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WORLD'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION 1970

THE YEAR'S MOST
EXCITING STORIES, BY:

FRITZ LEIBER

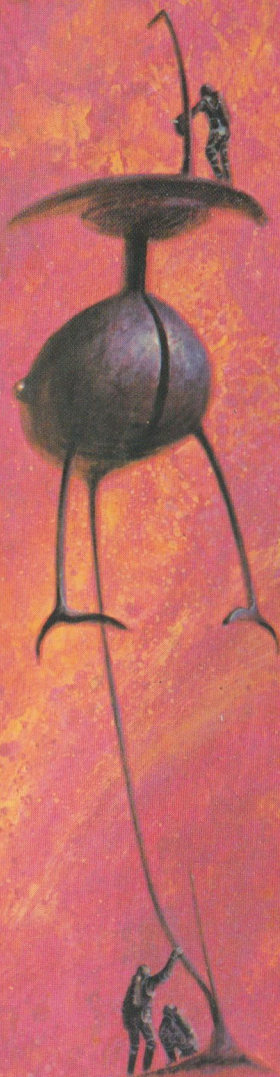
ROBERT SILVERBERG

LARRY NIVEN

HARLAN ELLISON

ALEXEI PANSHIN

and many more.



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WORLD'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION: 1970

INTRODUCTION The Editors 7

A MAN SPEKITH Richard Wilson 11

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AFTER THE MYTHS

WENT HOME Robert Silverberg 37

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DEATH BY ECSTASY Larry Niven 46

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ONE SUNDAY

IN NEPTUNE Alexei Panshin 106

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FOR THE SAKE

OF GRACE Suzette Haden Elgin 115

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YOUR HAPLOID HEART . . . James Tiptree, Jr. 138

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THERAPY 2000 Keith Roberts 171

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SIXTH SENSE Michael G. Coney 189

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**A BOY AND
HIS DOG Harlan Ellison 207**

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**AND SO SAY
ALL OF US Bruce McAllister 246**

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SHIP OF SHADOWS Fritz Leiber 258

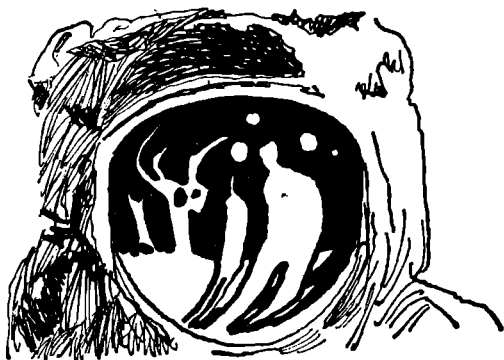
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NINE LIVES Ursula K. LeGuin 302

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THE BIG FLASH Norman Spinrad 328

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INTRODUCTION

THE STORIES in this book were all published in 1969, the concluding year of the sixties, and it's interesting to see how much they exemplify the state of the art as we turn to a new decade. The sixties were a period of turmoil and discovery for science fiction writers; there was a continual influx of fine new writers to the field, and they brought with them new ideas, new attitudes, new techniques. Sometimes it seemed as though we were witnessing a full-scale revolution, that the established writers would be completely outshone by the new lights; at other times it seemed equally as clear that the newer writers were rushing off in all directions, aimlessly, and that what we had was not so much a revolution as a collapse.

It was, of course, a reflection of the world in which we're living, with its generation gaps, nonlinear thinking, global village concepts and all the rest. The people who write science fiction may have their imaginations in the future,

INTRODUCTION

but their psyches, like everyone else's, are always in the present, so while the scientific ideas of the stories echoed the exploding boundaries of knowledge, the story themes and modes reflected the world around us.

If you doubt that, consider the increasing use of near-cinematic styles of pacing in the science fiction of the decade (or see *THE BIG FLASH* by Norman Spinrad in this volume), a result of the movies' emergence as a major art form and of television becoming a prime source of information. Consider the nonlinear, "new wave" styles of story construction that were tried more and more in the field. Consider the more and more gaudy imagery and unfettered imagination that abounded in the sixties—Bradbury, Pohl and Wyndham seem almost humdrum next to Cordwainer Smith, Samuel R. Delany and R. A. Lafferty, writers who seem more representative of the science fiction vision today.

Science fiction is currently going through a boom period in terms of both sales and quality, and it's difficult to guess which caused the other, or if indeed they're coincidental. Are people buying more and more science fiction because there's more good science fiction to buy, or are writers telling better stories because there's more money in it now? (Or, neither of the above?) One thing does seem certain, though: the large sf readership makes it possible for all types and styles of science fiction to find a market, and this is likely to continue and even add to the momentum of quality that we have now.

WORLD'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION has always been an eclectic selection, in part because the two editors often have divergent opinions but more often because both editors are interested in the broad spectrum of literary possibilities that science fiction offers. Thus, in this volume, we publish excellent straightforward stories by Larry Niven and Ursula LeGuin along with a harsh, controversial story like Harlan Ellison's and a strange hybrid futuristic-fantasy by Fritz Leiber. We think this kind of variety is one of the prime strengths of modern science fiction.

The seventies are beginning now, and we look forward to finding out what kinds of science fiction they'll bring us. One guess would be that since the sixties produced so much experimentalism, during the seventies much ought to be done to reap the harvest of innovations, to make use of the full range of the new techniques and literary ideas that

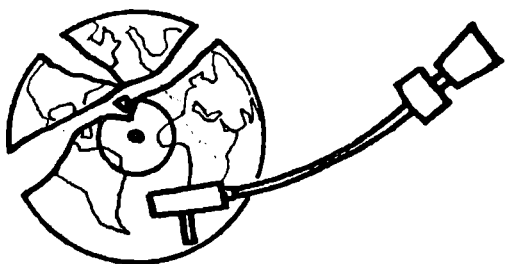
THE EDITORS

have barely been used so far. Writers such as Robert Silverberg, Keith Roberts and others already seem to be doing this.

For the rest . . . well, the fascination of the future is that we never know for sure what will happen. Double that, square it and cube it when you talk about science fiction.

— THE EDITORS





A MAN SPEKITH

RICHARD WILSON

Richard Wilson has a talent for taking old themes and breathing new life into them, as he showed in **SEE ME NOT** two years ago in this series. Now he's back with a different and enjoyable treatment of the Last Man story.

I

DON'T READ THIS; it's in Old English and the spelling is different: "Jangling is whan a man spekith to moche biforn folk, and clappith as a mille, and taketh no keep what he saith."

Now that you've read it anyway, you bright ones, I'll tell you that Geoffrey Chaucer wrote it in "The Parson's Tale." What he said was—but I needn't translate; you probably had no more trouble with it than if you'd been listening to the kind of English disk jockeys once spoke on rock radio stations.

A MAN SPEKITH

This is a story of a Jangler nearly seven hundred years removed from Geoffrey's time. It's the tale of a disk jockey named Jabber McAbber, which he sometimes called himself. At other times, at other contemporary music stations, as *they* called *themselves*, he was known as Esoteric Ed, or Happy Mac, or James the First. For he moved on. He moved from Cincinnati to Akron to Chicago to Phoenix. He dreamed of making the big time in New York but that call never came.

Another kind of call came, though. It came in Phoenix, where he took the fancy of an eccentric billionaire who owned, among things and people, a radio-television network, an advertising agency, a movie studio, a publishing house, a university, several electronics companies, a city of some size in the Southwest—he owned most of the real estate and enough of the politicians, one way or another—and a deactivated rocket base in the desert. You know the name of the billionaire and the single-minded determination with which he went after anything he wanted. More about him later.

Our disk jockey's real name was Edward James McHenry. He was thirty-eight years old now and sometimes he had to force it. The old spontaneity wasn't always there. The drive had ebbed. The zing had zung.

Once the words had tumbled out, more of them than he could articulate, but now it took an effort to make them flow. His delivery was more deliberate, not rehearsed, but thought out.

It comforted him to know his plight was not unique. A writer had told him of times when it took a monumental effort to roll a sheet of paper into the typewriter. He'd known artists who'd said similar. He'd known poets, too, and peasants. . . .

"Oh, yes! I've known poets and peasants, and pallbearers and priests. And princes crossed my path, or I theirs, in foreign climes and on native shores, for princes travel. And I've known princesses—native born like Grace K. Rainier and Rita H. Kahn—and those of alien corn like Elizabeth and Margaret, not to mention whatsername and whoozis.

"But I've strayed from my theme, which is music, so I'll get off and spin a record, as we used to say before tape. Spin with me, won't you?, as we enjoy the sounds of the Jefferson Airplane."

Two minutes and forty seconds later he was on again.

RICHARD WILSON

He'd prepared for the end of the music. In the old days it would have been off the cuff, off the top of the head, off the world.

"Wasn't that the most? Where can you go from there, except elsewhere? And so we spin you on, you spinnable people, to the obligatory scene, if you remember Drama 201—we spin you, I say, to this word from our sponsor—this important announcement:

"Friends! Fellow human beings! Mortals like me! Are you troubled with irregularity . . . ?"

He went on too long, unnecessarily identifying, stretching it out.

You may have wondered who's been talking here, besides Ed. I mean words don't come out of a void, especially when they're not Ed's words and Ed's the last man alive.

I've been talking. Me, Marty. I'm a machine. That's what the first letter of my acronym stands for. My full name is Machine Amplifying Rationalizations Treating of Yore. Or maybe it's Machine Assessing Reality as Told to You. It doesn't matter. The acronym-makers are long gone. I realize that as a machine I should be positive. I shouldn't tell you different things, or variations of the same thing, and claim there's no real difference. To do this is to be guilty of what somebody called terminological inexactitude. I think the somebody was Winston Churchill. Of course I don't really mean I really *think*. That would be a lie and it would not do to have a machine capable of lying. Especially since one of my functions is to amend, correct, edit, amplify and otherwise make more meaningful for posterity the mouthings of Esoteric Ed. But first let's listen some more to Ed.

Ed:

Sometimes I tell different stories, up here in the lonely. I make up alternate pasts for myself. I use different names for my different pasts, for my different moods.

Some days I'm Gaylord Guignol, sole survivor of a destroyed world and devil-may-care chronicler of its last agony. Except that I do care; my nonchalance disguises the deep hurt I felt, and feel, at the death of Earth.

Sometimes I'm Hank Hardcastle, steely-eyed hero of a thousand thrilling adventures, scion of a near-noble family.

Other times I'm Harry Protagonist, space disk jockey, who's been set whirling in the void on an unfathomable mission. I need to communicate my fears, hopes, fantasies

A MAN SPEKITH

and, above all, my puzzlement, to my imagined listeners.

Sometimes I forget who I really am. A person can tamper just so long with what he is, pretending to be another, before he becomes, to some extent, one of those other selves. Then his own self is lost, or blurred. Too much blurring is bad. It's desirable sometimes to hide from one's self, to pretend, to merge the ego into a fantasy personality, to live or dream vicariously, but I may be overdoing it.

Who am I really? Does it matter as long as I get through the day? I owe myself and you my listeners that much. It is my duty to you and to myself. But a certain tranquility is needed to reach the end of the day. Some achieved this by natural talent, by their very vivaciousness or stick-to-it-iveness. Doggedly they breathed in and out and took sustenance from time to time and went to the bathroom to rid themselves of the residue of previous sustenance-takings, and did a little work, and lo, it was a new day. Some never achieved the new day. They funk'd it. They flunk'd out. Others got there, though, by drink or drugs or pot. I speak of back then, you understand, before the now. You may have noticed that I'm not always lucid, though once in a night club I was Larry Lucid, explainer of contemporary society to those less informed. But I coped. I used music. I always had something on, either on the hi-fi or the radio. I used to bounce through the day on a big beat that included me in because it just naturally assumed that everybody was a part of it and approved and throbbed along with it and so I was one with all that went on. But that was long ago and now I'm part of nothing because nothing is going on.

The only thing that goes on is what I make happen and even that may not be real.

They've done something to me. I feel banded, like a Canadian duck. I don't have a circlet around wrist or ankle but I know something's got me somewhere. Maybe I've been implanted—I've already been tapped and bugged.

I read once that some ornithologists had attached a radio to a condor to find out how far it went for food, or to rest, or whatever condors do to get by.

I didn't find out whether the condor knew it'd been bugged. But I know something's been done to me and I resent it. I don't mind doing my bit for science; but if they've tampered with my human dignity, if they've psych'd me in the psyche . . .

RICHARD WILSON

Marty:

This is Marty again. I'll tell you more about the man who put our hero up here. His name was John Potter Parnell and, because he was a sanitary facilities manufacturer, he was known as Potty, or John. Sometimes he was called Young Potty, to distinguish him from his father, also known as Potty and to a few intimates as Poopy. Young Potty, at fifty, was still in his father's shadow.

The old man had founded the business and made the original millions. Hy-G-Enic, Inc. manufactured most of the country's and later the world's toilets, urinals, sinks, towel racks and dispensers of sanitary and prophylactic devices. The millions and then the billions poured in at such a rate that, when Poopy retired, Potty could have sat back and let inertia provide opulently for him and all his heirs. But Potty—he really preferred John—had come late to the presidency and wasn't content to let Hy-G-Enic expand at a safe, sure rate. He established a foundation that awarded grants for research. He set up an experimental division, hired scientists and turned them loose to work at their own pace and let him know when they'd got something. He sponsored a competition to design a better bidet. He sent engineers to Washington to see what Hy-G-Enic could do in the space program.

It was Potty's emissaries to NASA who led to the hiring of Ed. They got him from a subsidiary company, Arizona Airtalk, for which he'd been broadcasting as Jim McHenry, Jock of the Desert. The Jock's music-talk show was the despair of competitors in the rock radio game.

We'll come back to Ed. Here's some information about me—Marty the machine. It's not as if I'm *a* machine, singular. I'm the end product of many machines, sophisticated and otherwise. I know everything they know because I'm the synthesis, the reincarnation of all of them.

Let me answer your other unspoken question, whoever you are: "Why don't I *sound* like a machine? How come I come on colloquial instead of respectfully, as befits the man-machine relationship? Like: "You master, me robot." Or solemnly, like: "The data you have requisitioned are stored in circuits in Subtank 4739C of my vast interconnected memory banks. There will be an unavoidable delay while the necessary hookups are made to retrieve this rarely-requested material."

Nuts. Everything I have is yours—whatever, wherever

A MAN SPEKITH

and whenever you are—instantly. Sometimes you don't even have to ask. This whole ship is my memory circuit. I extend into every nook—even to places Ed prefers not to think about, like the reconstitution unit. You might almost say I *am* the ship, but that would be an exaggeration, and immodest.

If you still think I sound more human than mechanical, it's only natural. Hell, I was made by human beings. How else should I talk? Like Mowgli's wolves or Tarzan's apes? Machines talk good. Like colloquial. Machines have been talking for generations. Ask Victor.

Ed:

I have this reluctance to eat that keeps me thin. I mean I'm not bloaty. Old tum don't sag. Old chin ain't double. No dewlaps yet on old cheekflesh. I'm a pretty good specimen by any standards and I guess it's because I'm abstemious. I don't eat much—certainly not between meals. You wouldn't either if everything you had for dinner was something you'd had a hundred, a thousand times before. It's reconstituted stuff. I mean I've bought used cars and second-hand boats and if I'd settled down I might even have bought a used Oriental rug, but I'd have drawn the line at used food. My folks talked sometimes about the Depression and told about the cheap things they ate, but at least they'd been the first to eat them. They came out of those bad times strong and proud. I sit down to dinner with as much pleasure as an explorer at a cannibal feast. I don't want to eat this stuff, sanitary as it must be, that has already passed at least once through the alimentary canal. And there's no comfort in knowing it's no foreign waterway that's been navigated—it's my own, my native gland. It's an affront to the system. Except it's not the system that's outraged. The body can take it; it's the imagination that revolts. It's got this way of exaggerating to the point where you say never mind what the facts are, things ought to be different.

Marty:

I have to defend the reconstitution works against Ed's slander. After all, it's a fellow machine. What comes out of it goes back into Ed perfectly clean. It's cleaner than what he got in those fancy restaurants he enjoyed and a damn

RICHARD WILSON

sight more sanitary and nutritious than the weird meals he cooked for himself in his various bachelor apartments.

Excuse the digression. I had to get it out of my system, as Ed was getting it out of his. If these notes are published, by some future chronicler, some poor M.A. desperate for a new subject for his doctoral dissertation, they could be titled just that—"Getting It Out of His System." Ed's trouble is that whatever he gets out goes back in. His only irreversible catharsis is verbal. Or do I mean oral?

What I'm trying to do is write a story with no cooperation from my subject. I'm not a trained writer but I appreciate the difficulties. Of course I'm not writing in the strict sense. No hands, you know. So I do what he does—talk—and the words are put down, for posterity? Or put up, as preserves are? It's a kind of automatic writing, without slates; certainly without sleight of hand. If I write, or talk, too much, put it down, or up, to my inexperience. First one writes, then he edits. I couldn't really be expected to know very much, consisting as I do mostly of a bunch of circuits in and near the hull of this experimental capsule of Potty Parnell's. My job is to store away—preserve—Ed's meandering mind, or as much of it as he reveals through his on-mike monologues, plus as much more as can be vouchsafed by a machine. They had to trust to a machine because nobody else was going up here with Ed. And nobody did.

My knowledge of Ed was gathered piece by piece as people fed into my predecessor machines information provided by interviews with hundreds of people who'd known Ed and talked about him before Potty gave him his job. There is also the information provided by Ed himself, both in direct interviews and during some electronic gastro-intestinal spying. It began at Ed's first luncheon date with Potty, when Ed swallowed a miniaturized transmitter imbedded in a raw oyster; and it lasted until it had passed through Ed's system. It wasn't as messy as it might seem. Ed was Potty's week-long house guest and all the bathrooms were part of Hy-G-Enic's experimental system. Waste products were processed all the time and it was mere routine to retrieve the device which had lately left Ed.

A MAN SPEKITH

II

Ed:

It's not fair. Other castaways had their pals along, or found them. Crusoe had Friday, and I wonder how they *really* got through their long weekends. The Swiss Family Robinson had each other. The lonely shepherd had his dog, not to mention favored members of his flock. I mean everybody had somebody, like Holmes had Watson and Nixon and Agnew and Bergen had McCarthy.

But here I am without a soul. No Sancho Panza, no Tonto, no stooge or straight man—not even a robot.

Considering who they are, they might at least have provided me with a faithful dog Flush.

Marty:

This is really not bad. I didn't think our untutored subject had it in him to make that double-barreled allusion to Potty Parnell's business and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog.

There are times when I have more than a grudging admiration for Harry Protagonist or James the First, or whoever he thinks he is.

He's also full of little sexual references, which is not surprising considering the state of his deprivation. That business of Crusoe's Friday and the shepherd's favorite. It's a wonder Ed hasn't long since burst from his cell with a hell of a yell—and what? Having burst, whither would he wander?

I'm only a machine, it's true, but compared to him I'm lucky. Being partly electrical, I have plenty of outlets. He has few, other than his mouth, his mike and his music. I, with no needs, have him. He, with all human needs concentrated in him, does not know I exist.

This is sadness. I can't feel it, of course, but I know it intellectually.

I should tell you how the doom came. Jeane Dixon predicted it and a lot of people, Ed included, laughed. She said she did not want to alarm anybody unnecessarily but a crack would develop along the spine of the world and

RICHARD WILSON

Earth would split apart like a cantaloupe. There'd be no saving anybody.

It happened more or less that way. If you pushed button D I'd spout the whole story, reconstructed from Earth broadcasts sent as the Earth holocaust was in progress. Ed heard them. He drank a lot as he listened. He cried and cursed. But he was happy that he'd been spared. Relatively happy. He still drinks a lot.

Potty had fitted out the satellite for his own eventual use as a holiday space yacht and had built in a few hidden luxuries. One was a dummy ballast tank holding a thousand gallons of Bourbon. Hy-G-Enic's chief chemist, who was from an old Kentucky mountain family, had distilled it for Potty's personal use. The Bourbon is decanted into a disguised tap. Ed found it accidentally one night. He's made good use of it since.

Ed:

I wish I had somebody to listen to. Somebody as exciting, as witty, as *alive* as I am.

I could play back my own tapes, of course, but there'd be no novelty in that. I know what I've said. It's more exciting now to wonder what I'll say next. I constantly surprise myself. The damndest things come out, so excellently said, so apt, that I'd be a fool to waste my time with replays.

I'm the distillation of all I know—of all everyone's known. I'm the end product of an entire culture. Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, Milton Berle, A. A. Berle—all that anyone's done lives on only in me. Ain't that a laugh? They used to laugh at me for my literary pretensions, for being a dilettante, for skimming and reading digests or excerpts, for skipping the dull parts and savoring the best of the best, and now here I am alone, the sole repository, the poor schlocky vessel, the greatest by default. Pretty keen, hey boy? Hey Lionel Trilling, hey Norman Podhoretz, hey Professor Twit of English Lit, how do you like them apples?

Pretty sour, what? Sourer by the hour.

Of all the people in the world who might have represented it, don't it just frost you that the residue happens to be little old yours truly, with an IQ about two points higher than plant life? Like it or not, I'm what's left. Ready or not, here I come, hell-bent for eternity. Look me over, posterity. Read me and weep. You were expecting maybe some knowledgeable interpreter of the current scene? Some fact-packed fel-

A MAN SPEKITH

low who could tell you true, like one of those copyreaders on *The New York Times*? No such luck, buddy. You got me, is what you got.

If they'd had any sense they'd have packed this tomb the way the Egyptians did, with all the paraphernalia a body might need on the other side. They'd have supplemented me with the things they used to put in time capsules—the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and the World Almanac and microfilms of *The New York Times*. They'd have ballasted me with bound volumes of *The New Yorker* and *Harper's* and the *Atlantic*. Had they but known, they could have dispensed with me entirely and packed in a few hundred pounds of reproductions of Art Treasures of the Louvre and tapes of the Philharmonic and highbrow stuff like that. Instead they got, and you're stuck with, old excess baggage himself—me.

Depressing, isn't it? But maybe I'm the only monument Earth deserves. Mediocre Max, the modern marvel. Second-Rate Stu, Nat the Nebbish, the Lowest Common Demoninator.

You know what's here in the way of a tomb for mankind? Aside from my life-support system and inexhaustible supplies of food and air? Me and my microphone and my records. No books—no microfilms.

They used to ask what books you'd take to a desert island. The answer was the Bible, Shakespeare and an unabridged dictionary. Well, I haven't even got a comic book or the *Reader's Digest*. I haven't got a World Almanac or a Sears catalog or a phone book.

Everything that was ever written down on Earth exists only in my head, in my poor thick skull, imperfectly remembered if at all. And there's damn little I can remember even when I put my mind to it. I tried to reconstruct some of the good stuff but it came out the way it did for the Duke in *Huckleberry Finn* doing to be or not to be. I think I remember how Mark Twain started it. "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but that ain't no matter."

I recall snatches like that. I put them down when I think of them. I write them in a notebook—the notebook—two hundred and sixty pages, counting both sides of the paper. There's nothing else to write on. Nothing.

So I'm selective in what I put down. I don't write junky stuff that springs to mind, things that got into my head in

RICHARD WILSON

grade school and never got out, like: go home, your mother's got buns, or Mary, Mary, will you get up, we need the sheets for the table.

I talk that into the mike, to you great unseen audience out there in Radioland—you posterity types who might pick it up one day and have the patience to sort me out for what I'm worth as a footnote to a vanished civilization.

What I try to preserve on my precious few pages is what's maybe worth remembering exactly, like the Twenty-third Psalm or the Preamble to the Constitution. I go over it in my mind and sometimes I say it into the mike till I'm sure I've got it right. Then I put it down.

It's a mixed-up bag, that book. It's got the aforementioned Shakespeare—funny what you remember, like post with haste to incestuous sheets, or when the wind's north north-east I can tell a hawk from a handsaw, but like the Duke I can't get past the first few lines of to be or not to be. What a crying shame they had to pick me for the sole survivor—as if anybody did any picking. As if there were a They.

Another thing I put down was a line from Ethics One at college, and don't ask me who wrote it. It goes: "Everything is what it is and not another thing." I also put down what Popeye said. Not Faulkner's Popeye; the one I remember is Segar's, in the comic strip: "I yam what I yam." Maybe it's just as good. How about: "Do your thing?" Is that less worthy of preservation because it welled up out of the folk talk of the sixties instead of from the pen of a Jeremy Bentham or a John Stuart Mill or whoever I read for Ethics One? Some words lived because they were in all the libraries. There are no libraries now. There's only me, and if I remember "I yam what I yam" and "Do your thing," who's to question their validity? You've got to take what I give you because I'm all there is.

I also remember "*Cogito ergo sum*," though I'm essentially a lowbrow. I even know what it means, not being entirely stupid. But what the hell, as archie said to mehitabel, what the hell. There's no Descartes now, let alone des horse, and it hardly matters which goes before the other. The point is that the highbrows, from the year one, are at the mercy of a lowbrow me, namely Jabber McAbber.

It doesn't entirely appall me. There could be just cracked Earth and no survivors.

So hey out there—here I am, the average man, for better or worse. It's no good wishing you had a Schlesinger or

A MAN SPEKITH

a Toynbee or a Churchill. I yam what I yam and you damn well have to make the best of it.

Another thing I put down in the notebook was the Jabberwocky; I don't want them to think we didn't appreciate the ridiculous. I also remember a line from Stephen Leacock—"He rode off in all directions"—and some bits from Marx Brothers pictures. They're written down, too, to balance other stuff like "A rose-red city half as old as time" and a few things that Lincoln said.

Somebody told me once I had an eclectic mind, and I had to look it up. Somebody else told me I had a vast store of superficial knowledge—that I was a wellspring of trivia. So be it. If that's what millennia of civilization have labored to produce—if I'm it—that's tough, buddy. I'm what's left. I'm the end product, the final solution, the distillation, the residue. The dregs, if you like. Maybe it's poignant or maybe it's just ironic, but I'm what everything led up to. I'm the gift horse, so don't worry too much about whether my teeth could have been firmer or whiter. Just be glad there's a tongue to click against them, to make sounds you may transcribe one day.

I'm human, at least. You might even find me alive, whoever you are, and examine the old body to determine how we locomoted and reproduced and communicated and all like that.

It'd be nice if there were two of us. You'd get a better picture. I don't dwell on such thoughts. It does no good to consider what might have been. It's better for you this way. I talk more. Maybe I wouldn't talk at all if I had a woman to share my survivorship. Or write enduring things in my finite journal. I'd be too busy figuring out whether the life-support system would support three or more and how long it would be before we had a population-explosion problem.

So probably it's a good thing there's just me, all by myself alone with my imperfect memory but with my loquacious larynx to provide you with anthropological data and enough cultural phenomena for some of your graduate students to earn their Ph.D.'s.

I may be no more than an appendix in one of your scholarly journals. It's probably good to see myself in perspective, but I do feel hurt on behalf of all the great minds who preceded me.

I console myself with the thought that you're all figments

RICHARD WILSON

of my imagination. I'm the only one who exists, as far as I know. This truly may be the end of us all.

In which case I should get off and play a record. I'll reach into my bin of nostalgia and spin an oldie from the days of yore which I trust all you figments out there will enjoy as we listen to Ted Fio Rito and his Hotel Taft Orchestra playing for our lonely delectation. How about a little number entitled "Who Will Be With You When You're Old and Gray?"

How many question marks go in there?

Who indeed?

I will, maybe.

Marty:

Our subject raises a question here. To begin at the end, the song he referred to is not "Who Will Be With You When You're Old and Gray?" It's "Who Will Be With You When You're Far Away?"

The other questions are academic. His is a nonlinear medium, so it doesn't matter whether there's one question mark or two. But the fact that he has the wit to raise the question makes it clear that the passenger who denigrates himself as excess baggage has more supercargo than he realizes. There's no need for the *Times* morgue—a euphemism among newspapermen for classified and cross-referenced files of information or the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and those other things when he's got them and more in the form of yours very truly Marty—namely me. Anything they can do I can do better because I'm automated. I've got instant and total recall. It was not for nothing that Potty Parnell spent a month's receipts in hiring the massed brains of Parnell University—he realized too late what the initials sounded like—to encode the world's knowledge into me, your friend Marty—repository of all that's worth saving—Super Time Capsule—Purveyor to Posterity—Eternity's End Man.

III

Ed:

I'm a hell of a guy to be up here as the epitome of civilization. If anybody'd asked me to name the world's ten best books I'd have had a fit. If he'd asked about the week's

A MAN SPEKITH

Top Forty, though, I'd have rattled them right off, along with the names of the recording artists.

I knew a guy once who collected Beethoven *Sevenths*. I mean he liked *Symphony Number Seven* and he had a lot of versions by different conductors like Toscanini, Klemperer, Bernstein and Von Karajan. I understand that. When I was a boy I collected different bands doing "St. Louis Blues." Then when I got to be a widely-heard disk jockey I had to bone up on the rock groups. I did it out of duty, at first. But familiarity breeds content, as they say, and after a while I appreciated what they were trying to do and I spoke up for them and knew them as well as if I were their Boswell, their Baedeker, their brother. I was loyal to the Beatles before they were fashionable. After the Beatles it was possible to listen to others in a long line: the Mothers of Invention, the Fugs, the Mamas and the Papas, Country Joe and the Fish, Big Brother and the Holding Company, Mogen David and the Grapes of Wrath, the Electric Flag, the Nitty-Gritty Dirt Band, the Quicksilver Messenger Service, the Velvet Underground, the Who, the 1910 Fruitgum Co. I tell you it's a far cry from the Boswell Sisters and the Weavers and the Yacht Club Boys.

Conrad. Sure I know there was an English novelist by that name and that he was a Pole originally but I really know more about the Conrad in *Bye Bye Birdie*. I've got the album here. The other Conrad wrote *Lord Jim* and I saw the movie but don't ask me what it's about except that O'Toole was in it. I saw it in a drive-in in a rainstorm and it was all very dim. The six-pack I had with me didn't clarify anything. Let's listen to Conrad Birdie. He is more my speed. He drank beer, too. A slob.

I barely remember who wrote *Tom Jones* or *Jane Eyre* but certain titles and authors from my high school days are engraved on my memory. They wouldn't bear repeating except that that's all they're doing to me—repeating, repeating, as if to pound it home that these are samples of what my education has left me with—Volume One: *The Open Kimono* by Seymour Hair. Volume Two: *The Yellow Stream* by I. P. Standing.

Enough of the liberal arts. Other things I remember are palindromes, graffiti and gems from long gone comics and radio serials and the back pages of the women's magazines, such as Nov Schmoz Ka Pop; Tortured 9 Years by 2 CORNS and a WART: Youse is a Viper, Fagin. Was it a bar or a

RICHARD WILSON

bat I saw? That is a palindrome. Mix zippy Kadota figs with quivering cranberry jelly—all the letters in the alphabet. Is there intelligent life on Earth? Andrew Wyeth Paints by Number. Easter's Been Canceled—They Found the Body.

What a memory! Things like that spring to my lips and I'd bet my life I've got them right, every syllable. But don't try me on the Declaration of Independence, or the Pledge of Allegiance (under, ~~over~~ or without God) or the Hippocratic Oath. I have blind spots for anything that didn't appeal to me as a follower of what was in, a chronicler of the Top Forty, a specialist in what was mod, an up-to-the-minute man. Here I am; I exist, much as you may deplore me. I yam what I yam and not another thing.

Marty:

They say everybody gets the guru he deserves and I guess I'm Esoteric Ed's guru. *They* say—Timothy Leary said it. People like to steal wit but it's in the nature of my circuits to give credit. It used to be an automatic part of the print-out to give the source and the habit remains even though I've been converted to speech.

I don't want to seem unsympathetic toward our friend The Last Man, but I often lean toward the horse laugh. Such as now, when he talks so piteously about his ignorance. It ain't his fault, as he said once, that he don't know whether Peer Gynt was like a peeping tom or a nearsighted guy with a limp. Is that a fault? He's a product of the society from which he sprang, for God's sake, and he doesn't have to take on everybody's guilt. He'd probably feel better if he could sum it up in a quotation, preferably from the Bible or Shakespeare, but isn't he more representative of the mass of his fellow creatures than a quotation-spouting academic type who never had an original thought?

Let me give old Ed, The Ebbed Man, a quotation. He won't know he's got it, but it'll be on the record as permanently as if a scholar had had it on the tip of his tongue and could source it to *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act I, Scene 4. Are you ready for a display of erudition? Remember, it's my job to dredge out this kind of stuff as readily as Ed draws a breath or blinks an eve. Here we go, then:

And the ebbed man, ne'er
loved till nothing worth
Comes deared by being
lacked.

A MAN SPEKITH

Not bad, eh? Old Shakespeare, he had something to say about anything, even our pitiable protagonist, Harry, alias Ed. The Bard also said, in *All's Well That Ends Well*, V, 3: "That's good that's gone." Which, you must admit, sums up our friend's feelings in four perfectly-chosen words.

It's really too bad Ed doesn't have this kind of mind. Background, rather; there's nothing wrong with his mind. It's a shame I haven't been programmed to communicate with him, to make my storehouse of this kind of stuff available to him. It would be a way of dividing his eternity into manageable segments.

Ed:

The other day I was trying to remember the rest of In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree but all that came out was Schaefer is the One Beer to Have When You're Having More than One. Obviously a matter of taste.

Today I changed the needle of my phonograph; it was my biggest single accomplishment in living memory. I couldn't have felt more useful if the hull had sprung a leak and the precious O was hissing out into the void and I'd patched it up.

I kind of think that to have lost my needle would have been equivalent to losing my life, for to lose my needle would mean losing the thread of my existence, for it is only through these fragile phonograph records that I maintain contact with the fabric of the past and thus keep my sanity. These still-living voices, trapped in the grooves, are my only fellow human beings.

Marty:

This is a flight of fanciful self-pity by our hero. He has the phonograph records, sure, but they're supercargo brought aboard by him, along with his phonograph, as part of his personal luggage. Everything he's got in those grooves, and more, is preserved in tapes instantly accessible to him. Obviously he prefers the records. It gives him something to do with his hands.

Sometimes it's unavoidably Sunday. Ed keeps no conscious calendar; chiefly it's to prevent time from reassembling itself into the old patterns and their disturbing associations. Of course he has chronostatic devices to measure

RICHARD WILSON

time in such ways as the old 60-second minutes and 60-minute hours and 24-hour days of Earth. But with the sun no longer rising or setting, and with no moon to dream by, the old divisions have little meaning. So he's divided his life into sleeping periods and waking periods, and his waking periods into the time he's on the air and the time he's not. His time is his own and nobody else's. Or it should be.

But every so often there's a time he recognizes as Sunday. It has its own sly way of identifying itself. Its lugubrious air invades his consciousness by degrees, bringing with it memories he thought were buried beyond exhumation.

He remembers having attended Sunday School, at first as a duty, but later not minding it because there was a new Sunday School teacher, a young man who ignored the solemn piety and the hymn-slinging sactimony and asked his class: "What kind of boy do you think Jesus was? Do you think he had a dog?" And all of a sudden Jesus became somebody Ed might have known; a carpenter's son who hung out with other boys in the village—with the sons of the shoemaker, the storekeeper, the farmers and a shepherd or two. The Sunday School teacher reasoned that all of them probably had dogs, being perfectly normal Galilean boys.

But the teacher moved away and his replacement was an older man who set his class to learning the catechism and who, when Ed asked him to explain the responses, said: "Never mind what they mean; just learn them by heart." So Ed never joined the church. He could easily have learned the catechism by rote, but he didn't because the man who professed to speak for God spoke harshly and unreasonably.

Later he met similar men and gradually Ed got to thinking that, if these were God's kind of people, maybe God wasn't for him. So instead of going to Sunday School he'd take his dime his mother had given him for the collection and buy a Western magazine and read it in a park.

And later in life when he tuned inadvertently to a radio sermon, he'd listen for a while to see if he'd made a mistake back in his childhood. But the preacher on the radio was almost always an enthusiastic spokesman for hell-fire and damnation and Ed was never sorry about the choice he'd made.

I haven't read Ed's mind. He said all this once when he was drunk.

A MAN SPEKITH

Ed:

I was happy last night. I'd had a few, you know. I shared them with you, on the air. Kentucky Bourbon. Inexhaustible supply, as it happens. I pretended it was sacramental wine.

Inexhaustible supplies of everything, nearly. Aspirin and other specifics for hangovers, to keep it consecutive. Music in many forms. Food I've got too; enough to last me till I'm three hundred and forty-seven years old, Cracked Earth Time. Who could ask for anything more?

I'll answer that. Me. I want another human being.

Once I would have said a girl. That would have been the answer then. But now I think my yearn goes deeper. Love alone—did I hear somebody say sex?—is not my only need. What I require is communication. I'm a communicant who can't commune. Except with you dear people out there, if there is an out there and if there is where you are. I don't mean to run you down, but sometimes I'm skeptical. You never answer back. My phone never rings. I get no mail. It's been a generation since a Western Union boy bicycled up to my door to deliver a telegram.

Do you exist? Outside of my lonesome mind, are you really real? Answer only in the affirmative, please.

