockets perhaps. There was no clue in the engine room. Blake waited until the ship was quiet and the last of the scientists gone again, then resumed his search. The room he was in was very large, a dorm, he guessed, with fifteen beds, slings, that were comfortable for sleeping. The walls were lined with storage bins, with bits of clothing in them. Bits and pieces, the way closets at camp might look. He looked over a tunic carefully, then put it back. Man-made fibers, lightweight, comfortable. The plastic walls of the room were pale green made up of thin layers of plastic that added a shimmering depth that was pleasing. The floors were of the same substance. The black plastic trim along the wall at waist height outlined the door that led to the corridor outside. The door was opened by passing a hand over a design of circles in a cluster. The design looked as if it was simply painted, but obviously was more than that. Heat sensors behind it operated the catch, releasing it, allowing the door to swing open. Where did the power come from? Blake went into the corridor and looked first in one direction then in the other. The corridors were wide, floored with the green plastic that was springy underfoot. Scrolls and curves of black were inlaid. They out-

lined every opening, formed every release for the doors, boxed in controls that must have been for communications, alarms, something that was needed at every corridor juncture. The use for the control boxes had not been determined. Inside the boxes were disks, much like the one Blake had, but they were all attached to boxes and could be taken out only by destroying the boxes. The boxes apparently were not connected to each other, or to anything else within the ship. The boxes were fastened to the walls, and the disks to the boxes. Blake studied the one nearest him for the tenth time, then turned from it with a frown of annoyance. His disk would fit in one of the hollows inside the box, except that all the boxes were filled already.

But there were other places his disk would also fit, and that was what made his task more difficult. The disks were everywhere, or objects just like them. In the boxes, in the engine rooms, on desks, in the various labs. . . .

He turned it over and over, then put it back in his pocket and picked up his search where he had left off. He had gone over the entire ship hurriedly, and was in the process of going through it again, more leisurely, more thoughtfully.

There were the elevator shafts that had no elevators. Why would they have removed the elevators? They had been found, stored together in a large, otherwise empty room, filled with some of the stocks that could be expected on a long voyage: foodstuffs, supplies of clothing, utensils that seemed designed for serving foods. Blake stood near the elevator shaft and stared up and down it; well lighted along its length it remained mysterious and bothersome.

He came to one of the rope guides for the tours and he stepped over it and entered the room that appeared to be a

film room. There were blank walls here and seats, but no sign of a projector, simply the seats lined up facing the blank walls. And the boxes with disks. And the carved trim.

It seemed to Blake that his greatest chances of learning anything from the ship must lie in the engine rooms and the chart rooms, and they were clustered on the fourth level. There were ninety-four floors, with seven major levels broken up by wide view windows and observation decks that jutted from the main body of the ship giving it a pagoda-like appearance from the outside. He knew that he had to be careful in those areas because he was exposed to the sight of anyone who happened to be looking that way at the right time. The ship was wired and was kept lighted day and night for the benefit of the investigators.

He had gone over the engine rooms twice already, but he felt that he had to try once more before he gave up there. It was from one of those overhangs that Matt had seen the alien walk out on air on their arrival, the topmost one. Blake stood by the door and stared at the first engine room with gaps where equipment had been at one time. This was a more functional-appearing room than the others he had given most of his attention to. There was little of the decorative trim here, for one thing, and the pale green in here was grayed. On the wall behind Blake was the box of disks. There were four island control areas, desks with panels of buttons and dials, small screens, computers, probably. The walls were lined with equipment, more computers, consoles whose purpose had not been determined. There were high chairs at each of the control panels in the islands, and more chairs along the walls for other operators. Blake glanced over them, stopped, and took note of the number of people needed

to fill the chairs, to man the controls. Sixteen. He turned to the box of disks and counted them. Sixteen. For the first time he thought he had found something.

For the next two hours he searched for a box with a disk missing. When he found such a box there were many disks missing, not only one. In disappointment he stared at the box with the shallow depressions, then turned to survey the room. It was the cold sleep room where so many bodies of already dead aliens had been found when finally the men had entered the ship. Blake counted the disks, twelve to a box here, with six boxes empty completely, and one with seven disks. He tried to fit his disk into one of the empty receptacles, and it slipped out again and he caught it. What then? Unless . . . he tried the disk in another place, then another, and on the fourth try in the partially filled box it held. It held so tightly that he couldn't remove it again.

He stepped back then and laughed. He had brought back a missing piece and the ship was keeping it. He saw that he had put it in shiny side down, with the dull side facing him and he grimaced at it. Let the boys with their slide rules try to figure out why one of them was in wrong side out. It bothered him, though, and he touched it again, to try one more time to get it out. It was hot.

Blake didn't laugh this time. He stared at it hard, then sat down on the nearest coffin rail and waited. Every fifteen minutes he touched the disk again. It got hotter, never hot enough to burn him, but enough to make him move his finger. Where was the power coming from? He heard the first of the tours starting, and the disk was still in the hollow, sitting there quietly hot, held fast. He found a hiding place and waited throughout the day. The tours came through the cold sleep room, and he heard the guide's voice:

"Here they slept for many many years while their ship

hurtled through space. Chemicals replaced blood, wires with electrodes recorded their temperatures and any chemical action that took place and prepared them for revival at the end of their journey. Unfortunately for two hundred and forty-seven persons that revival never came."

"What's that stuff over there?" A small boy's voice.

"Those are computers, we think, and the chemical banks. We have analyzed . . ."

"What's that stuff up there?" The same voice.

"We don't know exactly what they are for. We think a signal device that probably was lighted from within when the person took his place in the cold sleep storage unit. They are markers of some sort."

"You said two hundred and forty-seven. Why're there two hundred and forty-eight of them?"

"There are two hundred and forty-seven, the exact number of aliens we found. . . ."

"There's two hundred and forty-eight. Twelve in a box, twenty filled up boxes and one box with eight things. . . ."