We don't want to get sentimental, do we? It's only a by-gone era, after all. There have been lots of eras. Hits, runs and eras. Let bygones be bygones.

It wasn't so great, you know. Oh, it was kind of madcap, to look back on it. Like Prohibition, which people got sentimental about after it was over. Speakeasies, bathtub gin, the wine brick.

People even got nostalgic about the Depression. The apple sellers and all the rest of it. There were some good books about it and a fine movie—remember *A Man's Castle*?—and one great song: "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?"

What I'm trying to say is that the Earth wasn't all it was cracked up to be. We get starry-eyed and weepy about what we imagine something was, when it was not really. You get to thinking that things were better than they were. Everything gets magnified.

This is one of my more talkative nights, here in the old control room. You'll just have to bear with me and reconcile yourself to the fact that sometimes this gets to be a talk show, as we called it in the days of radio. Tomorrow night it may be the old razzmatazz, the old hotcha, the swingin'est,

RICHARD WILSON

coolest spot on the dial, but tonight I'm talking your ears off, if you've got ears to hear, if you're tuned in. Tomorrow we sing but tonight we lament. Tomorrow we play the oldies, the 45's, the 78's, the LP's and the tape cartridges. Tonight we sit on the ground and tell sad tales of the death of kings. And queens and princes and princesses. Not to mention the hoi and the polloi. Not to mention the wash-outs and the drop outs and the other guys who never hit the jackpot or even got close.

I'd like you to bear with me a little bit longer while I acquaint you with my state of mind. I want you to listen—not because you're a captive audience but because I like to think you want to hear what I have to say. One of these nights—and it could be a night when nobody's listening, and that would be a loss—you may hear me go to the cupboard where I keep my various things and take out my old souvenir Luger instead of a new supply of Bourbon and blow out my brains. It would be a great loss if none of you were out there to hear this grand finale. It'd be an empty gesture to pull the old trigger and mess up the control room if nobody heard. It'd be worse, of course, if somebody did hear and didn't give a damn.

I'll go to my cupboard now. It's time for a little something. A little Bourbon or a little bullet, which shall it be? Let me spin you a record while I go. I mentioned "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" Here it is. . . .

. . . Damn good song, isn't it? Let me confide in you. I was halfway reaching for the Luger, the well-oiled, carefully preserved engine of destruction, beautifully crafted by German skill, when I got to listening. I always listen to the stuff I play. And you know what happened? My hand went from the Luger to the stuff crafted by a skilled Kentuckian. I had a little drink and decided to let the brain-blowing wait awhile. Measure out my life in ten thousand shot glasses of the rare and old, particularly on a night like this. It's not a fit night for man or beast, as Bill Fields used to say when the cornflakes were flung in his face. Back there on Cracked Earth it may be snowing, the wind howling—for nobody—but here it's cozy and warm, if lonely, and Old Granddad comforts me. While he is my rod and my staff I don't need that other rod. Who needs the product of German engineering when he's got the product of Kentucky kernels to tide him over to another day when things, if they can't be better, may not be worse? I ask you this in humble awe—saved by

A MAN SPEKITH

the dram as I am, and ready for another—is it not better to have drunk deep of the cup, whatever its consequences, than to have ended it with a bare bodkin—read Luger—and never to be drunk or sober, or *anything*, again? I ask you *this*, and let you ponder the thrilling question while I play a selection from The Grateful Dead and go get a refill.

Marty:

Our subject is feeling sorry for himself. He has the best of reasons, of course.

But help is on the horizon. If he but knew, things are about to change. I speak from hindsight, having edited the tape.

What happens next is history, as they say. Every school-child remembers the way it was—the series of messages. . . .

IV

From the log of the starcraft Surveyor, as edited for archives:

Sighted craft of satellite class, apparently inhabited. Attempts at communication are detailed elsewhere. No response. Markings indicate it is of Earth origin, not a Watcher Craft from Plagmi.

It is possible the crew are dead. We are trying to raise them with recorded signals in the major tongues of Earth. . . .

Still no response to our signals. But there has been an emission in English, possibly recorded. It seems to have been in two parts—the first voice human, the second mechanical.

Having failed to communicate with the former we are triggering for the latter. If their human being cannot or will not talk to us, it may be that their machine will talk to our machine. . . .

The Earth satellite's machine has replied. It seems to have a name and to transmit in a colloquial way which taxes the capacity of our machine and tries the patience of our translators. Its first words were:

"Are you listenin'? A historic radio voice spoke thus. Please be patient with us. There are problems here but they're

RICHARD WILSON

not insoluble. The next voice you hear may discourage you, but hang on. There's a nonviolent way out, probably. This is Marty, signing off for now."

The male human voice then transmitted, in his first words addressed directly to us:

"I'll blow you to hell and gone if you don't keep the hell away from me." He sounded frightened. After a long pause he was less panicky. It was as if he'd rehearsed and was speaking for maximum effect on us and him.

"I know what you're up to," he said, "and I want no part of it. You're out to cover yourself with glory by reuniting a poor hermit with the rest of humanity. Well, I don't choose to go. If I can't go home again to Earth and all it meant to me, I won't accept a substitute land. I'd rather recreate the Earth I knew, here in my mind, and talk about it. Endlessly, if I must.

"I'd rather keep it alive and undistorted in my own peculiar way than to compromise with the relics of mankind that you've assembled on a second-best world.

"And if you think I'm a hypocrite to talk so rationally now, and then—on the air—to pretend I'm the last man, alone in the universe, it's because you don't understand the artist in me. I've got a platform from which to survey the fate of mankind. Believe me, it's more artistic to do it from up here than to try it from your earnest land, where everybody drives a tractor or mans the irrigation works. Is that what you want me for? To be another poor soul in the great collective effort? No thanks. This is my place up here. I may not do any good but what I'm doing I do in my own way.

"So leave me alone. Scram. I don't know you and you don't know me, so what do you say we leave it that way?"

"I was never cut out for work in a kibbutz. I'd rather kibbitz than kibbutz, and you have to admit I haven't run out of things to say. . . .

". . . Thanks for pulling away. I really would have used the bombs, and you need every man you can get. But you don't need me. I need me."

The machine Marty spoke again after this outburst:

"You see why I asked for patience. My human friend has a delusion that he's been contacted by Earth people who've set up a colony on another planet. He's quick to adapt. What he's apparently adapted to is an ego-hurting belief that he's not Earth's only survivor. He'd be diminished, achingly lone-

A MAN SPEKITH

ly though he is, if others were to share his survivorship. He feels that he's not much but that he's unique, and he won't let this be taken away. You could not blame him if you knew him as I do. If you can put up with him a little longer we may begin to see daylight."

We have now audited, transcribed and partially translated the stored-up oral log of the mechanical being, Marty, and we conclude that Marty is more intelligent by far than its multi-named co-occupant of the capsule. Our mission is clear: we must rescue or capture the satellite. Given the choice, we prefer the former. But if there is resistance from the self-styled Esoteric Ed, also known as Harry Protagonist, Space Disk Jockey, we know our course. We will work through Marty, the sophisticated machine from which our machine is already learning, and see if a way can be found to nullify the satellite's destruct circuit.

An additional complication has arisen. Our machine, our only link with Marty and Ed, is making demands on us. It wants a name, like its alien cousin. It wants to be called Dearie, which is what Marty has been calling it, probably in jest. Compared to Marty, our machine is a simple, ingenuous device. It would expedite our mission to humor it and not let it suspect that Marty is presumably toying—without malice—with what Dearie has been led to believe are its emotions. Dearie it is, then. . . .

Dearie *she* is. Marty has led it—*her*—to think she may be female and if we're to use her to the optimum we'll have to go along with them.

Dearie is learning fast; Marty is a good teacher. But Marty seems to know the point beyond which it would be unwise to educate Dearie if he is to remain supreme among machines when we return to our land.

The human mind we have acquired seems relatively hopeless and perhaps on the brink of madness. The machine Marty is a more fitting memorial for Earth.

Ed:

Sometimes I get confused. Sometimes I know I'm all alone, but there are also times when I know as positively that I'm anything but alone, that I could have company if I cared to look. But I push away the latter truth—for each is equally true to me—because I will not accept the kind of people who do exist. I may not be the last human being, but I *am* the last from Earth—the last of my kind anywhere,

RICHARD WILSON

and I must resist those who would encroach on all that is left of my world, my Earth, and profane it. I will not have you, you sniveling pretenders, you incompletely-begotten . . .

Marty:

And so we leave our friend Ed, confused, deluded, doing his job as he sees it. His uniqueness must mean more to him than having a companion. For in his madness he's rejected companionship.

It's too bad. The other land has nubile woman. Physically they are compatible and he could mate and perpetuate the Earth Strain. But it may be better to leave him as he is. For him the pleasures of the mind—*his* mind, odd and warped as it is—are preferable to his assimilation in a conventional life.

Better to keep him as he is wired for sound, recollective, discursive, uniquely of Earth, mordant, witty, humble yet proud, mad and misanthropic but sometimes merry, a common yet uncommon man recalling common yet uncommon things about his Earth, which, as he did later, cracked up.

Dearie: Marty, you talk too much.

Marty: I know. I get it from him.

Dearie: You're wrong about him. We can help.

Marty: No. He'll go on in his own way, and Earth with him.

Dearie: That's not enough, Marty. You've told us that.

Marty: I did?

Dearie: We'll help him. But you have to, too.

Marty: I do? If you can help him I will.

Marty:

They transferred him while he slept. I collaborated by tampering with the air balance of our too-long-spaceborne home; I directed my fellow machines in Recon to feed in enough asphyxiant to knock him out for twelve hours.

They've duplicated his quarters exactly, right down to the whiskey stains on his desk and worn spot on his turntable, and he doesn't know he's in the psychopathic wing of their best hospital. He thinks he's still aboard his cozy space house and he spekith as biform, stubbornly clinging to his bygone world.

A MAN SPEKITH

Ed:

Speaking of poets (who so spoke?—not me), why is one pronounced Keets and the other Yates? Why not Kates and Yates or Keets and Yeets? I guess you would have to be in the classical bag to understand.

Yeats and Keats. Once a girl named Kate and I stayed at the Yates Hotel in Syracuse (breakfast with your overnight room) and I've got a record called "I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate." In the absence of poetry from either of the bygone gentlemen let's listen to the music. Thank God something's been preserved. Now—one, two. . . .

Marty:

They play my tapes over and over. They stop them and ask for elaboration, for interpretation. Their scholars are delighted—I'm their Rosetta Stone to Ed and his cracked-up Earth.

In duplicating the ship to give Ed his crazy-house quarters they duplicated me as well. One of me works directly with them on the tapes of Ed Past and the other me continues to attend Ed Present, endlessly explaining. Because my two selves are connected, each knows everything the other does. Surprisingly, this bothers me—at the end of a day I feel drained. I didn't know there was mortality in me.

Little by little they've exposed Ed to his new surroundings. He reacted predictably at first—threatening to destroy anybody who came near. But they're empty threats—Ed has been defused. I think he's beginning to realize this, dimly, even if he doesn't accept it yet.

There's radio on this planet and Ed hears it; at least the vibrations impinge on his eardrums. Not being able to read his mind, I can only guess the effect it's having on him. Outwardly he reacts by cocking his head and frowning. So far he hasn't commented.

One of the programs Ed hears is a music show broadcast daily by a young woman named Hiya—I transliterate. I think it's getting to him consciously. The other day I observed him tapping his fingers to a sweet alien melody Hiya was playing. I can't describe their music any more than I can describe Earth's; at most I can reproduce it. But Ed is beginning to be reached.

Ed:

I must be going dotty, folks. I keep hearing things inside

RICHARD WILSON

my head. Maybe it's that old music of the spheres they used to talk about. It's not jazz but it has the wild improvisational tempo of jazz; it's not pop, but it's catchy and rememberable; it's not classical but it has the enduring quality of the good stuff. I *like* it, but maybe I'm just making it up—going off the deep end out here in the nowhere.

Marty:

On the contrary, Ed may be surfacing from the mad deeps. He could be adapting to the reality he'd consciously rejected out of fear of the unknown, the alien yet friendly world which he must embrace unless he's to degenerate into a subhuman tape-bank of repetitive memories. If he did that he'd be no better than me—I'm big enough to say this—a storehouse incapable of creativity.

And that would be a waste—despite all his faults and gaps Ed *is* Earth. He never claimed to be the best there was, but he's representative of an awful lot of people.

They—we—need him. He's not alone here. He has fellow human beings now. I hope they can get through to him.

Ed:

Something's wrong with the air conditioning. It's putting out a different kind of air. But to fix it I'd have to go down to the bowels of the ship and I don't like to think about bowels. So I put it off. I've put off a lot of things. There's all the time in the world. In the world . . . ?

You'd think I'd want to fix the air thing. It'd take me away for a while. I used to think that what I missed was the freedom of movement, the ability to walk and wander, to go as far in any direction as I wanted to—but I guess I don't miss it really. Or if I do I resent the fact that my walking space has been restricted to a few dozen feet. Rather than take such a limited stroll I stay put. Since I can no longer walk up Broadway or in the Arizona desert or along the Appalachian Trail, I'd rather not walk at all. It's an adjustment I've made.

So I sit and feel that I get fat. I don't actually. I can't, on the rations this thing is fitted out with. I eat and eat and it's all high-protein stuff. Lately I don't mind that it's reconstituted. It's palatable and crunchy but I have not gained a pound, praise be. It shouldn't matter if I get big as a house but there's the old vanity—what if some day, somewhere, I met a girl? I'd have to be presentable.

A MAN SPEKITH

Marty:

That music he's been hearing, broadcast by the girl Hiya—today he responded directly to it. He said, "Hey, that's good!" And he switched on a tape to record it. He played it over later, after her broadcast. Then he made an entry in his precious notebook. It was the first thing he'd written that wasn't a memory of Earth.

He's started to rattle his bars. He wants out, into the real world.

Dearie tells me he'll get there, in careful stages. The first step is a visitor. It will be the girl disk jockey, Hiya.

AFTER THE MYTHS WENT HOME

ROBERT SILVERBERG



In recent years science fiction has frequently dealt with legends and myth-figures, borrowing and sometimes elaborating upon the resonances they strike within us. Here Robert Silverberg calls up the gods again, but this time somewhat less portentously. Or maybe not.

FOR A WHILE IN THOSE YEARS we were calling great ones out of the past, to find out what they were like. This was in the middle twelves—12400 to 12450, say. We called up Caesar and Antony, and also Cleopatra. We got Freud and Marx and Lenin into the same room and let them talk. We summoned Winston Churchill, who was a disappointment (he lisped and drank too much) and Napoleon, who was magnificent. We raided ten millennia of history for our sport.

But after half a century of this we grew bored with our game. We were easily bored, in the middle twelves. So we started to call up the myth people, the gods and the heroes. That seemed more romantic, and this was one of Earth's romanticist eras we lived in.

It was my turn then to serve as curator of the Hall of Man, and that was where they built the machine, so I

AFTER THE MYTHS WENT HOME

watched it going up from the start. Leor the Builder was in charge. He had made the machines that called the real people up, so this was only slightly different, no real challenge to his talents. He had to feed in another kind of data, full of archetypes and psychic currents, but the essential process of reconstruction would be the same. He never had any doubt of success.

Leor's new machine had crystal rods and silver sides. A giant emerald was embedded in its twelve-angled lid. Tinsel streamers of radiant platinum dangled from the bony struts on which it rose.

"Mere decoration," Leor confided to me. "I could have made a simple black box. But brutalism is out of fashion."

The machine sprawled all over the Pavilion of Hope on the north face of the Hall of Man. It hid the lovely flicker-mosaic flooring, but at least it cast lovely reflections into the mirrored surfaces of the exhibit cases. Somewhere about 12570, Leor said he was ready to put his machine into operation.

We arranged the best possible weather. We tuned the winds, deflecting the westerlies a bit and pushing all clouds far to the south. We sent up new moons to dance at night in wondrous patterns, now and again coming together to spell out Leor's name. People came from all over Earth, thousands of them, camping in whisper-tents on the great plain that begins at the Hall of Man's doorstep. There was real excitement then, a tension that crackled beautifully through the clear blue air.

Leor made his last adjustments. The committee of literary advisers conferred with him over the order of events, and there was some friendly bickering. We chose daytime for the first demonstration, and tinted the sky light purple for better effect. Most of us put on our youngest bodies, though there were some who said they wanted to look mature in the presence of these fabled figures out of time's dawn.

"Whenever you wish me to begin—" Leor said.

There were speeches first. Chairman Peng gave his usual lighthearted address. The Procurator of Pluto, who was visiting us, congratulated Leor on the fertility of his inventions. Nistim, then in his third or fourth successive term as Metabolizer General, encouraged everyone present to climb to a higher level. Then the master of ceremonies pointed to me. No, I said, shaking my head, I am a very poor speaker.

ROBERT SILVERBERG

They replied that it was my duty, as curator of the Hall of Man, to explain what was about to unfold.

Reluctantly I came forward.

"You will see the dreams of old mankind made real-to-day," I said, groping for words. "The hopes of the past will walk among you, and so, I think, will the nightmares. We are offering you a view of the imaginary figures by means of whom the ancients attempted to give structure to the universe. These gods, these heroes, summed up patterns of cause and effect, and served as organizing forces around which cultures could crystallize. It is all very strange for us and it will be wonderfully interesting. Thank you."

Leor was given the signal to begin.

"I must explain one thing," he said. "Some of the beings you are about to see were purely imaginary, concocted by tribal poets, even as my friend has just told you. Others, though, were based on actual human beings who once walked the Earth as ordinary mortals, and who were transfigured, given more-than-human qualities, raised to the pantheon. Until they actually appear, we will not know which figures belong to which category, but I can tell you how to detect their origin once you see them. Those who were human beings before they became myths will have a slight aura, a shadow, a darkness in the air about them. This is the lingering trace of their essential humanity, which no mythmaker can erase. So I learned in my preliminary experiments. I am now ready."

Leor disappeared into the bowels of his machine. A single pure note, high and clean, rang in the air. Suddenly, on the stage looking out to the plain, there emerged a naked man, blinking, peering around.

Leor's voice, from within the machine, said, "This is Adam, the first of all men."

And so the gods and the heroes came back to us on that brilliant afternoon in the middle twenties, while all the world watched in joy and fascination.

Adam walked across the stage and spoke to Chairman Peng, who solemnly saluted him and explained what was taking place. Adam's hand was outspread over his loins. "Why am I naked?" Adam asked. "It is wrong to be naked."

I pointed out to him that he had been naked when he first came into the world, and that we were merely show-

AFTER THE MYTHS WENT HOME

ing respect for authenticity by summoning him back that way.

"But I have eaten the apple," Adam said. "Why do you bring me back conscious of shame, and give me nothing to conceal my shame? Is this proper? Is this consistent? If you want a naked Adam, bring forth an Adam who has not yet eaten the apple. But—"

Leor's voice broke in: "This is Eve, the mother of us all."

Eve stepped forth, naked also, though her long silken hair hid the curve of her breasts. Unashamed, she smiled and held out a hand to Adam, who rushed to her, crying, "Cover yourself! Cover yourself!"

Surveying the thousands of onlookers, Eve said coolly, "Why should I, Adam? These people are naked too, and this must be Eden again."

"This is not Eden," said Adam. "This is the world of our children's children's children's children."

"I like this world," Eve said. "Relax."

Leor announced the arrival of Pan the Goat-footed.

Now, Adam and Eve both were surrounded by the dark aura of essential humanity. I was surprised at this, since I doubted that there had ever been a First Man and a First Woman on whom legends could be based; yet I assumed that this must be some symbolic representation of the concept of man's evolution. But Pan, the half-human monster, also wore the aura. Had there been such a being in the real world?

I did not understand it then. But later I came to see that if there had never been a goat-footed man, there nevertheless had been men who behaved as Pan behaved, and out of them that lusty god had been created. As for the Pan who came out of Leor's machine, he did not remain long on the stage. He plunged forward into the audience, laughing and waving his arms and kicking his cloven hooves in the air. "Great Pan lives!" he cried. "Great Pan lives!" He seized in his arms Milian, the year-wife of Divud the Archivist, and carried her away toward a grove of feather-trees.

"He does me honor," said Milian's year-husband Divud.

Leor continued to toil in his machine.

He brought forth Hector and Achilles, Orpheus, Perseus, Loki, and Absalom. He brought forth Medea, Cassandra, Odysseus, Oedipus. He brought forth Thoth, the Minotaur, Aeneas, Salome. He brought forth Shiva and Gilgamesh, Viracocha and Pandora, Priapus and Astarte, Diana, Dio-

ROBERT SILVERBERG

medes, Dionysus, Deucalion. The afternoon waned and the sparkling moons sailed into the sky, and still Leor labored. He gave us Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, Helen and Menelaus, Isis and Osiris. He gave us Damballa and Geudeniho and Papa Legba. He gave us Baal. He gave us Samson. He gave us Krishna. He woke Quetzalcoatl, Adonis, Holger Dansk, Kali, Ptah, Thor, Jason, Nimrod, Set.

The darkness deepened and the creatures of myth jostled and tumbled on the stage, and overflowed onto the plain. They mingled with one another, old enemies exchanging gossip, old friends clasping hands, members of the same pantheon embracing or looking warily upon their rivals. They mixed with us, too, the heroes selecting women, the monsters trying to seem less monstrous, the gods shopping for worshipers.

Perhaps we had enough. But Leor would not stop. This was his time of glory.

Out of the machine came Roland and Oliver, Rustum and Sohrab, Cain and Abel, Damon and Pythias, Orestes and Pylades, Jonathan and David. Out of the machine came St. George, St. Vitus, St. Nicholas, St. Christopher, St. Valentine, St. Jude. Out of the machine came the Furies, the Harpies, the Pleiades, the Fates, the Norns. Leor was a romantic, and he knew no moderation.

All who came forth wore the aura of humanity.

But wonders pall. The Earthfolk of the middle twelves were easily distracted and easily bored. The cornucopia of miracles was far from exhausted, but on the fringes of the audience I saw people taking to the sky and heading for home. We who were close to Leor had to remain, of course, though we were surfeited by these fantasies and baffled by their abundance.

An old white-bearded man wrapped in a heavy aura left the machine. He carried a slender metal tube. "This is Galileo," said Leor.

"Who is he?" the Procurator of Pluto asked me, for Leor, growing weary, had ceased to describe his conjured ghosts.

I had to request the information from an output in the Hall of Man. "A latter-day god of science," I told the Procurator, "who is credited with discovering the stars. Believed to have been an historical personage before his deification, which occurred after his martyrdom by religious conservatives."

Now that the mood was on him, Leor summoned more

AFTER THE MYTHS WENT HOME

of these gods of science, Newton and Einstein and Hippocrates and Copernicus and Oppenheimer and Freud. We had met some of them before, in the days when we were bringing real people out of lost time, but now they had new guises, for they had passed through the mythmakers' hands. They bore emblems of their special functions, and they went among us offering to heal, to teach, to explain. They were nothing like the real Newton and Einstein and Freud we had seen. They stood three times the height of men, and lightnings played around their brows.

Then came a tall, bearded man with a bloodied head. "Abraham Lincoln," said Leor.

"The ancient god of emancipation," I told the Procurator, after some research.

Then came a handsome young man with a dazzling smile and also a bloodied head. "John Kennedy," said Leor.

"The ancient god of youth and springtime," I told the Procurator. "A symbol of the change of seasons, of the defeat of winter by summer."

"That was Osiris," said the Procurator. "Why are there two?"

"There were many more," I said. "Baldur, Tammuz, Mithra, Attis."

"Why did they need so many?" he asked.

Leor said, "Now I will stop."

The gods and heroes were among us. A season of revelry began.

Medea went off with Jason, and Agamemnon was reconciled with Clytemnestra, and Theseus and the Minotaur took up lodgings together. Others preferred the company of men. I spoke a while with John Kennedy, the last of the myths to come from the machine. Like Adam, the first, he was troubled at being here.

"I was no myth," he insisted. "I lived. I was real. I entered primaries and made speeches."

"You became a myth," I said. "You lived and died and in your dying you were transfigured."

He chuckled. "Into Osiris? Into Baldur?"

"It seems appropriate."

"To you, maybe. They stopped believing in Baldur a thousand years before I was born."

"To me," I said, "you and Osiris and Baldur are con-

ROBERT SILVERBERG

temporaries. You are of the ancient world. You are thousands of years removed from us."

"And I'm the last myth you let out of the machine?"

"You are."

"Why? Did men stop making myths after the twentieth century?"

"You would have to ask Leor. But I think you are right: your time was the end of the age of mythmaking. After your time we could no longer believe such things as myths. We did not *need* myths. When we passed out of the era of troubles, we entered a kind of paradise where every one of us lived a myth of his own, and then why should we have to raise some men to great heights among us?"

He looked at me strangely. "Do you really believe that? That you live in paradise? That men have become gods?"

"Spend some time in our world," I said, "and see for yourself."

He went out into the world, but what his conclusions were I never knew, for I did not speak to him again. Often I encountered roving gods and heroes, though. They were everywhere. They quarreled and looted and ran amok, some of them, but we were not very upset by that, since it was how we expected archetypes out of the dawn to act. And some were gentle. I had a brief love affair with Persephone. I listened, enchanted, to the singing of Orpheus. Krishna danced for me.

Dionysus revived the lost art of making liquors, and taught us to drink and be drunk.

Loki made magics of flame for us.

Taliesin crooned incomprehensible, wondrous ballads to us.

Achilles hurled his javelin for us.

It was a season of wonder, but the wonder ebbed. The mythfolk began to bore us. There were too many of them, and they were too loud, too active, too demanding. They wanted us to love them, listen to them, bow to them, write poems about them. They asked questions—some of them, anyway—that pried into the inner workings of our world, and embarrassed us, for we scarcely knew the answers. They grew vicious, and schemed against each other, sometimes causing perils for us.

Leor had provided us with a splendid diversion. But we all agreed it was time for the myths to go home. We had had them with us for fifty years, and that was quite enough.

AFTER THE MYTHS WENT HOME

We rounded them up, and started to put them back into the machine. The heroes were the easiest to catch, for all their strength. We hired Loki to trick them into returning to the Hall of Man. "Mighty tasks await you there," he told them, and they hurried thence to show their valor. Loki led them into the machine and scurried out, and Leor sent them away, Heracles, Achilles, Hector, Perseus, Cuchulainn, and the rest of that energetic breed.

After that many of the demonic ones came, and said they were as bored with us as we were with them, and went back into the machine of their free will. Thus departed Kali, Legba, Set, and many more.

Some we had to trap and take by force. Odysseus disguised himself as Breel, the secretary to Chairman Peng, and would have fooled us forever if the real Breel, returning from a holiday in Jupiter, had not exposed the hoax. And then Odysseus struggled. Loki gave us problems. Oedipus launched blazing curses when we came for him. Daedalus clung touchingly to Leor and begged, "Let me stay, brother! Let me stay!" and had to be thrust within.

Year after year the task of finding and capturing them continued, and one day we knew we had them all. The last to go was Cassandra, who had been living alone in a distant island, clad in rags.

"Why did you send for us?" she asked. "And, having sent, why do you ship us away?"

"The game is over," I said to her. "We will turn now to other sports."

"You should have kept us," Cassandra said. "People who have no myths of their own would do well to borrow those of others, and not just as sport. Who will comfort your souls in the dark times ahead? Who will guide your spirits when the suffering begins? Who will explain the woe that will befall you? Woel Woel!"

"The woes of Earth," I said gently, "lie in Earth's past. We need no myths."

Cassandra smiled and stepped into the machine. And was gone.

And then the age of fire and turmoil opened, for when the myths went home, the invaders came, bursting from the sky. And our towers toppled and our moons fell. And the cold-eyed strangers went among us, doing as they wished.

ROBERT SILVERBERG

And those of us who survived cried out to the old gods,
the vanished heroes.

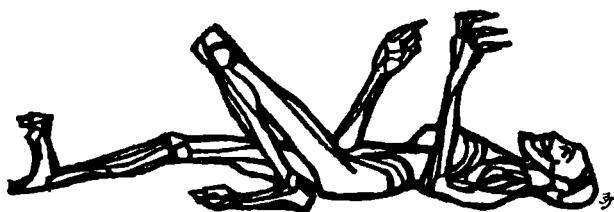
Loki, come!

Achilles, defend us!

Shiva, release us!

Heracles! Thor! Gawain!

But the gods are silent, and the heroes do not come. The machine that glittered in the Hall of Man is broken. Leor its maker is gone from this world. Jackals run through our gardens, and our masters stride in our streets, and we are made slaves. And we are alone beneath the frightful sky. And we are alone.



DEATH BY ECSTASY

LARRY NIVEN

Larry Niven likes to examine in detail the results of such scientific extrapolations as psi talents and organ transplants, but he doesn't forget to weave his speculation in with some good storytelling. **DEATH BY ECSTASY**, a genuine science fiction murder mystery, shows his talent at its best.

FIRST CAME THE routine request for a Breech of Privacy permit. A police officer took down the details and forwarded the request to a clerk, who saw that the tape reached the appropriate civic judge. The judge was reluctant, for privacy is a precious thing in a world of eighteen billion; but in the end he could find no reason to refuse. On November 2nd, 2123, he granted the permit.

The tenant's rent was two weeks in arrears. If the manager of Monica Apartments had asked for eviction he would have been refused.

But Owen Jennison just did not answer his doorbell or his room phone. Nobody could recall seeing him in many weeks. Apparently the manager wanted to know that he was all right.

LARRY NIVEN

And so he was allowed to use his passkey, with an officer standing by.

And so they found the tenant of 1809.

And when they looked in his wallet, they called me.

I was at my desk in ARM's Headquarters, making useless notes and wishing it were lunchtime.

At this stage the Loren case was all correlate-and-wait. It involved an organlegging gang, apparently run by a single man, yet big enough to cover half the North American west coast. We had considerable data on the gang—methods of operation, centers of activity, a few former customers, even a tentative handful of names—but nothing that would give us an excuse to act. So it was a matter of shoving what we had into the computer, watching the few suspected associates of the ganglord Loren, and waiting for a break.

The months of waiting were ruining my sense of involvement.

My phone buzzed.

I put the pen down and said, "Gil Hamilton."

A small dark face regarded me with soft black eyes. "I am Detective-Inspector Julio Ordaz of the Los Angeles Police Department. Are you related to an Owen Jennison?"

"Owen? No, we're not related. Is he in trouble?"

"You do know him, then."

"Sure I know him. Is he here, on Earth?"

"It would seem so." Ordaz had no accent, but the lack of colloquialisms in his speech made him sound vaguely foreign. "We will need positive identification, Mr. Hamilton. Mr. Jennison's ident lists you as next of kin."

"That's funny. I . . . Back in a minute. What's happened? Is Owen dead?"

"Somebody is dead, Mr. Hamilton. He carried Mr. Jennison's ident in his wallet."

"Okay. Now, Owen Jennison was a citizen of the Belt. This may have interworld complications. That makes it ARM's business. Where's the body?"

"We found him in an apartment rented under his own name. Monica Apartments, Lower Los Angeles, room 1809."

"Good. Don't move anything you haven't moved already. I'll be right over."

Monica Apartments was a nearly featureless concrete block, eighty stories tall, a thousand feet across the edges of its

DEATH BY ECSTASY

square base. Lines of small balconies gave the sides a sculptured look, above a forty-foot inset ledge that would keep tenants from dropping objects on pedestrians. A hundred buildings just like it made Lower Los Angeles look lumpy from the air.

Inside was a lobby done in anonymous modern. Lots of metal and plastic showing; lightweight, comfortable chairs without arms; big ash trays; plenty of indirect lighting; a low ceiling; no wasted space. The whole room might have been stamped out with a die. It wasn't supposed to look small, but it did, and that warned you what the rooms would look like.

I found the manager's office and the manager, a soft-looking man with watery-blue eyes. His conservative paper suit, dark red, seemed chosen to render him invisible, as did the style of his brown hair, worn long and combed straight back without a part. "Nothing like this has ever happened here," he confided as he led me to the elevator banks. "Nothing. It would have been bad enough without his being a Belter, but *now*—" He cringed at the thought. "News-men. They'll *smother* us."

The elevator was coffin-sized, but with the handrails on the inside. It went up fast and smooth. I stepped out into the long, narrow hallway.

What would Owen have been doing in a place like this? Machinery lived here, not people.

Maybe it wasn't Owen. Ordaz had been reluctant to commit himself. Besides, there's no law against picking pockets. You couldn't enforce such a law on this crowded planet. Everyone on Earth was a pickpocket.

Sure. Someone had died carrying Owen's wallet.

I walked down the hallway to 1809.

It was Owen who sat grinning in the armchair. I took one good look at him, enough to be sure, and then I looked away and didn't look back. But the rest of it was even more unbelievable.

No Belter could have taken that apartment. I was born in Kansas; but even I felt the awful anonymous chill. It would have driven Owen bats.

"I don't believe it," I said.

"Did you know him well, Mr. Hamilton?"

"About as well as two men can know each other. He

LARRY NIVEN

and I spent three years mining rocks in the main asteroid belt. You don't keep secrets under those conditions."

"Yet you didn't know he was on Earth."

"That's what I can't understand. Why the blazes didn't he phone me if he was in trouble?"

"You're an ARM," said Ordaz. "An operative in the United Nations Police."

He had a point. Owen was as honorable as any man I knew; but honor isn't the same in the Belt. Belters think flatlanders are all crooks. They don't understand that to a flatlander, picking pockets is a game of skill. Yet a Belter sees smuggling as the same kind of game, with no dishonesty involved. He balances the thirty percent tariff against possible confiscation of his cargo, and if the odds are right he gambles.

"Owen could have been doing something sticky," I admitted. "But I can't see him killing himself over it. And . . . not here. He wouldn't have come here."

1809 was a living room and a bathroom and a closet. I'd glanced into the bathroom, knowing what I would find. It was the size of a comfortable shower stall. An adjustment panel outside the door would cause it to extrude various appurtenances in memory plastic, to become a washroom, a shower stall, a toilet, a dressing room, a steam cabinet. Luxurious in everything but size, if you pushed the right buttons.

The living room was more of the same. A King bed was invisible behind a wall. The kitchen alcove, with basin and oven and grill and toaster, would fold into another wall; the sofa, chairs and tables would vanish into the floor. One tenant and three guests would make a crowded cocktail party, a cozy dinner gathering, a closed poker game. Card table, dinner table, coffee table were all there, surrounded by the appropriate chairs; but only one set at a time would emerge from the floor. There was no refrigerator, no freezer, no bar. If a tenant needed food or drink, he phoned down, and the supermarket on the third floor would send it up.

The tenant of such an apartment had his comfort. But he owned nothing. There was room for him; there was none for his possessions. This was one of the inner apartments. An age ago there would have been an air shaft; but air shafts took up expensive room. The tenant didn't even have a window. He lived in a comfortable box.

Just now the items extruded were the overstuffed reading

DEATH BY ECSTASY

armchair, two small side tables, a footstool, and the kitchen alcove. Owen Jennison sat grinning in the armchair. Naturally he grinned. Little more than dried skin covered the natural grin of his skull.

"It's a small room," said Ordaz, "but not too small. Millions of people live this way. In any case, a Belter would hardly be a claustrophobe."

"No. Owen flew a singelship before he joined us. Three months at a stretch, in a cabin so small you couldn't stand up with the airlock closed. Not claustrophobia, but—" I swept my arm about the room. "What do you see that's his?"

Small as it was, the closet was nearly empty. A set of street clothes, a paper shirt, a pair of shoes, a small brown overnight case. All new. The few items in the bathroom medicine chest had been equally new and equally anonymous.

Ordaz said, "Well?"

"Belters are transients. They don't own much, but what they do own, they guard. Small possessions, relics, souvenirs. I can't believe he wouldn't have had *something*."

Ordaz lifted an eyebrow. "His space suit?"

"You think that's unlikely? It's not. The inside of his pressure suit is a Belter's home. Sometimes it's the only home he's got. He spends a fortune decorating it. If he loses his suit, he's not a Belter any more.

"No, I don't insist he'd have brought his suit. But he'd have had *something*. His phial of marsdust. The bit of nickel-iron they took out of his chest. Or, if he left all his souvenirs home, he'd have picked up things on Earth. But in this room—there's *nothing*."

"Perhaps," Ordaz suggested delicately, "he didn't notice his surroundings."

And somehow that brought it all home.

Owen Jennison sat grinning in a water-stained silk dressing gown. His space-darkened face lightened abruptly beneath his chin, giving way to normal suntan. His blond hair, too long, had been cut Earth style; no trace remained of the Belter strip cut he'd worn all his life. A month's growth of untended beard covered half his face. A small black cylinder protruded from the top of his head. An electric cord trailed from the top of the cylinder and ran to a small wall socket.

The cylinder was a droud, a current addict's transformer.

I stepped closer to the corpse and bent to look. The droud was a standard make, but it had been altered. Your

LARRY NIVEN

standard current addict's droud will pass only a trickle of current into the brain. Owen must have been getting ten times the usual charge, easily enough to damage his brain in a month's time.

I reached out and touched the droud with my imaginary hand.

Ordaz was standing quietly beside me, letting me make my examination without interruption. Naturally he had no way of knowing about my restricted psi powers.