"There are seven in the last. . . ."

"Eight!"

"In the next room we will see the dining quarters, a large room, with rather conventional tables and stools. . . ."

"Why not look if you don't believe—"

"This way, please. Please don't lean over the ropes. . . . Son, don't crawl under . . ."

"Harry, if you don't behave, we'll leave right now. I'm sick and tired of having to haul you out of corners and drag you. . . ."

Blake darted from the small storage room where he had been hiding and tried the disk again. It was perceptibly cooler, but still wouldn't budge. If the guide had paid

any attention to the kid and came back, or reported the addition . . . he hurried back to his little room when the next tour came through.

Three tours later the disk was cool again and it slid out into his hand as if it never had resisted at all. Blake hurried back to the hideaway and examined it carefully, but as far as he could see there was nothing different about it. He rubbed it, feeling foolish, like Aladdin, tried to push it in, tried to turn the two halves from each other. It was still a black disk, shiny on one side, dull on the other, with no powers to do anything that he could detect.

Between the tours he left that area and made his way higher in the ship well away from the various tours that crawled through endlessly, like a procession of worms through an apple. He passed the wardroom where clothing was issued, apparently, and went on to the general stores room. There was little left in it. Most of the portable goods had been taken from the ship long ago, to be studied in laboratories around the world where they were cut apart, analyzed, X-rayed, subjected to electron microscopic examination, irradiated. . . .

Mostly he wanted a place where no one would come for a while so he could think. The disk puzzled him more than anything else had so far. The woman had owned it; she had taken it with her when she left the ship; then when she realized that she was dying she had given it to Matt. His reasoning had been right, probably. She had meant it for her child. But why? For what reason. Where had the power come from that heated it, and why heat it? Blake turned it over and over and was as blank after he thought through it as he had been before. There was something missing still. He recalled Matt's words: ". . . and when she took off the tunic the disc fell to the floor. I picked it up and she motioned for me to keep it." Not in her hand then, but in the tunic. He went back to

the wardroom and examined a tunic. There were no pockets, no place for the disk to have been. He narrowed his eyes recalling every detail of the dressed dummies that had been positioned in the first room of the guided tour. The aliens had worn hip-length tunics over pants that were loose and comfortable. The tunics were without pockets, but were belted and things hung from the belts. Instruments of various sorts, they differed from one figure to the next, according to occupation, so said the cards that described the outfits. But there was something in common. Each belt had a loop that dangled odds and ends. Curious odds and ends, and some of them with nothing. Just loops. Blake hunted until he had found a belt and he looked closely at the fittings on it. This one would hold six different objects, each one fitted into a slot and held securely. The belt was wide and heavy, plastic, or hide of some sort. It was held together by self-fastening studs that clung tightly, and couldn't be pulled apart no matter how hard he pulled, but slid apart easily when he tried to raise one side and lower the other. He put the belt on, too big. He tried another, then another until he found one that fastened securely on his waist and was a comfortable fit. He fitted the disk into the loop, and he knew that it belonged there. That solved one problem, where they carried them, but not the other, why? He started to slide the two halves of the belt apart, and he shot upward. He straightened the belt hurriedly, and hovered with his head touching the ceiling. Very cautiously he touched the belt again, nothing. He tried to lean over enough to see it, but he couldn't get a close enough look to see any details that way. He ran his fingers over the front of the belt, near the fasteners, and he could feel depressions in it then. He touched the bottom one very lightly and started to settle. When his feet were again on the floor he touched the center hollow,

and he felt reasonably steady again. He remembered a high-ceilinged room that had no discernible purpose for being and he headed toward it. He needed practice.

Chapter Twenty-four

HE'S in there, and I want him out. Take a dozen of your men and get inside that ship and don't come out until you find him."

Merton watched his lieutenant walk out stiffly, and he knew that Blake had eluded them again. No one could have stayed inside the ship for two weeks without being found, or running out of food, or making his presence known somehow. His spies among the UNEF reported nothing untoward had occurred aboard. He went to find Obie.

"It was your job to keep him," Obie said. "And it's your job to find him now and put him in a cage. Get that, Merton. If you don't get the job done this week, I'll find someone who will."

"Oh, shut up," Merton said.

Obie started from the deep chair that was massaging his back. There were fatty deposits over Obie's hips, around his rib cage. No jiggling chair would take them away. Hard work, less food might, but even that was doubtful. Obie was destined to put on weight. Merton scowled at him and motioned for him to sit down again. He draped a leg over Obie's desk and said, "Let's get this out in the open, Obie. You aren't going to fire me now, or ever. If I get tired, I'll leave. Period. I have enough on

you, on Dee Dee, on Wanda, Billy, everyone you ever hired for any little nose-picking job you wanted done to put all of you away for the rest of your lives. So forget it."

Obie turned very red. Where his hair was thinning on top, his scalp showed through, cherry bright. "You think I don't have the same kind of stuff on you?"

"I know what you got. So we'd all go together. Forget it, Obie. We've got things to decide." Obie glared at him, but he sat back again and the chair shook him gently. "First, you go ahead with the Son of God routine that you started. I'm putting everyone I have on this. We'll find him, and by the end of next year we'll be ready for the resurrection, just like we planned. Tell your writers to bear down on that."

"No," Obie said firmly. "Not unless we have him in our hands. Too risky."

"Listen, you fool," Merton said. "We need him now. I got a ringer for him. With the gas, and the buildup, they'll accept it. For the climax, we'll have him. Leave it to me."

"Let me see the ringer first."

Merton had the boy brought in. He did look like Blake. Fair, with intense eyes, good build. But he was incredibly stupid. Which probably was a good thing. He would follow any orders that he could remember. Obie grunted and the boy was led away.

"He's an idiot!"

"So what? You want him to sit on the stage and look at them. That's all. You do the rest anyway."