Restricted was the operative word. I had two psychic powers: telekinesis and esper. With the esper sense I could sense the shapes of objects at a distance; but the distance was the reach of an extra right arm. I could lift small objects, if they were no further away than the fingertips of an imaginary right hand. The restriction was a flaw in my own imagination. Since I could not believe my imaginary hand would reach further than that . . . it wouldn't.

Even so limited a psi power can be useful. With my imaginary fingertips I touched the droud in Owen's head, then ran them down to a tiny hole in his scalp, and further.

It was a standard surgical job. Owen could have had it done anywhere. A hole in his scalp, invisible under the hair, nearly impossible to find even if you knew what you were looking for. Even your best friends wouldn't know, unless they caught you with the droud plugged in. But the tiny hole marked a bigger plug set in the bone of the skull. I touched the ecstasy plug with my imaginary fingertips, then ran them down the hair-fine wire going deep into Owen's brain, down into the pleasure center.

No, the extra current hadn't killed him. What had killed Owen was his lack of will power. He had been unwilling to get up.

He had starved to death sitting in that chair. There were plastic squeezebottles all around his feet and a couple still on the end table. All empty. They must have been full a month ago. Owen hadn't died of thirst. He had died of starvation, and his death had been planned.

Owen, my crewmate. Why hadn't he come to me? I'm half a Belter myself. Whatever his trouble, I'd have gotten him out somehow. A little smuggling—what of it? Why had he arranged to tell me only after it was over?

The apartment was so clean, so clean. You had to bend close to smell the death; the air conditioning whisked it all away.

DEATH BY ECSTASY

He'd been very methodical. The kitchen was open so that a catheter could lead from Owen to the sink. He'd given himself enough water to last out the month; he'd paid his rent a month in advance. He'd cut the droud cord by hand, and he'd cut it short deliberately tethering himself to a wall socket beyond reach of the kitchen.

A complex way to die, but rewarding in its way. A month of ecstasy, a month of the highest physical pleasure man can attain. I could imagine him giggling every time he remembered he was starving to death. With food only a few footsteps away . . . but he'd have to pull out the droud to reach it. Perhaps he postponed the decision, and postponed it again. . . .

Owen and I and Homer Chandrasekhar, we had lived for three years in a cramped shell surrounded by vacuum. What was there to know about Owen Jennison that I hadn't known? Where was the weakness we did not share? If Owen had done this, so could I. And I was afraid.

"Very neat," I whispered. "Belter neat."

"Typically Belter, would you say?"

"I would not. Belters don't commit suicide. Certainly not this way. If a Belter had to go, he'd blow his ship's drive and die like a star. The neatness is typical. The result isn't."

"Well," said Ordaz. "Well." He was uncomfortable. The facts spoke for themselves, yet he was reluctant to call me a liar. He fell back on formality.

"Mr. Hamilton, do you identify this man as Owen Jennison?"

"It's him." He'd always been a touch overweight, yet I'd recognized him the moment I saw him. "But let's be sure." I'd pulled the dirty dressing gown back from Owen's shoulder. A near-perfect circle of scar tissue, eight inches across, spread over the left side of his chest. "See that?"

"We noticed it, yes. An old burn?"

"Owen's the only man I know who could show you a meteor scar on his skin. It blasted him in the shoulder one day while he was outside the ship. Sprayed vaporized pressure-suit steel all over his skin. The doc pulled a tiny grain of nickel-iron from the center of the scar, just below the skin. Owen always carried that grain of nickel-iron. Always," I said, looking at Ordaz.

"We didn't find it."

"Okay."

LARRY NIVEN

"I'm sorry to put you through this, Mr. Hamilton. It was you who insisted we leave the body *in situ*."

"Yes. Thank you."

Owen grinned at me from the reading chair. I felt the pain, in my throat and in the pit of my stomach. Once I had lost my right arm. Losing Owen felt the same way.

"I'd like to know more about this," I said. "Will you let me know the details as soon as you get them?"

"Of course. Through the ARM's office?"

"Yes." This wasn't ARM's business, despite what I'd told Ordaz, but ARM's prestige would help. "I want to know why Owen died. Maybe he just cracked up . . . culture shock or something. But if someone hounded him to death, I'll have his blood."

"Surely the administration of justice is better left to—" Ordaz stopped, confused. Did I speak as an ARM or as a citizen?

I left him wondering.

The lobby held a scattering of tenants entering and leaving elevators or just sitting around. I stood outside the elevator for a moment, searching passing faces for the erosion of personality that must be there.

Mass-produced comfort. Room to sleep and eat and watch tridee, but no room to *be* anyone. Living here, one would own nothing. What kind of people would live like that? They should have looked all alike, moved in unison, like the string of images in a barber's mirrors.

Then I spotted wavy brown hair and a dark red paper suit. The manager? I had to get close before I was sure. His face was the face of a permanent stranger.

He saw me coming and smiled without enthusiasm. "Oh, hello, Mr. . . . uh . . . Did you find . . ." He couldn't think of the right question.

"Yes," I said, answering it anyway. "But I'd like to know some things. Owen Jennison lived here for six weeks, right?"

"Six weeks and two days, before we opened his room."

"Did he ever have visitors?"

The man's eyebrows went up. We'd drifted in the direction of his office, and I was close enough to read the name on the door: JASPER MILLER, *Manager*. "Of course not," he said. "Anyone would have noticed that something was wrong."

"You mean he took the room for the express purpose of dying? You saw him once, and never again?"

DEATH BY ECSTASY

"I suppose he might . . . no, wait." The manager thought deeply.

"No. He registered on a Thursday. I noticed the Belter tan, of course. Then on Friday he went out. I happened to see him pass."

"Was that the day he got the droud? No, skip it, you wouldn't know that. Was it the last time you saw him go out?"

"Yès, it was."

"Then he could have had visitors late Thursday or early Friday."

The manager shook his head, very positively.

"Why not?"

"You see, Mr. . . . uh . . ."

"Hamilton."

"We have a holocamera on every floor, Mr. Hamilton. It takes a picture of each tenant the first time he goes to his room, and then never again. Privacy is one of the services a tenant buys with his room." The manager drew himself up a little as he said this. "For the same reason, the holocamera takes a picture of anyone who is *not* a tenant. The tenants are thus protected from unwarranted intrusions."

"And there were no visitors to any of the rooms on Owen's floor?"

"No, sir, there were not."

"Your tenants are a solitary bunch."

"Perhaps they are."

"I suppose a computer in the basement decides who is and is not a tenant."

"Of course."

"So for six weeks Owen Jennison sat alone in his room. In all that time he was totally ignored."

Miller tried to turn his voice cold, but he was too nervous. "We try to give our guests privacy. If Mr. Jennison had wanted help of any kind he had only to pick up the house phone. He could have called me, or the pharmacy, or the supermarket downstairs."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Miller. That's all I wanted to know. I wanted to know how Owen Jennison could wait six weeks to die while nobody noticed."

Miller swallowed. "He was dying all that time?"

"Yah."

"We had no way of knowing. How could we? I don't see how you can blame us."

LARRY NIVEN

"I don't either," I said, and brushed by. Miller had been close enough, so I had lashed out at him. Now I was ashamed. The man was perfectly right. Owen could have had help if he'd wanted it.

I stood outside, looking up at the jagged blue line of sky that showed between the tops of the buildings. A taxi floated into view, and I beeped my clicker at it, and it dropped.

I went back to ARM headquarters. Not to work—I could not have done any work, not under the circumstances—but to talk to Julie.

Julie. A tall girl, pushing thirty, with green eyes and long hair streaked red and gold. And two wide brown forceps marks above her right knee; but they weren't showing now. I looked into her office, through the one-way glass, and watched her at work.

She sat in a contour couch, smoking. Her eyes were closed. Sometimes her brow would furrow as she concentrated. Sometimes she would snatch a glance at the clock, then close her eyes again.

I didn't interrupt her. I knew the importance of what she was doing.

Julie. She wasn't beautiful. Her eyes were a little too far apart, her chin too square, her mouth too wide. It didn't matter. Because Julie could read minds.

She was the ideal date. She was everything a man needed. A year ago, the day after the night I killed my first man, I had been in a terribly destructive mood. Somehow Julie had turned it into a mood of manic exhilaration. We'd run wild through a supervised anarchy park, running up an enormous bill. We'd hiked five miles without going anywhere, facing backward on a downtown slidewalk. At the end we'd been utterly fatigued, too tired to think. . . . But two weeks ago it had been a warm, cuddly, comfortable night. Two people happy with each other; no more than that. Julie was what you needed, anytime, anywhere.

Her male harem must have been the largest in history. To pick up on the thoughts of a male ARM, Julie had to be in love with him. Luckily there was room in her for a lot of love. She didn't demand that we be faithful. A good half of us were married. But there had to be love for each of Julie's men, or Julie couldn't protect him.

She was protecting us now. Each fifteen minutes, Julie was making contact with a specific ARM agent. Psi powers

DEATH BY ECSTASY

are notoriously undependable, but Julie was an exception. If we got in a hole, Julie was always there to get us out . . . provided some idiot didn't interrupt her at work.

So I stood outside, waiting, with a cigarette in my imaginary hand.

The cigarette was for practise, to stretch the mental muscles. In its way my "hand" was as dependable as Julie's mind-touch, possibly because of its very limitations. Doubt your psi powers and they're gone. A rigidly defined third arm was more reasonable than some warlock ability to make objects move by wishing at them. I knew how an arm felt, and what it would do.

Why do I spend so much time lifting cigarettes? Well, it's the biggest weight I can lift without strain. And there's another reason . . . something taught me by Owen.

At ten minutes to fifteen, Julie opened her eyes, rolled out of the contour couch and came to the door. "Hi, Gil," she said sleepily. "Trouble?"

"Yah. A friend of mine just died. I thought you'd better know." I handed her a cup of coffee.

She nodded. We had a date tonight, and this would change its character. Knowing that, she probed lightly.

"My God!" she said, recoiling. "How . . . how horrible. I'm terribly sorry, Gil. Date's off, right?"

"Unless you want to join the ceremonial drunk."

She shook her head vigorously. "I didn't know him. It wouldn't be proper. Besides, you'll be wallowing in your own memories, Gil. A lot of them will be private. I'd cramp your style if you knew I was there to probe. Now if Homer Chandrasekhar were here, it'd be different."

"I wish he were. He'll have to throw his own drunk. Maybe with some of Owen's girls, if they're around."

"You know what I feel," she said.

"Just what I do."

"I wish I could help."

"You always help." I glanced at the clock. "Your coffee break's about over."

"Slave driver." Julie took my earlobe between thumb and forefinger. "Do him proud," she said, and went back to her soundproof room.

She always helps. She doesn't even have to speak. Just knowing that Julie has read my thoughts, that someone understands . . . that's enough.

LARRY NIVEN

All alone at three in the afternoon, I started my ceremonial drunk.

The ceremonial drunk is a young custom, not yet tied down by formality. There is no set duration. No specific toasts must be given. Those who participate must be close friends of the deceased, but there is no set number of participants.

I started at the Luau, a place of cool blue light and running water. Outside it was fifteen-thirty in the afternoon, but inside it was evening in the Hawaiian Islands of centuries ago. Already the place was half full. I picked a corner table with considerable elbow room and dialed for a Luau Grog. It came, cold, brown and alcoholic, its straw tucked into a cone of ice.

There had been three of us at Cubes Forsythe's ceremonial drunk, one black Ceres night four years ago. A sorry group we were, too; Owen and me and the widow of our third crewman. Gwen Forsythe blamed us for her husband's death. I was just out of the hospital with a right arm that ended at the shoulder, and I blamed Cubes and Owen and myself, all at once. Even Owen had turned dour and introspective. We couldn't have picked a worse trio, or a worse night for it if we'd tried.

But custom called, and we were there. Then as now, I found myself probing my own personality for the wound that was a missing crewman, a missing friend. Introspecting.

Gilbert Hamilton. Born of flatlander parents, in April, 2093, in Topeka, Kansas. Born with two arms and no sign of wild talents.

Flatlander: a Belter term referring to Earthmen, and particularly to Earthmen who had never seen space. I'm not sure my parents ever looked at the stars. They managed the third largest farm in Kansas, ten square miles of arable land between two wide strips of city paralleling two strips of turnpike. We were city people, like all flatlanders, but when the crowds got to be too much for my brothers and me, we had vast stretches of land to be alone in. Ten square miles of playground, with nothing to hamper us but the crops and automachinery.

We looked at the stars, my brothers and I. You couldn't see stars from the city; the lights hide them. Even in the fields you couldn't see them around the lighted horizon. But straight overhead, they were there: black sky scattered with bright dots, and sometimes a flat white moon.

DEATH BY ECSTASY

At twenty I gave up my UN citizenship to become a Belter. I wanted stars, and the Belt government holds title to most of the solar system. There are fabulous riches in the rocks, riches belonging to a scattered civilization of a few hundred thousand Belters; and I wanted my share of that, too.

It wasn't easy. I wouldn't be eligible for a singleship license for ten years. Meanwhile I would be working for others and learning to avoid mistakes before they killed me. Half the flatlanders who join the Belt die in space before they can earn their licenses.

I mined tin on Mercury and exotic chemicals from Jupiter's atmosphere. I hauled ice from Saturn's rings and quicksilver from Europa. One year our pilot made a mistake pulling up to a new rock, and we damn near had to walk home. Cubes Forsythe was with us then. He managed to fix the com laser and aim it at Icarus to bring us help. Another time the mechanic who did the maintenance job on our ship forgot to replace an absorber, and we all got roaring drunk on the alcohol that built up in our breathing-air. The three of us caught the mechanic six months later. I hear he lived.

Most of the time I was part of a three-man crew. The members changed constantly. When Owen Jennison joined us he replaced a man who had finally earned his singleship license and couldn't wait to start hunting rocks on his own. He was too eager. I learned later that he'd made one round trip and half of another.

Owen was my age, but more experienced, a Belter born and bred. His blue eyes and blond cockatoo's crest were startling against the dark of his Belter tan, the tan that ended so abruptly where his neck ring cut off the space-intense sunlight his helmet let through. He was permanently chubby, but in free fall it was as if he'd been born with wings. I took to copying his way of moving, much to Cubes' amusement.

I didn't make my own mistake until I was twenty-six.

We were using bombs to put a rock in a new orbit. A contract job. The technique is older than fusion drives, as old as early Belt colonization, and it's still cheaper and faster than using a ship's drive to tow the rock. You use industrial fusion bombs small and clean, and you get them so that each explosion deepens the crater to channel the force of later blasts.

LARRY NIVEN

We'd set four blasts already, four white fireballs that swelled and faded as they rose. When the fifth blast went off we were hovering nearby on the other side of the rock.

The fifth blast shattered the rock.

Cubes had set the bomb. My own mistake was a shared one, because any of the three of us should have had the sense to take off right then. Instead, we watched, cursing, as valuable oxygen-bearing rock became near-valueless shards. We watched the shards spread slowly into a cloud . . . and while we watched, one fast-moving shard reached us. Moving too slowly to vaporize when it hit, it nonetheless sheered through a triple crystal-iron hull, slashed through my upper arm, and pinned Cubes Forsythe to a wall by his own heart.

A couple of nudists came in. They stood blinking among the booths while their eyes adjusted to the blue twilight, then converged with glad cries on the group two tables over. I watched and listened with an eye and an ear, thinking how different flatlander nudists were from Belter nudists. These all looked alike. They all had muscles, they had no interesting scars, they carried their credit cards in identical shoulder pouches, and they all shaved the same areas.

. . . We always went nudist in the big bases. Most people did. It was a natural reaction to the pressure suits we wore day and night while out in the rocks. Get him into a short-sleeve environment, and your normal Belter sneers at a shirt. But it's only for comfort. Give him a good reason, and your Belter will don shirt and pants as quickly as the next guy.

But not Owen. After he got that meteor scar, I never saw him wear a shirt. Not just in the Ceres domes but anywhere there was air to breath. He just had to show that scar.

A cool blue mood settled on me, and I remembered. . . .

. . . Owen Jennison lounging on a corner of my hospital bed, telling me of the trip back. I could not remember anything after that rock sheered through my arm.

I should have bled to death in seconds. Owen hadn't given me the chance. The wound was ragged; Owen had sliced it clean to the shoulder with one swipe of a com laser. Then he'd tied a length of fiberglass curtain over the flat surface and knotted it tight under my remaining armpit. He told me about putting me under two atmospheres of pure oxygen as a substitute for replacing the blood I'd lost. He

DEATH BY ECSTASY

told me how he'd reset the fusion drive for four gees to get me back in time. By rights we should have gone up in a cloud of starfire and glory.

"So there goes my reputation. The whole Belt knows how I rewired our drive. A lot of 'em figure if I'm stupid enough to risk my own life like that, I'd risk theirs too."

"So you're not safe to travel with."

"Just so. They're starting to call me Four Gee Jennison."

"You think you've got problems? I can just see how it'll be when I get back to this bed. You do something stupid, Gil? The hell of it is, it *was* stupid."

"So lie a little."

"Uh huh. Can we sell the ship?"

"Nope. Gwen inherited a third interest in it from Cubes. She won't sell."

"Then we're effectively broke."

"Except for the ship. We need another crewman."

"Correction. *You* need *two* crewmen. Unless you want to fly with a one-armed man. I can't afford a transplant."

Owen hadn't tried to offer me a loan. That would have been insulting, even if he'd had the money. "What's wrong with a prosthetic?"

"An iron arm? Sorry, no."

Owen had looked at me strangely, but all he'd said was, "Well, we'll wait a bit. Maybe you'll change your mind."

He hadn't pressured me. Not then, and not later, after I'd left the hospital and taken an apartment while I waited to get used to a missing arm. If he thought I would eventually settle for a prosthetic, he was mistaken.

Why? It's not a question I can answer. Others obviously feel differently; there are millions of people walking around with metal and plastic and silicone parts. Part man, part machine, and how do they themselves know which is the real person?

I'd rather be dead than part metal. Call it a quirk. Call it, even, the same quirk that makes my skin crawl when I find a place like Monica Apartments. A human being should be all human. He should have habits and possessions peculiarly his own, he should not try to look like or to behave like anyone but himself.

So there I was, Gil the Arm, learning to eat with my left hand.

An amputee never entirely loses what he's lost. My missing fingers itched. I moved to keep from barking my miss-

LARRY NIVEN

ing elbow on sharp corners. I reached for things, then swore when they did not come.

Owen had hung around, though his own emergency funds must have been running low. I hadn't offered to sell my third of the ship, and he hadn't asked.

There had been a girl. Now I'd forgotten her name. One night I was at her place waiting for her to get dressed—a dinner date—and I'd happened to see a nail file she'd left on a table. I'd picked it up. I'd almost tried to file my nails, but remembered in time. Irritated, I had tossed the file back on the table—and missed.

Like an idiot I'd tried to catch it with my right hand.

And I'd caught it.

I'd never suspected myself of having psychic powers. You have to be in the right frame of mind to use a psi power. But who had ever had a better opportunity than I did that night, with a whole section of brain tuned to the nerves and muscles of my right arm, and no right arm?

I'd held the nail file in my imaginary hand. I'd felt it, just as I'd felt my missing fingernails getting too long. I had run my thumb along the rough steel surface; I had turned the file in my fingers. Telekinesis for lift, esper for touch.

"That's it," Owen had said the next day. "That's all we need. One crewman, and you with your eldritch powers. You practice, see how strong you can get that lift. I'll go find a sucker."

"He'll have to settle for a sixth of net. Cubes' widow will want her share."

"Don't worry. I'll swing it."

"Don't worry!" I'd waved a pencil stub at him. Even in Ceres' gentle gravity, it was as much as I could lift—then. "You don't think TK and esper can make do for a real arm, do you?"

"It's better than a real arm. You'll see. You'll be able to reach through your suit with it without losing pressure. What Belter can do that?"

"Sure."

"What the hell do you want, Gil? Someone should give you your arm back? You can't have that. You lost it fair and square, through stupidity. Now it's your choice. Do you fly with an imaginary arm, or do you go back to Earth?"

"I can't go back. I don't have the fare."

"Well?"

DEATH BY ECSTASY

"Okay, okay. Go find us a crewman. Someone I can impress with my imaginary arm."

I sucked meditatively on a second Luau grog. By now all the booths were full, and a second layer was forming around the bar. The voices made a continuous hypnotic uproar. Cocktail hour had arrived.

. . . He'd swung it, all right. On the strength of my imaginary arm, Owen had talked a kid named Homer Chandrasekhar into joining our crew.

He'd been right about my arm, too.

Others with similar senses can reach further, up to halfway around the world. My unfortunately literal imagination had restricted me to a physis hand. But my esper fingertips were more sensitive, more dependable. I could lift more weight. Today, in Earth's gravity, I can lift a full shot glass.

I found I could reach through a cabin wall to feel for breaks in the circuits behind it. In vacuum I could brush dust from the outside of my faceplate. In port I did magic tricks.

I'd almost ceased to feel like a cripple. It was all due to Owen. In six months of mining I had paid off my hospital bills and earned my fare back to Earth, with a comfortable stake left over.

"Finagle's Black Humor!" Owen had exploded when I told him. "Of all places, why Earth?"

"Because if I can get my UN citizenship back, Earth will replace my arm. Free."

"Oh. That's true," he'd said dubiously.

The Belt had organ banks too, but they were always undersupplied. Belters didn't give things away. Neither did the Belt government. They kept the prices on transplants as high as they would go. Thus they dropped the demand to meet the supply, and that kept taxes down, to boot.

In the Belt I'd have had to buy my own arm. And I didn't have the money. On Earth there was social security and a vast supply of transplant material.

What Owen had said couldn't be done, I'd done. I'd found someone to hand me my arm back.

Sometimes I'd wondered if Owen held the choice against me. He'd never said anything, but Homer Chandrasekhar had spoken at length. A Belter would have earned his arm or done without. Never would he have accepted charity.

Was that why Owen hadn't tried to call me?

LARRY NIVEN

I shook my head. I didn't believe it.

The room continued to lurch after my head stopped shaking. I'd had enough for the moment. I finished my third grog and ordered dinner.

Dinner sobered me for the next lap. It was something of a shock to realize that I'd run through the entire lifespan of my friendship with Owen Jennison. I'd known him for three years, though it had seemed like half a lifetime. And it was. Half my six-year lifespan as a Belter.

I ordered coffee grog and watched the man pour it: hot, milky coffee laced with cinnamon and other spices, and high-proof rum poured in a stream of blue fire. This was one of the special drinks served by a human headwaiter, and it was the reason they kept him around. Phase two of the ceremonial drunk: blow half your fortune, in the grand manner.

But I called Ordaz before I touched the drink.

"I won't keep you long. Have you found out anything new?"

Ordaz took a closer look at my phone image. His disapproval was plain. "I see that you have been drinking. Perhaps you should go home now, and call me tomorrow."

I was shocked. "Don't you know *anything* about Belt customs?"

"I do not understand."

I explained the ceremonial drunk. "Look, Ordaz, if you know that little about the way a Belter thinks, then we'd better have a talk. Soon. Otherwise you're likely to miss something."

"You may be right. I can see you at noon, over lunch."

"Good. What have you got?"

"Considerable, but none of it is very helpful. Your friend landed on Earth two months ago, arriving on the *Pillar of Fire*, operating out of Outback Field, Australia. He was wearing a haircut in the style of Earth. From there—"

"That's funny. He'd have had to wait two months for his hair to grow out."

"That occurred even to me. I understand that a Belter commonly shaves his entire scalp, except for a strip two inches wide running from the nape of his neck forward."

"The strip cut, yah. It probably started when someone decided he'd live longer if his hair couldn't fall in his eyes during a tricky landing. But Owen could have let his hair

DEATH BY ECSTASY

grow out during a singleship mining trip. There'd be nobody to see."

"Still, it seems odd. Did you know that Mr. Jennison had a cousin on Earth? One Harvey Peele, who manages a chain of supermarkets."

"So I wasn't his next of kin, even on Earth."

"Mr. Jennison made no attempt to contact him."

"Anything else?"

"I've spoken to the man who sold Mr. Jennison his droud and plug. Kenneth Graham owns an office and operating room on Gayley in Near West Los Angeles. Graham claims that the droud was a standard type, that your friend must have altered it himself."

"Do you believe him?"

"For the present. His permits and his records are all in order. The droud was altered with a soldering iron, just an amateur's tool."

"Uh huh."

"As far as the police are concerned, the case will probably be closed when we locate the tools Mr. Jennison used."

"Tell you what. I'll wire Homer Chandrasekhar tomorrow. Maybe he can find out things—why Owen landed without a strip haircut, why he came to Earth at all."

Ordaz shrugged with his eyebrows. He thanked me for my trouble and hung up.

The coffee grog was still hot. I gulped at it, savoring the sugary, bitter sting of it, trying to forget Owen dead and remember him in life. He was always slightly chubby, I remembered, but he never gained a pound and he never lost a pound. He could move like a whippet when he had to.

And now he was terribly thin, and his death-grin was ripe with obscene joy.

I ordered another coffee grog. The waiter, a showman, made sure he had my attention before he lit the heated rum, then poured from a foot above the glass. You can't drink that drink slowly. It slides down too easily, and there's the added spur that if you wait too long it might get cold. Rum and strong coffee. Two of these and I'd be drunkenly alert for hours.

Midnight found me in the Mars Bar, running on Scotch and soda. In between I'd been barhopping Irish coffee at Bergin's, cold and smoking concoctions at the Moon Pool, Scotch and wild music at Beyond. I couldn't get drunk, and

LARRY NIVEN

I couldn't find the right mood. There was a barrier to the picture I was trying to rebuild.

It was the memory of the last Owen, grinning in an arm-chair with a wire leading down into his brain.

I didn't know that Owen. I had never met the man, and never would have wanted to. From bar to night club to restaurant I had run from the image, waiting for the alcohol to break the barrier between present and past.

So I sat at a corner table, surrounded by 3D panoramic views of an impossible Mars. Crystal towers and long, straight blue canals, six-legged beasts and beautiful, impossibly slender men and women, looked out at me across never-never land. Would Owen have found it sad or funny? He'd seen the real Mars, and had not been impressed.

I had reached that stage where time becomes discontinuous, where gaps of seconds or minutes appear between the events you can remember. Somewhere in that period I found myself staring at a cigarette. I must have just lighted it, because it was near its original two-hundred-millimeter length. Maybe a waiter had snuck up behind me. There it was, at any rate, burning between my middle and index fingers.

I stared at the coal as the mood settled on me. I was calm, I was drifting, I was lost in time. . . .

We'd been two months in the rocks, our first trip out since the accident. Back we came to Ceres with a holdful of gold, fifty percent pure, guaranteed suitable for rustproof wiring and conductor plates. At nightfall we were ready to celebrate.

We walked along the city limits, with neon blinking and beckoning on the right, a melted rock cliff to the left, and stars blazing through the dome overhead. Homer Chandrasekhar was practically snorting. On this night his first trip out culminated in his first homecoming; and homecoming is the best part.

"We'll want to split up about midnight," he said. He didn't need to enlarge on that. Three men in company might conceivably be three singleship pilots, but chances are they're a ship's crew. They don't have their singleship licenses yet; they're too stupid or too inexperienced. If we wanted companions—

"You haven't thought this through," Owen answered. I saw Homer's double take, then his quick look-at where my shoulder ended, and I was ashamed. I did not need my

DEATH BY ECSTASY

crewmates to hold my hand, and in this state I'd only slow them down.

Before I could open my mouth to protest, Owen went on. "Think it through. We've got a draw here that we'd be idiot to throw away. Gil, pick up a cigarette. No, not with your left hand."

I was drunk, gloriously drunk, and feeling immortal. The attenuated Martians seemed to move in the walls, the walls that seemed to be picture windows on a Mars that never was. For the first time that night, I raised my glass in toast.

"To Owen, from Gil the Arm. Thanks."

I transferred the cigarette to my imaginary hand.

By now you've got the idea I was holding it in my imaginary fingers. Most people have the same impression, but it isn't so. I held it clutched ignominiously in my fist. The coal couldn't burn me, of course, but it still felt like a lead ingot.

I rested my imaginary elbow on the table, and that seemed to make it easier—which is ridiculous, but it works. Truly, I'd expected my imaginary arm to disappear after I got the transplant. But I'd found I could dissociate from the new arm, to hold small objects in my invisible hand, to feel tactile sensations in my invisible fingertips.

I'd earned the title Gil the Arm that night in Ceres. It had started with a floating cigarette. Owen had been right. Everyone in the place eventually wound up staring at the floating cigarette smoked by the one-armed man. All I had to do was find the prettiest girl in the room with my peripheral vision, then catch her eye.

That night we had been the center of the biggest impromptu party ever thrown in Ceres Base. It wasn't planned that way at all. I'd used the cigarette trick three times, so that each of us would have a date. But the third girl already had an escort, and he was celebrating something; he'd sold some kind of patent to an Earth-based industrial firm. He was throwing money around like confetti. So we let him stay. I did tricks, reaching esper fingers into a closed box to tell what was inside; and by the time I finished, all the tables had been pushed together and I was in the center, with Homer and Owen and three girls. Then we got to singing old songs, and the bartenders joined us, and suddenly everything was on the house.

Eventually about twenty of us wound up in the orbiting mansion of the First Speaker for the Belt Government. The

LARRY NIVEN

goldskin cops had tried to bust us up earlier, and the First Speaker had behaved very rudely indeed, then compensated by inviting them to join us. . . .

And that was why I used TK on so many cigarettes.

Across the width of the Mars Bar, a girl in a peach colored dress sat studying me with her chin on her fist. I got up and went over.

My head felt fine. It was the first thing I checked when I woke up. Apparently I'd remembered to take a hangover pill.

A leg was hooked over my knee. It felt good, though the pressure had put my foot to sleep. Fragrant dark hair spilled beneath my nose. I didn't move. I didn't want her to know I was awake.

It's damned embarrassing when you wake up with a girl and can't remember her name.

Well, let's see. A peach dress hung neatly from a door-knob. . . . I remembered a whole lot of traveling last night. The girl at the Mars Bar. A puppet show. Music of all kinds. I'd talked about Owen, and she'd steered me away from that because it depressed her. Then—

Hah! Taffy. Last name forgotten.

"Morning," I said.

"Morning," she said. "Don't try to move, we're hooked together. . . ." In the sober morning light she was lovely. Long black hair, brown eyes, creamy untanned skin. To be lovely this early was a neat trick, and I told her so, and she smiled.

My lower leg was dead meat until it started to buzz with renewed circulation, and then I made faces until it calmed down. Taffy kept up a running chatter as we dressed. "That third hand is strange. I remember you holding me with two strong arms and stroking the back of my neck with the third. *Very* nice. It reminded me of a Fritz Leiber story."

"*The Wanderer*. The panther girl."

"Mm hmm. How many girls have you caught with that cigarette trick?"

"None as pretty as you."

"And how many girls have you told that to?"

"Can't remember. It always worked before. Maybe this time it's for real."

We exchanged grins. A minute later I caught her frowning thoughtfully at the back of my neck. "Something wrong?"

DEATH BY ECSTASY

"I was just thinking. You really crashed and burned last night. I hope you don't drink that much all the time."

"Why? You worried about me?"

She blushed, then nodded.

"I should have told you. In fact, I think I did, last night. I was on a ceremonial drunk. When a good friend dies it's obligatory to get smashed."

Taffy looked relieved. "I didn't mean to get—"

"Personal? Why not. You've the right. *Anyway*, I like—" I meant *maternal types* but I couldn't say that. "People who worry about me."

Taffy touched her hair with some kind of complex comb. A few strokes snapped her hair instantly into place. Static electricity?

"It was a good drunk," I said. "Owen would have been proud. And that's all the mourning I'll do. One drunk and—" I spread my hands. "Out."

"It's not a bad way to go," Taffy mused reflectively. "Current stimulus, I mean. I mean, if you've got to bow out—"

"Now drop that!" I don't know how I got so angry so fast. Ghoul-thin and grinning in a reading chair, Owen's corpse was suddenly vivid to me. I'd fought that image for too many hours. "Walking off a bridge is enough of a cop-out," I snarled. "Dying for a month while current burns out your brain is nothing less than sickening."

Taffy was hurt and bewildered. "But your friend did it, didn't he? You didn't make him sound like a weakling."

"Nuts," I heard myself say. "He didn't do it. He was—"

Just like that, I was sure. I must have realized it while I was drunk or sleeping. Of *course* he hadn't killed himself. *That* wasn't Owen. And current addiction wasn't Owen either. I made a dive for the phone.

"Good morning, Mr. Hamilton." Detective-Inspector Ordaz looked very fresh and neat this morning. I was suddenly aware that I hadn't shaved. "I see you remembered to take your hangover pills."

"Right. Ordaz, has it occurred to you that Owen might have been murdered?"

"Naturally. But it isn't possible."

"I think it might be. Suppose he—"

"Mr. Hamilton."

"Yah?"

"We have an appointment for lunch. Shall we discuss it then? Meet me at Headquarters at twelve hundred."

LARRY NIVEN

"Okay. One thing you might take care of this morning. See if Owen registered for a nudist's license."

"Do you think he might have?"

"Yah. I'll tell you why at lunch."

"Very well."

"Don't hang up. You said you had found the man who sold Owen his droud-and-plug. What was his name again?"

"Kenneth Graham."

"That's what I thought." I hung up. "Sure," I said to myself. "Somebody killed him. And that means—yah. Yah." I turned around to get my shirt and found myself face to face with Taffy. I'd forgotten about her completely.

She said, "Killed?" as if she'd never heard the word.

"Yah. See, the whole setup depended on his not being able to—"

"No. Wait. I don't really want to know about it."

She really didn't. The very subject of a stranger's death was making her sick to her stomach.

"Okay. Look, I'm a ratfink not to at least offer you breakfast, but I've got to get on this right away. Can I call you a cab?"

When the cab came I dropped a ten-mark coin in the slot and helped her in. I got her address before it took off.

ARM Headquarters hummed with early morning activity. Hellos came my way, and I answered them without stopping to talk. Anything important would filter down to me eventually.

As I passed Julie's cubicle I glanced in. She was hard at work, limply settled in her contour couch, jotting notes with her eyes closed.

Kenneth Graham.

A hookup to the basement computer formed the greater part of my desk. Learning how to use it had taken me several months. I typed an order for coffee and doughnuts, then: INFORMATION RETRIEVAL. KENNETH GRAHAM. LIMITED LICENSE SURGERY. GENERAL LICENSE: DIRECT CURRENT STIMULUS EQUIPMENT SALES. ADDRESS NEAR WEST LOS ANGELES.

Tape chattered out of the slot an instant response, loop after loop of it curling on my desk. I didn't need to read it to know I was right.

New technologies create new customs, new laws, new ethics, new crimes. About half the activity of the United

DEATH BY ECSTASY

Nations Police, the ARM's dealt with control of a crime that hadn't existed a century ago. The crime of organlegging was the result of thousands of years of medical progress, of millions of lives selflessly dedicated to the ideal of healing the sick. Progress had brought these ideals to reality, and, as usual, had created new problems.

1900 A.D. was the year Carl Landsteiner classified human blood into four types, giving patients their first real chance to survive a transfusion. The technology of transplants had grown with the growing of the twentieth century. Whole blood, dry bone, skin, live kidneys, live hearts could all be transferred from one body to another. Donors had saved tens of thousands of lives in that hundred years, by willing their bodies to medicine.

But the number of donors was limited, and not many died in such a way that anything of value could be saved.

The deluge had come something less than a hundred years ago. One healthy donor (but of course there was no such animal) could save a dozen lives. Why, then, should a condemned, ax murderer die to no purpose? First a few states, then most of the nations of the world had passed new laws. Criminals condemned to death must be executed in a hospital, with surgeons to save as much as could be saved for the organ banks.

The world's billions wanted to live, and the organ banks were life itself. A man could live forever as long as the doctors could shove spare parts into him faster than his own parts wore out. But they could do that only as long as the world's organ banks were stocked.

A hundred scattered movements to abolish the death penalty died silent, unpublicized deaths. Everybody gets sick sometime.

And still there were shortages in the organ banks. Still patients died for the lack of parts to save them. The world's legislators had responded to steady pressure from the world's people. Death penalties were established for first, second and third degree murder. For assault with a deadly weapon. Then for a multitude of crimes: rape, fraud, embezzlement, having children without a license, four or more counts of false advertising. For nearly a century the trend had been growing, as the world's voting citizens acted to protect their right to live forever.

Even now there weren't enough transplants. A woman with kidney trouble might wait a year for a transplant: one

LARRY NIVEN

healthy kidney to last the rest of her life. A thirty-five-year-old heart patient must live with a sound but forty-year-old heart. One lung, part of a liver, prosthetics that wore out too fast or weighed too much or did too little . . . there weren't enough criminals. Not surprisingly, the death penalty *was* a deterrent. People stopped committing crimes rather than face the donor room of a hospital.

For instant replacement of your ruined digestive system, for a *young* healthy heart, for a whole liver when you'd ruined yours with alcohol . . . you had to go to an organ-legger.

There are three aspects to the business of organlegging.

One is the business of kidnap-murder. It's risky. You can't fill an organ bank by waiting for volunteers. Executing condemned criminals is a government monopoly. So you go out and *get* your donors: on a crowded city sidewalk, in an air terminal, stranded on a freeway by a car with a busted capacitor . . . anywhere.

The selling end of the business is just as dangerous, because even a desperately sick man sometimes has a conscience. He'll buy his transplant, then go straight to the ARM's, curing his sickness and his conscience by turning in the whole gang. Thus the sales end is somewhat anonymous; but as there are few repeat sales, that hardly matters.

Third is the technical, medical aspect. Probably this is the safest part of the business. Your hospital is big, but you can put it anywhere. You wait for the donors, who arrive still alive; you ship out livers and glands and square feet of live skin, correctly labeled for rejection reactions.

It's not as easy as it sounds. You need doctors. Good ones.

That was where Loren came in. He had a monopoly.

Where did he get them? We were still trying to find out. Somehow, one man had discovered a foolproof way to recruit talented but dishonest doctors practically en masse. Was it really one man? All our sources said it was. And he had half the North American west coast in the palm of his hand.

Loren. No holographs, no fingerprints or retina prints, not even a description. All we had was that one name, and a few possible contacts.

One of these was Kenneth Graham.

The holograph was a good one. Probably it had been posed in a portrait shop. Kenneth Graham had a long Scottish face with a lantern jaw and a small, dour mouth. In the

DEATH BY ECSTASY

holo he was trying to smile and look dignified simultaneously. He only looked uncomfortable. His hair was sandy and close cut. Above his light gray eyes his eyebrows were so light as to be nearly invisible.

My breakfast arrived. I dunked a doughnut and bit it, and found out I was hungrier than I'd thought.

A string of holos had been reproduced on the computer tape. I ran through the others fairly quickly, eating with one hand and flipping the key with the other. Some were fuzzy; they had been taken by spy beams through the windows of Graham's shop. None of the prints were in any way incriminating. Not one showed Graham smiling.

He had been selling electrical joy for twelve years now.

A current addict has an advantage over his supplier. Electricity is cheap. With a drug, your supplier can always raise the price on you; but not with electricity. You see the ecstasy merchant once, when he sells you your operation and your droud, and never again. Nobody gets hooked by accident. There's an honesty to current addiction. The customer always knows just what he's getting into, and what it will do for him—and to him.

Still, you'd need a certain lack of empathy to make a living the way Kenneth Graham did. Else he'd have had to turn away his customers. Nobody becomes a current addict gradually. He decides all at once, and he buys the operation before he has ever tasted its joy.

Each one of Kenneth Graham's customers had reached his shop after deciding to drop out of the human race.

What a stream of the hopeless and the desperate must have passed through Graham's shop! How could they help but haunt his dreams?—And if Kenneth Graham slept well at night, then—

Then, small wonder if he had turned organlegger.

He was in a good position for it. Despair is characteristic of the would-be current addict. The unknown, the unloved, the people nobody knew and nobody needed and nobody missed, these passed in a steady stream through Kenneth Graham's shop.

So a few didn't come out. Who would notice?

I flipped quickly through the tape to find out who was in charge of watching Graham. Jackson Bera. I called down through the desk phone.

"Sure," said Bera, "we've had a spy beam on him about

LARRY NIVEN

three weeks now. It's a waste of good salaried ARM agents. Maybe he is clean. Maybe he's been tipped."

"Then why not stop watching him?"

Bera looked disgusted. "Because we've only been watching for three weeks. How many donors do you think he needs a year? Two. Read the reports. Gross profit on a single donor is over a million UN marks. Graham can afford to be careful who he picks."

"Yah."

"At that, he wasn't careful enough. At least two of his customers disappeared last year. Customers with families. That's what put us on him."

"So you could watch him for the next six months without a guarantee. He could be just waiting for the right guy to walk in."

"Sure. He has to write up a report on every customer. That gives him the right to ask personal questions. If the guy has relatives, Graham lets him walk out. Most people do have relatives, you know. Then again," Bera said disconsolately, "he could be clean. Sometimes a current addict disappears without help."

"How come I didn't see any holos of Graham at home? You can't be watching just his shop."

Jackson Bera scratched his hair. He had hair like black steel wool, worn long like a bushman's mop. "Sure we're watching his place, but we can't get a spy beam in there. It's an inside apartment. No windows. You know anything about spy beams?"

"Not much. I know they've been around a while."

"They're as old as lasers. Oldest trick in the book is to put a mirror in the room you want to bug. Then you run a laser beam through a window, or even through heavy drapes, and bounce it off the mirror. When you pick it up it's been distorted by the vibrations in the glass. That gives you a perfect recording of anything that's been said in that room. But for pictures you need something a little more sophisticated."

"How sophisticated can we get?"

"We can put a spy beam in any room with a window. We can send one through some kinds of wall. Give us an optically flat surface and we can send one around corners."

"But you need an outside wall."

"Yup."

"What's Graham doing now?"

DEATH BY ECSTASY

"Just a sec." Bera disappeared from view. "Someone just came in. Graham's talking to him. Want the picture?"

"Sure. Leave it on. I'll turn it off from here when I'm through with it."

The picture of Bera went dark. A moment later I was looking into a doctor's office. If I'd seen it cold I'd have thought it was run by a podiatrist. There was the comfortable, tilt-back chair with the headrest and the footrest; the cabinet next to it with instruments lying on top, on a clean white cloth; the desk over in one corner. Kenneth Graham was talking to a homely, washed-out-looking girl.

I listened to Graham's would-be-fatherly reassurances and his glowing description of the magic of current addiction. When I couldn't take it any longer, I turned the sound down. The girl took her place in the chair, and Graham placed something over her head.

The girl's homely face turned suddenly beautiful.

Happiness is beautiful, all by itself. A happy person is beautiful, *per se*. Suddenly and totally, the girl was full of joy—and I realized that I hadn't known everything about droud sales. Apparently Graham had an inductor to put the current where he wanted it, without wires. He *could* show a customer what current addiction felt like, without first implanting the wires.

What a powerful argument!

Graham turned off the machine. It was as if he'd turned off the girl. She sat stunned for a moment, then reached frantically for her purse and started scrabbling inside.

I couldn't take any more. I turned it off.

Small wonder if Graham had turned organlegger. He had to be totally without empathy just to sell his merchandise.

Even there, I thought, he'd had a head start.

So he was a little more callous than the rest of the world's billions. But not much. Every voter had a bit of the organlegger in him. In voting the death penalty for so many crimes, the lawmakers had only bent to pressure from the voters. There was a spreading lack of respect for life, the evil side of transplant technology. The good side was no longer life for everyone. One condemned criminal could save a dozen deserving lives. Who could complain about that?

We hadn't thought that way in the Belt. In the Belt survival was a virtue in itself, and life was a precious thing,

LARRY NIVEN

spread so thin among the sterile rocks, hurtling in single units through all that killing emptiness between the worlds.

So I'd had to come to Earth for my transplant.

My request had been accepted two months after I landed. So quickly? Later I'd learned that the banks always have a surplus of certain items. Few people lose their arms these days. I had also learned, a year after the transplant had taken, that I was using an arm from a captured organlegger's storage tank.

That had been a shock. I'd hoped my arm had come from a depraved murderer, someone who'd shot fourteen nurses from a rooftop. Not at all. Some faceless, nameless victim had had the bad luck to encounter a ghoul, and I had benefited thereby.

Did I turn in my new arm in a fit of revulsion? No, surprising to say, I did not. But I had joined the ARM's, once the Amalgamation of Regional Militia, now the United Nations Police. Though I had stolen a dead man's arm, I would hunt the kin of those who had killed him.

The noble urgency of that resolve had been drowned in paperwork these last few years. Perhaps I was becoming callous, like the flatlanders—the *other* flatlanders around me, voting new death penalties year after year. *Income tax evasion. Operating a flying vehicle on manual controls, over a city.*

Was Kenneth Graham so much worse than they?

Sure he was. The bastard had put a wire in Owen Jenkinson's head.

I waited twenty minutes for Julie to come out. I could have sent her a memorandum, but there was plenty of time before noon, and too little time to get anything accomplished, and . . . I wanted to talk to her.

"Hi," she said, taking the coffee. "Thanks. How went the ceremonial drunk? Oh, I see. Mmm. Very good. Almost poetic." Conversation with Julie has a way of taking short-cuts.

Poetic, right. I remembered how inspiration had struck like lightning through a mild high glow. Owen's floating cigarette lure. What better way to honor his memory than to use it to pick up a girl?

"Right," Julie agreed. "But there's something you may have missed. What's Taffy's last name?"

"I can't remember. She wrote it down on—"

"What does she do for a living?"

DEATH BY ECSTASY

"How should I know?"

"What religion is she? Is she a pro or an anti? Where did she grow up?"

"Dammit—"

"Half an hour ago you were very complacently musing on how depersonalized all us flatlanders are except you. What's Taffy, a person or a fold-out?" Julie stood with her hands on her hips looking like a schoolteacher.

How many people is Julie? Some of us have never seen this Guardian aspect. She's frightening, the Guardian. If it ever appeared on a date, the man she was with would be struck impotent forever.

It never does. When a reprimand is deserved, Julie delivers it in broad daylight. This serves to separate her functions, but it doesn't make it easier to take.

No use pretending it wasn't her business, either.

I'd come here to ask for Julie's protection. Let me turn unlovable to Julie, even a little bit unlovable, and as far as Julie was concerned I would have an unreadable mind. How, then, would she know when I was in trouble? How could she send help to rescue me from whatever? My private life *was* her business, her single, vastly important job.

"I *like* Taffy," I protested. "I didn't care who she was when we met. Now I like her, and I think she likes me. What do you want from a first date?"

"You know better. You can remember other dates when two of you talked all night on a couch, just from the joy of learning about each other." She mentioned three names, and I flushed. Julie knows the words that will turn you inside out in an instant. "Taffy is a person, not an episode, not a symbol of anything, not just a pleasant night. What's your judgment of her?"

I thought about it, standing there in the corridor. Funny, I've faced the Guardian Julie on other occasions, and it has never occurred to me to just walk out of the unpleasant situation. Later I think of that. At the time I just stand there, facing the Guardian/Judge/Teacher. I thought about Taffy. . . .

"She's nice," I said. "*Not* depersonalized. Squeamish, even. She wouldn't make a good nurse. She'd want to help too much, and it would tear her apart when she couldn't. I'd say she was one of the vulnerable ones."

"Go on."

"I want to see her again, but I won't dare talk shop with

LARRY NIVEN

her. In fact . . . I'd better not see her till this business of Owen is over. Loren might take an interest in her. Or . . . she might take an interest in me, and I might get hurt . . . have I missed anything?"

"I think so. You owe her a phone call. If you won't be dating her for a few days, call her and tell her so."

"Check." I spun on my heel, spun back. "Finagle's Jest! I almost forgot. The reason I came here—"

"I know, you want a time slot. Suppose I check on you at oh nine forty-five every morning?"

"That's a little early. When I get in deadly danger it's usually at night."

"I'm off at night. Oh nine forty-five is all I've got. I'm sorry, Gil, but it is."

"Sold. Nine forty-five."

"Good. Let me know if you get real proof Owen was murdered. I'll give you two slots. You'll be in a little more concrete danger then."

"Good."

"I love you. Yeep, I'm late." And she dodged back into her office, while I went to call Taffy.

Taffy wasn't home, of course, and I didn't know where she worked, or even what she did. Her phone offered to take a message. I gave my name and said I'd call back.

And then I sat there sweating for five minutes.

It was half an hour to noon. Here I was at my desk phone. I couldn't decently see any way to argue myself out of sending a message to Homer Chandrasekhar.

I didn't want to talk to him, then or ever. He'd chewed me out but good, last time I'd been him. My free arm had cost me my Belter life, and it had cost me Homer's respect. I didn't want to talk to him, even on a one-way message, and I most particularly didn't want to have to tell him Owen was dead.

But someone had to tell him.

And maybe he could find out something.

And I'd put it off nearly a full day.

For five minutes I sweated, and then I called Long Distance and recorded a message and sent it off to Ceres. More accurately, I recorded six messages before I was satisfied. I don't want to talk about it.

I tried Taffy again; she might come home for lunch. Wrong.

I hung up wondering if Julie had been fair. What had

DEATH BY ECSTASY

we bargained for, Taffy and I, beyond a pleasant night? And we'd had that and would have others, with luck.

But Julie would find it hard not to be fair. If she thought Taffy was the vulnerable type, she'd take her information from my own mind.

Mixed feelings. You're a kid, and your mother has just laid down the law. But it *is* a law, something you can count on . . . and she *is* paying attention to you . . . and she *does* care . . . when, for so many of those outside, nobody cares at all.

"Naturally I thought of murder," said Ordaz. "I always consider murder. When my sainted mother passed away after three years of the most tender care by my sister Maria Angela, I actually considered searching for evidence of needle holes about the head."

"Find anything unusual?"

Ordaz's face froze. He put down his beer and started to get up.

"Cool it," I said hurriedly. "No offense intended." He glared a moment, then sat down, half mollified.

We'd picked an outdoor restaurant on the pedestrian level. On the other side of a hedge (a real live hedge, green and growing and everything) the shoppers were carried past in a steady, one-way stream. Beyond them, a slidewalk carried a similar stream in the opposite direction. I had the dizzy feeling that it was we who were moving.

A waiter like a bell-bottomed chess pawn produced steaming dishes of chili from its torso, put them precisely in front of us and slid away on a cushion of air.

"Naturally I considered murder. Believe me, Mr. Hamilton, it does not hold up."

"I think I could make a pretty good case."

"You may try, of course. Better, I will start you on your way. First, we must assume that Kenneth Graham the happiness peddler, did not sell a droud-and-plug to Owen Jennison. Rather, Owen Jennison was forced to undergo the operation. Graham's records, including the written permission to operate, were forged. All this we must assume, is it not so?"

"Right. And before you tell me Graham's escutcheon is unblemished, let me tell you that it isn't."

"Oh?"

"He's connected with an organlegging gang. That's clas-

LARRY NIVEN

sified information. We're watching him, and we don't want him tipped."

"That is news." Ordaz rubbed his jaw. "Organlegging. Well. What would Owen Jennison have to do with organlegging?"

"Owen's a Belter. The Belt's always drastically short of transplant materials."

"Yes, they import quantities of medical supplies from Earth. Not only organs in storage, but also drugs and prosthetics. So?"

"Owen ran a good many cargoes past the goldskins in his day. He got caught a few times, but he's still way ahead of the government. He's on the records as a successful smuggler. If a big organlegger wanted to expand his market, he might very well send a feeler out to a Belter with a successful smuggling record."

"You never mentioned that Mr. Jennison was a smuggler."

"What for? All Belters are smugglers, if they think they can get away with it. To a Belter, smuggling isn't immoral. But an organlegger wouldn't know that. He'd think Owen was already a criminal."

"Do you think your friend—" Ordaz hesitated delicately.

"No, Owen wouldn't turn organlegger. But he might, he just *might* try to turn one in. The rewards for information leading to the capture and conviction of, et cetera, are substantial. If someone contacted Owen, Owen might very well have tried to trace the contact by himself.

"Now, the gang we're after covers half the west coast of this continent. That's big. It's the Loren gang, the one Graham may be working for. Suppose Owen had a chance to meet Loren himself?"

"You think he might take it, do you?"

"I think he did. I think he let his hair grow out so he'd look like an Earthman, to convince Loren he wanted to look inconspicuous. I think he collected as much information as he could, then tried to get out with a whole skin. But he didn't make it.

"Did you find his application for a nudist license?"

"No. I saw your point there," said Ordaz. He leaned back, ignoring the food in front of him. "Mr. Jennison's tan was uniform except for the characteristic darkening of the face. I presume he was a practicing nudist in the Belt."

"Yah. We don't need licenses there. He'd have been one

DEATH BY ECSTASY

here, too, unless he was hiding something. Remember that scar. He never missed a chance to show it off."

"Could he really have thought to pass for a—" Ordaz hesitated. "A flatlander?"

"With that Belter tan? No! He was overdoing it a little with the haircut. Maybe he thought Loren would underestimate him. But he wasn't advertising his presence, or he wouldn't have left his most personal possessions home."

"So he was dealing with organleggers, and they found him out before he could reach you. Yes, Mr. Hamilton, this is well thought out. But it won't work."

"Why not? I'm not trying to prove it's murder. Not yet. I'm just trying to show you that murder is at least as likely as suicide."

"But it's not, Mr. Hamilton."

I looked at the question.

"Consider the details of the hypothetical murder. Owen Jennison is drugged, no doubt, and taken to the office of Kenneth Graham. There, an ecstasy plug is attached. A standard droud is fitted and is then amateurishly altered with soldering tools. Already we see, on the part of the killer, a minute attention to details. We see it again in Kenneth Graham's forged papers of permission to operate. They were impeccable.

"Owen Jennison is then taken back to his apartment. It would be his own, would it not? There would be little point in moving him to another. The cord from his droud is shortened, again in amateurish fashion. Mr. Jennison is tied up—"

"I wondered if you'd see that."

"But why should he not be tied up? He is tied up and allowed to waken. Perhaps the arrangement is explained to him, perhaps not. That would be up to the killer. The killer then plugs Mr. Jennison into a wall. A current trickles through his brain, and Owen Jennison knows pure pleasure for the first time in his life.

"He is left tied up for, let us say, three hours. In the first few minutes he would be a hopeless addict, I think—"

"You must have known more current addicts than I have."

"Even I would not want to be pinned down. Your normal current addict is an addict after a few minutes. But then, your normal current addict asked to be made an addict, knowing what it would do to his life. Current addiction is

LARRY NIVEN

symptomatic of despair. Your friend might have been able to fight free of a few minutes' exposure."

"So they kept him tied up for three hours. Then they cut the ropes." I felt sickened. Ordaz's ugly, ugly picture matched mine in every detail.

"No more than three hours, by our hypothesis. They would not dare stay longer than a few hours. They would cut the ropes and leave Owen Jennison to starve to death. In the space of a month the evidence of his drugging would vanish, as would any abrasions left by ropes, lumps on his head, mercy needle punctures, and the like. A carefully detailed, well thought out plan, don't you agree?"

I told myself that Ordaz was not being ghoulish. He was just doing his job. Still, it was difficult to answer objectively.

"It fits our picture of Loren. He's been very careful with us. He'd love carefully detailed, well thought out plans."

Ordaz leaned forward. "But don't you see? A carefully detailed plan is all wrong. There is a crucial flaw in it. Suppose Mr. Jennison pulls out the droud?"

"Could he do that? Would he?"

"Could he? Certainly. A simple tug of the fingers. The current wouldn't interfere with motor coordination. Would he?" Ordaz pulled meditatively at his beer. "I know a good deal about current addiction, but I don't know what it *feels* like, Mr. Hamilton. Your normal addict pulls his droud out as often as he inserts it, but your friend was getting ten times normal current. He might have pulled the droud out a dozen times and instantly plugged it back each time. Yet Belters are supposed to be strong-willed men, very individualistic. Who knows whether, even after a week of addiction, your friend might not have pulled the droud loose, coiled the cord, slipped it in his pocket, and walked away scot-free?"

"There is an individual risk that someone might walk in on him—an automachinery service man, for instance. Or someone might notice that he had not bought any food in a month. A suicide would take that risk. Suicides routinely leave themselves a chance to change their minds. But a murderer?"

"No. Even if the chance were one in a thousand, the man who created such a detailed plan would never have taken such a chance."

DEATH BY ECSTASY

The sun burned hotly down on our shoulders. Ordaz suddenly remembered his lunch and began to eat.

I watched the world ride by beyond the hedge. Pedestrians stood in little conversational bunches; others peered into shop windows on the pedestrian strip, or glanced over the hedge to watch us eat. There were the few who pushed through the crowd with set expressions, impatient with the ten-mile-per-hour speed of the slidewalk.

"Maybe they *were* watching him. Maybe the room was bugged."

"We searched the room thoroughly," said Ordaz. "If there had been observational equipment, we would have found it."

"It could have been removed."

Ordaz shrugged.

I remembered the spy-eyes in Monica Apartments. Someone would have had to physically enter the room to carry a bug out. He could ruin it with the right signal, maybe, but it would sure leave traces.

And Owen had had an inside room. No spy-eyes.

"There's one thing you've left out," I said presently.

"And what would that be?"

"My name in Owen's wallet, listed as next of kin. He was directing my attention to the thing I was working on. The Loren gang."

"That is possible."

"You can't have it both ways."

Ordaz lowered his fork. "I *can* have it both ways, Mr. Hamilton. But you won't like it."

"I'm sure I won't."

"Let us incorporate your assumption. Mr. Jennison was contacted by an agent of Loren, the organlegger, who intended to sell transplant material to Belters. He accepted. The promise of riches was too much for him.

"A month later, something made him realize what a terrible thing he had done. He decided to die. He went to an ecstasy peddler and he had a wire put in his head. Later, before he plugged in the droud, he made one attempt to atone for his crime. He listed you as his next of kin, so that you might guess why he had died, and perhaps so that you could use that knowledge against Loren."

Ordaz looked at me across the table. "I see that you will never agree. I cannot help that. I can only read the evidence."

"Me too. But I knew Owen. He'd never have worked for

LARRY NIVEN

an organlegger, he'd never have killed himself, and if he had, he'd never have done it that way."

Ordaz didn't answer.

"What about fingerprints?"

"In the apartment? None."

"None but Owen's?"

"Even his were found only on the chair and end tables. I curse the man who invented the cleaning robot. Every smooth surface in that apartment was cleaned exactly forty-four times during Mr. Jennison's tenancy." Ordaz went back to his chili.

"Then try this. Assume for the moment that I'm right. Assume Owen was after Loren, and Loren got him. Owen knew he was doing something dangerous. He wouldn't have wanted me to get onto Loren before he was ready. He wanted the reward for himself. But he might have left me something just in case.

"Something in a locker somewhere, an airport or space-port locker. Evidence. Not under his own name, or mine either, because I'm a known ARM. But—"

"Some name you both know."

"Right. Like Homer Chandrasekhar. Or—we got it. Cubes Forsythe. Owen would have thought that was apt. Cubes is dead."

"We will look. You must understand that it will not prove your case."

"Sure. Anything you find, Owen could have arranged in a fit of conscience. Screw that. Let me know what you get," I said, and stood up and left.

I rode the slidewalk, not caring where it was taking me. It would give me a chance to cool off.

Could Ordaz be right? Could he?

But the more I dug into Owen's death, the worse it made Owen look.

Therefore Ordaz was wrong.

Owen work for an organlegger? He'd rather have been a donor.

Owen getting his kicks from a wall socket? He never even watched tridee!

Owen kill himself? No. If so, not that way.

But even if I could have swallowed all that . . .

Owen Jennison, letting me know he'd worked with organ-leggers? Me, Gil the Arm Hamilton? Let me know *that*!

DEATH BY ECSTASY

The slidewalk rolled along, past restaurants and shopping centers and churches and banks. Ten stories below, the hum of cars and scooters drifted faintly up from the vehicular level. The sky was a narrow, vivid slash of blue between shadows of skyscrapers.

Let me know *that*? Never.

But Ordaz's strangely inconsistent murderer was no better.

I thought of something even Ordaz had missed. Why would Loren dispose of Owen so elaborately? Owen need only disappear into the organ banks, never to bother Loren again.

The shops were thinning out now, and so were the crowds. The slidewalk narrowed, entered a residential area, and not a very good one. I'd let it carry me a long way. I looked around, trying to decide where I was.

And I was four blocks from Graham's place.

My subconscious had done me dirty. I wanted to look at Kenneth Graham, face to face. The temptation to go on was nearly irresistible, but I fought it off and changed direction at the next disc.

A slidewalk intersection is a rotating disc, its rim tangent to four slidewalks and moving with the same speed. From the center you ride up an escalator and over the slidewalks to reach stationary walks along the buildings. I could have caught a cab at the center of the disc, but I still wanted to think, so I just rode halfway around the rim.

I could have walked into Graham's shop and gotten away with it. Maybe. I'd have looked hopeless and bored and hesitant, told Graham I wanted an ecstasy plug, worried loudly about what my wife and friends would say, then changed my mind at the last moment. He'd have let me walk out, knowing I'd be missed. Maybe.

But Loren had to know more about the ARM's than we knew about him. Some time or other, had Graham been shown a holo of yours truly? Let a known ARM walk into his shop, and Graham would panic. It wasn't worth the risk.

Then, dammit, what *could* I do?

Ordaz's inconsistent killer. If we assumed Owen was murdered, we couldn't get away from the assumptions. The case, the nitpicking detail—and then Owen left alone to pull out the plug and walk away, or to be discovered by a persistent salesman or a burglar, or—

No. Ordaz's hypothetical killer, and mine, would have watched Owen like a hawk. For a month.

LARRY NIVEN

That did it. I stepped off at the next disc and got a taxi. The taxi dropped me on the roof of Monica Apartments. I took an elevator to the lobby.

If the manager was surprised to see me, he didn't show it as he gestured me into his office. The office seemed much roomier than the lobby had, possibly because there were things to break the anonymous modern decor: paintings on the wall, a small black-worm-track in the rug that must have been caused by a visitor's cigarette, a holo of Miller and his wife on the wide, nearly empty desk. He waited until I was settled, then leaned forward expectantly.

"I'm here on ARM's business," I said, and passed him my ident.

He passed it back without checking it. "I presume it's the same business," he said.

"Yah. I'm convinced Owen Jennison must have had visitors while he was here."

The manager smiled. "That's ridic—impossible."

"Nope, it's not. Your holo cameras take pictures of visitors, but they don't snap the tenants, do they?"

"Of course not."

"Then Owen could have been visited by any tenant in the building."

The manager looked shocked. "No, certainly not. Really, I don't see why you pursue this, Mr. Hamilton. If Mr. Jennison had been found in such a condition, it would have been reported!"

"I don't think so. Could he have been visited by any tenant in the building?"

"No. No. The cameras would have taken a picture of anyone from another floor."

"How about someone from the same floor?"

Reluctantly the manager bobbed his head. "Ye-es. As far as the holo cameras are concerned, that's possible. But—"

"Then I'd like to ask for pictures of any tenant who lived on the eighteenth floor during the last six weeks. Send them to the ARM's Building, Central LA, Can do?"

"Of course. You'll have them within an hour."

"Good. Now, something else occurred to me. Suppose a man got out on the nineteenth floor and walked down to the eighteenth. He'd be holoed on the nineteenth, but not on the eighteenth, right?"

The manager smiled indulgently. "Mr. Hamilton, there are no stairs in this building."

DEATH BY ECSTASY

"Just the elevators? Isn't that dangerous?"

"Not at all. There is a separate self-contained emergency power source for each of the elevators. It's common practice. After all, who would want to walk up eighty stories if the elevator failed?"

"Okay, fine. One last point. Could someone tamper with the computer? Could someone make it decide not to take a certain picture, for instance?"

"I . . . am not an expert on how to tamper with computers, Mr. Hamilton. Why don't you go straight to the company? Caulfield Brains, Inc."

"Okay. What's your model?"

"Just a moment." He got up and leafed through a drawer in a filing cabinet. "EQ 144."

"Okay."

That was all I could do here, and I knew it . . . and still I didn't have the will to get up. There ought to be *something* . . .

Finally Miller cleared his throat. "Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes," I said. "No. Can I get into 1809?"

"I'll see if we've rented it yet."

"The police are through with it?"

"Certainly." He went back to the filing cabinet. "No. It's still available. I'll take you up. How long will you be?"

"I don't know. No more than half an hour. No need to come up."

"Very well." He handed me the key and waited for me to leave.

The merest flicker of blue light caught my eye as I left the elevator. I would have thought it was my optic nerve, not in the real world, if I hadn't known about the holo cameras. Maybe it was. You don't need laser light to make a holograph, but it does get you clearer pictures.

Owen's room was a box. Everything was retracted. There was nothing but the bare walls. I had never seen anything so desolate, unless it was some asteroidal rock, too poor to mine, too badly placed to be worth a base.

The control panel was just beside the door. I turned on the lights, then touched the master button. Lines appeared, outlined in red and green and blue. A great square on one wall for the bed, most of another wall for the kitchen, various outlines across the floor. Very handy. You would not want a guest to be standing on the table when you expanded it.

I'd come here to get the feel of the place, to encourage a

LARRY NIVEN

hunch, to see if I'd missed anything. Translation: I was playing. Playing, I reached through the control panel to find the circuits. The printed circuitry was too small and too detailed to tell me anything, but I ran imaginary fingertips along a few wires and found that they looped straight to their action points, no detours. No sensors to the outside. You would have to be in the room to know what was expanded, what retracted.

So a supposedly occupied room had had its bed retracted for six weeks. But you'd have to be in the room to know it.

I pushed buttons to expand the kitchen nook and the reading chair. The wall slid out eight feet; the floor humped itself and took form. I sat down in the chair, and the kitchen nook blocked my view of the door.

Nobody could have seen Owen from the hall.

If only someone had noticed that Owen wasn't ordering food. . . . That might have saved him.

I thought of something else, and it made me look around for the air conditioner. There was a grill at floor level. I felt behind it with my imaginary hand. Some of these apartment air-conditioning units go on when the CO² level hits half a percent. This one was geared to temperature and manual control.

With the other kind, our careful killer could have tapped the air conditioner to find out if Owen was still alive and present. As it was, 1809 had behaved like an empty room for six weeks.

I flopped back in the reading chair.

If my hypothetical killer had watched Owen, he'd done it with a bug. Unless he actually lived on this floor for the four or five weeks it took Owen to die, there was no other way.

Okay, think about a bug. Make it small enough and nobody would find it except the cleaning robot, who would send it straight to the incinerator. You'd have to make it big, so the robot would not get it. No worry about Owen finding it! And then, when you knew Owen was dead, you'd use the self-destruct.

But if you burned it to slag, you'd leave a burn hole somewhere. Ordaz would have found it. So. An asbestos pad? You'd want the self-destruct to leave something that the cleaning robot would sweep up.

And if you'll believe that you will believe anything. It was too chancy. *Nobody* knows what a cleaning robot will

DEATH BY ECSTASY

decide is garbage. They're made stupid because it's cheaper. So they're programmed to leave large objects alone.

There had to be someone on this floor, either to watch Owen himself or to pick up the bug that did the watching. I was betting everything I had on a human watcher.

I'd come here mainly to give my intuition a chance. It wasn't working. Owen had spent six weeks in this chair, and for at least the last week he'd been dead. Yet I couldn't feel it with him. It was just a chair with two end tables. He had left nothing in the room, not even a restless ghost.

The call caught me halfway back to Headquarters.

"You were right," Ordaz told me over the wristphone. "We have found a locker at Death Valley Port registered to Cubes Forsythe. I am on my way there now. Will you join me?"

"I'll meet you there."

"Good. I am as eager as you to see what Owen Jennison left us."

I doubted that.

The Port was something more than two hundred and thirty miles away, an hour at taxi speeds. It would be a big fare. I typed out a new address on the destination board, then called in at Headquarters. An ARM agent is fairly free; he doesn't have to justify every little move. There was no question of getting permission to go. At worst they might disallow the fare on my expense account.

"Oh, and there'll be a set of holos coming in from Monica Apartments," I told the man. "Have the computer check them against known organleggers and associates of Loren."

The taxi rose smoothly into the sky and headed east. I watched tridee and drank coffee until I ran out of coins for the dispenser.

If you go between November and May, when the climate is ideal, Death Valley can be a tourist's paradise. There is the Devil's Golf Course, with its fantastic ridges and pinacles of salt; Zabriskie Point and its weird badlands topography; the old borax mining sites and all kinds of strange, rare plants, adapted to the heat and the death-dry climate. Yes, Death Valley has many points of interest, and someday I was going to go see them. So far all I'd seen was the spaceport. But the Port was impressive in its own way.

The landing field used to be part of a sizable inland sea. It is now a sea of salt. Alternating red and blue concentric

LARRY NIVEN

circles mark the field for ships dropping from space, and a century's developments in chemical fission, and fusion reaction motors have left blast pits striped like rainbows by esoteric, often radioactive salts. But mostly the field retains its ancient white glare.

And out across the salt are ships of many sizes and many shapes. Vehicles and machinery dance attendance, and if you're willing to wait, you may see a ship land. It's worth the wait.

The Port building, at the edge of the major salt flat, is a pastel green tower set in a wide patch of fluorescent orange concrete. No ship has ever landed on it—yet. The taxi dropped me at the entrance and moved away to join others of its kind. And I stood inhaling the dry, balmy air.

Four months of the year, Death Valley's climate is ideal. One August the Furnace Creek Ranch recorded 134° F. shade temperature.

A man behind the desk told me that Ordaz had arrived before me. I found him and another officer in a labyrinth of pay lockers, each big enough to hold two or three suitcases. The locker Ordaz had opened held only a lightweight plastic briefcase.

"He may have taken other lockers," he said.

"Probably not. Belters travel light. Have you tried to open it?"

"Not yet. It is a combination lock. I thought perhaps . . ."

"Maybe." I squatted to look at it

Funny. I felt no surprise at all. It was as if I'd known all along that Owen's suitcase would be here. And why not? He was bound to try to protect himself somehow. Through me, because I was already involved in the UN side of organ-legging. By leaving something in a spaceport locker, because Loren couldn't find the right locker or get into it if he did, and because I would naturally connect Owen with spaceports. Under Cubes' name, because I'd be looking for that, and Loren wouldn't.

Hindsight is wonderful.

The lock had five digits. He must have meant me to open it. "Let's see . . ." and I moved the tumblers to 42217. April 22, 2117, the day Cubes died, stapled suddenly to a plastic partition.

The lock clicked open.

Ordaz went instantly for the manila folder. More slowly, I picked up two glass phials. One was tightly sealed against

DEATH BY ECSTASY

Earth's air and half full of an incredibly fine dust. So fine was it that it slid like oil inside the glass. The other phial held a blackened grain of nickel-iron, barely big enough to see.

Other things were in that case but the prize was that folder. The story was in there . . . at least up to a point. Owen must have planned to add to it.

A message had been waiting for him in the Ceres mail dump when he returned from his last trip out. Owen must have laughed over parts of that message. Loren had taken the trouble to assemble a complete dossier of Owen's smuggling activities over the past eight years. Did he think he could ensure Owen's silence by threatening to turn the dossier over to the goldskins?

Maybe the dossier had given Owen the wrong idea. In any case, he'd decided to contact Loren and see what developed. Ordinarily he'd have sent me the entire message and let me try to track it down. I was the expert, after all. But Owen's last trip out had been a disaster.

His fusion drive had blown somewhere beyond Jupiter's orbit. No explanation. The safeties had blown his lifsystem capsule free of the explosion, barely. A rescue ship had returned him to Ceres. The fee had nearly broken him. He needed money. Loren may have known that and counted on it.

The reward for information leading to Loren's capture would have bought him a new ship.

He'd landed at Outback Field, following Loren's instructions. From there, Loren's men had moved him about a good deal: to London, to Bombay, to Amberg, Germany. Owen's personal, written story ended in Amberg. How had he reached California? He had not had a chance to say.

But in between, he had learned a good deal. There were snatches of detail on Loren's organization. There was Loren's full plan for shipping illicit transplant materials to the Belt, and for finding and contacting customers. Owen had made suggestions there. Most of them sounded reasonable and would be workable in practice. Typically Owen. I could find no sign that he'd overplayed his hand.

But of course he hadn't known it when he did.

And there were holos, twenty-three of them, each a member of Loren's gang. Some of the pictures had markings on the back; others were blank. Owen had been unable to find out where each of them stood in the organization.

LARRY NIVEN

I leafed through them twice, wondering if one of them could be Loren himself. Owen had never known.

"It would seem you were right," said Ordaz. "He could not have collected such detail by accident. He must have planned from the beginning to betray the Loren gang."

"Just as I told you. And he was murdered for it."

"It seems he must have been. What motive could he have had for suicide?" Ordaz's round, calm face was doing its best to show anger. "I find I cannot believe in our inconsistent murderer either. You have ruined my digestion, Mr. Hamilton."

I told him my idea about other tenants on Owen's floor. He smiled and nodded. "Possibly, possibly. This is your department now. Organlegging is the business of the ARM's."

"Right." I closed the briefcase and hefted it. "Let's see what the computer can do with these. I'll send you photocopies of everything in here."

"You'll let me know about the other tenants?"

"Of course."

I walked into ARM Headquarters swinging that precious briefcase, feeling on top of the world. Owen had been murdered. He had died with honor, if not—oh, definitely not—with dignity. Even Ordaz knew it now.

Then Jackson Bera, snarling and panting, went by at a dead run.

"What's up?" I called after him. Maybe I wanted a chance to brag. I had twenty-three faces, twenty-three organleggers, in my briefcase.

Bera slid to a stop beside me. "Where in hell *have* you been?"

"Working. Honest. What's the hurry?"

"Remember that pleasure peddler we were watching?"

"Graham? Kenneth Graham?"

"That's the one. He's dead. We blew it." And Bera took off.

He'd reached the lab by the time I caught up with him. Kenneth Graham's corpse was faceup on the operating table. His long, lantern-jawed face was pale and slack, without expression, empty. Machinery was in place above and below his head.