The buildup started. Blake would appear henceforth along with Obie; the God-given healing powers had been restored in full. Bring forth the halt and the lame, bring the blind and the dumb, bring you small ones whose bodies are twisted, your old one whose legs stumble and falter. Bring them all. Let Obie and His Son heal them,

with the power and the strength and the might of God that abides in them.

The next show was scheduled for Miami, a tough city, filled with money men and bought women and hedonists of all ages and bents. If Obie and the ringer got through to them, anything was possible.

The billboards read: They give you water where there was none. Power where there was no power. Wine where there was no wine. Health where health has failed. Come feel the power of God that shines forth through Obie Cox and his son Blake.

The auditorium seated two hundred thousand, and it was filled. The MM's were out in full force, most of them in plainclothes, all of them armed and alert for the Barbers, and for Blake Daniels.

Obie glowed and was beautiful, his beard gleamed, with peroxide and a luminous dye, and his eyes shone with the power of God. He paced in his dressing room smoking furiously, waiting for Merton's report that all was clear. Billy chewed on a fingernail and looked fat. Dee Dee in her white robe was lovely, but she, like Obie, was smoking hard.

"I wish you hadn't let him talk you into this," Billy said, spitting out a bit of his thumbnail. "It isn't going to take many of those scenes like Chicago to make a fool out of you. If those kids show up with their voice distorter and their scissors . . ."

"If Merton bitches this one," Obie muttered, "I have just the guys for him. They have orders. . . ."

Dee Dee gasped. "You're kidding!"

"You too, if you think it's time to take sides," Obie said.

Dee Dee shrugged. If she had to take sides, she would stand pat. Obie knew that. Merton without Obie was just another ex-F.B.I. man.

Merton came in then, looking satisfied and very matter

of fact. "Time," he said. "I gave the word to get started."

"You're sure about the audience?"

"Absolutely. We used the scanners on everyone who came in, no electronic devices, no scissors, nothing. We had to take a hundred seventy-four aside and escort them back out, but they weren't Barbers. Blackjacks and knives and a few stun guns. That's all." The sound of the choir drifted in. They were very good, three hundred voices, each girl good enough to solo.

"The kid? Is he set?"

"He knows what he's supposed to do. As long as he doesn't have to speak, he'll be fine. Calm down Obie. This one is fixed down the line."

Billy turned on the 3D and they saw the choir, miniaturized, but there in the room with them. A camera did a slow sweep of the audience, and again they were there, seeing the individuals in person. Dee Dee stubbed out her cigarette, and left for her solo. Billy waddled out, still unhappy, to watch from behind stage and to take charge of the money when it came in. Presently it was time for Obie to go on. Obie straightened his shoulders and left Merton alone in the dressing room. Only then did Merton allow some of the worry he was feeling to show on his face. He drank a quick scotch and water, then concentrated on the 3D. It was going out all over the world; everywhere people were watching to see if the Barbers would break up yet another of the rallies held by Obie. Riots, fires, National Guards had repaid their diligence the last three times Brother Cox had held open revivals, and they were hopeful that this would be as exciting. Obie had been forced to go to closed meetings with only the broadcasts to take the message to the people, and it had cost him; at the rate of half a million dollars a meeting, it had cost him. Now they would regain lost ground. But Merton worried.

The lights went out slowly, the flickering tapers re-

lieving the dark very little, and when the spot came on, Obie was there, looking handsome and very sure of himself. He could feel the excitement from the crowds, and their fear of being caught up in something that could get dangerous. Obie prayed, getting the full feeling of his audience, and when the prayer was over the collection was taken. Billy managed that part of it. He would be jubilant; there were many bills of credit, many dollars, the jingle of coins. Obie had the feel now: he knew what he would preach. He never really knew until he felt with the audience. Actually what he said didn't vary all that much, but his delivery did, and tonight he would be happy, hopeful, excited. This was the beginning of the end. The power of God had been contested and had not been found wanting. The forces of evil had been driven out once more. God was triumphant. Obie Cox was triumphant. The hallelujah chorus started and Blake's stand-in came forward. For a second Obie's stomach churned; the kid looked legitimate as hell. Blake had always come out reluctantly, closed in on himself somehow. The boy took his seat and Obie started:

"God gave us this boy so that His power could be shown here on Earth. And God said, 'I shall reveal many things through this boy, and when the time comes, I shall take him to My bosom that man might know that I have put My Mark on him.' And to this boy God revealed many things: how to restore sight to eyes grown dim; how to put strength in limbs twisted and weak; how to bring well-being to bodies suffering and pained; how to bring peace of mind to man. And when this house, Earth, is in order, then will God return this boy to his home in heaven and man will be ready to meet the strangers and to overcome them. . . ."

The trouble with charisma, one of the problems of making it understandable, is that on paper it is so flat, while in the flesh it sings and dances and draws and com-

pels. Obie Cox had that charisma. He was insincere, he was crafty, he was a cheat, a liar, a clown according to some of those who had seen through him, but he had charisma. He could say A-B-C and make his audience love it. He could recite nursery rhymes and they would go away thinking they had heard great poetry. He had the gift. He held the audience of two hundred thousand.

Obie fed them, nourished them, structured their fears and their anxieties for them; he buoyed them to the heavens and then took away the props and replaced them with conditions. First they had to eradicate the menace to mankind: the forces of evil among them, the short hairs who threatened mankind by not believing in the message of the Voice of God. There would then be room enough, food enough, hope enough. But only after Armageddon.

When Obie ordered them to come forward and declare themselves on the side of The Voice of God and what it stood for, they came in droves. They pushed and fought to get to the stage where each convert was presented with a plastic glass which he filled with water by himself, and which then gave him wine. The miracle of the wine drew more converts. But the first batch started to act strangely. They stared at the wine, looked about as if awakening, and when the time came for them to withdraw backstage to sign up for instructions and for a place in the Listener's Booths, they edged away, and gradually resumed their seats, or tried to leave the auditorium. They were quiet and well behaved for the most part; unless an eager MM tried to force them backstage, they simply acted bewildered by it all.

Obie hurriedly started his final prayer, calling on God to manifest Himself through Blake.

"And God said, 'Rise ye who would seek delivery from pain and from hurts, and look on him, My Son.'" Obie motioned to the boy, who stared at him dully, half

asleep, forgetful of his role for the moment. Obie motioned again and the boy remembered. He stood up and turned to his left and stared at the masses of faces turned toward him. Somewhere behind them a small scuffle broke out when a newly awakened wine sipper woke up and demanded back his credit of ten dollars, his donation to the Church. The boy stared and slowly people in that section of the audience started to gasp and some of them stood up weeping and crying out. The healing was taking place.

In the dressing room Merton was sipping Scotch and water, a satisfied smile on his face. Like clockwork. there was something with the wine routine that needed looking into, but they could fix that. The rest was as sweet as honey. He dropped his glass suddenly and leaned forward. A figure was floating over Obie's head. Merton swore long and fluently and watched.

Blake Daniels sat on air cross-legged and nodded to people in the audience. He looked down at the double standing on the stage with his arms outstretched, and he laughed. Everyone heard him laugh. Obie heard. Obie's head snapped back and he stared, turned white, looked like he might faint, but stood there, unable to move, unable to speak. Blake waved to him casually, pointed again to the boy and laughed once more. He floated easily over the heads of the audience, looked down on them, and made several gestures. Some of those in the audience rose from their seats, with looks of astonishment and pleasure on their faces, and joined him in the air. One was a frail white-haired woman who left a wheelchair behind to float. Blake laughed joyously at her and she laughed also. There had been a total silence at first, but now people were starting to react. There were screams and cries: "Take me, too." "Pick me up." "Show me how to do it." "Who are you?" and so on. Some fainted. Blake looked down again and made another motion; more joined him,

a youngster of ten or eleven, another white-haired woman, a young man of twenty-five or so, two teen-aged girls. A Militant Millenniumist pulled his stun gun and aimed it. Blake turned toward him shaking his head. The man said later that he felt a flashing pain in his hand, heat, electricity, something that he couldn't describe, and he dropped the gun. Other guns were dropped. Blake led his floaters from the auditorium then, and they all vanished upward into the sky.

The auditorium was in a shambles by then. People forgot Obie Cox and his son and tried to clamber out over and under other people for another glimpse of the floaters. The MM's were pushed aside, as were ushers, and the plainclothesmen. The noise was intolerable. The choir was ordered to sing, but they couldn't be heard. Backstage a band of youths dressed in black staged a robbery and the entire take was lifted and vanished while the attention of the guards was on the bedlam of the auditorium. The boys floated away with the loot afterward.

When Obie got back to his dressing room Merton was there. Obie said nothing. He was as white as the robe he wore; his eyes were quite mad. He hit Merton on the side of his face with his fist and his ring cut deeply into the flesh, baring the cheekbone. Merton was staggered and dazed, but he wasn't out. He lashed back with a knife. Obie kicked him in the groin, and this time Merton fell screaming in pain.

Obie sat down then and drank Scotch from the bottle. He got very drunk very fast. When Merton could move, Obie kicked him again, and this time Merton lay unmoving for a long time. Obie left him on the floor and returned to Mount Laurel. Merton would have joined the opposition when he got in condition to join anything once more, but he never found them. He went back to the F.B.I. and became their chief informer concering the Church.

INTERLUDE THIRTEEN

A composition found among Winifred Harvey's clippings, etc., reproduced as it was written.

Rats

by Michael F. Shea

Page One

Rats are every where in the world. They are brown rats and black and white. White rats are good ones. They are laboratory rats and do work for Science. Brown rats and Black rats eats things like rubber off of wires and burn down houses and our food and bite babies in their cribs and wont eat poison but sometimes people do and it's better to keep the rats.

In conclusion the preponderance of evidence supports

the theory that when the environmental factors of food and water are maintained at a stable level high enough to sustain the colony regardless of the population increase the condition of overcrowding per se is the causal factor for the incidence of pathological social behavior, ie. schizophrenic withdrawals, sexual aberrations, cannibalism, and everything.

The End

1. I will not cut off rats' tails.
2. I will not cut off rats' tails
3. I will not cut off rats' tails
4. I will not cut off rats' tails
5. I will not cut off rats' tails

98. I will not cut off rats' tails.
99. I will not cut off rats' tails.
100 I will not cut off rats' tails.

Chapter Twenty-five

LORNA said to herself, as she often did, "This is New Hampshire, United States of America. I am sane. I am not hallucinating, not having nightmares, not right now at any rate. There really is an announcer reading from a news card. . . ."

"'. . . manic phase. Electro-shock used to be the specific treatment for this condition, but, of course, one cannot administer to an entire population an electric charge sufficient to jar the brains and restore normalcy.' That ends the quote from Dr. Teodor Dyerman. Tonight in the following cities riots and fighting go on : St. Augustine, Florida; Miami, Jacksonville, St. Petersburg. In Georgia the cities suffering from pitched battles are Atlanta, Waycross . . ."

Lorna stopped watching and listening. She searched the group before the 3D for Blake, but he had wandered outside. Derek and the others were engrossed in the newscast. This was the resistance, Lorna thought scornfully, a bunch of kids with close-cropped hair and sharp scissors. They were all members of the Barbers, all waiting for the latest word from Obie Cox. She knew everything Obie Cox might say. Another miracle for the people, courtesy of the Cox Foundation Laboratories and the Star Child. Only the Star Child was not the Star Child, and he was mad, and the miracles were those of Blake Daniels' agile mind, and he was alien. She got up presently and wandered outside where Blake was sitting

under a tree. It was late spring, 1998, and the weather was hot and dry. It was always dry.