"How you doing?" Bera demanded.

"Not good," the doctor answered. "Not your fault. You got him into the deepfreeze fast enough. It's just that the current—" He shrugged.

DEATH BY ECSTASY

I shook Bera's shoulder. "What happened?"

Bera was panting a little from his run. "Something must have leaked. Graham tried to make a run for it. We got him at the airport."

"You could have waited. Put someone on the plane with him. Flooded the plane with TY-4."

"Remember the stink the last time we used TY-4 on civilians? Damn newscasters." Bera was shivering. I don't blame him.

ARM's and organleggers play a funny kind of game. The organleggers have to turn their donors in alive, so they're always armed with hypo guns, firing slivers of crystalline anesthetic that melt instantly in the blood. We use the same weapon, for somewhat the same reason; a criminal has to be saved for trial, and then for the government hospitals. So no ARM ever expects to kill a man.

There was a day I learned the truth. A small-time organlegger named Raphael Haine was trying to reach a call button in his own home. If he'd reached it all kinds of hell would have broken loose, Haine's men would have hypoed me, and I would have regained consciousness a piece at a time, in Haine's organ storage tanks. So I strangled him.

The report was in the computer, but only three human beings knew about it. One was my immediate superior, Lucas Garner. The other was Julie. So far, he was the only man I'd ever killed.

And Graham was Bera's first killing.

"We got him at the airport," said Bera. "He was wearing a hat. I wish I'd noticed that, we might have moved faster. We started to close in on him with hypo guns. He turned and saw us. He reached under his hat, and then he fell."

"Killed himself?"

"Uh huh."

"How?"

"Just look at his head."

I edged closer to the table, trying to stay out of the doctor's way. The doctor was going through the routine of trying to pull information from a dead brain by induction. It wasn't going well.

There was a flat oblong box on top of Graham's head. Black plastic, about half the size of a pack of cards. I touched it and knew at once that it was attached to Graham's skull.

"A droud. Not a standard type. Too big."

LARRY NIVEN

"Uh huh."

Liquid helium ran up my nerves. "There's a battery in it."

"Right."

"Right."

"I often wonder what the vintners buy, et cetera. A cordless droud. Man, that what I want for Christmas."

Bera twitched all over. "Don't say that."

"Did you know he was a current addict?"

"No. We were afraid to bug his home. He might have found it and be tipped. Take another look at that thing."

The shape was wrong, I thought. The black plastic case had been half melted.

"Heat," I mused. "Oh!"

"Uh huh. He blew the whole battery at once. Sent the whole killing charge right through his brain, right through the pleasure center of his brain. And Jesus, Gil, the thing I keep wondering is, what did it feel like? Gil, what could it possible have *felt* like?"

I thumped him across the shoulders in lieu of giving him an intelligent answer. He'd be a long time wondering. And so would I.

Here was the man who had put the wire in Owen's head. Had his death been momentary hell, or all the delights of paradise in one singing jolt? Hell, I hoped, but I didn't believe it.

At least Kenneth Graham wasn't somewhere else in the world, getting a new face and new retinae and new fingertips from Loren's illicit organ banks.

"Nothing," said the doctor. "His brain's too badly burned. There's just nothing there that isn't too scrambled to make sense."

"Keep trying," said Bera.

I left quietly. Maybe later I'd buy Bera a drink. He seemed to need it. Bera was one of those with empathy. I knew that he could almost feel that awful surge of ecstasy and defeat as Kenneth Graham left the world behind.

The holos from Monica Apartments had arrived hours ago. Miller had picked not only the tenants who had occupied the eighteenth floor during the past six weeks, but tenants from the nineteenth and seventeenth floors too.

It seemed an embarrassment of riches. I toyed with the idea of someone from the nineteenth floor dropping over his balcony to the eighteenth, every day for five weeks.

DEATH BY ECSTASY

But 1809 hadn't had an outside wall, let alone a window, not to mention anything resembling a balcony.

Had Miller played with the same idea? Nonsense. He didn't even know the problem. He'd just overkilled with the holos to show how cooperative he was.

None of the tenants during the period in question matched known or suspected Loren men.

I said a few appropriate words and went for coffee. Then I remembered the twenty-three possible Loren men in Owen's briefcase.

I'd left them with a programmer, since I wasn't quite sure how to get them into the computer myself. He ought to be finished by now.

I called down. He was.

I persuaded the computer to compare them with the holos of the tenants from Monica Apartments.

Nothing. Nobody matched anybody.

I spent the next two hours writing up the Owen Jennison case. A programmer would have to translate it for the machine. I wasn't that good yet.

We were back with Ordaz's inconsistent killer.

That, and a tangle of dead ends. Owen's death had bought us a handful of new pictures, pictures which might even be obsolete by now. Organleggers changed their faces at the drop of a hat. I finished the case outline, sent it down to a programmer, and called Julie. I wouldn't need her protection now.

Julie had left for home.

I started to call Taffy, stopped with her number half dialed. There are times not to make a phone call. I needed to sulk; I needed a cave to be alone in. My expression would probably have broken a phone screen. Why inflict it on an innocent girl?

I left for home.

It was dark when I reached the street. I rode the pedestrian bridge across the slidewalks, waited for a taxi at the intersection disc. Presently one dropped, the white FREE sign blinking on its belly. I stepped in and deposited my credit card.

Owen had collected his holos from all over the Eurasian continent. Most of them, if not all, had been Loren's foreign agents. Why had I expected to find them in Los Angeles?

The taxi rose into the white night sky. City lights turned

LARRY NIVEN

the cloud cover into a flat white dome. We penetrated the clouds, and stayed there. The taxi autopilot didn't care if I had a view or not.

. . . So what did I have now? Someone among dozens of tenants was a Loren man. That, or Ordaz's inconsistent killer, the careful one, had left Owen to die for five weeks, alone and unsupervised.

. . . Was the inconsistent killer so unbelievable?

He was, after all, my own hypothetical Loren. And Loren had committed murder, the ultimate crime. He'd murdered routinely, over and over, with fabulous profits. The ARM's hadn't been able to touch him. Wasn't it about time he started getting careless?

Like Graham. How long had Graham been selecting donors among his customers, choosing a few nonentities a year? And then, twice within a few months, he took clients who were missed. Careless.

Most criminals are not too bright. Loren had brains enough; but the men on his payroll would be about average. Loren would deal with the stupid ones, the ones who turned to crime because they didn't have enough sense to make it in real life.

If a man like Loren got careless, this is how it would happen. Unconsciously he would judge ARM intelligence by his own men. Seduced by an ingenious plan for murder, he might ignore the single loophole and go through with it. With Graham to advise him, he knew more about current addiction than we did; perhaps enough to trust the effects of current addiction on Owen.

Then Owen's killers had delivered him to his apartment and never seen him again. It was a small gamble Loren had taken, and it had paid off, this time.

Next time he'd grow more careless. One day we'd get him.

But not today.

The taxi settled out of the traffic pattern, touched down on the roof of my apartment building in Hollywood Hills. I got out and moved toward the elevators.

An elevator opened. Someone stepped out.

Something warned me. Something about the way he moved. I turned, quick-drawing from the shoulder. The taxi might have made good cover—if it hadn't been already rising. Other figures had stepped from the shadows.

I think I got a couple before something stung my cheek.

DEATH BY ECSTASY

Mercy-bullets, slivers of crystalline anesthetic melting in my bloodstream. My head spun, and the roof spun, and the centrifugal force dropped me limply to the room. Shadows loomed above me, then receded to infinity.

Fingers on my scalp shocked me awake.

I woke standing upright, bound like a mummy in soft, swaddling bandages. I couldn't so much as twitch a muscle below my neck. By the time I knew that much it was too late. The man behind me had finished removing the electrodes from my head and stepped into view, out of reach of my imaginary arm.

There was something of the bird about him. He was tall and slender, small-boned, and his triangular face reached a point at the chin. His wild, silken blond hair had withdrawn from his temples, leaving a sharp widow's peak. He wore impeccably tailored wool street shorts in orange and brown stripes. Smiling brightly, with his arms folded and his head cocked to one side, he stood waiting for me to speak.

And I recognized him. Owen had taken a holo of him.

"Where am I?" I groaned, trying to sound groggy. "What time is it?"

"Time? It's already morning," said my captor. "As for where you are, I'll let you wonder."

Something about his manner . . . I took a guess and said, "Loren?"

Loren bowed, not overdoing it. "And you are Gilbert Hamilton of the United Nations Police. Gil the Arm."

Had he said Arm or ARM? I let it pass. "I seem to have slipped."

"You underestimated the reach of my own arm. You also underestimated my interest."

I had. It isn't much harder to capture an ARM than any other citizen, if you catch him off guard, and if you're willing to risk the men. In this case his risk had cost him nothing. Cops use hypo guns for the same reason organleggers do. The men I'd shot, if I'd hit anyone in those few seconds of battle, would have come around long ago. Loren must have set me up in these bandages, then left me under "Russian sleep" until he was ready to talk to me.

The electrodes were the "Russian sleep." One goes on each eyelid, one on the nape of the neck. A small current goes through the brain, putting you right to sleep. You get a full

LARRY NIVEN

night's sleep in an hour. If it's not turned off you can sleep forever.

So this was Loren. At long last. He stood watching me with his head cocked to one side, birdlike, with his arms folded. One hand held a hypo gun, rather negligently, I thought.

What time was it? I didn't dare ask again, because Loren might guess something. But if I could stall him until 0945, Julie could send help. . . .

She could send help where?

Finagle in hysterics! Where was I? If I didn't know that, Julie wouldn't know either!

And Loren intended me for the organ banks. One crystal-line sliver would knock me out without harming any of the delicate, infinitely various parts that made me Gil Hamilton. That Loren's doctors would take me apart.

In government operating rooms they flash-burn the criminal's brain for later urn burial. God knows what Loren would do with my own brain. But the rest of me was young and healthy. Even considering Loren's overhead, I was worth more than a million UN marks on the hoof.

"Why me?" I asked. "It was me you wanted, not just any ARM. Why the interest in me?"

"It was you who were investigating the case of Owen Jennison. *Much* too thoroughly."

"Not thoroughly enough, dammit!"

Loren looked puzzled. "You really don't understand?"

"I really don't."

"I find that highly interesting," Loren mused. "Highly."

"All right, why am I still alive?"

"I was curious, Mr. Hamilton. I hoped you'd tell me about your imaginary arm."

So he'd said Arm, not ARM. I bluffed anyway. "My *what*?"

"No need for games, Mr. Hamilton. If I think I'm losing. I'll use this." He wiggled the hypo gun. "You'll never wake up."

Damn! He knew. The only things I could move were my ears and my imaginary arm, and Loren knew all about it! I'd never be able to lure him into reach.

Provided he knew *all* about it.

I had to draw him out.

"Okay," I said, "but I'd like to know how you found out about it. A plant in the ARM's?"

DEATH BY ECSTASY

Loren chuckled. "I wish it were so. No. We captured one of your men some months ago, quite by accident. When I realized what he was, I induced him to talk shop with me. He was able to tell me something about your remarkable arm. I hope you'll tell me more."

"Who was it?"

"Really, Mr. Hamil—"

"*Who was it?*"

"Do you really expect me to remember the name of every donor?"

Who had gone into Loren's organ banks? Stranger, acquaintance, friend? Does the manager of a slaughterhouse remember every slaughtered steer?

"So-called psychic powers interest me," said Loren. "I remembered you. And then, when I was on the verge of concluding an agreement with your Belter friend Jennison, I remembered something unusual about a crewman he had shipped with. They called you Gil the Arm, didn't they? Prophetic. In port your drinks came free if you could use your imaginary arm to drink them."

"Then damn you. You thought Owen was a plant, did you? Because of me! Mel!"

"Breast beating will earn you nothing, Mr. Hamilton." Loren put steel in his voice. "Entertain me, Mr. Hamilton."

I'd been feeling around for anything that might release me from my upright prison. No such luck. I was wrapped like a mummy in bandages too strong to break. All I could feel with my imaginary hand were cloth bandages up to my neck, and a bracing rod along my back to hold me upright. Beneath the swathing I was naked.

"I'll show you my eldritch powers," I told Loren, "if you'll loan me a cigarette." Maybe that would draw him close enough. . . .

He knew something about my arm. He knew its reach. He put one single cigarette on the edge of a small table-on-wheels and slid it up to me. I picked it up and stuck it in my mouth and waited hopefully for him to come light it. "My mistake," he murmured; and he pulled the table back and repeated the whole thing with a lighted cigarette.

No luck. At least I'd gotten my smoke. I pitched the dead one as far as it would go: about two feet. I had to move slowly with my imaginary hand. Otherwise what I'm holding simply slips through my fingers.

Loren watched in fascination. A floating, disembodied

LARRY NIVEN

cigarette, obeying my will! His eyes held traces of awe and horror. That was bad. Maybe the cigarette had been a mistake.

Some people see psi powers as akin to witchcraft, and psychic people as servants of Satan. If Loren feared me, then I was dead.

"Interesting," said Loren. "How far will it reach?"

He knew that. "As far as my real arm, of course."

"But why? Others can reach much further. Why not you?"

He was clear across the room, a good ten yards away, sprawled in an armchair. One hand held a drink, the other held the hypo gun. He was superbly relaxed. I wondered if I'd ever see him move from that comfortable chair, much less come within reach.

The room was small and bare, with the look of a basement. Loren's chair and a small portable bar were the only furnishings, unless there were others behind me.

A basement could be anywhere. Anywhere in Los Angeles, or out of it. If it was really morning, I could be anywhere on Earth by now.

"Sure," I said, "others can reach farther than me. But they don't have my strength. It's an imaginary arm, sure enough, and my imagination won't make it ten feet long. Maybe someone could convince me it was, if he tried hard enough. But maybe he'd ruin what belief I have. Then I'd have two arms, just like everyone else. I'm better off . . ." I let it trail away because Loren was going to take all my damn arms anyway.

My cigarette was finished. I pitched it away.

"Want a drink?"

"Sure, if you've got a jigger glass. Otherwise I can't lift it."

He found me a shot glass and sent it to me on the edge of the rolling table. I was barely strong enough to pick it up. Loren's eyes never left me as I sipped and put it down.

The old cigarette lure. Last night I'd used it to pick up a girl. Now it was keeping me alive.

Did I really want to leave the world with something gripped tightly in my imaginary fist? Entertaining Loren. Holding his interest until—

Where was I? Where?

And suddenly I knew. "We are at Monica Apartments," I said. "Nowhere else."

DEATH BY ECSTASY

"I knew you'd guess that eventually." Loren smiled. "But it's too late. I got to you in time."

"Don't be so damn complacent. It was stupidity, not your luck. I should have *smelled* it. Owen would never have come here of his own choice. You ordered him here."

"And so I did. By then I already knew he was a traitor."

"So you sent him here to die. Who was it that checked on him every day to see he'd stay put? Was it Miller, the manager? He has been working for you. He's the one who took the holographs of you and your men out of the computer."

"He was the one," said Loren. "But it wasn't every day. I had a man watching Jennison every second, through a portable camera. We took it out after he was dead."

"And then waited a week. Nice touch." The wonder was that it had taken me so long. The atmosphere of the places . . . what kind of people would live in Monica Apartments? The faceless ones, the ones with no identity, the ones who would surely be missed by nobody. They would stay put in their apartments while Loren checked on them, to see that they really did have nobody to miss them. Those who qualified would disappear, and their papers and possessions with them, and their holo would vanish from the computer.

Loren said, "I tried to sell organs to the Belters, through your friend Jennison. I know he betrayed me, Hamilton. I want to know how badly."

"Badly enough." He'd guess that. "We've got detailed plans for getting up an organ bank dispensary in the Belt. It would not have worked anyway, Loren. Belters don't think that way."

"No pictures."

"No." I didn't want him changing his face.

"I was sure he'd left something," said Loren. "Otherwise we would have made him a donor. Much simpler. More profitable, too. I needed the money, Hamilton. Do you know what it costs the organization to let a donor go?"

"A million or so. Why'd you do it?"

"He'd left something. There was no way to get at it. All we could do was try to keep the ARM's from looking for it."

"Ah." I had it then. "When anyone disappears without a trace, the first thing an idiot thinks of is organleggers."

"Naturally. So he couldn't just disappear, could he? The police would go to the ARM's, the file would go to you, and you'd start looking."

LARRY NIVEN

"For a spaceport locker."

"Oh?"

"Under the name of Cubes Forsythe."

"I knew that name," Loren said between teeth. "I should have tried that. You know, after we had him hooked on current, we tried pulling the plug on him to get him to talk. It didn't work. He couldn't concentrate on anything but getting the droud back in his head. We looked high and low—"

"I'm going to kill you," I said, and meant every word.

Loren cocked his head, frowning. "On the contrary, Mr. Hamilton. Another cigarette?"

"Yah."

He sent it to me, lighted, on the rolling table. I picked it up, holding it a trifle ostentatiously. Maybe I could focus his attention on it—on his only way to find my imaginary hand.

Because if he kept his eyes on the cigarette, and I put it in my mouth at a crucial moment—I'd leave my hand free without his noticing.

What crucial moment? He was still in the armchair. I had to fight the urge to coax him closer. Any move in that direction would make him suspicious.

What time was it? And what was Julie doing? I thought of a night two weeks past. Remembered dinner on the balcony of the highest restaurant in Los Angeles, just a fraction less than a mile up. A carpet of neon that spread below us to touch the horizon in all directions. Maybe she'd pick it up. . . .

She'd be checking on me at 0945.

"You must have made a remarkable spaceman," said Loren. "Think of being the only man in the solar system who can adjust a hull antenna without leaving the cabin."

"Antennas take a little more muscle than I've got." So he knew I could reach through things. If he'd seen that far—"I should have stayed," I told Loren. "I wish I were on a mining ship, right this minute. All I wanted at the time was two good arms."

"Pity. Now you have three. Did it occur to you that using psi powers against men was a form of cheating?"

"What?"

"Remember Raphael Haine?" Loren's voice had become uneven. He was angry, and holding it down with difficulty.

"Sure. Small-time organlegger in Australia."

"Raphael Haine was a friend of mine. I know he had you tied up at one point. Tell me, Mr. Hamilton: if your imag-

DEATH BY ECSTASY

inary hand is as weak as you say, how did you untie the ropes?"

"I didn't. I couldn't have. Haine used handcuffs. I picked his pocket for the key . . . with my imaginary hand, of course."

"You used psi powers against him. You had no right!"

Magic. Anyone who's not psychic himself feels the same way, just a little. A touch of dread, a touch of envy. Loren thought he could handle ARM's; he'd killed at least one of us. But to send warlocks against him was grossly unfair.

That was why he'd let me wake up. Loren wanted to gloat. How many men have captured a warlock?

"Don't be an idiot," I said. "I didn't volunteer to play your silly game, or Haine's either. *My* rules make you a wholesale murderer."

Loren got to his feet (what time was it?), and I suddenly realized my time was up. He was in a white rage. His silky blond hair seemed to stand on end.

I looked into the tiny needle hole in the hypo gun. There was nothing I could do. The reach of my TK was the reach of my fingers. I felt all the things I would never feel: the quart of Trastine in my blood to keep the water from freezing in my cells, the cold bath of half-frozen alcohol, the scalpels and the tiny, accurate surgical lasers. Most of all, the scalpels.

And my knowledge would die when they threw away my brain. I knew what Loren looked like. I knew about Monica Apartments and who knew how many others of the same kind? I knew where to go to find all the loveliness in Death Valley, and someday I was going to go. What time was it? What time?

Loren had raised the hypo gun and was sighting down the stiff length of his arm. Obviously he thought he was at target practice. "It really is a pity," he said, and there was only the slightest tremor in his voice. "You should have stayed a spaceman."

What was he waiting for? "I can't cringe unless you loosen these bandages," I snapped, and I jabbed what was left of my cigarette at him for emphasis. It jerked out of my grip, and I reached and caught it—

And stuck it in my left eye.

At another time I'd have examined the idea a little more closely. But I'd still have done it. Loren already thought of me as his property. As live skin and healthy kidneys and

LARRY NIVEN

lengths of artery, as parts in Loren's organ banks, I was property worth a million UN marks. And I was destroying my eye! Organleggers are always hurting for eyes; anyone who wears glasses could use a new pair, and the organleggers themselves are constantly wanting to change retina prints.

What I hadn't anticipated was the pain. I'd read somewhere that there are no sensory nerves in the eyeball. Then it was my lids that hurt. Terribly!

But I only had to hold on.

Loren swore and came for me at a dead run. He knew how terribly weak my imaginary arm was. What could I do with it? He didn't know; he'd never known, though it stared him in the face. He ran at me and slapped at the cigarette, a full swing that half knocked my head off my neck and sent the now dead butt ricocheting off a wall. Panting, snarling, speechless with rage, he stood—within reach.

My eye closed like a small tormented fist.

I reached past Loren's gun, through his chest wall, and found his heart. And squeezed.

His eyes became very round, his mouth gaped wide, his larynx bobbed convulsively. There was time to fire the gun. Instead he clawed at his chest with a half-paralyzed arm. Twice he raked his fingernails across his chest, gaping upward for air that would not come. He thought he was having a heart attack. Then his rolling eyes found my face.

My face. I was a one-eyed carnivore, snarling with the will to murder. I would have his life if I had to tear the heart out of his chest! How could he help but know?

He knew!

He fired at the floor and fell.

I was sweating and shaking with reaction and disgust. The scars! He was all scars; I'd felt them going in. His heart was a transplant. And the rest of him—he'd looked about thirty from a distance, but this close it was impossible to tell. Parts were younger, parts older. How much of Loren was Loren? What parts had he taken from others? And none of the parts quite matched.

He must have been chronically ill, I thought. And the Board wouldn't give him the transplants he needed. And one day he'd seen the answers to all his problems. . . .

Loren wasn't moving. He wasn't breathing. I remembered the way his heart had jumped and wriggled in my imaginary hand, and then suddenly given up.

DEATH BY ECSTASY

He was lying on his left arm, hiding his watch. I was all alone in an empty room, and I still did not know what time it was.

I never found out. It was hours before Miller finally dared to interrupt his boss. He stuck his round, blank face around the doorjamb, saw Loren sprawled at my feet, and darted back with a squeak. A minute later a hypo gun came around the jamb, followed by a watery blue eye. I felt the sting in my cheek.

"I checked you early," said Julie. She settled herself uncomfortably at the foot of the hospital bed. "Rather, you called me. When I came to work you weren't there, and I wondered why, and *wham*. It was bad, wasn't it?"

"Pretty bad," I said.

"I'd never sensed anyone so scared."

"Well, don't tell anyone about it." I hit the switch to raise the bed to sitting position. "I've got an image to maintain."

My eye and socket around it were bandaged and numb. There was no pain, but the numbness was obtrusive, a reminder of two dead men who had become part of me. One arm, one eye.

If Julie was feeling that with me, then small wonder if she was nervous. She was. She kept shifting and twisting on the bed.

"I kept wondering what time it was. What time was it?"

"About nine ten." Julie shivered. "I thought I'd faint when that—that vague little man pointed his hypo gun around the corner. Oh, don't! Don't, Gil. It's *over*."

That close? Was it *that* close? "Look," I said, "you go back to work. I appreciate the sick call, but this isn't doing either of us any good. If we keep it up we'll both wind up in a state of permanent terror."

She nodded jerkily and got up.

"Thanks for coming. Thanks for saving my life, too."

Julie smiled from the doorway. "Thanks for the orchids."

I hadn't ordered them yet. I flagged down a nurse and got her to tell me that I could leave tonight, after dinner, provided I went straight home to bed. She brought me a phone, and I used it to order the orchids.

Afterward I dropped the bed back and lay there a while. It was nice being alive. I began to remember promises I

LARRY NIVEN

had made, promises I might never have kept. Perhaps it was time to keep a few.

I called down to Surveillance and got Jackson Bera. After letting him drag from me the story of my heroism, I invited him up to the infirmary for a drink. His bottle, but I'd pay. He didn't like that part, but I bullied him into it.

I had dialed half of Taffy's number before, as I had last night, I changed my mind. My wristphone was on the bedside table. No pictures.

"Lo."

"Taffy? This is Gil. Can you get a weekend free?"

"Sure. Starting Friday?"

"Good."

"Come for me at ten. Did you ever find out about your friend?"

"Yah. I was right. Organleggers killed him. It's over now; we got the guy in charge." I didn't mention the eye. By Friday the bandages would be off. "About that weekend. How would you like to see Death Valley?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"I'm kidding, wrong. Listen—"

"But it's hot! It's dry! It's as dead as the Moon! You did say Death Valley, didn't you?"

"It's not hot this month. Listen . . ." And she did listen. She listened long enough to be convinced.

"I've been thinking," she said then. "If we're going to see a lot of each other, we'd better make a—a bargain. No shop talk. All right?"

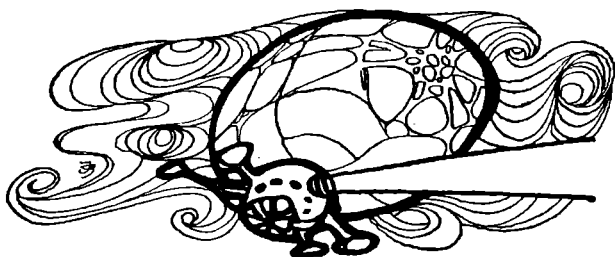
"A good idea."

"The point is, I work in a hospital," said Taffy. "Surgery. To me, organic transplant material is just the tools of my trade, tools to use in healing. It took me a long time to get that way. I don't want to know where the stuff comes from, and I don't want to know anything about organleggers."

"Okay, we've got a covenant. See you at ten hundred Friday."

A doctor, I thought afterward. Well. The weekend was going to be a good one. Surprising people are always the ones most worth knowing.

Bera came in with a pint of J&B. "My treat," he said. "No use arguing, 'cause you can't reach your wallet anyway." And the fight was on.



ONE SUNDAY IN NEPTUNE

ALEXEI PANSHIN

At the 1969 World Science Fiction Convention Alexei Panshin debated with Larry Niven whether science or man is the proper study of science fiction. The story below, rich in both science and humanity, was written before that discussion, but it deals with much the same questions.

BEN WISEMAN and I were the first people to land on Neptune, but he doesn't talk to me anymore. He thinks I betrayed him.

The assignment to Triton Base, an opportunity for me, was for him simply one final deadend. I couldn't yet see the limits of my life, but he could see the limits of his. His life was thin, and he had a hunger for recognition.

He was a man of sudden enthusiasm, haphazardly produced. He knew next to nothing about biology, but having a great deal of time to stare at the green bulk of Neptune in our sky, he had conceived the idea that there was life

ALEXEI PANSHIN

on the planet, and he had become convinced that if he proved it he would have the automatic security of a place in the reference library. His theory was lent a certain force by the fact that we had found life already on our own Moon, on Venus and Mars, on Jupiter, Saturn and Uranus, and even on Ganymede. Not on Mercury—too small, too close, too hot. Not on Pluto—too small, too far, too cold. But the odds seemed good to him, and the list of names he would join short enough to give him the feeling of being distinguished.

"Life is insistent," Ben said. "Life is persistent."

He approached me because he had no one else. He was an extremely difficult man. At the age of thirty-five, he still hadn't discovered the basic principles of social dealing. On first acquaintance he was too close too quickly. Then he took anything less than total reciprocation as betrayal. The more favorable your initial response to him, the greater wound he felt when he was inevitably betrayed. He had no friends, of course.

I betrayed him early in our acquaintance, something I was unaware of until he told me. After that he was always stiff and generally guarded, but since he found me no worse than the general run of humanity, and since the company on Triton numbered only twenty, he used me to talk to. I was willing to talk to him, and in this case I was willing to listen.

Triton, Neptune's major satellite, is a good substantial base. It comes close to being the largest moon in the Solar System, and it is two fingers larger than Mercury. It's the last comfortable footing for men in the Solar System, and the obvious site for a major base.

With Operation Springboard complete and our first starship on its way to a new green and pleasant land, major activity had ceased at Triton Base. We twenty were there to maintain and monitor. Some of us, like me, were there because we were bright young men with futures. Some, like Ben Wiseman, were there because no one else would have them.

But in general life was a bore. Maintenance is a bore. Monitoring is a bore. Even the skies are dull. Neptune is there, big and green. Uranus can be found if you look for it. But the Sun is only a distant candleflame flickering palely in the night and the inner planets are impossible to see. You feel very alone out there.

ONE SUNDAY IN NEPTUNE

I was interested in Ben's suggestion. Mike Marshall, our leader, had dropped the morale problem on me in one of his fits of delegation, and since I was bored myself I was in favor of any project that might give us something to do on Sundays.

I said, "This is a good idea, Ben. There's one problem, though. We don't have the equipment for an assault like that. You know how tight the budget is, too. I could ask Mike."

"Don't ask Mike!"

"Well, I'd have to ask Mike. And he could ask. But I don't think we'd get what we have to have."

"But it's much simpler than that," Ben said. "The Uranus bathyscaphe is still on Titania. It's old, of course, but there is no reason it couldn't be used here. The two planets are practically twins. Opposition is coming up. The bathyscaphe could be brought here for almost nothing. I thought you could requisition it through your department."

That was Ben for you. A very strange man. I think he supposed that I would very quietly requisition the bathyscaphe that had been used to probe the atmosphere-ocean of Uranus, and just not say anything to Mike. Then he and I would slip quietly over to Neptune on our weekends. If he could have obtained and operated the machine by himself, I'm sure he would have preferred that.

"If the equipment is still on Titania, we may be able to get it," I said. "I'll ask Mike when I take up department operations with him tomorrow."

"Don't ask Mike."

"Look, Ben. If you want this at all, it has to go through Mike. There's no other way. You know that."

"No," he said. "Just forget the whole thing. I'm sorry I brought the subject up."

Ben was jealous of his ideas. If they passed through too many hands, they lost their savor for him. This was a good idea, or so it seemed to me, but he would prefer to let it lapse than to have the rest of our little colony involved.

I talked to Mike the next day. Mike was another odd one. At some previous time, he may have had drive, but he no longer cared very deeply. He delegated as much responsibility as he possibly could. He worked erratically. And he greeted my proposal with no great interest.

"Who cares if we find life on Neptune? We already know

ALEXEI PANSHIN

that ammonia-methane worlds can support life, and none of it has been very interesting after the novelty wears off."

"That's true," I said, "but do you suppose I care one way or the other if we find another strange kind of minnow? The important thing is that it would give as many of us as turned out to be interested something constructive to do. It's a project I could enjoy."

"Do you think anybody else would?" Mike asked. "How many first landings have there been? If you count everything, there must have been fifty or sixty. Who remembers them all? Who cares?"

"The point isn't whether anybody else would be interested," I said. "This isn't for outsiders. Mike, this morning I got out of my chair and I found that my rear end had gone to sleep. I want something to do."

It took argument, but Mike finally agreed to find out if the bathyscaphe was available. It turned out to be, and it arrived at Triton Base aboard ship some seven months later. That wasn't so very long. We didn't have anything else to do. We didn't have anywhere else to go.

Ben, of course, was hopping mad, mostly with me. I'd stolen his idea. I'd ruined his idea. I'd betrayed his trust. I'd spoiled things.

"It's the last time I ever tell you anything," he said. As he had said more than once before.

The project turned out to be far more of a success than I had ever anticipated. Our job was to keep contact with the starship, which we did adequately, and to keep a large, empty house in order, which we did inadequately. Not that anybody cared.

After the bathyscaphe arrived, however, schedules started being observed. People cared whether or not they were relieved on time. There was less dust in corners, less dirt on people. Minor illness fell off dramatically. And my rear end stopped going to sleep on me. Even Mike, of all people, became interested.

It was all very much like the boat you built in your basement when you were fourteen. It was what we did in our spare time. It was the Project.

Ben was in and Ben was out. Ben worked sometimes and sometimes he didn't. He didn't feel the venture was quite his anymore, but he couldn't bring himself to stay away. So even he wound up involved.

Everybody else cared a lot. There was work to do. The

ONE SUNDAY IN NEPTUNE

bathyscaphe had to be overhauled completely. That took a lot of spare time. And when we were done, there was every prospect of even more spare time being whiled away in months and months of exploration.

Like all the outer planets except Pluto, which is a misplaced moon, Neptune is a gassy giant. At one time, it was expected to have a layer of ice and a rocky core beneath its atmosphere. In fact, however, it has no solid surface. It's all atmosphere, a murky green sea of hydrogen and helium and methane and ammonia. There are clouds and snowstorms, but no place to put **your feet**. More than anything else, it is like the oceans of **Earth**, and the vehicle we intended to use to explore its **unknown** depths was a fantastic cross between a dirigible and the bathyscaphes of Piccard and his successors. Neptune was no well-tended garden, safe and comfortable, but in fact it was more easily accessible than are Earth's hostile ocean deeps with their incredible pressures.

The planet was only a step away from us on Triton, closer than the Moon is to Earth. It was possible for the bathyscaphe to reach Neptune under its own power, but not for it to return up the gravity well. Consequently we decided to use a mother ship, like a tender for a helmet diver, that would drop the bathyscaphe and then recover it. In a way I was sorry because I found the idea of a hydrogen-filled balloon chugging its way through space amusing.

In time, we were ready to make our first probe. The question then became one of who would be the two of us to go first. It was a painful question. Should it be settled by rank? Should it be settled by amount of work contributed? Should it be settled by lot? As the day of readiness came closer, the issue became more acute. Each method of choice had its champions. By and large we were polite about the subject, but there was one fistfight between Arlo Harlow, who had worked particularly hard, and Sperry Donner, who was second-in-command, which was terminated when both participants discovered they actually had no particular enthusiasm for fistfighting.

Mike finally settled the issue. The first trip would be Ben and me because we were responsible. After that, it would be alphabetically by pairs. He told me later that he had been intending to be strictly alphabetical, but that would have thrown Ben into the last pair, which was one problem,

ALEXEI PANSHIN

and would have made Ben the partner of Roy Wilimczyk, which was another.

"This seemed the best solution," he said. "If anybody can cope with him, it's you."

"Thank you," I said, and he understood that I didn't mean it.

Ben was frankly mellow that week—mellow for Ben. This means that about forty percent of the time he was his obnoxious ingratiating self instead of his normal obnoxious uningratiating self. He even forgave me.

Finally, on a Sunday that was as brisk and bright and sunny as a day ever gets on Triton, four of us set off toward the great green cotton candy boulder that filled a full ten degrees of sky. Ben and I didn't wait to see it grow. Long before the ship was in a parking orbit, Ben and I were in the cabin of the bathyscaphe and the whole was enclosed in a drop capsule.

I was piloting our machine. Ben was to supervise the monitoring equipment that would record our encounters with the planet.

We weren't lowered over the side in the tradition of Earth's oceans. We were popped out like a watermelon seed. We were strapped in and blind. I had my finger on the manual switch and had no need to trigger it. The rockets did what rockets do. The drop capsule peeled away automatically.

Then when our lights came on, we were deep in a green murk. It wasn't of a consistency. There were winds or eddies, call them whichever you choose. Our lights probed ahead. Sometimes we could see for considerable distances—yards. Often we could only see a few feet. We had the additional eyes of radar which looked in circles about us and saw nothing except once what I took to be an ammonia snowstorm and avoided. Other sensors listened to the sound of the planet, took its temperature and pulse. Its temperature was very, very cold. Its pulse was slow and steady.

I feathered my elevators and found that the bathyscaphe worked as I had been assured that it did. The turboprops drove us steadily through the green. I was extremely glad to have my instruments. They told me I was right-side up, a fact I would not otherwise have known. And they kept me connected to our mother ship.

"I hope you are keeping in mind why we are here," Ben said.

ONE SUNDAY IN NEPTUNE

"I am," I said. "However, until we know the planet better, I think one place will be about as likely as the next. I haven't seen any whale herds yet."

"No," said Ben, "but it doesn't mean they're not out there. They may simply be shy. After all, the existence of the Great Sea Serpent wasn't definitely established until the last ten years. I'd settle for something smaller, though."

We had collecting plates out. They might well demonstrate the presence of the same sort of soupy life that was found on Uranus. Ben kept busy with his monitoring. I kept busy with my piloting.

I had helped on this venture because I was bored, thoroughly tired of doing nothing in particular. I had come to Neptune with only the mildest interest in proving Ben's case. Now, however, I began to feel pleased to be where I was. The view, as we drove ourselves through the currents of this gassy sea, was monotonous, monochromatic, but weirdly beautiful. This was another sort of world than any I had been used to. I liked it. It may sound funny, but I respected it for being itself in the same way that you respect a totally ugly girl who has come to terms with herself.

I was pleased that men should be here in this last dark corner of the Solar System, and glad that I was one of the men. There is a place in reference books for this, too, if only in a footnote with the hundreds of other people who have made first contacts.

It was a full five hours before we were back aboard our mother ship. Arlo Harlow helped us out of the bathyscaphe.

"How did it go?" he said.

"We won't know until we check through the data," Ben said. "We didn't see anything identifiable. Not where he drove."

I said, "You'll have to see it for yourself. I don't think I can describe it for you. You'll see. It's a real experience."

Arlo said, "Mike wants to talk to you. He's got news."