"The world's going to hell, isn't it?" Lorna said joining him.

"Year 2000 might see few left to predict the new century," he said. His eyes were distant, however, as if he had been deep in thought, and would return as soon as she left him. The Barbers and Blake told her little because they knew that she would talk again if the Church got her back. She hadn't realized that during their long trek through the mountains up from North Carolina, but it had become obvious as soon as Blake had joined the Barbers and had become their tactical leader. No one called him that, least of all Blake, but there it was. He had brought them the anti-gravity belts and the disks that powered them and had instructed them in the use of the things. He had planned the fiasco that had retired Obie Cox from public. He was planning something now.

Once a millionaire, he had depleted his fortunes in the purchase of factories all over the country. He had bought machinery, designed some of it, had Derek and his friends design other components, and he was turning out water converters by the millions, power units, and now the anti-gravity belts and disks. Lorna didn't know how he meant to use them, or why. If Derek knew he wasn't talking about it. She suspected that Derek knew. He was haunted-looking, with deep violet circles under his eyes, and the restlessness of one who isn't sleeping enough.

"No one sleeps enough any more," she said.

"Insomnia is certainly part of it," Blake said absently. She looked at him suspiciously, afraid he was mocking her, but he wasn't even noticing her now.

Lorna sat there only a minute; when Blake didn't say anything else, she pushed herself from the ground, a thin figure in pants and boy's shirt, with her hair close to her

head. "Is this all we do about it, Blake? Harass them now and then? Annoy the long hairs a bit when we think we can get away with it, then hide again? Is that all? There is civil war going on now. Can't we do something?"

Blake smiled at her. He was no longer distant, but was there, close and warm. He reached up for her hand and pulled her down to his side again. "Lorna, if we can get through the next year and a half, more or less whole, then all this will ease off. Don't you see that? People have been afraid for so long that if they get past the mystical number 2000, they will breathe again, and be able to look at the sky again, and at each other again, and automatically Obie Cox and his religion will be swept aside. Get past 2000 A.D., spread them out, hold the population. . . ."

"But can we get through the next eighteen months? How many will be left? You know what it's like now in the cities. I saw on the 3D news that another twenty-five square miles of winter wheat had burned down last night. Fires were started every five miles, and the army was fought off when they tried to put it out. Why things like that, Blake? What can they hope to gain? They'll be hungry too."

"I don't think so. In most states they have the legislatures tied up tight; they'll get their rations, and if the others go hungry . . . sooner or later they'll be forced to join the Church and then they'll eat again."

"And you're willing for that to happen? To have everyone become a member of the Church and worship his god of hate? Is that it? You think salvation for Earth lies with Obie Cox and his Church!"

"I think it does. I really think it does."

"I just don't understand you at all!" Lorna jumped up again, and this time Blake merely watched her. "You knew what Obie is like, you better than most of us, and

yet you sit there and say you think he can save mankind. Why? It's mad. But of course, you're not even human so how can you know what I feel, what most of us feel about this!" Blake laughed and was still laughing when she turned and fled back to the house.

That night he told the Barbers that he was going back to Obie Cox and that he planned to stay with him through to the end.

"He needs one last miracle," Blake said slowly, "and I'm afraid that I'm it."

"What are you talking about?" Lorna asked. She looked to Derek for support, but he nodded at Blake in agreement.

"There has to be a crucifixion and a resurrection," Blake said simply. "And that will tie all the loose ends, make a package of it."

Late that night when she finally gave up on trying to get to sleep, Lorna walked under the trees where Blake had sat earlier. Derek was there.

"Why did he go back, Dek? Why?"

"Would you believe," he said, but his voice was heavy and only the words were facetious, "that he has to close a circle. That no one else will fit?"

"But he doesn't have to! Don't you think it's useless?"

"I think it's useless. Now quit bugging me, Lorna."

"Okay. He's gone back. Obie will have his sacrifice and he'll stage the resurrection." She was silent for several minutes and then said quietly, "We couldn't have had children. Alien and human. . . ."

Chapter Twenty-six

OBIE dreamed that Blake drifted in through his bedroom window, riding moonbeams down from the sky to land very gently on a leather chair near the bed.

Obie dreamed that Blake said, "I've come home, Brer Cox. The prodigal son is home again."

Obie dreamed that he tried to rise, tried to shout for help, tried to reach the gun that he kept on the bedside table. All he could do, in his dream, was stare terrified at the blond monster bathed in moonlight. His terror grew, and it was a crushing weight on his chest; it paralyzed him completely. He had to close his eyes, had to, had to. . . . They closed. In a minute or two he awakened completely, sat straight up, clammy and shivering, and looked about wildly. No one was in the room with him. Of course.

When Obie entered the sun porch where he breakfasted every day, he thought at first that Billy was there reading the morning fax, waiting for him to talk to him. He was sleepy, the sunlight was glaring, he wanted it to be Billy there waiting for him. The fax was lowered and it was Blake, smiling at him.

"I'm ready to pick up where we left off, Obie," he said. "I want to take my place at your side again."

Obie didn't believe him at first, probably didn't believe him at all ever, but gradually he came to act as if he did. The riots continued, worsened as the weather changed and winter came, and the food shortage began to be felt

more and more. To add to the miseries promised by the winter weather there was a world-wide shortage of fuel. Radiation leaks had forced the closing of many of the world's reactors, and there wasn't enough coal and oil to replace them. Rationing became tighter. Christmas arrived in a bleak season of little work, little money, long lines of unemployed and hungry men ready to burn down the city if they were refused jobs. They were refused jobs because the jobs were nonexistent, and they tried to burn down the cities. Whole neighborhoods vanished under the torch, miles of business districts became charred ruins. There were very few deaths even when the long hairs and the short hairs clashed; they all seemed more intent on burning down the material wealth of the country.

Obie was willing for Blake to be on camera with him, but he refused to be with him at other times. Billy was the emissary who delivered messages back and forth. Blake didn't ask permission to use the lab, nor did he produce any new invention or make any discoveries. He sat on the stage with Obie and throughout the world people wrote in to say they had been cured of this and that by his presence. When Obie started to talk about the promise of God to recall his son to his bosom he doubled the guards about Blake, who smiled and said nothing. Spring came.

The Star Child, Johnny, was pronounced cured, or improved as much as was possible. Obie couldn't stand to be with the boy, who looked at him haughtily and ordered the immediate recognition from the people of Earth that was his due. Dr. Mueller hovered in the background anxiously and seemed pleased with the product of his long labors.

"Keep him under lock and key," Obie said and left. Johnny stared after him; he called on all the powers he

knew to dwell within himself, called on his people to descend and destroy Earth. Obie continued to move away, untouched by the powers that were hurled against him, and Johnny decided that Obie was a man protected by a very powerful god. He would need more time to ponder this.

Blake was kept locked up much of the time, also, but he accepted it without comment, or even without notice, it appeared. When he was permitted to walk about the grounds, he was followed by half a dozen men, some stationed quite close to him, others overlooking the entire group from more distant vantage points. Spring was cold and windy, and without promise of a letup in the drought that was plaguing Earth.

Billy was uneasy about Blake's presence, as were the others who had known him in the past. Often Obie, Dee Dee, Billy, and Wanda met to discuss his reappearance, and they never came to a satisfactory conclusion about why he had come back. Or why he was suddenly so docile.

"Merton," Billy said, more than once, "would have had him killed on sight, put in deep freeze until the right time, then brought him out for the climax."

"Yeah, I know that," Obie said.

He dropped it there. They knew that he wouldn't have Blake killed, yet, and that no one else in the room would have him killed. No one said this, however.

"Have you asked him if he'd take money and just get lost?" Wanda asked in the silence that followed.

Obie stared malevolently at her without bothering to answer.

"How do you know he won't if you don't ask?" she said peevishly. Blake's presence was more upsetting than his disappearance ever had been. "If only he wouldn't look at me like he does," she muttered, more peevishly.

"What I want to know is why he came back," Billy said angrily. "He didn't have to. He managed to stay hidden well enough when that was what he wanted."

"Knock it off, for chrissakes!" Dee Dee said. "I am so tired of listening to all of you. Why the hell don't you ask him why he came back? Have you thought of that?"

Obie looked at her as if she had suggested that he walk into a nest of rattlers to see if they had fangs. But Billy said, "Have you, Obie? Not through me you haven't."

So Blake was sent for, and he entered the room with a faint smile on his face. "Reunion," he said. "Old home week, and all that."

"What do you want?" Obie said.

Blake laughed. "I don't know what you mean. I'm your prisoner. How could I have demands?"

"Why did you come back?" Dee Dee was as lovely as ever, although skill and technique now replaced what had been natural. She studied Blake appraisingly, noting the broad shoulders, the long, smooth muscles, the way his gaze had gone over the room just once, but with an intensity that suggested that he had noted every object there.

"To finish Obie's jigsaw puzzle for him. It can't be left with the last few pieces missing. That drives people mad, is driving them mad now. There was only so much that Obie could do, and he has done it, all of it. The rest depends on me." He bowed slightly toward Obie as he said this. Obie continued to watch him with narrowed eyes. His hand was in his pocket tight about a stun gun.

"What are you talking about?" Wanda asked. Her voice, like the rest of her, was big. It filled the room and reverberated.

"There has to be the finale. Ask Obie, he understands these things. Not in words maybe, but he feels how it has to be. Those millions of people out there understand it,

too. They don't believe Obie can deliver, so the tension grows. I have to die, publicly, isn't that right, Brother Cox? Then a waiting period while Obie prays to his god, and a miraculous resurrection, again public, and my physical ascension to heaven." Wanda grew steadily paler as he spoke. He smiled gently at her. "You never did like to have it out where everyone could look at it at the same time, did you? But that's how it has to be. The tide is coming in and there's no way now to stop it. You can't start things of this magnitude, then step to one side and say, I didn't mean *that*. You have to ride it out, right to the end, or get smashed by it."

Wanda continued to stare at him as if hypnotized. "You're planning a trick of some sort. You won't let yourself be killed like that. . . ."

"Is this being taped?" At her sudden start he nodded. "I thought so. Okay, then you can have this for future study. I'll outline it for you. By fall the curtain will go up on the last act. Mobs storming the citadel here, after my blood. The government will have to come to grips with the legislation that is being pushed through, things like teaching the Voice of God Church dogma in schools, like tax allowances for members. . . . You know all that. It will come to the fore by the start of the fall session. Many things will come to light all at once, bribery, perjury, forged documents, phony election returns. . . . The army will be sent for Brother Cox, and me, because by then I will have become the rallying point. It will all come to pass," he said very quietly, as Billy started to wrestle himself from the oversized chair that had been built specially for him. "You have this on tape. You can check it point for point. So the Army will come, followed by many thousands of persons, short hairs mostly, but also long hairs who will want in on the excitement. There will be 3D cameras to catch it all.

Obie will escape, using my flying trick, but I'll be shot down. And later, after the crowds realize that they have killed me, a reaction will set in: they will come to mourn where they had come to mock and kill. Obie will return. There will be a resurrection. The body will rise from the coffin on display, and it will keep rising until it has vanished into the clouds."

Obie was as pale as death when Blake turned from Wanda to face him.

"You're making all of this up. All of it," Obie said. "It's a cheap trick. . . ."

Blake jiggled some coins in his pocket and said nothing.

"We had you searched. You haven't got anything with you to use to fly with. Whatever that trick was back in Miami, you can't pull it again without equipment."

"I'm not going to pull it at all, Brother Cox. You are. When the time gets near, you will come to me and demand to know how I did it, and at that time, I'll tell you."