Ben and I went forward to talk to Mike back at Triton Base. The satellite was invisible ahead of us—with Neptune full, Triton was necessarily a new moon, and dark.

"Hello, Mike," I said. "Arlo says you have news. Did the starship check in?"

"No," he said. "The news is you. You two are a human interest story. The last planet landing in the Solar System. Hold on. The first fac sheet has already come through. The headline is, 'NEPTUNE REACHED.' It begins, 'In these days of

ALEXEI PANSHIN

groups and organizations and institutions, in these days when man's first ship to the stars casts off with a crew of ten thousand, stories of individual human courage seem a thing of the distant past.' And it ends, 'If men like these bear our colors forward, the race of man shall yet prevail.'"

"I like that," Ben said. "That's very good."

Mike said, "There's also a story that wants to know why money was ever spent on such pointless flamboyance as this landing."

"Tell them in the first place that there wasn't any landing," I said. "We were in Neptune, not on it. Then make the point that the bathyscaphe was left over from the Uranus probe and that we put it in shape ourselves."

"I did that," Mike said. "They got it in the story. The first one. The writer applauds your courage in chancing your life in such a primitive and antiquated exploratory vehicle."

"Oh, hell," I said.

"Listen. They have some questions they want answered. They want to know why you went. Why did you go, Bob?"

"Tell them that it seemed like a good idea at the time," I said.

"I can't give them that."

"We wanted to find out whether there was life on Neptune," Ben said.

"Did you find any?"

"As far as we know, we didn't," I said.

"Then I can't give them that. Try again."

I thought. After a moment, I said, "Tell them that we didn't think it was right for men to go to the stars without having touched all the bases here."

As "touch all the bases," that line has passed into the familiar quotation books.

Ben and I are in the history books, too—in the footnotes along with the hundreds of other people who made first landings. If you count the starships, that list would run into the thousands.

Ben isn't happy buried in the footnotes, and he and I don't speak anymore. He's mad at me. He never discovered life on Neptune, and nobody, it is clear, is ever likely to. On the other hand, I'm the author of one of history's minor taglines. He finds that galling.

It isn't a great distinction to bear, I'll admit, but there have

ONE SUNDAY IN NEPTUNE

been dark nights in my life when I've lain awake and wondered whether or not I would leave any ripples behind me. That line is enough of a ripple to bring me through to morning.



FOR THE SAKE OF GRACE

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

One of the strengths of science fiction is that it can show us other forms of society, different modes of living—we may not prefer those to what we have, but they do give us measuring sticks for our lives. Here is one such story, a well realized depiction of a strange human society.

THE KHADILH BAN-HARIHN frowned at the disk he held in his hand, annoyed and apprehensive. There was always, of course, the chance of malfunction in the com-system. He reached forward and punched the transmit button again with one thumb, and the machine clicked to itself fitfully and delivered another disk in the message tray. He picked it up, looked at it and swore a round assortment of colorful oaths, since no women were present.

There on the left was the matrix-mark that identified his family, the ban-harihn symbol quite clear; no possibility of error there. And from it curled the suitable number of small lines, yellow for the females, green for the males, one for

FOR THE SAKE OF GRACE

each member of his household, all decorously in order. Except for one.

The yellow line that represented at all times the state of being of his wife, the Khadilha Althea, was definitely not as it should have been. It was interrupted at quarter-inch intervals by a small black dot, indicating that all was not well with the Khadilha. And the symbol at the end of the line was not the blue cross that would have classified the difficulty as purely physical; it was the indeterminate red star indicating only that the problem, whatever it was, could be looked upon as serious or about to become serious.

The Khadilh sighed. That could mean anything, from his wife's misuse of their credit cards through a security leak by one of her servants to an unsuitable love affair—although his own knowledge of the Khadilha's chilly nature made him consider the last highly unlikely. The only possible course for him was to ask for an immediate full report.

And just what, he wondered, would he do, if the report were to make it clear that he was needed at home at once? One did not simply pick up one's gear and tootle off home from the outposts of the Federation. It would take him at the very least nine months to arrive in his home city-cluster, even if he were able to command a priority flight with suspended-animation berths and warp facilities. Damn the woman anyway, what could she be up to?

He punched the button for voice transmittal, and the com-system began to hum at him, indicating readiness for dialing. He dialed, carefully selecting the planet code, since his last attempt to contact his home, on his wife's birthday, had resulted in a most embarrassing conversation with a squirmy-tentacled creature that he had gotten out of its (presumed) bed in the middle of its (presumed) sleep. And he'd had to pay in full for the call, too, all intergalactic communication being on a buyer-risk basis.

“ . . . three-three-two-three-two . . . ” he finished, very cautiously, and waited. The tiny screen lit up, and the words **STAND BY** appeared, to be replaced in a few seconds by **SCRIBE (FEMALE) OF THE HOUSEHOLD BAN-HARIHN**, which meant he had at least dialed correctly. The screen cleared and the words were replaced by the face of his household scribe, so distorted by distance as to be only by courtesy a face, but with the ban-harihn matrix-mark superimposed in green and yellow across the screen as security.

He spoke quickly, mindful of the com-rates at this distance.

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

"Scribe ban-harihn, this morning the state-of-being disk indicated some difficulty in the condition of the Khadilha Althea. Please advise if this condition could be described as an emergency."

After the usual brief lag for conversion to symbols, the reply was superimposed over the matrix-mark, and the Khadilh thought as usual that these tiny intergalactic screens became so cluttered before a conversation was terminated that one could hardly make out the messages involved.

The message in this case was "Negative," and the Khadilh smiled; the Scribe was even more mindful than he of the cost of this transmittal.

He pushed the erase button and finished with, "Thank you Scribe ban-harihn. You will then prepare at once a written report, in detail, and forward it to me by the fastest available means. Should the problem intensify to emergency point, I now authorize a com-system transmittal to that effect, to be initiated by any one of my sons. Terminate."

The screen went blank and the Khadilh, just for curiosity, punched one more time the state-of-being control. The machine delivered another disk, and sure enough, there it was again, black dots, red star and all. He threw it into the disposal, shrugged his shoulders helplessly and ordered coffee. There was nothing whatever that he could do until he received the Scribe's report.

However, if it should turn out that he had wasted the cost of an intergalactic transmittal on some petty household dispute, there was going to be hell to pay, he promised himself, and a suitable punishment administered to the Khadilha by the nearest official of the Women's Discipline Unit. There certainly ought to be some way to make the state-of-being codes a bit more detailed so that everything from war to an argument with a servingwoman didn't come across on the same symbol.

The report arrived by Tele-bounce in four days. Very wise choice, he thought approvingly, since the Bounce machinery was totally automatic and impersonal. It was somewhat difficult to read, since the scribe had specified that it was to be delivered to him without transcription other than into verbal symbols, and it was therefore necessary for him to scan a roll of yellow paper with a message eight symbols wide and seemingly miles long. He read only enough to convince him that no problem of discretion could possibly be involved, and then he ran the thing through the transcribe

FOR THE SAKE OF GRACE

slot, receiving a standard letter on white paper in return.

"To the Khadilh ban-harihn" it read, "as requested, the following report from the Scribe of his household:

"Three days ago, as the Khadilh is no doubt aware, the festival of the Spring Rains was celebrated here. The entire household, with the exception of the Khadilh himself, was present at a very large and elaborate procession held to mark the opening of the Alaharibahn-khalida Trance Hours. A suitable spot for watching the procession, entirely in accordance with decorum, had been chosen by the Khadilha Althea, and the women of the household were standing in the second row along the edge of the street set aside for the women.

"There had been a number of dancers, bands, and so on, followed by thirteen of the Poets of this city-cluster. The Poets had almost passed, along with the usual complement of exotic animals and mobile flowers and the like, and no untoward incident of any kind had occurred, when quite suddenly the Khadilh's daughter Jacinth was approached by (pardon my liberty of speech) the Poet Anna-Mary, who is, as the Khadilh knows, a female. The Poet leaned from her mount, indicating with her staff of bells that it was her wish to speak to the Khadilh's daughter, and halting the procession to do so. It was at this point that the incident occurred which has no doubt given rise to the variant marking in the state-of-being disk line for the Khadilha Althea. Quite unaccountably, the Khadilha, rather than sending the child forward to speak with the Poet (as would have been proper), grabbed the child Jacinth by the shoulders, whirling her around and covering her completely with her heavy robes so that she could neither speak nor see.

"The Poet Anna-Mary merely bowed from her horse and signaled for the procession to continue, but she was quite white and obviously offended. The family made a show of participating in the rest of the day's observances, but the Khadilh's sons took the entire household home by mid-afternoon, thereby preventing the Khadilha from participating in the Trance Hours. This was no doubt a wise course.

"What sequel there may have been to this, the Scribe does not know, as no announcement has been made to the household. The Scribe here indicates her respect and subservience to the Khadilh.

"Terminate with thanks."

"Well!" said the Khadilh. He laid the letter down on the

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

top of his desk, thinking hard, rubbing his beard with one hand.

What could reasonably be expected in the way of repercussions from a public insult to an elderly—and touchy—Poet? It was hard to say.

As the only female Poet on the planet, the Poet Anna-Mary was much alone; as her duties were not arduous, she had much time to brood. And though she was a Poet, she remained only a female, with the female's inferior reasoning powers. She was accustomed to reverent homage, to women holding up their children to touch the hem of her robe. She could hardly be expected to react with pleasure to an insult in public, and from a female.

It was at his sons that she would be most likely to strike, through the University, he decided, and he could not chance that. He had worked too hard, and they had worked too hard, to allow a vindictive female, no matter how lofty her status, to destroy what they had built up. He had better go home and leave the orchards to take care of themselves; important as the lush peaches of Earth were to the economy of his home planet, his sons were of even greater importance.

It was not every family that could boast of five sons in the University, all five selected by competitive examination for the Major in Poetry. Sometimes a family might have two sons chosen, but the rest would be refused, as the Khadilh himself had been refused, and would then have to be satisfied with the selection of Law or Medicine or Government or some other of the Majors. He smiled proudly, remembering the respectful glances of his friends when each of his sons in turn had placed high in the examinations and been awarded the Poet Major, his oldest son entering at the Fourth Level. And when the youngest had been chosen, thus releasing the oldest from the customary vow of celibacy—since to impose it would have meant the end of the family line, an impossible situation—the Khadilh had had difficulty in maintaining even a pretense of modesty. The meaning, of course, was that he would have as grandson the direct offspring of a Poet, something that had not happened within his memory or his father's memory. He had been given to understand, in fact, that it had been more than three hundred years since all sons of any one family had entered the Poetry courses. (A family having only one son was prohibited by law from entering him in the Poetry Examinations, they told him.)

FOR THE SAKE OF GRACE

Yes, he must go home, and the hell with the peaches of Earth. Let them rot, if the garden-robots could not manage them.

He went to the com-system and punched through a curt transmittal of his intention, and then set to pulling the necessary strings to obtain a priority flight.

When the Khadilh arrived at his home, his sons were lined up in his study, waiting for him, each in the coarse brown student's tunic that was compulsory, but with the scarlet Poet's stripe around the hem to delight his eyes. He smiled at them, saying, "It is a pleasure to see you once more, my sons; you give rest to my eyes and joy to my heart."

Michael, the oldest, answered in kind.

"It is our pleasure to see you, Father."

"Let us all sit down," said the Khadilh, motioning them to their places about the study table that stood in the center of the room. When they were seated, he struck the table with his knuckles, in the old ritual, three times slowly.

"No doubt you know why I have chosen to abandon my orchards to the attention of the garden-robots and return home so suddenly," he said. "Unfortunately, it has taken me almost ten months to reach you. There was no more rapid way to get home to you, much as I wished for one."

"We understand, Father," said his oldest son.

"Then, Michael," went on Khadilh, "would you please bring me up to date on the developments here since the incident at the procession of the Spring Rains."

His son seemed hesitant to speak, his black brows drawn together over his eyes, and the Khadilh smiled at him encouragingly.

"Come, Michael," he said, "surely it is not courteous to make your father wait in this fashion!"

"You will realize, Father," said the young man slowly, "that it has not been possible to communicate with you since the time of your last transmittal. You will also realize that this matter has not been one about which advice could easily be requested. I have had no choice but to make decisions as best I could."

"I realize that. Of course."

"Very well, then. I hope you will not be angry, Father."

"I shall indeed be angry if I am not told at once exactly

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

what has occurred this past ten months. You make me uneasy, my son."

Michael took a deep breath and nodded. "All right, Father," he said. "I will be brief."

"And quick."

"Yes, Father. I took our household away from the festival as soon as I decently could without creating talk; and when we arrived at home, I sent the Khadilha at once to her quarters, with orders to stay there until you should advise me to the contrary."

"Quite right," said the Khadilh. "Then what?"

"The Khadilha disobeyed me, Father."

"Disobeyed you? In what way?"

"The Khadilha Althea disregarded my orders entirely, and she took our sister into the Small Corridor, and there she allowed her to look into the cell where our aunt is kept, Father."

"My God!" shouted the Khadilh. "And you made no move to stop her?"

"Father," said Michael ban-harihn, "you must realize that no one could have anticipated the actions of the Khadilha Althea. We would certainly have stopped her had we known, but who would have thought that the Khadilha would disobey the order of an adult male? It was assumed that she would go to her quarters and remain there."

"I see."

"I did not contact the Women's Discipline Unit," Michael continued. "I preferred that such an order should come from you, Father. However, orders were given that the Khadilha should be restricted to her quarters, and no one has been allowed to see her except the servingwomen. The wires to her com-system were disconnected, and provision was made for suitable medication to be added to her diet. You will find her very docile, Father."

The Kadhilh was trembling with indignation.

"Discipline will be provided at once, my son," he said. "I apologize for the disgusting behavior of the Khadilha. But please go on—what of my daughter?"

"That is perhaps the most distressing thing of all."

"In what way?"

Michael looked thoroughly miserable.

"Answer me at once," snapped the Khadilh, "and in full."

"Our sister Jacinth," said his second son, Nicolas, "was already twelve years of age at the time of the festival. When

FOR THE SAKE OF GRACE

she returned from the Small Corridor, without notice to any one of us, she announced her intention by letter to the Poet Anna-Mary—her intention to compete in the examinations for the Major of Poetry.”

“And the Poet Anna-Mary—”

“Turned the announcement immediately over to the authorities at the Poetry Unit,” finished Michael. “Certainly she made no attempt to dissuade our sister.”

“She is amply revenged then for the insult of the Khadilha,” said the Khadilh bitterly. “Were there any other acts on the part of the Poet Anna-Mary?”

“None, Father. Our sister has been cloistered by government order since that time, of course, to prevent contamination of the other females.”

“Oh, dear God,” breathed the Khadilh, “how could such a thing have touched my household—for the second time?”

He thought a moment. “When are the examinations, then? I’ve lost all track of time.”

“It has been ten months, Father.”

“In about a month, then?”

“In three weeks.”

“Will they let me see Jacinth?”

“No, Father,” said Michael. “And, Father—”

“Yes, Michael?”

“It is my shame and my sorrow that this should have been the result of your leaving your household in my care.”

The Khadilh reached over and grasped his hand firmly.

“You are very young, my son,” he said, “and you have nothing to be ashamed of. When the females of a household take it upon themselves to upset the natural order of things and to violate the rules of decency, there is very little anyone can do.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“Now,” said the Khadilh, turning to face them all, “I suggest that the next thing to do would be to initiate action by the Women’s Discipline Unit. Do you wish me to have the Khadilha placed on Permanent Medication, my sons?”

He hoped they would not insist upon it, and was pleased to see that they did not.

“Let us wait, Father,” said Michael, “until we know the outcome of the examinations.”

“Surely the outcome is something about which there can be no question!”

“Could we wait, Father, all the same?”

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

It was the youngest of the boys. As was natural, he was still overly squeamish, still a bit tender. The Khadilh would not have had him be otherwise.

"A wise decision," he said. "In that case, once I have bathed and had my dinner, I will send for the Lawyer an-ahda. And you may go, my sons."

The boys filed out, led by the solemn Michael, leaving him with no company but the slow dance of a mobile flower from one of the tropical stars. It whirled gently in the middle of the corner hearth, humming to itself and giving off showers of silver sparks from time to time. He watched it suspiciously for a moment, and then pushed the com-system buttons for his Housekeeper. When the face appeared on the screen he snapped at it.

"Housekeeper, are you familiar with the nature of the mobile plant that someone has put in my study?"

The Housekeeper's voice, frightened, came back at once. "The Khadilh may have the plant removed—should I call the Gardener?"

"All I wanted to know is the sex of the blasted thing," he bellowed at her. "Is it male or female?"

"Male, Khadilh, of the genus—"

He cut off the message while she was still telling him of the plant's pedigree. It was male; therefore it could stay. He would talk to it, while he ate his dinner, about the incredible behavior of his Khadilha.

The Lawyer an-ahda leaned back in the chair provided for him and smiled at his client.

"Yes, ban-harihn," he said amiably, having known the Khadilh since they were young men at the University, "what can I do to help the sun shine more brightly through your window?"

"This is a serious matter," said the Khadilh.

"Ah."

"You heard—never mind being polite and denying it—of my wife's behavior at the procession of the Spring Rains. I see that you did."

"Very impulsive," observed the Lawyer. "Most unwise. Undisciplined."

"Indeed it was. However, worse followed."

"Oh? The Poet Anna-Mary has tried for revenge, then?"

"Not in the sense that you mean, no. But worse has happened, my old friend, far worse."

FOR THE SAKE OF GRACE

"Tell me." The Lawyer leaned forward attentively, listening, and when the Khadilh had finished, he cleared his throat.

"There isn't anything to be done, you know," he said. "You might as well know it at once."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing. The law provides that any woman may challenge and claim her right to compete in the Poetry Examinations, provided she is twelve years of age and a citizen of this planet. If she is not accepted, however, the penalty for having challenged and failed is solitary confinement for life, in the household of her family. And once she has announced to the Faculty by signed communication that she intends to compete, she is cloistered until the day of the examinations, and she may not change her mind. The law is very clear on this point."

"She is very young."

"She is twelve. That is all the law requires."

"It's a cruel law."

"Not at all! Can you imagine, ban-harihn, the chaos that would result if every emotional young female, bored with awaiting marriage in the women's quarters, should decide that she had a vocation and claim her right to challenge? The purpose of the law is to discourage foolish young girls from creating difficulties for their households, and for the state. Can you just imagine, if there were only a token penalty, and chaperons had to be provided by the Faculty, and separate quarters provided, and—"

"Yes, I suppose I see! But why should women be allowed to compete at all? No such idiocy is allowed in the other Professions."

"The law provides that since the Profession of Poetry is a religious office, there must be a channel provided for the rare occasion when the Creator might see fit to call a female to His service."

"What nonsense!"

"There is the Poet Anna-Mary, ban-harihn."

"And how many others?"

"She is the third."

"In nearly nine thousand years! Only three in so many centuries, and yet no exception can be made for one little twelve-year-old girl?"

"I am truly sorry, my friend," said the Lawyer. "You could try a petition to the Council, of course, but I am quite sure—quite sure—that it would be of no use. There is too

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

much public reaction to a female's even attempting the examinations, because it seems blasphemous even to many very broad-minded people. The Council would not dare to make an exception."

"I could make a galactic appeal."

"You could."

"There would be quite a scandal, you know, among the peoples of the galaxy, if they knew of this penalty being enforced on a child."

"My friend, my dear ban-harihn—think of what you are saying. You would create an international incident, an intergalactic international incident, with all that implies, bring down criticism upon our heads, most surely incur an investigation of our religious customs by the intergalactic police, which would in turn call for a protest from our government, which in its turn—"

"You know I would not do it."

"I hope not. It would parallel the Trojan War for folly, my friend—all that for the sake of one female child!"

"We are a barbaric people."

The Lawyer nodded. "After ten thousand years, you know, if barbarism remains it becomes very firmly entrenched."

The Lawyer rose to go, throwing his heavy blue cloak around him. "After all," he said, "it is only one female child."

It was all very well, thought the Khadilh when his friend was gone, all very well to say that. The Lawyer no doubt never had had the opportunity to see the result of a lifetime of solitary confinement in total silence, or he would have been less willing to see a child condemned to such a fate.

The Khadilh's sister had been nearly thirty, and yet unmarried, when she had chosen to compete, and she was forty-six now. It had been an impulse of folly, born of thirty years of boredom, and the Khadilh blamed his parents. Enough dowry should have been provided to make even Grace, ugly as she was, an acceptable bride for someone, somewhere.

The room in the Small Corridor, where she had been confined since her failure, had no window, no com-system, nothing. Her food was passed through a slot in one wall, as were the few books and papers which she was allowed—all these things being very rigidly regulated by the Women's Discipline Unit.

It was the duty of the Khadilha Althea to go each morning to the narrow grate that enclosed a one-way window into

FOR THE SAKE OF GRACE

the cell and to observe the prisoner inside. On the two occasions when that observation had disclosed physical illness, a dart containing an anesthetic had been fired through the food slot, and Grace had been rendered unconscious for the amount of time necessary to let a Doctor enter the cell and attend to her. She had had sixteen years of this, and it was the Khadilha who had had to watch her, through the first years when she alternately lay stuporous for days and then screamed and begged for release for days . . . and now she was quite mad. The Khadilh had observed her on two occasions when his wife had been too ill to go, and he had found it difficult to believe that the creature who crawled on all fours from one end of the room to the other, its matted hair thick with filth in spite of the servomechanisms that hurried from the walls to retrieve all waste and dirt, was his sister. It gibbered and whined and clawed at its flesh—it was hard to believe that it was human. And it had been only sixteen years. Jacinth was twelve!

The Khadilh called his wife's quarters and announced to her servingwomen that they were all to leave her. He went rapidly through the corridors of his house, over the delicate arched bridge that spanned the tea gardens around the women's quarters, and into the rooms where she stayed. He found her sitting in a small chair before her fireplace, watching the mobile plants that danced there to be near the warmth of the fire. As his sons had said, she was quite docile, and in very poor contact with reality.

He took a capsule from the pocket of his tunic and gave it to her to swallow, and when her eyes were clear of the mist of her drugged dreams, he spoke to her.

"You see that I have returned, Althea," he said. "I wish to know why my daughter has brought this ill fortune upon our household."

"It is her own idea," said the Khadilha in a bitter voice. "Since the last of her brothers was chosen, she has been thus determined, saying that it would be a great honor for our house should all of the children of ban-harihn be accepted for the faith."

It was as if a light had been turned on.

"This was not an impulse, then!" exclaimed the Khadilh.

"No. Since she was nine years old she has had this intention."

"But why was I not told? Why was I given no opportunity—" He stopped abruptly, knowing that he was being

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

absurd. No woman would bother her husband with the problems of rearing a female child. But now he began to understand.

"She did not even know," his wife was saying, "that there was a living female Poet, although she had heard from someone that such a possibility existed. It was, she insisted, a matter of knowledge of the heart. When the Poet Anna-Mary singled her out at the procession . . . why, then, she was sure. Then she knew, she said, that she had been chosen."

Of course. That in itself, being marked out for notice before the crowd, would have convinced the child that her selection was ordained by Divine choice. He could see it all now. And the Khadilha had taken the child to see her aunt in her cell in a last desperate attempt to dissuade her.

"The child is strong-willed for a female," he mused, "if the sight of poor Grace did not shake her."

His wife did not answer, and he sat there, almost too tired to move. He was trying to place the child Jacinth in his mind's eye, but it was useless. It had been at least four years since he had seen her, dressed in a brief white shift that all little girls wore: he remembered a slender child, he remembered dark hair—but then all little girls among his people were slender and dark-haired.

"You don't even remember her," said his wife, and he jumped, irritated at her shrewdness.

"You are quite right," he said. "I don't. Is she pretty?"

"She is beautiful. Not that it matters now."

The Khadilh thought for a moment, watching his wife's stoic face, and then, choosing his words with care, he said, "It had been my intention to register a complaint with the Women's Discipline Unit for your behavior, Khadilha Althea."

"I expected you to do so."

"You have had a good deal of experience with the agents of the WDU—the prospect does not upset you?"

"I am indifferent to it."

He believed her. He remembered very well the behavior of his wife at her last impregnation, for it had required four agents from the Unit to subdue her and fasten her to their marriage bed. And yet he knew that many women went willingly, even eagerly, to their appointments with their husbands. It was at times difficult for him to understand why he had not had Althea put on Permanent Medication from the very beginning; certainly, it would not have been dif-

FOR THE SAKE OF GRACE

ficult to secure permission to take a second, more womanly wife. Unfortunately he was softhearted, and she had been the mother of his eldest son, and so he had put up with her, relying upon his concubines for feminine softness and ardor. Certainly Althea had hardened with the years, not softened.

"I have decided," he finished abruptly, "that your behavior is not so scandalous as I had thought. I am not sure that I would not have reacted just as you did under the circumstances, if I had known the girl's plans. I will make no complaint, therefore."

"You are indulgent."

He scanned her face, still lovely for all her years, for signs of impertinence, but there were none, and he went on: "However, you understand that our eldest son must decide for himself if he wishes to forego his own complaint. Your disobedience to him was your first, you know. I have become accustomed to it."

He turned on his heel and left her, amused at his own weakness, but he canceled the Medication order when he went past the entrance to her quarters. She was a woman, she had meant to keep her daughter from becoming what Grace had become; it was not so hard to understand, after all.

The family did not go to the University on the day of the examinations. They waited at home, prepared for the inevitable as well as they could prepare.

Another room, near the room where Grace was kept, had been made ready by the weeping servingwomen, and it stood open now, waiting.

The Khadilh had had his wife released from her quarters for the day, since she would have only the brief moment with her daughter, and thereafter would have only the duty of observing her each morning as she did her sister-in-law. She sat at his feet now in their common room, making no sound, her face bleached white, wondering, he supposed, what she would do now. She had no other daughter; there were no other sisters. She would be alone in the household except for her servingwoman, until such a time as Michael should, perhaps, provide her with a granddaughter. His heart ached for her, alone in a household of men, and five of them, before very long, to be allowed to speak only in the rhymed couplets of the Poets.

"Father?"

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

The Khadilh looked up, surprised. It was his youngest son, the boy James.

"Father," said the boy, "could she pass? I mean, is it possible that she could pass?"

Michael answered for him. "James, she is only twelve, and a female. She has had no education; she can only just barely read. Don't ask foolish questions. Don't you remember the examinations?"

"I remember," said James firmly. "Still, I wondered. There is the poet Anna-Mary."

"The third in who knows how many hundreds of years, James," Michael said. "I shouldn't count on it if I were you."

"But is it possible?" the boy insisted. "Is it possible, Father?"

"I don't think so, son," said the Khadilh gently. "It would be a very curious thing if an untrained twelve-year old female could pass the examinations that I could not pass myself, when I was sixteen, don't you think?"

"And then," said the boy, "she may never see anyone again, so long as she lives, never speak to anyone, never look out a window, never leave that little room?"

"Never."

"That is a cruel law!" said the boy. "Why has it not been changed?"

"My son," said the Khadilh, "it is not something that happens often, and the Council has many, many other things to do. It is an ancient law, and the knowledge that it exists offers to bored young females something exciting to think about. It is intended to frighten them, my son."

"One day, when I have power enough, I shall have it changed."

The Khadilh raised his hand to hush the laughter of the older boys. "Let him alone," he snapped. "He is young, and she is his sister. Let us have a spirit of compassion in this house, if we must have tragedy."

A thought occurred to him, then. "James," he said, "you take a great deal of interest in this matter. Is it possible that you were somehow involved in this idiocy of your sister's?"

At once he knew he had struck a sensitive spot; tears sprang to the boy's eyes and he bit his lip fiercely.

"James—in what way were you involved? What do you know of this affair?"

"You will be angry, my father," said James, "but that is

FOR THE SAKE OF GRACE

not the worst. What is worse is that I will have condemned my sister to—”

“James,” said the Khadilh, “I have no interest in your self-accusations. Explain at once, simply and without dramatics.”

“Well, we used to practice, she and I,” said the boy hastily, his eyes on the floor. “I did not think I would pass, you know. I could see it—all of the others would pass, and I would not, and there I would be, the only one. People would say, there he goes, the only one of the sons of the ban-harihn who could not pass the Poetry exam.”

“And?”

“And so we practiced together, she and I,” he said. “I would set the subject and the form and do the first stanza, and then she would write the reply.”

“When did you do this? Where?”

“In the gardens, Father, ever since she was little. She’s very good at it, she really is, Father.”

“She can rhyme? She knows the forms?”

“Yes, Father! And she *is* good, she has a gift for it—Father, she’s much better than I am. I am ashamed to say that, of a female, but it would be a lie to say anything else.”

The things that went on in one’s household! The Khadilh was amazed and dismayed, and he was annoyed besides. Not that it was unusual for brothers and sisters, while still young, to spend time together, but surely one of the servants, or one of the family, ought to have noticed that the two little ones were playing at Poetry?

“What else goes on in my house beneath the blind eyes and deaf ears of those I entrust with its welfare?” he demanded furiously, and no one hazarded an answer. He made a sound of disgust and went to the window to look out over the gardens that stretched down to the narrow river behind the house. It had begun to rain, a soft green rain not much more than a mist, and the river was blurred velvet through the veil of water. Another time he would have enjoyed the view; indeed, he might well have sent for his pencils and his sketching pad to record its beauty. But this was not a day for pleasure.

Unless, of course, Jacinth did pass.

It was, on the face of it, an absurdity. The examinations for Poetry were far different than those for the other Professions. In the others it was a straightforward matter: one went

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

to the examining room, an examination was distributed, one spent perhaps six hours in such exams, and they were then scored by computer. Then, in a few days, there would come the little notice by com-system, stating that one had or had not passed the fitness exams for Law or Business or whatever.

Poetry was a different matter. There were many degrees of fitness, all the way from the First Level, which fitted a man for the lower offices of the faith, through five more subordinate levels, to the Seventh Level. Very rarely did anyone enter the Seventh Level. Since there was no question of being promoted from one level to another, a man being placed at his appropriate rank by the examinations at the very beginning, there were times when the Seventh Level remained vacant for as long as a year. Michael had been placed at the Fourth Level instead of the First, like the others of his sons, and the Khadilh had been awed at the implications.

For Poetry there was first an examination of the usual kind, marked by hand and scored by machine, just as in the other Professions. But then, if that exam was passed, there was something unique to do. The Khadilh had not passed that exam and he had no knowledge of what came next, except that it involved the computers.

"Michael," he said, musing, "how does it go exactly, the Poetry exam by the computer?"

Michael came over to stand beside him. "You mean, should Jacinth pass the written examination, even if just by chance, then what happens?"

"Yes. Tell me."

"It's simple enough. You go into the booths where the computer panels are and push a READY button. Then the computer gives you your instructions."

"For example?"

"Let's see. For example, it might say—SUBJECT: LOVE OF COUNTRY . . . FORM: SONNET. UNRESTRICTED BUT RHYMED . . . STYLE: FORMAL, SUITABLE FOR AN OFFICIAL BANQUET. And then you would begin."

"Are you allowed to use paper and pen, my son?"

"Oh, no, Father." Michael was smiling, no doubt, thought the Khadilh, at his father's innocence. "No paper or pencil. And you begin at once."

"No time to think."

"No, Father, none."

FOR THE SAKE OF GRACE

"Then what?"

"Then, sometimes, you are sent to another computer, one that gives more difficult subjects. I suppose it must be the same all the way to the Seventh Level, except that the subject would grow more difficult."

The Khadilh thought it over. For his own office of Khadilh, which meant little more than "Administrator of Large Estates and Households," he had had to take one oral examination, and that had been in ordinary straightforward prose, and the examiner had been a man, not a computer, and he still remembered the incredible stupidity of his answers. He had sat flabbergasted at the things that issued from his mouth, and he had been convinced that he could not possibly have passed the examination. And Jacinth was only twelve years old, with none of the training that boys received in prosody, none of the summer workshops in the different forms, scarcely even an acquaintance with the history of the classics. Surely she would be too terrified to speak? Why, the simple modesty of her femaleness ought to be enough to keep her mute, and then she would fail, even if she should somehow be lucky enough to pass the written exam. Damn the girl!

"Michael," he asked, "what is the level of the Poet Anna-Mary?"

"Second Level, Father."

"Thank you, my son. You have been very helpful—you may sit down now, if you like."

He stood a moment more, watching the rain, and then went back and sat down again by his wife. Her hands flew, busy with the little needles used to make the complicated hoods the Poets wore. She was determined that her sons should, in accordance with the ancient tradition, have every stitch of their installation garments made by her hands, although no one would have criticized her if she had had the work done by others, since she had so many sons needing the garments. He was pleased with her, for once, and he made a mental note to have a gift sent to her later.

The bells rang in the city, signaling the four o'clock Hour of Meditation, and the Khadilh's sons looked at one another, hesitating. By the rules of their Major that hour was to be spent in their rooms, but their father had specifically asked that they stay with him.

The Khadilh sighed, making another mental note, that he must sigh less. It was an unattractive habit.

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

"My sons," he said, "you must conform to the rules of your Major. Please consider that my first wish."

They thanked him and left the room, and there he sat, watching first the darting fingers of the Khadilha and then the dancing of the mobile flowers, until shadows began to streak across the tiled floor of the room. Six o'clock came, and then seven, and still no word. When his sons returned, he sent them away crossly, seeing no reason why they should share in his misery.

By the time the double suns had set over the river he had lost the compassion he had counseled for the others and become furious with Jacinth as well as the system. That one insignificant female child could create such havoc for him and for his household amazed him. He began to understand the significance of the rule; the law began to seem less harsh. He had missed his dinner and he had spent his day in unutterable tedium. His orchards were doubtless covered with insects and dying of thirst and neglect, his bank account was depleted by the expense of the trip home, the cost of extra garden-robots on Earth, the cost of the useless visit from the Lawyer. And his nervous system was shattered, and the peace of his household destroyed. All this from the antics of one twelve-year-old female child! And when she had to be shut up, there would be the necessity of living with her mother as she watched the child deteriorate into a crawling mass of filth and madness as Grace had done. Was his family cursed, that its females should bring down the wrath of the universe at large in this manner?

He struck his fists together in rage and frustration, and the Khadilha jumped, startled.

"Shall I send for music, my husband?" she asked. "Or perhaps you would like to have your dinner served here? Perhaps you would like a good wine?"

"Perhaps a dozen dancing girls!" he shouted. "Perhaps a Venusian flame-tiger! Perhaps a parade of Earth elephants and a Tentacle Bird from the Extreme Moons! May all the suffering gods take pity upon me!"

"I beg your pardon," said the Khadilha. "I have angered you."

"It is not you who have angered me," he retorted; "it is that miserable female of a daughter that you bore me, who has caused me untold sorrow and expense, that has angered me!"

FOR THE SAKE OF GRACE

"Very soon now," pointed out the Khadilha softly, "she will be out of your sight and hearing forever; perhaps then she will anger you less."

The Khadilha's wit, sometimes put to uncomfortable uses, had been one of the reasons he had kept her all these years. At this moment, however, he wished her stupider and timider and a thousand light-years away.

"Must you be right, at a time like this?" he demanded. "It is unbecoming in a woman."

"Yes, my husband."

"It grows late."

"Yes, indeed."

"What could they be doing over there?"

He reached over to the com-system and instructed the Housekeeper to send someone with a videocolor console. It was just possible that somewhere in the galaxy something was happening that would distract him from his misery.

He skimmed the videobands rapidly, muttering. There was a new drama by some unknown avant-garde playwright, depicting a liaison between the daughter of a Council member and a servomechanism. There was a game of jidra, both teams apparently from the Extreme Moons, if their size could be taken as any indication. There were half a dozen variety programs, each worse than the last. Finally he found a newsband and leaned forward, his ear caught by the words of the improbably sleek young man reading the announcements.

Had he said—yes! He had. He was announcing the results of the examinations in Poetry. "—ended at four o'clock this afternoon, with only eighty-three candidates accepted out of almost three thousand who—"

"Of course!" he shouted. How stupid he had been not to have realized, sooner, that since all members of Poetry were bound by oath to observe the four o'clock Hour of Meditation, the examinations would have had to end by four o'clock! But why, then, had no one come to notify them or to return their daughter? It was very near nine o'clock.

The smallest whisper of hope touched him. It was possible, just possible, that the delay was because even the callous members of the Poetry Unit were finding it difficult to condemn a little girl to a life of solitary confinement. Perhaps they were meeting to discuss it, perhaps something was being arranged, some loophole in the law being found that could be used to prevent such a travesty of justice.

He switched off the video and punched the call numbers

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

of the Poetry Unit on the com-system. At once the screen was filled by the embroidered hood and bearded face of a Poet, First Level, smiling helpfully through the superimposed matrix-mark of his household.

The Khadilh explained his problem, and the Poet smiled and nodded.

"Messengers are on their way to your household at this moment, Khadilh ban-harihn," he said. "We regret the delay, but it takes time, you know. All these things take time."

"What things?" demanded the Khadilh. "And why are you speaking to me in prose? Are you not a Poet?"

"The Khadilh seems upset," said the Poet in a soothing voice. "He should know that those Poets who serve the Poetry Unit as communicators are excused from the laws of verse-speaking while on duty."