"Get out!" Obie said. He looked very frightened. "*Get out of here!*"..

It came to pass almost exactly as Blake said it would. By the end of summer he was the chief attraction in the Voice of God Church. Obie was the prophet, but Blake was the mystical son of God with the powers of God in him. In Congress speeches were made denouncing the Voice of God Church as an anarchist plot to seize the government and the country. The fear of anarchy pushed harder than anything ever had in the past. By November the call went out to arrest Obie Cox and Blake Daniels Cox and try them as revolutionists and traitors, and more specifically to charge them with attempts to bribe law officers and government officials, and with exerting undue, even criminal, influence over elec-

tions, with tax frauds, etc., etc. Obie grew more and more frightened. To no avail did Billy Warren Smith point out that other people had made the same predictions that Blake had made. Hysteria over the coming new year and new century was being manifested in many ways. Obie listened and did not hear. He was afraid of Blake Daniels.

In December he walked into Blake's room, dismissing the guard posted at the door as he entered. "Where is it?" he demanded.

Blake stood up. He was not smiling now. "You have it in your safe among the goodies you had taken from me when I arrived."

"Come on," Obie said. He led the way toward the main house. The guard fell into place. It was a cold, clear night: December 27, 1999.

Obie opened the safe and Blake took out the box that held the few belongings that he had brought with him. There was the opal-like stone, the coins that he liked, the black disc. He took them all. Obie watched him suspiciously. He kept one hand in his pocket. He waved Blake back and examined the objects carefully. "It's just junk," he said finally. Blake made a motion toward the stone with fire in the middle of it, and Obie's hand closed over it. "Get back," he said. "Way back." He watched until Blake had crossed the room to sit in one of the contour chairs near the desk. Then he examined the stone again, this time turning it over and over and over and over and over. . . . Blake smiled.

Chapter Twenty-seven

THE deputy and his men have reached the last road-block now. You can see that it, like the others, is not manned. There are no planes of any sort on the airstrip, no hovercraft, no *vto* craft of any sort, although it is known that the Voice of God Church possesses every kind of modern aircraft made. Now the deputy and his men are making the last turn.

"From our vantage point high over the mountain we can see most of the grounds. There, on the left of the picture is the main building, a huge colonial-type mansion, three stories high, snowy white and gleaming, and behind it are smaller guest houses. Through the trees, in the center of the picture, you can see the other buildings, hospital, and medical personnel quarters. There is a laboratory there also. Panning to the right now we see a man-made lake perched like a daub of blue paint against the ground lightly sprinkled with snow, surrounded by fir trees and low-growing pine trees. Then we see the campsites. The buildings are not visible. . . .

"The deputy has reached the last leg of his trip up the mountain. He is now at the beginning of a sweeping driveway that winds about beautifully landscaped grounds and ends at the front entrance of the mansion. Still no one has appeared to challenge the deputy. The crowds are pushing hard against the cordon of soldiers who are trying to hold them back. Slowly, foot by foot

they have pushed their way up the mountain also, and they are not far behind the deputy and his posse. Ah . . . Ladies and gentlemen, the crowds have broken through! They are swarming over the grounds now. . . ."

The picture dimmed momentarily and came back, but the voice was out. The people swarmed over everything in sight during the interlude. They were pressing into the great house, windows broken out, torches here and there flying through the air and the satisfying sudden flare of a building catching fire. The fires went out almost immediately. The mansion was fireproofed in the most thorough manner imaginable.

The announcer's voice again: "We can't see the deputy any longer. He is lost in that surge of people below, trying to make his way to the entrance of the house. His ground effect car has been overturned and presumably he is on foot now, as are his men. . . . Ah, there is his group, still far back. It doesn't look like they will be able to get through. . . . Look, over there! To the right . . ." The camera swung wildly and the 3D image was the vision of a man reeling in a drunken daze. It settled again on a balcony on the third floor of the building. Two figures were there, both in white robes, both blond, both silent. Obie and Blake. The crowds went mad.

"Ladies and gentlemen, there must be fifty thousand people down there now, and more coming all the time. It's a madhouse down there. I can't see any of the armed forces, or the deputy, no one at all in authority. Obie Cox and his son are standing on the balcony, not moving. Why doesn't he get out?" Pause. "They are throwing things at them. . . . There are some stun guns down there! And a rifle or two! Oh, my God! They are going to murder them!" The images of the milling people, stones flashing through the air, a fire in the distance—the

hospital?—the engineers had adjusted the sound down so that the shrieks and screams and curses were muffled, and the pop now and then of a gun was too low to be ominous. The figures stood quietly. They began to rise slowly, and it was more as if everything else were sinking and they were still motionless. They were ten feet above the balcony before the crowds realized that they were ascending.

There was a scream from thousands of throats simultaneously, then absolute silence. The announcer: "It has to be a trick, of course. But what a trick! Higher and higher! They are fifty feet above the house now. . . ." Sounds of rifle fire shattered the silence. One of the figures doubled over, was caught by the other, and together, they vanished into the woods. Static.

"I repeat, Blake Daniels Cox has been shot. We don't know yet how badly he has been wounded. The people are silent now and the Army is getting through them, going into the woods to try to find a trace of Obie Cox and his son. We are circling the area but we can see nothing through the trees below us. They are down there somewhere. At the clearing there is a stunned silence now. . . ."

Hours later they found Blake. He was lying on the ground, on a bed of pine needles, his eyes closed, his face composed in death, his hands across his chest. The front of his robe was crimson and brown with drying blood. Two doctors pronounced him dead.

The Church claimed him and took him to the temple, where he lay in state for three days, and on the third day Obie reappeared. He said nothing, but walked to the altar draped with black where he prayed before the casket.

Orders had been given out: no matter what happened the 3D cameras were to stay on, the proceedings were to

be followed to the end. Later it was disputed on whose orders, but no matter, they had been given and the entire sequence was shown, although distorted in the memories of those who witnessed. One of the versions is as follows.

Obie prayed before the casket, his voice too low to catch the words, but his attitude that of sorrow and grief. Behind him the satin of the covering in the casket stirred and Blake sat up, then stood up and stepped out. There were screams and moans and fainting spells and even a heart attack down in the congregation and Obie whirled around to see why. He blanched and caught the dais to keep himself upright. Blake was laughing.

He didn't go near the microphone, but his voice was everywhere. He must have been wired with a hidden mike. "This is another of Obie's miracles! The miracle of a pill! Dead? Do I look dead? If I fly, is that a miracle of God, or is it the miracle of a new mechanical device? And if one is miraculous, why not the other? I can fly. So can you. I can produce water from rocks. So can you. I can make you heal yourselves. So can you. These are not miracles. These are the products of hard work, done by men, on Earth, for the benefit of other men. Miracles? The only miracle is that you have been duped. You have believed when you should have laughed. Obie Cox, God's Voice? That is the joke, and you didn't laugh. That is the only miracle." He rose from the stage and hovered six feet above the coffin. "This is the climax of this act, I am to ascend into heaven, but not yet. Not today." He pulled open his robe and put his hand on the belt that was under it. "Do I want to go higher, this depression will take me up. Lower, this one. Sideways, like this . . ." He demonstrated as he spoke and there was only profound silence now as the people watched him. He landed easily once more, beside the shaking Obie. He

draped his arm about Obie's shoulder. "And this man can fly also, if he has an anti-gravity unit and the proper controls. As you can."

His voice dropped dramatically then and he looked at Obie in wonder as he added, "You would let this man, this mortal man with thinning hair and feet that hurt and beard that is dyed regularly, this man with his exerciser and his girdle and his fondness for rich food, this man with his lusts and his fears pushing him, you would let this man define your god for you! That is the miracle!

"If you seek a god, seek him alone. That is the only way you can find one.

"If you seek miracles, look at the flowers that grow, at the rainbows that bridge the skies, at the ripening wheat in the field.

"If you seek an anti-gravity, go to the Barber Shops! They are for you, free, with no tithe expected in return. Go to the Barber Shops!" He patted Obie's livid cheek and said sardonically, "Sorry, old man. The game's over." Then he rose into the air and, waving to the congregation, ascended through the skylight and vanished into the night sky.

All eyes turned again to Obie, who stood alone in the circle of the spotlight. He motioned to the engineer and the light went out. When it came back on, he was gone. He was never seen on Earth again.

Some say that he shaved his beard and simply vanished into the crowds that surged about the temple all night. Others say that Dee Dee and Billy were waiting for him and there ensued a three-way battle that, like the tigers racing about the tree, left only grease on the floor.

And that's all, except for the cleanup, the loose ends, some of which will remain forever loose, because that's how life is.

With such pretty new toys to play with the people forgot about the Church rather quickly. There they were, free to anyone who asked for them. Anti-gravity belts and power sources; the water-producing gadget; the power supply for dwellings. They flew from the cities. They found how simple it was to live when there was water and power and freedom to come and go as they chose. They learned that they could build their houses high in the skies, and support them with anti-gravity units; they could float into them with ease. They could float their cities over the ground if they chose. The governments were not happy about it, especially in the beginning. But can you shoot down October leaves in the wind? It was anarchy, but it was the new tide that was flowing, and no government was large enough to stop the tide. Eventually they went with it.

There were rumors. There were hearings concerning the mysterious disappearance of Obie Cox, and of his son. Everyone was questioned repeatedly, with no clear-cut answers arising from the testimony. Speculations grew: Obie had absconded with five billion dollars, said some. He had died and gone to heaven, said others.

There was some speculation, Wanda talked about it much later, that Obie had been secreted away by Blake on the fateful night when he demanded help. That Blake had donned a beard, and appeared alongside his own double on the balcony, taking equal chances with him of stopping any of the fatal bullets, but when the metal deflectors appeared shortly after that, it was argued that Blake hadn't actually taken such a dreadful chance after all, if indeed he had been the one to appear in place of Obie. Oh, they studied the films carefully, and the experts said it was Obie Cox and his son Blake, and other experts said that it could have been almost anyone with a

beard. . . . Fraud, charlatan, Voice of God. . . . What difference does it make now? He was gone. The funds from the Church had been signed over to a new research company, The Black Foundation, that despite lawsuits and threats gave away everything it developed.

Rumors had it that when a curly haired young woman and her stiff, straight dark-haired husband were brought out of cold sleep by Dr. Winifred Harvey, they were met by a young man who resembled the older man very strongly, and by a young couple with a small child, the girl very like the woman, the man blond and good-looking. And they had a child.

Alien and human? They can't breed. Everyone knows that. So did that mean that Johnny was actually the alien that he claimed to be? What then of the recognition of him that caused Dee Dee to faint? Do our memories trick us like that? During the melee on Mount Laurel Johnny got out of the hospital wing where he had been kept, and he melted into the crowd so efficiently that he never left it again. Now and again his claims of alien superiority forced him to move, but he was tolerated; he didn't cause anyone any trouble, and there was room for his kind too.

This is the good ending.

The other one goes something like this:

When Obie prayed at the altar the cameras turned again to the coffin where Blake was lying. Slowly he rose and he was a towering figure. He spoke: "The Church, the people, the Earth is mine, so saith the Lord. I have come this night to take unto myself that which is mine." And protected by the magic that gave them wings, and even stronger magic that turned away bullets, the believers that night slaughtered the non-believers and made the Earth safe for the godly. They cleansed the Earth of the

forces of evil, and forever after lived under God, in peace, and prepared for the coming of the strangers. And Blake reigned nine hundred years and begat four thousand sons and daughters who reigned after him. Amen.

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