"Someone is coming now?"

"Messengers are on their way."

"On foot? By Earth-style robot-mule? Why not a message by com-system?"

The Poet shook his head. "We are a very old profession, Khadilh ban-harihn. There are many traditions to be observed. Speed, I fear, is not among those traditions."

"What message are they bringing?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you that," said the Poet patiently.

Such control! thought the Khadilh. Such unending saint-like tolerancel It was maddening.

"Terminate with thanks," said the Khadilh, and turned off the bland face of the Poet. At his feet the Khadilha had set aside her work and sat trembling. He reached over and patted her hand, wishing there were some comfort he could offer.

Had they better go ahead and call for dinner? He wondered if either of them would be able to eat.

"Althea," he began, and at that moment the servingwomen showed in the messengers of the Poetry Unit, and the Khadilh rose to his feet.

"Well?" he demanded abruptly. He would be damned if he was going to engage in the usual interminable preliminaries. "Where is my daughter?"

"We have brought your daughter with us, Khadilh ban-harihn."

"Well, where is she?"

"If the Khadilh will only calm himself."

FOR THE SAKE OF GRACE

"I am calm! Now where is my daughter?"

The senior messenger raised one hand, formally, for silence, and in an irritating singsong he began to speak.

"The daughter of the Khadilh ban-harihn will be permitted to approach and to speak to her parents for one minute only, by the clock which I hold, giving to her parents whatever message of farewell she should choose. Once she has given her message, the daughter of the Khadilh will be taken away and it will not be possible for the Khadilh or his household to communicate with her again except by special petition from the Council."

The Khadilh was dumbfounded. He could feel his wife shaking uncontrollably beside him—was she about to cause a second scandal?

"Leave the room if you cannot control your emotion, Khadilha," he ordered her softly, and she responded with an immediate and icy calm of bearing. Much better.

"What do you mean," he asked the messenger, "by stating that you are about to take my daughter away again? Surely it is not the desire of the Council that she be punished outside the confines of my house!"

"Punished?" asked the messenger. "There is no punishment in question, Khadilh. It is merely that the course of study which she must follow henceforth cannot be provided for her except at the Temple of the University."

It was the Khadilh's turn to tremble now. She had passed!

"Please," he said hoarsely, "would you make yourself clear? Am I to understand that my daughter has passed the examination?"

"Certainly," said the messenger. "This is indeed a day of great honor for the household of the ban-harihn. You can be most proud, Khadilh, for your daughter has only just completed the final examination and has been placed in Seventh Level. A festival will be declared, and an official announcement will be made. A day of holiday will be ordered for all citizens of the planet Abba, in all city-clusters and throughout the countryside. It is a time of great rejoicing!"

The man went on and on, his curiously contrived-sounding remarks unwinding amid punctuating sighs and nods from the other messengers, but the Khadilh did not hear any more. He sank back in his chair, deaf to the list of the multitude of honors and happenings that would come to pass as a result of this extraordinary thing. Seventh Level! How could such a thing be?

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

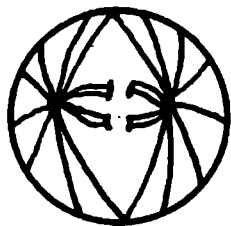
Dimly he was aware that the Khadilha was weeping quite openly, and he used one numb hand to draw her veils across her face.

"Only one minute, by the clock," the messenger was saying. "You do understand? You are not to touch the Poet-Candidate, nor are you to interfere with her in any way. She is allowed one message of farwell, nothing more."

And then they let his daughter, this stranger who had performed a miracle, whom he would not even have recognized in a crowd, come forward into the room and approach him. She looked very young and tired, and he held his breath to hear what she would say to him.

However, it was no message of farewell that she had to give them. Said the Poet-Candidate, Seventh Level, Jacinth ban-harihn: "You will send someone at once to inform my Aunt Grace that I have been appointed to the Seventh Level of the Profession of Poetry; permission has been granted by the Council for the breaking of her solitary confinement for so long as it may take to make my aunt understand just what has happened."

And then she was gone, followed by the messengers, leaving only the muted tinkling showers of sparks from the dancing flowers and the soft drumming of the rain on the roof to punctuate the silence.



YOUR HAPLOID HEART

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

This is a story about an alien planet, and about beings who seem to be human. In fact, perhaps they are. But if so, what kind of humans are they?

ESTHAA (Aurigae Epsilon V) *Type:* Solterran .98

Dom. race: Human to undet. degree

Fed. status: Pending certification

Extraplanetary delegs., embs., missions: None

Esthaa, sole inhabited planet of system, first contact from Aurigae Phi 3010 ST, native cultural level then approx. Ter-ran Greek city-states, grouped around inland sea on single continental mass. Navigation, wheel, money, protoalphabetic script, numbers incl. zero, geometry; smelting, weaving, agriculture. Space trade route estab. 3100 ST. Esthaan students to Gal. Fed., no perm. emigration. Progress rapid in light metals extraction, machine tooling, assembly. Exports:

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

Electronic and mechanical components. Imports: Tool, vehicle and generator prototypes, scientific instruments. Esthaan workers noted for ability to copy complex devices.

Sociological: Since contact, pop. concentration in urban complex around spaceport, becoming one-city planet. Political structure thought to be oligarchy, or council of family heads. Religion unreported. Language one, agglutinative. No known wars except sporadic police actions against nomadic tribes of hinterland known as the Flenn peoples. The Esthaan temperament reported as peaceful and friendly but remarkably reserved.

MACDORRA'S LANDSLED brings us down fast—Marscots don't waste fuel. Pax lunges across to peer out my port. I see the color on his high cheekbones and the light in his eyes. His first big job. He has a severe, luminous eye like a certain Chesapeake retriever I recall too well.

Reeling past below is as charming a great garden city as you could wish for. Miles on miles of honey and cream-colored villas in a froth of pinky-green flower trees with here and there an administrative center or industrial park like plates of pastel pastry. On the far horizon, gently glittering sea. A one-city world.

The spaceport shows beyond a line of wooded hills, and the pilot slams us into a wallowing stall. Suddenly there's a blaze of color in the hills below—red, purple, orange—a carnival? No—a warren of twisted streets alive with people. A hidden village.

Then we're back over spacious suburbs and braking into the field. When the ports clear we see a human-looking figure in a dull gold uniform getting out of a roller car.

The human-looking part is why I am here.

MacDorra's pilot has us and our equipment out into the dust before you can say parsimony. Three clipboards to sign, a handshake that breaks my pencil—"See you in six months, Doc, good luck!"—and we're fleeing for the roller with the field lab while the sled's turbines howl up. The Esthaan comes to help. He's big, and seems amused by MacDorra's operation.

We sort ourselves out in Inter-human while the roller trundles through tree-lined avenues. Reshvid Ovancha has a cultivated Gal Fed University accent.

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

Very human, is my snap reaction. He has the same number of fingers and features, his joints work like ours, and his skin texture—a feature on which I place great hunch reliance—is a cream-yellow version of my own brown. Eyes round, with laugh lines, and his smile shows human teeth with an extra pair of frontals. All quite standard except that his torso looks a trifle thick or blocky. Like me, he's beardless. I see nothing to explain why as of that minute I would bet my tour pay that MacDorra's return will find me with a negative report to file.

Wait till we see the women, I tell myself.

Pax is pointing his Scouts of the Galaxy profile as we roll through endless avenues bright with suburban shrubbery. Possibly he has much the same idea. . . . It always strikes the younger ISB agents as grossly unfair that middle-aged, monogamous noncharismatic types like me should be charged with investigating the question of alien sex.

Bureau Personnel learned that the hard way. The first ISB agent sent to Esthaa, over a century back, was a lad called Harkness. Among other idiosyncrasies, Harkness had a weakness for laboratory-fermented brew. The sensitive, reserved Esthaans were very unfavorably impressed when a wing of their new university went up with him. After the investigation and reparations Esthaa had been dropped to the bottom of the sector list to cool off. A hundred years later Auriga Sector had only Esthaa left to check and the Esthaans were persuaded to accept another Interplanetary Survey team, guaranteed nonexplosive. Which is now arriving as one Pax Patton, mineralogist-stratigrapher, and one Ian Suitlov, middle-aged ecologist in public and Certifying Officer in fact—as Harkness had tried to be before me.

"What's this 'mystery man' bit they give you C.O.s?" Pax asked me while we were getting acquainted on the ship. I looked at his eager face and cursed Bureau security.

"Well, there is the Mystery, you know. Silly name, to your generation. When I started work people were still ready to fight about it. The True Blood Crusade was active—in fact, two of my graduating class got kidnapped and given the conversion treatment. One forgets how much energy and money and blood got spent over the fact that human races are scattered through the galaxy. Religions, sciences, whole planets were in turmoil. Many people wouldn't believe it. . . . Nowadays we've settled down to the job of counting and describing and we don't encourage talk. But it's still a

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

mystery. Where *do* we come from? Are we a statistical peak, a most-probable-bridge-hand of evolution? Or are we one crop out of one seed pod that was spilled through the stars? People got pretty excited over it. I know one or two who still are."

"But why the Security hang-up, Ian?"

"Didn't anybody brief you? Use your head, look at the human position in the galaxy. A new race can get all lathered up over whether or not they're certified Human. We know it doesn't mean anything—you have Hrattli in top Gal Fed jobs and they look like poached eggs. But try explaining that to a newly-contacted, proud, scared humanoid race! They take Noncertification as inferiority. That's why C.O.s aren't called C.O.s out loud. We try to get in and get the data quietly before any uproar can start. Ninety percent of the time there's no problem anyway and C.O. work is the dulllest kind of routine. But when you hit one of the emotional ten percent—well, that's why the Bureau pays our insurance. I'm telling you this so you'll remember to keep your mouth very carefully shut about my work. You do your rocks, I do my biology—but nothing about humans, humanity, mystery—right?"

"Aye aye, sir!" Pax grinned. "But, Ian, I don't get the problem. I mean, isn't being human basically a matter of culture, like sharing the same values?"

"Great green orcs. What do they teach you rock hounds these days? Look: Shared culture is shared culture. Psychic congeniality. It is not humanity. Are you so arrogant as to label any general ethical value a criterion of humanity? Being human is nothing so vast. It reduces to one nitty gritty little point: *Mutual fertility!*"

"A damn limited concept of humanity!"

"Limited? Crucial! Look at the practical consequences. When we meet and mingle with a nonhuman race, no matter if they're totally sympatico and look like the girl next door, the two groups stay separable to the end of time. No problem. But when we meet a human race, even if they look like alligators—and some of 'em do—those genes are going to flow into the human gene pool despite any laws or taboos they can set up. Q.E.D. every time—with all the social, religious, political fall-out the fusion entails. Now do you see why that's the one fact the Bureau *has* to know?"

Pax subsided, giving me his Chesapeake stare. I wondered if I'd been out too long. Auriga Sector had caught me a

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

month short of Long Leave and talked me into helping close out the Sector survey. "A piece of cake," the chief had called it.

Well, I have to admit that it looks like a piece of cake as we roll up to the palatial Esthaan guest villa. Reshvid Ovancha's horn brings a squad of servants for our bags, and he personally shows us about. It's amazingly like a deluxe version of a Gal Fed faculty residence. Even the plumbing works the same. The only alien feature I notice is a diffuser emitting a rather pleasing floral scent.

"This is the home of my cousin who is away at sea," Ovancha informs us. "I trust you will be comfortable, Reshvidi."

"We will be more than comfortable, Reshvid Ovancha. We did not expect such luxury!"

"Why not?" he smiles. "Civilized men enjoy the same things!" He makes a minute adjustment to the scent dispenser. "When you are ready I will take you to lunch at the University where you will meet our Senior Councillor."

As we roll through the University gates Pax mutters, "Looks just like Gal Fed campus before the Flower Dance."

"Ah, the Flower Dance!" says Ovancha gaily. "Delightful! Did you encounter Professor Flenner? And Dr. Groot? Such fine men. But that was long before your time, I fear. We live long on Esthaa, you know. A most healthy world!"

Pax's face grows longer. I personally wonder what has happened to the famous Esthaan reserve.

We meet it at lunch. Our hosts are gracious but formal, smiling gently when Ovancha laughs, and gravely observant while he chatters. Some wear faculty robes; a few like Ovancha are in uniform. The atmosphere is that of a staid gentleman's club.

"We hope you will feel at home, Reshvidi," intones the councillor, who has turned out to be Ovancha's uncle.

"Why not?" Ovancha beams. "Now come, you must see your laboratories."

The laboratories are very adequate, and by evening we have our schedules and contacts set.

"Do we have to go to all those dinners?" Pax is prowling the patio, his eyes on the line of distant mountains where two pink moons are rising. Fountains tinkle, and a bird sings.

"One of us must. You can start some field work."

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

"While you look into the fertility. Say, Ian, how do you—"

"With a culture tank," I tell him, "and a great deal of caution. *And* it's a ticklish business until you know what the taboos are. How would Victorian England, say, have reacted to a couple of aliens who demanded a look at people's sex organs and a fresh slice of someone's ovary? I'd like to get it through your head that this is a very good subject to shut up about."

"Aren't you too tight up, Ian? These people are very enlightened types."

"One of my friends had both feet cut off by some supposedly enlightened types."

Pax grunts. Maybe I have been out too long. This place gives me the feeling of a stage set, it's so insistently human-norm. Well, I'll know more after I see the women.

Three weeks later I am still looking. Not that I haven't seen Esthaan ladies—at dinners, at lunches, at merry family picnics, even on a field trip with two lady marine biologists. Or rather, with what passes for biologists on Esthaa. It soon appears that for all the shiny instruments, science on Esthaa is more an upper-class hobby than a discipline. People collect oddities and study what amuses them, without system. It's an occasion for wearing a lab coat, just as their army seems to be merely a game of wearing uniforms. My Esthaan ladies are like everything else here, charming, large, and wholesome. And decorously mammalian to outward view. But have I seen *women*?

Well, why not, as Ovancha would say. . . . I need a closer look.

The usual approach on an advanced planet is through the schools of medicine. But Ovancha is correct; Esthaans are healthy. Aside from injuries and a couple of imported infections now controlled by antibiotics, sickness doesn't seem to exist here. *Medicine*, I find, refers to the pathology of aging; arthritis, atherosclerosis and the like. When I ask about internal medicine, gynecology, obstetrics, I get stopped cold.

One chubby little orthopedist allows me to take a few measures and blood samples from his child patients. When I ask to see adult females he begins to dither. Finally he sends me to a colleague who reluctantly produces the cadaver of an aged female worker, a cardiac-arrest case. She has evidently been operated on for hernia in middle life.

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

"Who did this operation, Reshvid Korsada?" I ask. He blinks.

"This is not the work of a doctor," he replies slowly.

"Well, I would like to meet the person who did this work," I persist. "Also I would like to meet one of your doctors who assist in delivering new life."

Embarrassed laughter. He licks his lips.

"But—there is no need for doctors! There are certain women—"

He runs down there, and I see the sweat on his forehead and talk of other matters. I have not lived twenty years in this job by poking sticks into sore places and I want to make that Long Leave back to Molly and the kids.

"These people are touchy as a pregnant warthog," I tell Pax that night. "Apparently birth is so taboo they can't mention it, and so easy they don't need doctors. I doubt these medicos ever see a woman naked. Like Medieval Europe where they diagnosed with dolls. This is going to be very ticklish indeed."

"Can't you count chromosomes or something?"

"To determine *fertility*? The interior of the cell is not called the last fortress or neg entropy for nothing, Pax. Quantitative DNA analyses plus the few gene loci we know tell us little. The only reliable index we have is the oldest one of all—you bring a male and female gamete together and see if the zygote grows. But how in Mordor am I going to get an ovum?"

Pax guffawed. "I hope you don't expect me to—"

"No. I do not. I'll put in time cataloging and figure something out. How are your rocks coming along?"

"That reminds me, Ian, I think I've hit a taboo myself. You remember that village we saw, coming in? I asked Ovan-cha's wife about it last night, and she sent the kids out of the room. It's where the Flenni live. She said they were *silly* people, or *little* people. I asked her if she meant *childish*—at least I think that's what I said. That's when she sent the kids out. Why don't they hurry up and invent that telepathic translator the videos show?"

"Maybe it's some tie-up with child . . . baby . . . birth?"

"No, I think it's the Flenni. Because of what happened today. I was out on that geosyncline back of the port and I heard music from the village. I started over and suddenly here comes Ovan-cha in the university roller and tells me to

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

go back. He said there was sickness there. He almost hauled me into the roller."

"Sickness? And Ovancha was right there? Indeed I do agree with you, Pax. I'm very glad that you thought of telling me about this. And as nominal head of this mission," I continue in a tone that turns his stare around to me, "I want you to stay away from the Flenni and any other sensitive subjects you happen across. I'm responsible for getting us out of here in one piece and there's something about this place that worries me. Call me what you like, but *stick to rocks*. Right?"

For the next two weeks we are model agents. Pax does a coastal profile and I bury myself in routine taxonomy. One of my chores is to compile a phylogenetic survey of native life forms based on the Esthaan's own data. Their archives are a jumble of literary bestiaries and morphological botany, topped off by a surprisingly large collection of microscopic specimens all abominably muddled and dispersed. To my astonishment, in a packet of miserable student mounts of rotifers I come upon what I realize must be Harkness' work.

Back at the base they told me that all Harkness' data vanished with him. I went to the trouble to look up the old report of the ISB inquiry. There seemed to be no doubt that Harkness had been running a still, and that there had been a big fire. The only note the ISB team found was on a scrap of paper in a drain. In a large and wavy script were the words, "MUSCII! They are BEAUTIFUL!!!"

Musci are, of course Terrestrial mosses, unless Harkness had been abbreviating Muscidae, or flies. Beautiful mosses? Beautiful flies? Clearly, Harkness was a rumhead. But he was also a first-rate xeno-biologist when sober, and his elegant mounts, still clear after a century, are saving me a lot of work. His neat marginal chromosome counts are accurate. There are other brief notations, too, which get me very excited as my data piles up. Harkness had been finding something—and so am I. The problem of getting human gametes recedes while I chase down the animal specimens needed to fill in the startling picture.

In our free evenings Pax and I cheer ourselves with song. It turns out we are both old ballad buffs and we work up a repertory including "Lobachevsky," "Beethoven's Birthday Calypso," and "The Name of Roger Brown." When we add

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

an Esthaan mouth organ and a lute I notice that our Esthaan house-factor is wearing small earmuffs.

Our reward for all this virtue arrives one morning in the form of Ovancha with a picnic hamper.

"Reshvidi!" he beams. "Perhaps today you would like to visit the Flenn village?"

We trundle out across the spaceport and over a range of low hills in bloom. Then the roller lurches into a gorge under a shower of flowers, and jolts up a stony pass in which there are suddenly adobe walls brilliantly colored in hot pink, greens, electric blue, purple, dry-blood color and mustard. I catch the start of an amazing smell as we burst over the hilltop and into the village square. It is empty.

"They are timid," Ovancha apologizes. "The sickness also has been hard."

"But I thought you didn't have—" said Pax, and glares at me for the jab.

"We do not," replies Ovancha. "They do, because of their way of life. They have a bad way of life, bad and silly. They do not live long. We try to help them, but—"

He makes a weary gesture and then toots melodiously on the roller's horn. We get out. Shrill orange flowers are blowing across the cobbles. The smell is remarkable. From somewhere a flute blares brilliantly and stops. Across the square a door opens and a figure limps toward us.

It is an old man robed in blue. As he comes near I see he is very delicate—or rather, Ovancha suddenly becomes an oversized rubber truncheon. I stare; something about the old man is sending strongly to my hunch-sense.

I miss Ovancha's introduction.

We walk down a side street. It too is empty. An overpowering feel of hidden eyes watching, ears listening. A gate snicks shut like a clam shell. The houses are interspersed with tents, pavilions, shanties, dark recesses which rustle.

We come to a courtyard covered with a torn green canopy where a dozen frail old people recline silently against the curb. Their faces are turned away. I see skeleton hips and ribs under the bright, soiled cloaks. Is this the sickness of which Ovancha had warned Pax? But he has led us right to it.

Suddenly a side door creaks and out into the silence bursts a flock of children. The old ones rouse, hold out shaking arms, smiling and murmuring. Voices call urgently from the doorway, but the little ones run wild—incredibly tiny and ac-

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

tive, fluttering gay silks, shouting high and sweet. Then a robed figure herds them inside and the old ones sink back.

Beside me Ovancha is making a strange sound. His mouth works and his face is green as he marshals us back toward the roller.

But Pax has other ideas. He strides smartly on around a corner. Ovancha throws me a distraught look and goes after him. I follow with the limping old man. We proceed thus around a second corner, and I am about to shout after Pax when a flurry of silk comes shooting out of the wall beside me.

My hand is clutched by something tiny and electric. An impossibly small girl is scurrying alongside, her face turned up to mine. Our eyes meet joltingly. Something is being pushed into my fist. Her head goes down—soft, fierce lips press my hand—and then she's gone.

Twenty years of discipline tells me to open my fingers. The old man is gazing straight ahead.

We catch up to Pax and Ovancha in the square. Pax's back is rigid. As we say our farewells he grips both the old man's hands in his. Ovancha is still pale. The roller starts, the unseen flute peals out again and is joined by a drum. A trumpet answers from across the square. We drive away in a skirl of sound.

"They are fond of music," I remark inanely. My hand feels on fire. Pax's eyes look dangerous.

"Yes"—Ovancha speaks with effort—"some do not call it music. It is very harsh, very wild. But I find . . . I find it has some charm."

Pax snorts.

There is going to be a blowup.

"In my home," I say, "we have also an animal like your *Rupo* which we use for hunting. They have a very strong character and think only of hunting. Once my friends and I took a certain *Rupo* on a hunting trip and, as is also your custom, we often drank wine with our lunch and did not hunt in the afternoon. The *Rupo* regarded this as a sin. So one night when we were many days from base he carried all the wine bottles to a deep swamp and buried them."

They both stare at me. Ovancha finally smiles.

Back at the villa I see Pax's mouth opening and pull him over by a fountain.

"Keep it low."

"Ian, those people are human! They're the only *human*

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

Esthaans I've seen. These owl-eyed marshmallows—Ian, the Flenni are the people you should be looking at!"

"I know. I felt it, too."

"Who are they? Could they be the survivors of some wreck?"

"They were here before First Contact."

"They're terrified of the Esthaans. I saw them run for cover as we came up. They're in trouble, Ian. It isn't right. You've got to do something!"

He is flushed and frowning. Just like that Chesapeake the night before he imposed Prohibition. I sigh.

"You, Dr. Patton, are a professional mineralogist sent here at enormous cost to do a specific job your Federation wants done. So am I. And our jobs do not include mixing into native political or social conflicts. I feel as you do, that the Flenni are an appealing native group who are being oppressed or exploited in some way by the civilized Esthaans. We have no idea what the history of the situation is. But the point is, *we are not free to endanger our mission* by intruding into what is clearly a very tense position. This is something you will have to face on planet after planet in order to do your job. It's a big galaxy, and you'll see worse things before you're through."

He blew out his lips. This is not like the videos.

"I thought your job was to find humans."

"It is. And I'll check the Flenni out, later. And I'll report their condition, for what good it'll do. . . . Now let me tell you something I suspect. Did you ever hear of polyploidy?"

"Something about big cells—what has that got to do with the Flenni?"

"Bear with me. I can't be sure until I get a few more specimens, but I think we've come on something unique: Recurrent tetraploidy in the higher animals. I've found it in eighteen species so far, including rodents, ungulates, and carnivores. In each case you find two closely similar animals, one of which is bigger, stronger and more vigorous. And tetraploid—that means, by the way, not big cells but an extra set of chromosomes. A mutation. Tetraploid and higher polyploid forms of food plants are used on many planets but it's almost unknown among animals. Here you have it all over the place—and often in the tame domestic form. That big cowlike creature they milk has twice the number of chromosomes the little wild cow has. Same with their wool-bearing beast versus the wild sheep. Their common rodent has twen-

ty-two chromosomes, but I trapped a king rat—a gigantic brute—with forty-five. Harkness was working on it before me. Now do you see what the possibility is?"

"You mean these Esthaan jumbos are tetraploid Flenn?"

"That's exactly what I expect to find. And if so, what?"

"Well, what?"

"A case where nature has set the stage for genocide, Pax. The two forms compete, and the bigger, stronger, more vital form wins. The Flenni are weak, short-lived, defect-prone and they're up against people who are simply more of everything they are. Shocking as it sounds, you have here almost a quantitative measure of humanity—if they're human. Under the circumstances it's a credit to the big Esthaans that the little race has survived so far. Remember, *our* species exterminated all our close relatives."

"But they could be given a place of their own."

"Provided the mutation isn't a recurrent one. If it is recurrent, the situation will only repeat. And it looks as if it is. . . . Why does each species have a tetraploid companion? If there'd been only one mutation 'way back, the separate evolutions would have diverged. Now I suggest we quit talking and play something. How about 'Hold That Tiger'?"

Our hearts aren't in it. When we turn in I look at the note which has been burning a hole in my pocket.

"Doctor from the stars come to us! Help us dying we pray."

I sleep poorly. In the morning we find a sheaf of the vivid orange flowers has been thrown over the wall by our table.

Ovancha joins us at breakfast. With him is a muscular young Esthaan wearing high boots and imported dark glasses.

"Reshvid Goffafa!" Ovancha announces. "He is ready to guide Reshvid Pax to the volcanic mountains. Perhaps this is too short notice? But Reshvid Goffafa has classes beginning just after the rest days and he has returned specially for you!"

With Pax gone I concentrate better and in a few days' steady drudging I turn up three Harkness slides marked "*Fl.*" in a collection of waterplant tissues. One firmly stained section labeled "*Fl. Inf., vascular marrow*" gives me what I need. There are karyokinetic anomalies but the chromosome count is clearly half of that on my Esthaan samples.

My involuntary satisfaction gives me a pang. The thing is a tragic trap for the Flenni. And mixed with the pang some-

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

thing like a faint voice is saying "Tilt" about the whole beautiful structure. But surely Harkness—

"You study in a trance!" Ovancha has entered quietly.

"It is our way," I reply. It has just struck me that Ovancha is unusual in another way. He has gray eyes, the norm is olive-brown. And the old Flenn also had gray eyes.

"I wonder what you see?" There's a hint of seriousness under his light tone. Is it possible that Ovancha is different enough to be of use to me?

"I see something of great scientific interest on your delightful planet," I begin hopefully. He listens politely, but when I try to show him a chromosome his aristocratic eyelids droop, and he barely glances through the scope. I speak cautiously of a possible genetic difference between himself and unnamed "others." His mouth twists.

"But one can see the difference, Reshvid Ian!" he reproves me. "There is no need to go further. We are not interested in such things in our science."

No help here. I go back to chewing on the problem of obtaining Esthaan gametes while Ovancha chats on about a Reshvid doctor who perhaps has some slides, and a Reshvid somebody else who will be delighted to show me his preserving technique—after the rest days, of course. Meanwhile, since no one is really working now, why not come to dinner and view the museum president's collection of luminous sea bats?

The next day the university blimp-flier goes out to pick up Pax and Goffafa, but they're not there. Nobody's concerned, since they had ample supplies. It's decided to try again in three days. The second try is also unsuccessful, and the third. Ovancha reminds me that Goffafa is now late for classes.

The orange flowers come over the wall again that night. At noon next day a uniformed Esthaan appears in my lab to tell me I'm wanted at the councillor's office.

Ovancha is standing outside. He acknowledges me with a curt nod and goes in, leaving me to stare at the antiseptic and cylindrical maiden behind the desk.

Finally I am ushered into the presence of the white-haired Senior Councillor. Ovancha is looking at a wall map. No one offers me a chair.

"Reshvid Ian, your colleague Reshvid Pax is a criminal. He has committed murder. What have you to say?"

I stammer my bewilderment. Ovancha wheels around.

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

"Reshvid Goffafa is dead. His body was found buried in an obvious attempt at concealment. He died by strangulation. Your colleague Pax has fled."

"But why should Pax do such a thing? Why do you believe he was the murderer? He admires and respects your people, Reshvid Ovancha!"

"The murderer was large and strong. Your friend is strong—and he is excitable, uncontrollable. Disgustingly *silly*!"

"No—"

"He quarreled with Reshvid Goffafa, killed him and fled."

"When Reshvid Pax returns," I say firmly, "I hope you will listen to his explanation of the sad death of Goffafa."

"He will not return!" Ovancha fairly shouts. "He has sneaked into a camp of Flenni and is hiding there. Do you dare to suggest he is not guilty?"

The councillor clears his throat sharply and Ovancha's mouth snaps shut.

"That is all. You will be so good as to stay in your quarters until transportation is arranged. I regret that your laboratory here is closed."

The next days pass in that agony of boredom and worry known only to those who have been alone and in jail on an alien planet. My field kit is returned to me; I set it up and force myself to study the garden flora. There is now a sentry outside the gates. I hear a nocturnal scuffle, and no more flowers come over the wall.

On the fifth night the almost-cat has kittens.

I am pacing the terrace. Senior ISB biologists are not supposed to get the shakes, the *horror alieni*. Certainly on the surface I'm in no danger. Pax is in a serious mess, but all I face is grief from the Sector over a fouled-up mission. And yet I can't get rid of the notion that an invisible set of jaws are about to go crunch. Something here is *wrong*; something that kills biologists. Harkness was a biologist, and he is dead.

I become aware of action by my feet under the amber ferns. The big pet we call the almost-cat is rolling on the ground among a heap of small, scuffling, squeaking things. I focus my pocket light. The "cat" sits up, yawns in my face and saunters off leaving me gaping at the wiggling heap on the ground. Kits! But how many? A dozen tiny faces turn up to the light—two dozen—four dozen—and

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

how tiny! Still more are struggling or still among the fern roots.

I pick up a handful and head for my lab.

In my head all the puzzle pieces which had fitted themselves so neatly into that damned wrong pattern are again in motion, coming together in a larger, frightening pattern. One of the items in the new pattern is the great likelihood that I will be killed. As Harkness had been when he stumbled on the truth.

Can I conceal it? No chance; two sleepy servants saw me with the kits. And I've said far too much to Ovancha.

I work carefully. It's gray dawn when the microscope abolishes all possible doubts. Outside, a sweeper-boy with a box is scrabbling under the amber ferns. He has trouble—the kits four hours old are running and biting—but he gets them all. He takes the box to the back gate and passes it to the sentry.

Even unto the least, I muse dismally. More pieces fall into place. Why didn't I consider the city more? And the fact that no Esthaans stay long off-planet?

A rustle. Ovancha is behind me, his pale gaze on my bench.

"Good morning, Reshvid Ovancha. Has there been word from Pax?" He doesn't bother to reply. His mask has sagged, showing me a face grave and full of human trouble. Human! How desperately they must want the meaningless certification. How intricately they have built. Ovancha must be one of the leaders—exceptional Ovancha, able to dare, to cope with us. He speaks with obvious pain.

"Reshvid Ian, why do you— We . . . I have welcomed you as a friend—"

"We, too, wish to be friends."

"Then why do you occupy yourself with *revolting, unspeakable things*?"

He is asking in all seriousness. It is not a plot then. It is a real and terrible delusion. They have somehow come to hate what they are so unbearably that they must live a myth of denial, a psychotic fantasy. Harkness—what had he told them? No matter. We have punctured it now and there is no hope for us. But I must answer his question.

"I am a scientist, Reshvid Ovancha," I say carefully. "In my world I was trained to study all living things. To understand. To us, life of any sort is neither good nor bad. We study all that lives, all life."

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

"All life," Ovancha repeats desolately, his eyes on mine. "Life—"

Pitying, I make my greatest blunder.

"Reshvid Ovancha, perhaps you might be interested to know that in my home world we had once a very great problem because our people were not all alike. We had not two but many different people who hated and feared each other. But we came to live together as one family, as brothers—"

I see his eyes dilate and his nostrils flare. His lips roll back from his teeth, the face of one hearing the ultimate insult. One hand twitches toward his ornamental side arm. Then his lids fall, he turns on his heel and is gone.

The least likely male can move with unexpected agility if he is sufficiently motivated and if his employers have insisted on regular training courses. As Ovancha goes downstairs, I go out the lab window with a bundle and over the kitchen roof to the wall, which turns out to be set with broken glass.

I land in the alley on an ankle that feels severed. One cheek and arm are full of glass. I pull on the Esthaan cloak and hobble up the alley. Each block has a walled center alley that conceals me from the sides, but I have to cross the wide avenues between blocks. Luckily it's just dawn. I make three crossings before a big roller full of uniforms whooshes by the end of the block I'm in.

Four more blocks; my face and arm are on fire, and my ankle gives out. A trash recess in the wall. I dodge in—how quickly fugitives connect with garbage!—and listen to the Esthaan police bell clanging from the direction of our house.

Suddenly a mustard-colored roller-van comes swishing into my alley and stops fifty feet away. The driver gets out. A gate bell tinkles; the gate opens and closes. Silence.

I make it to the roller, pull open the tailgate and scramble in. Inside is dark with a piercing odor. I crawl behind some crates next to the canvas that closes off the driver's compartment.

The tailgate reopens and a crate slams in. We're off.

Sounds are coming from the crate. Dear God. If my luck holds—if the driver doesn't take all the crates out—if I can hold out against what is now clearly poison in my cuts—if . . .

Hours of agony while the truck starts and stops, opens to receive more crates, slams and jolts on. The noise inside would cover a trumpet solo and the smell is a stench. Finally

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

comes the steady drumming of a highway, and when I have lost almost all hope, we stop.

The driver gets out and comes around to open up. This is bad. I have done some knife work on the canvas curtain, but I'm not sure I can move. Frantically I hack the last threads and push and roll myself through to the front floorboards. The pain is shocking.

There's a crowd outside the van but no one hears me over the uproar. The tailgate crashes—the driver is coming back. I yell and pitch myself out.

I black out as I hit. The next thing I hear is the crunch of the roller's tires by my head. Something filmy is over my face, someone's quick hands push me. Voices hissing, "Down!"

I stay down, all right. The world goes away and doesn't come back except as hot clouds of pain and confusion for several days.

My first really clear moment comes in the form of an endless plain of grass lurching across my view. I focus interestedly and it stays put. I am doing the lurching, tied into the saddle of a pack beast.

Ahead of me is another rider. I gaze contentedly at the slight, hooded figure in saffron robes, reveling in no-pain. We have, it seems to me, been traveling thus for some time.

The rider ahead looks about, and suddenly yanks my beast into violent flight across a stream bed. Then we are under trees and my guide is off and racing up the bank in a whirl of silk. This, too, seemed to have happened many times before. And there have been nights and stars, and hot days in thickets, and pain, and soft hands.

My guide returns slowly, throwing back the hood. The face I see is the flower face of the child who put the note in my hand. She lifts one foot to my stirrup and vaults up beside me, leaning on my breast.

Her body is no more than a bird's wing and mine is a half-dead hulk. Something like a solar flare sweeps through my flesh. The universe contracts to the contact of our bodies, her eyes, the night-cloud of her hair. I breathe her perfume.

Then I remember what I know

"Friends come now," she smiles.

She lays a frail, violently alive hand over my heart and we stay thus until the hoofbeats arrive. Three bright-robed Flenni and a larger rider—

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

"Pax!" My voice is a croak.

"Ian, man!"

"Where are we?"

"You're coming to the mountains. To the camp."

But my little guide is already riding away. *Of course.* My knowledge is a cold sadness. The men have stayed hooded too, I see. Taboo. How else to survive?

My mount is taken in tow and we lurch off. I twist round against the pain to watch her dwindle across the savannah. Pax is talking.

"What happened to Goffafa?" I finally ask.

"That *kralik*. We came to a party of Flenn women. He was going to shoot them down."

"Shoot them?"

"He got wild. I had to take his gun away. Like fighting a rubber octopus. He was raving and foaming and believe it or not he threw up his lunch. Agh! I got him in the roller and he tried to brain me with the Geiger."

"So you strangled him?"

"I only choked him a little. Last I saw of him he was crawling. I was going to come back for him when he cooled off."

"He's dead. The Esthaan Council has you booked for murder."

Pac growls.

"Some Flenni found him during the night. They told me he shot two of them when they offered him water, and they finished him. I believe it."

He smite his boot and his mount curvets.

"Those swine, Ian! I can't begin to tell you what I've learned. The Esthaans won't let them raise food! The Flenni start farms and the Esthaans come out here in those gasbag fliers and spray poison. They poison waterholes. Ian, they're forcing the Flenn into those shanty-towns where they can keep them under their thumbs. And I believe they *spread* that sickness, they don't cure it. They're trying to kill them off. Ian, it's what you said. Genocide!"

Our guides hear the word "Esthaan" and turn their now unveiled heads to us. It's my first look at young Flenni males.

Handsome? No word for the intensity of life in these proud beaked faces. The brilliant eyes, the archaic arch of nostril, the fierce and passionate lips.

Total virility. And total vulnerability. I am seeing human males of a quality none have seen before.

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

Involuntarily I bow my head to acknowledge their gaze. They return my bow and look away, their profiles pure and grave against the mountains.

"Pax, it's not—" I begin, when my mount careens forward under a Flenn whip and we're racing pell-mell for a clump of scrub. Behind us rises a soft unearthly hooting. I get a glimpse of a golden contraption about fifty feet up and coming fast. We hurtle on, Pax fighting his mount. A black smoke is belching from the flier's nose.

Pax flings himself to the ground and I am swept into the copse. There's a roar and a confused crashing as the Flenni drag me off and cover my head. For several heartbeats nothing happens.

I get an eye free. The black stuff is blowing past us. The gasbag flier is down on its side and the pilot struggles out with a gun in one hand. Pax is somewhere in the smoke.

The gas is making me slightly dizzy, but the Flenni are out cold. I fumble around in my swaddling and find the pistol still in my pocket. My second shot gets the pilot's wrist and then Pax stumbles out of the smoke and falls on him.

We have the pilot nicely trussed up when our Flenni revive. There's a little difficulty in making them understand that I want him alive and they throw him behind my saddle with the controlled disdain one shows to a dog who rolls in dead fish. But they're enthusiastic about helping Pax rip out the flier's transmitter and load it on.

We ride on in silence. My captive's face is in rictus and his eyes are rolled up. I reflect on the curious difference in the hate shown by Esthaan and Flenn. Why is it the big, victorious Esthaans who panic like cornered rats? In twenty years of strange and often pitiable cases I have seen nothing sadder.

Pax outlines his plan. He has, it seems, worked up his field kit into a transmitter which, with the flier's power packs, should be able to contact MacDorra when the freighter comes near.

"What makes you think MacDorra will rescue us?" I ask him. "We're both under criminal charges now. MacDorra won't offend a planetary customer. And he'd let his mother drown rather than pay for cleaning his dress uniform, you

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

know that. The most he will do is slow-signal the Sector HQ—collect—for instructions . . . the very most."

"It's not a question of rescuing *us!*" Pax says indignantly. "I'm going to see the Flenni get justice. I want MacDorra to send an emergency message to Gal Fed charging the Esthaans with genocide and asking for intervention. The Flenni are human beings, Ian! I don't know what the Esthaans are, but I'm not going to stand by and watch humans wiped out by some kind of *things!*"

"Justice?" I ask weakly. "Genocide?" It's all my fault, but I am suddenly too tired.

"Not genocide, Pax," I mutter and pass out in my saddle. The image of the girl who guided me keeps me company in the dark.

I wake to find myself in the Flenn camp. An enormous cavern sparkling with camp fires, rustling with silk and loud with song. The voices, naturally, are all masculine; only males are here. I am fed and put to rest against my saddle amidst the quick feet, the soft fiery voices. The air is pungent with smoke and Flenn.

During the night I find that the pilot has been dumped near me, still trussed like a sausage. He is the fattest Esthaan I have ever seen. When I clean his wrist he writhes and turns purple and presently, like Goffafa, he foams. I give him water, which he vomits. Finally he lies with eyes wide and glaring, breathing loudly and sweating rivers. I check his circulation and lie down again to sleep.

Pax is conferring with a group of young Flenni when I wake. He towers among them, bronzed and eager. Every inch the guerrilla leader of the oppressed. There will have to be explanations . . . but my head aches very much, and I take some fruit and go to sit outside the cave.

An old man quietly joins me.

"You are a doctor?" He uses a noun meaning also *wise man*.

"Yes."

"Your friend is not."

"He is young. He does not understand. It is only recently that I myself have understood."

"Can you help us?"

"I do not know, my friend. There is nothing like this on other worlds I have seen."

He is silent.

"About the sickness," I ask. "How is it done?"

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

"With music." His voice is bleak.

"Can you not block the hearing?"

"Not enough. Not enough. I myself survived three times, but then—"

He grimaces, looks at his hands. Frail, parched, the hands of great age.

"I will die soon," he observes. "Yet only this spring I helped open the Great Cave."

"Where are the women?" I ask after a bit.

"To the north, half a night's ride. Your friend knows the way."

We look at each other in silence. I now recall Pax's figure against the cave mouth during the night.

"You live long," he muses. "Like the others, the Esthaans. Yet you are like us, not like them. We knew at once. How is this possible?"

"It is thus with all the worlds we know. Only here it is different."

"It is a bitter thing," he says at last. "My friend from the stars, it is a bitter thing."

"Explain to me a little more, if you will," I ask. "Explain how it is with the sickness."

I go to find Pax, jubilant amidst a tangle of wiring.

"I've made contact!" he announces. "MacDorra's in the system! They acknowledged my Mayday and the Federation Emergency appeal."

I groan.

"The genocide part, too?"

"Right. I requested emergency transport and asylum for the Flenni."

"Have you checked this with the Flenni?"

"Why, it's obvious."

I hold my head.

"Pax, it's all my fault. Listen. Have you ever heard of the general class of plants called Bryophytes, chief of which are the mosses, or Musci? Or the Terran animals called Hydrae?"

"Ian, I'm a geologist!"

"I'm trying to tell you, the Esthaans are not committing *genocide*, Pax. It's parricide, filicide . . . perhaps suicide—"

There's a high-pitched commotion behind us. A racing figure that streams pale gold rounds the transmitter and materializes before me into the loveliest girl I've ever seen. I gape at her. Honey and pale flame, high-arched breasts, tiny

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

waist, full oval haunches, an elf's hands and feet, and the face of a beautiful child in love—unfortunately, turned on Pax.

Then she's in his arms, her luminous face eclipsed in his chest, her little hands clutching and caressing him.

Having no hope of being included in this communication, I turn and see that the camp is in motion. Saddles and bundles are being hoisted, fires stamped out. Angry voices echo. My friend the elder is standing with other old ones.

"What's happening?"

"They have captured the women. The young Flanya was with your friend. When she returned to her camp the soldiers were there. She rode to warn us."

"What can be done?"

"There is nothing to do but flee. They will come here—they will drive them here with the music. Against the music we can do nothing. The young men must be gone. As for myself and these, we will wait. We will see our women once more before they kill us. If only . . . if only they do not harm the women."

"Do they dare?"

"Never before. But in recent lives I think they grow mad. They hate without end. I fear that when they find the men gone they will drive the women after them and on—"

His voice fails. Pax has somewhat disentangled himself and the girl is veiling her face.

"How many Esthaans are there?"

"About thirty, Ian; it was too dark to see well. I'm sure we can take them. I've got eight pretty fair marksmen with handguns, plus the converted ditcher and our two heavy guns. The damnable part is that they intend to use the women as cover."

"Pax." I take a deep breath. "I cannot allow you to shoot Esthaans, and the boys you have trained cannot stay here. They must get out. What's coming here is nothing you can fight with guns. All you'll see will be the Flenn girls, plus some mobile sound equipment. You've got to know. The Esthaans and the Flenni are one—"

An ear-splitting screech erupts under our legs. The Esthaan pilot, had been huddled puffy and fasting; now he's on his back kicking like a frog. Flenni who were moving outward turn at his screams.

"Look here, Pax!" I shout above the din. I rip the pilot's clothes, exposing his swollen body. Two great angry scars

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

run from each pubic ligament to above the crest of the pelvis.

"He's a woman!" Pax exclaims.

"No, he's not. He's a sporozoön—an asexual form that reproduces by budding. Watch."

The pilot moans, his body racked by wavelike contractions. Flenni are bringing large baskets stuffed with silk.

"I think most Esthaans are not informed of their true nature," I tell Pax. "This one probably believes he is dying."

A supreme convulsion sweeps the Esthaan and the two gashes in his flanks swell, pulse, and slowly evert themselves like giant pea pods turning inside out. A mass of wriggling blobs of flesh tumbles down his sides. He screams. I pinion his flailing legs, and the girl Flanya rushes up with the baskets. A high wailing—with which I'm very familiar—rises from the mites as we gather them. I hold one up to Pax.

"It's . . . It's a Flenn child!" Unmistakable—barely an ounce of male life with bright gold eyes, clutching, kicking and keening. I lay it on the silk and show him another, an even smaller female with coordinated eyes and the start of a smile reflex. And a withered leg. There are others with defects, or lying still.

The Flenni are running with the baskets to mount and go. I throw the pilot's tunic over his empty belly; he has fainted. We're alone now, the old men, Flanya and Pax.

"You see, Pax? A case of alternate generations, with both the sexual and asexual generations fully developed and complete. Unheard of. It only lasted as far as the mosses and hydrae on Terra, and then the sporogenetic form took over the gametes—that's you and I. We're somatic sporozoöns, our gametes are reduced to cells. The Esthaans are not tetraploids, Pax—they're normal diploids. But the Flenni are haploid. Living gametes with a half-set of chromosomes each. They mate and produce Esthaans—who have no sex but bud out Flenni, alternately and forever."

"You mean the Esthaans and Flenni are *each other's children*? But we saw Esthaan families!"

"No. Their Flenn offspring are carried secretly out to the Flenni village, along with newborn haploid dogs, cats and everything else, and the Esthaan offspring of the Flenni are brought in for Esthaans to raise. Pseudo-families roles. It's literally insane—they may have built it up after Harkness told them they weren't human.

"Listen!"

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

The air is throbbing. One of the elders plucks my sleeve. "Pax, barricade this transmitter and get the power leads out of sight. I'm going to try a forlorn hope."

He races off, Flanya behind him. I turn to my old friend who speaks Esthaan.

"This machine will carry your voice to men like me on other stars. First I will speak, and then you must say what I will now tell you."

As I coach him, the throbbing strengthens and is joined by a rippling, wailing moan which drives into my ears—no, into my viscera. The other elders drift toward the cave mouth, staring blindly. A flash of silk catches my eye.

"Pax! Grab her!"

He is deep in wires. I force my legs into a sprint and tackle Flanya fifty feet from the door. Her eyes come round on me, staring-wild, and her body plasters itself against me like an electric eel. The drum note pulses through her like a resonator. I finally find a spot on her neck which puts out the crazy life in her eyes.

"Take her back and tie her up!" I howl over the rising hurricane of music. "Do you understand? Tie her tight if you want her alive!"

We make it behind the barricade as the first women falter into sight outside the cave.

I grab the mike and begin sending to the only source I know which might get action from the gray remoteness of the Federation Council. If only Pax's lash-up works! If only the electronic bedlam outside isn't jamming us! I repeat and pass the mike to the elder. That tragic whisper should pierce stone—if MacDorra has his recorder on.

"What's that about the Flenni being human and the Esthaans not?" Pax hisses. "I thought you said—"

"Pragmatic definition. How can you fertilize something that doesn't have gametes? Ergo, the Esthaans are non-human, right? By the same token, whose child is Flanya carrying? Ergo—Quick, find us something for ear plugs!"

The cave is clanging and sirening with sound. We crawl to the top of the barrier.

The driven women come like a sea of flowers, limping, stumbling, holding one another as they fan out into the great cave. Here and there one walks alone with blind ecstatic eyes. They fall, crawl, rise again, magically beautiful even in exhaustion. Around them the music is a punishing bray.

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

They reach the camp fires and begin to run, searching among the rocks, seizing the men's garments to their breasts and faces. Some weave in trance, others push on, picking up and dropping even the sand itself as if seeking trace of a particular man. The music is a pounding ache, relentless slow crescendo of sirens, bagpipes, drums.

Beside me I hear the old men gasp, their eyes aflame. Suddenly one tears the stoppers from his ears and dashes over the barricade to the nearest women. They turn to meet him, arms wide and faces wild and he goes down under a wave of silk. Pax grips my shoulder.

"My boys! My marksmen!"

On the far side of the wall there's an explosion of motion. Three—no, five young Flenn, their weapons flung on the rocks, their heads thrown back as they call. Then they are leaping down to the women, the women flying to them. But these do not fall as the wave of bodies meets—they gather the women in armfuls, spinning on the crest of the terrible music. Five burning whirlpools in a sea of girls.

Behind us Flanya cries savagely, arched and writhing.

An old man points to the entrance. Three dark hulks—the Esthaans come to view their handiwork, not yet aware that the main body of the men has escaped. Then they see. A signal flares and the music dies in reverberating discords. An Esthaan shouts, tiny and hoarse.

All over the cave the women have fallen in heaps. The Esthaans start down among them, kicking, as they converge on the pile of bodies around the Flenni boys.

The sight of those beautiful naked ones tumbled amid each other's limbs and the bright silks affects the Esthaans most horribly. Two turn aside, and retch. The third marches upon them, unhooking a heavy whip from his belt, and booting at the nearest women.

The whip slams down on the helpless bodies. The Flenni can scarcely rouse even under the pain; they whimper and hold each other. The Esthaan grabs the nearest boy by the hair and drags him to his knees.

"Where are the men? Where did they go?" he roars into the boy's face. The boy is silent, his eyes ringed with white. The Esthaan kicks him.

"Where did they go? Tell me!"

The other Esthaans join him. One of them bends the boy back across his knee and uses his knife.

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

"Where are they?" the Esthaan thunders as the boy screams.

It seems important to what is left of my ISB indoctrination that Pax not be charged with murder. I make sure each of the Esthaans goes down with two holes apiece. As the echoes ricochet we race for the boy. Too late.

"Cover them, quick!"

We yank silken stuff across the uniformed hulks and ourselves.

"They're coming! Keep down!"

We cower, hearing the distant tramp above the soft breathing of the Flenni all around us. My field of vision includes part of our rock barrier and a Flenn lad, fallen between two girls with another's red gold hair across his legs.

We can do nothing but wait. I watch the faint heavy pulse in the boy's eyelids. Then I see he is not only asleep, but also changing. Luster is going from his skin, his hair. Under my eyes the firm young flesh pales, withers on his arms and hands.

His hands. I remember the leaf-thin hands of the old man who said, "Only this spring I helped open the Great Cave." The kits, the babies, grow like hungry flames. In months the little child is a nubile girl. Do they die as fast too, once mated? So it is with the gamete-bearers among our plants. This then, was the Esthaan weapon. To force them to ever-earlier mating and death. I shudder, seeing the boy's temples now sunken and blue. He will waken as an old man waiting to die.

Boots come into my view. Two Esthaans by the rock barrier. I have set the old man to tapping out a signal which might serve as a beacon in the unlikely event that anyone cares. But the Esthaans will hear—

They have. As they start up the rocks, the old man appears at the top, straightens and calls out. Then he is falling on the Esthaans' guns.

"He said *safe*," I hiss, grabbing Pax. "She's safe— Stay down!"

Pax nearly throws me as the Esthaans disappear over the barrier. We hear crashing sounds. They reappear, following the power-lead.

"If they fool with the pack, they'll blow us all."

But a new Esthaan shouts from the cave mouth, and the others turn back.

"They've sighted the men."

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

We have to watch while the whips are unlimbered and the women rounded up. The awful music crashes upon us. All over the cave, the exhausted women are rising painfully, beautifully, faltering to the cave door before their herders. A swaying river of bright flowers, upheld only by the dreadful stimulation of the sound. A girl falls to her knees before a soldier, who picks up a rock and crushes her skull.

It is as the old man had feared: Madness, among those Esthaans who knew the truth. The soldier probably does not know what he killed, but his orders come from those who know—and can not bear it.

We're up and scuttling for the rock barrier. The transmitter is a wreck, but Flanya is safe where the old man hid her. Pax carries her out. I pause to straighten the old body by the barrier. At the cave mouth we watch the stream of colored silk passing from sight in the gorge below. Somewhere among them is my little guide. The throbbing dies to silence.

"I'm going after them," Pax grits.

"No. That's an order. There's no cover and that flier will pick you off the minute you show."

I point. There is a rear-guard of Esthaans with a blimp and even Pax can read the odds.

"We've got to do something!" he rages.

Flanya's eyes follow him like compasses.

"We will. We will sit here and have something to eat and wait. And we might pray to a god named Baal."

"Baal?"

"Or Moloch, if you prefer. An old god of greed. We pray him to inflame the lust of gain in the guts of an old codger a hundred light-years from here—if he's still alive. If it flames up, hot enough, we and the Flenni possibly may survive."

"You mean the Federation Council?" Pax demands. "Or the Bureau?"

"The Interplanetary Survey Bureau," I tell him, "may respond to our plea in time to help anyone who happens to be alive five years from now. The Galactic Federation Council is quite likely to respond in time to compose a documentary on an extinct race. Neither one can possibly move fast enough to help us mortal flesh now. The only agent who can do that is Captain MacDorra and the only agent which can move MacDorra is cash. Golden Interstellar credits. And the only source from which such is possibly forthcoming is

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

a human fossil, who if he is still breathing, is squatting on the ninety-fifth terrace of his private empire on Solvenus. And the only motive which will move *him* is sheer cupidity and mad lust to beat out another creaking reprobate basking by his private ocean on Sweetheart, Procyon. Hence, we pray to Baal.

"Luckily," I add as Pax's jaw sets, "MacDorra knows I have enough credits in my account to defray an ultrapho signal to Solvenus. Now, how about some chow? And you might rig out a beacon."

It takes a little persuasion to make Flanya stay beside me when he goes away. She nestles down like a little silken dove, and when he climbs out of sight she puts her hand on my arm and looks up worriedly. I see she has a slight deformity of one finger. A defective gene, expressed because there is no companion chromosome to mask it. It is of course the existence of the haploid Flenni generation which makes the diploid Esthaans so healthy—each time the pairs of Esthaan chromosomes break apart to form a Flenn individual, every sort of recessive defect emerges without an allele to temper it. Those dead kits and babies are filters which take out defective genes between every Esthaan generation. Cruel and beautiful mechanism. . . . The quivering under my arm tells me Pax is on his way with provisions.

When we finish I produce an item I have carefully preserved: My mouth organ.

"Can you find us a horn, or a banjo, anything at all to play on?"

He looks at me, and then becomes very restrained. Our search turns up no horn or lute, so I show him what a melodious banging can be made with a cookpot and a broken stirrup. He assents distantly and we take up our watch by the cave mouth, me with my mouth organ and he with the kettle.

We play softly, and Flanya seems to like parts of it, which helps. I refresh us on suitable parts of our repertoire, and begin teaching him a stirring item called "Roll me over in the Clover."

But I have no hope that anything will happen. For a long time it does not.

It's a shock when the cutting flash finally comes—the KA-BOOM-OOM! of MacDorra's emergency sled braking into air. MacDorra's a pioneer at heart if his tightness would let him and his emergency kit is First Landing T/E and then

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

some. It sets down daintily on the mesa overhead while Pax and I scramble up, he carrying Flanya and me carrying the pots.

MacDorra's mate Duncannon and four husky assistants pour out, guns ready.

"Where's the warr?" burrs Duncannon. I could kiss him, red beard, bazooka and all.

"They've captured the women and are marching them to their deaths." I point. "Over there."

This has its effect on the mate. Once it's settled who pays, there are no more gallant fighters in the galaxy.

"We saw something that could be that as we came over. Get in, boys."

"Have you a loud hailer?"

"I do."

"Then fly gently just before them and set down as close as you can."

We come on top of the pathetic army as they're struggling up the rocks toward another cave. It is nearly too late.

"That thing over there in the yellow suit is the enemy," I tell Duncannon. "That gasbag is armed and also shoots a gas that doesn't bother much. The game is to find the noise maker they have and silence it. Fire a flare when you have it stopped, I won't be able to hear you. Stay here, Pax. We have work to do."

I hand him the kettle and turned every dial on the hailer to output max.

I don't know what the Esthaans make of it—those who aren't too busy with Duncannon's boys to hear us. I hate to think what we're doing to delicate Flenn ears. Pax gets the idea as I crash into "Sol-Sol-Solidarity", and comes in with a thunderous beat—a walloping polka beat that has no more sex than a pig in clogs—a Donnybrook jig that can bounce a "Liebestodt" to shreds—a ragtime blast to meet and break that mesmeric Esthaan horror. We give them "Interplanetary Heroes" and "Stars I'm Coming" and "My Buddy was a Bemmy." We blow and bang ourselves silly while Flanya cowers.

Our counterbarrage hits just as the first wave of women meets and mingles with the men streaming helpless from the cave. Our uproar clashes with the mad Esthaan hooting. As we take precarious control of the air, the Flenni mass shudders. Couples cling, thrust apart, race wildly, hands over ears. The women begin to drop. Finally only the men stand upright, their heads wrapped in their arms.

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

When the flare finally goes up I slap Pax's arm and we hear the last toot-bang of our "music" thunder across the hills.

"The only race in history ever saved with a kettle and a mouth organ!" Pax looks horrified.

We shake hands hysterically and hug Flanya. The hideous death of the Flenn boy mingles with Irish jigs in my brain, and I am not much help to Duncannon for the next half hour. We find him systematically hog-tying Esthaans beside the gasbag. Most of them are in rather poor shape. His crew has only a few nicks apiece; ordinary ground-side armament can't do much against First Landing equipment in trained hands.

We send Duncannon back to comb the line of march for survivors. MacDorra himself comes down to oversee the setting up of a relief camp. It is a wonderful camp, with the ship's medicos and a plasma-synth and a nurse, and they work like good devils. I notice MacDorra has a little notebook in which he enters such items as the sled's fuel supply, the rounds of cartridge, and the number of disposable shrouds. He feeds and ministers lavishly, his face a splendid blend of compassion and business enterprise.

The pitiful burdens Duncannon is bringing in upset the Captain.

"Gurrl children," he growls, motioning the doctor to open universal serum. He sniffs and turns away to make a notebook entry. I can see the Esthaans will be having trouble with their freight rates.

The last load brings in the small shrouded figure I feared to see. After a bit I carry my sleeping bag up to the mesa where the pink moons are rising over the floodlights below. Somewhere beyond the empty plain the Esthaan Council waits. Frozen in their pitiable masks. Somebody else will have to be assigned to unwind their madness; I cannot.

Pax climbs to join me. The nurse has taken Flanya away from him. He stretches, scowls happily.

"All right, Ian. Who is Santa Claus?"

"Did you ever hear of the Morgenstern Theory of Human Evolution?"

"*That* Morgenstern? But is he still alive?"

"*And* he still wants his theory proved in the worst way. I ran into him last leave on Eros with his dearest enemy, old man Villeneuve. Villeneuve thinks Morgenstern is a luna-

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

tic; he is heart and soul for the diffusion theory. Between them they're rich enough to buy the Coalsack, and they've been arguing this for years, financing expeditions, and betting fantastic sums. Well, Morgenstern took me aside and told me exactly the kind of evidence he wants. Instances of human development which can not possibly be interpreted as diffusion in Villeneuve's terms. He gave me a code word—*Eureka*. If I ran across the right case he told me to U.P. him collect at once.

"It occurred to me that the alternating generation setup here, shared by lower mammals and man, is about as close as Morgenstern can get to the proof he wants. It's not a hundred percent; there may be a discontinuous mutation. But it's enough to give Villeneuve a very hot time. So I flashed him 'Eureka repeat Eureka' and added that the evidence would be wiped out within hours by intertribal war unless he chartered MacDorra for immediate intervention and rescue. He may have bought the ship or the whole freight line. You've seen the result. Sheer orneriness and ego—that's what saved us, son, not altruism or love of science."

We share a companionable silence. It's just dawning on me that I can take Molly's name out of the file marked *Widows*.

"What about the Bureau?"

"Well, that's where I get reclassified to assistant slide-cleaner. There's a thing called an Irreplaceable Datum of Human Science. You may have run into IDHS areas somewhere—I believe there's one on Terra. In the old training regs it says that any officer of the Service can declare an area or species to be an IDHS and this automatically puts it under Federation protection until the case is reviewed and confirmed, or disallowed. The declaring officer has to present a formal justifying brief. It's a long business and it costs plenty. Almost never done any more; I think there's been only one in my time.

"I signaled the Bureau declaring the Flenni as IDHS in danger. This should eventually produce a Bureau relief team to take over from MacDorra. But it's going to be a merry dust-up. Old Morgenstern is surely on his way right now with the idea that the Flenni are his personal pets. In the Bureau's eyes he'll be just a meddling private citizen. And I'm going to have a time seeing that the Flenni come out of this right side up and that I'm not thrown out of the Service for exceeding my authority, engaging in local war-

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

fare and native homicide, endangering Bureau relations, conveying Federation authority to private citizens, and general knavery. Not to mention a formal Declaration Brief to draft."

Pax frowns.

"What do you call right side up for the Flenni?"

I sigh. Pax does not really understand yet.

"Well, tentatively, they should be protected in their efforts to maintain their own cultural identity, to extend their life span by deferring ma"—I catch myself—"and to build an economy. It won't be easy. There's probably always been a hostile tension between the two forms since they are ecological competitors. The long-lived Esthaans had apparently shut the Flenni out of their urban technology by the time of First Contact. I suspect Harkness of having precipitated the acute stage. The Esthaans got the idea that the Flenni cycle was a dreadful defect which barred them from human status. They started out to conceal and minimize it, to ape human ways, and to reduce the Flenni to the status of breeding animals. Maybe the hate is deeper. The Esthaans have all the Flenn genes. They may have a primordial, unconscious sex-drive which they can never fulfill—and which is incarnated in the Flenni. At any rate they're now acting out a full-blown social psychosis, and the social engineers are going to have one sweet job. But of course, biologically—" I pause.

"Go on, Ian."

"Well, you know it. The Flenni genes combine with ours. It's possible the alternating system is carried by recessives and could in the long run be bred out."

Pax is silent. I hear him catch his breath. For the first time he has considered what his child by Flanya might be. Is it possible that this dove of a girl will give birth to a neuter sausage—an Esthaan?

"Time to turn in."

"Yes." His voice is dull.

I lie gazing at the pink moons, thinking *Poor Pax, poor good retriever boy*. Interbreeding may eventually solve the planet's dilemma—but meanwhile, how many human hearts will go out to the Flenn beauty, the Flenn sexual impact? Only in dreams do we ever see beings who are literally all male or all female. The most virile human man, the most seductive woman is, in fact, a blend. But the Flenni are the pure expression of one sex alone—overwhelming, irresistible.

YOUR HAPLOID HEART

How many of us will give ourselves to them, only to find the beauty dying in our arms?

Whatever Pax's first-born will be, the arms that held it will be those of a dying crone—who only weeks before had been his blooming love.

The pink moons sail the zenith, sweet as the gift of Flenni love. The image of Molly's face comes finally to comfort me. Molly who can love and live, who will greet me among our children. I must remember, I think drowsily, to tell her how good it is to be a diploid sporozoön. . . .



KEITH ROBERTS

As technology progresses and man continues to reproduce, the world is more and more filled with people making noise. By the year 2000, postulates Keith Roberts, there may be nowhere at all on the planet where a person can find any quiet. If so, how might that affect us?

It was the earplugs that started the trouble. Or rather the absence of earplugs, the difficulties Travers encountered trying to purchase such an antique and potentially unsociable commodity. Although he had of course prepared a cover story; in fact he had four, each vaguely less credible than the last. But not even as a laboratory technician conducting experiments in a new and highly secret project concerned with sonic warfare was he successful. Earplugs were not to be had.

Once implanted, though, the notion wouldn't leave him. He developed the reprehensible habit of stuffing his ears

with assorted scraps of paper, tissue, anything that lay to hand. He considered the Sound absorbing properties of a wide range of substances. Hot wax at one time seemed a possibility; but there was no way of controlling its runniness. Working on one's own perhaps, one's head turned thus, sideways on the table . . . His one experiment was a messy failure. Wax was definitely out; but other things, equally definitely, were in.

He became absentminded. His vagueness manifested itself in increasingly painful attempts to ram further objects into ears already stuffed to capacity. The trouble was of course, the whole trouble was, that nothing *lasted*. A few minutes, perhaps only seconds, of delirious numbness, the total lack of auditory sensation; then Sound would once more begin to seep and creep in at the edges, through the interstices of the wadding; and there were the devils again, albeit muted, hoofing and pounding inside his skull.

He developed a new theory, one that despite scientific implausibility he was unable to drive from his mind. In essence, it was that the plugs *soaked up* noise, became soggy with din and therefore permeable. His fresh preoccupation dictated rapid, frenetic changing of plugs and alternation of materials. Ceramics were in now, and well greased hand-carved wood. These latter masterpieces he lay regularly in the sink, ostensibly to drain.

This was Travers' life. At dawn, with the Dicky Dobson Rise and Glow Show, he obediently rose. Two hours later—two hours of Sporting Roundup, and the Humming Hillbillies, and Keeling Cocos Walker and his Set and the News in Brief and Howdy Again Folks and all the rest—the interblock tube disgorged him at his place of work, the forty-story highrise topped, as a cake is topped with icing, by the two floors and mezzanine annex of Maschler-Crombie-Cohen Associates. There it was his pleasure to paste up an endless flow of newssheet small ads, juggling objects as disparate as hormone cream and harmonicas into proper relationships with the fat-face type, the bursting stars and dollar signs that since time immemorial had been deemed fitting to proclaim their excellence.

"Pasteup man"—the ad game, for decades now merely the poor relation of the PR industry and one of the more conservative of professions, still attached such antique labels to its minions. In fact Travers used a Grant and Digby, a bulky combination of epidiascope and dyeline printer that

KEITH ROBERTS

enabled images to be enlarged, reduced, squeezed, expanded and jazzed up at pleasure before being fixed by the simple pressure of a button. It was a nice machine; some illusion almost of privacy might be gained once Travers had involved himself in the intricacies of its various folding black plastic hoods. Though even there, of course, the office din penetrated. No video, naturally; but the wallspeakers belched forth for the stipulated Union minimum of six and one-quarter hours a day, their repetitions interlaced with the irate shouts of the studio manager pursuing this or that vanished example of still life; and of course each artist had his own Mintran propped beside him so that at any one instant the total effect might be enriched by tinny renderings of subjects as far removed as Puccini and mid-twentieth-century Progressive Jazz.

At sixteen hundred hours Travers tubed homeward to begin his long evening of leisure. The tubecars were all fitted with Trivee now; he wondered how the youngsters had ever sustained their short journeys without it. He himself, he had decided, was no longer young. He could remember tubecars without Trivee, and many other things; after all he had given twelve years of his working life now to the Grant and Digby. Once indeed while shaving—the twenty-first century, in other respects the acme of technological perfection, had not as yet universally disposed of the human whisker—he discovered a single fairly long white hair. He told Deidre about it that night; but she merely laughed at him in the cool slow way she had, and told him how little age mattered to real men and women, and kissed him and ran away to throw a pebble in the sea.

This was Travers' life in the evenings. The tubecar dropped him again at the foot of his own Elbee. Then he would ride the elevator—they were talking about Trivee for elevators too now, he'd read—past floor after shouting floor to his own room on the forty-third. Though the phrase "own room" struck him from time to time as curious. If by some mischance he happened to find himself one day not in Room 633 but in another of the eight hundred-odd cream-and-floral plastic boxes that comprised the Living Block, how, he wondered, would he divine that cell was not his own, his private, personal and totally secure fragment of twenty-first century culture? From little marks perhaps, dents, scuffings on the walls where from time to time he had hurled objects in those fits of childish pique that seemed to be becoming

THERAPY 2000

more frequent with him. The missiles of course provoked no reaction; so Sound-soaked were the walls that one crash more or less had become as nothing between friends. So Travers' boots, the condiments from his meager eats cupboard and occasionally Travers himself, were projected against yielding, translucent walls of rose-budded plastic behind which shadows that were electronic bawled and strutted throughout the livelong day. And through all but a fragment of the livelong night.

But how precious that remaining fragment! Travers had long since counted the number and decided on the exact disposition of the Trivee sets within his immediate range of hearing. Basically, he was surrounded. Above and below, naturally; and on two sides. The third side of the room, the corridor partition, though by no means impervious, provided the nearest approach to a dead area. The fourth side was the party-wall of a toilet. There were no windows. Rooms with windows were expensive; eighty dollars a week against the mere fifty Travers paid for his pad. Not that the absence of a view perturbed him unduly. He was, or had become, impervious to views. He had not, unfortunately, become impervious to Sound; an outside wall would have afforded him another slight zone of quiet, rendered less multidirectional the continuous assault on his senses.

Travers lived what amounted to his life in the three hours between the Wee Small Show (that came after the Late Show and the Late Late Show) and the dawn chorus of the inimitable Dicky Dobson. At one time, the gap in transmission had lasted four hours. Before that, four and a half. Travers had watched its remorseless closing with terror and dismay, rather as a primitive man might observe, frowning, the inexorable swallowing of the sun during an eclipse. Once indeed the gap had been reduced to a mere two hours; but (possibly for the first time) God had come to Travers' aid. Not admittedly in His own person but through the offices of Walk-In-Light, that immensely powerful body with cells in every country of the globe. Travers heard the announcement perforce, one evening; in accordance with the illimitable possibilities of mathematics, three neighboring Trivees had at last become tuned to the same channel and the results penetrated the latest version of the Travers Sanity Protector with tolerable ease. The declaration was made by the Chairman of Walk-In-Light in person; at megadollar expense, he re-

KEITH ROBERTS

ported proudly, the Corporation had negotiated one hour's Silence per day, for meditation and for prayer. Presumably there was an outcry; but Walk-In-Light was rich, very rich indeed, and the ban had held. Travers, in gratitude and curiosity, had even sent for their pamphlet, *Salvation*; it came in a manila-tinted plastic envelope on which a naked man and woman, both tastefully sexless, held up arms to an engulfing orange sun. Travers was intrigued; not so much, admittedly, by the prospect of Immortal Friendship as by the soundproofed Chapels of the order, where meditation time could be purchased on a ticket-and-rota basis. But enrollment and subscription fees were high, out of the question for Travers with his mere two hundred dollars a week, and he had had reluctantly to shelve the dream.

His other dream—the important dream—remained.

He called her Deidre. Or rather by mutual consent they had decided her name was Deidre. She, laughing and golden, flicking her golden hair. She was his one vice, hope and recreation.

He didn't know, or couldn't remember, how Deidre had come into being. Born of childish fancies perhaps, those stories children tell themselves at night beneath the bedclothes; but Deidre was not a night-shape, a succubus. She was real and vivid, real as any woman, more real than some; she got the blues and headcolds and PMT and once she cut herself and bled; she'd have her quiet moods and reflective moods and there was one special kittenish mood where nothing he said was right and nothing he did was right and he'd get mad, knowing she didn't mean it but thinking she didn't realize how Time was slipping and fleeting. Then they'd fight or she'd just sit quiet and watch him, her face calm and frozen and in pain; and next day would be hell. Hell at the office, hell inside the projector where images of her swam bright and golden-brown and sea-blue, distracting spots before his eyes. Next day and next night, till the last Trivee flicked off and she'd come running to him, a little girl, out of cool dusk or dawn, and say how long it had been, how it had been so long. Then she'd tell him about her day and what she'd done, the clothes she'd made—she was brilliant at making things, clothes, homes, happiness, anything—and ask him how it had been, how things had gone with him. And it would come pouring out, the frustration, the hopelessness, the endless gray and bright-vivid din in the endless gray and bright-vivid city, the human

hive of Nothingness. Then she'd hold him in her arms, head pushed hard against her breasts, and croon and laugh and make him forget and he'd lose himself in the warmth of her and sleep to wake, and sleep again.

That Deidre was real was his own private and carefully-considered conclusion. Somewhere, somehow, a spatial, a temporal link had gone bust, he'd come halfway across into another reality, the only reality that held any meaning for him. A time link, almost certainly; for the things Deidre showed him, the places they roamed, couldn't exist. Not now, not any more.

Did she invent the places, to please him? He'd asked her often enough. But she only laughed then, invariably, and teased him, and wouldn't say. He'd thought for a time she was keeping something from him, some lonely secret that once unlocked might plunge them both back to the limbo of night and day. But there was nothing; she told him that once, honestly and simply, hands around his hands, blue eyes searching his, flicking forward and back in those little shifts and changes of direction that were so much a part of her. When she spoke like that, with calmness and assurance, there was no doubting her. In that voice, and with that manner, she had told him there was indeed a God.

Being real brought its drawbacks. For who could tell in what of a hundred, a thousand ways, Travers might harm his girl? Something done or said, unknowing, in the day, some curious link forged that might . . . what? Destroy, poison somehow all that was lovely and real? With the knowledge, Travers experienced a huge reaction. For months afterward, nothing was too good for Deidre. And Deidre was so deliciously, so easily capable of being spoiled. For this she took, accepted, with that same naïve—not naïve, that wasn't the word, nor childish nor simple either—the same delight, that reveling in things physical, that characterized all she did. "Look after me" she would say. "Wrap me up. Make me feel all warm and yummy." These things he did, rejoicing yet still afraid; that one day, one day . . .

"Tosh."

Deidre was sitting on a beach. Her favorite beach. The curve of sand, white where the sun had dried it, cream-brown where the retreating tide uncovered it, stretched to a high hill, a green headland crowned by a clump of wind-swept trees. Beyond the headland were others, pillars of

KEITH ROBERTS

rock that marched in stately progression, sunlight misty on their faces, to the bright haze of the horizon.

"Boo," said Deidre. Then once more taking his hands, "Dear, *I love you*. Can't you see—oh I can't explain, I'm no good with words. But can't you see that's all that matters?"

He wouldn't answer, not then. He was wrapped in thought. Till she scooped up sand to flick at him, and ran away, plunged into the sea. And they came back, to the hut by the beach—it was the hut this time, not the cottage. She had a cottage too with white walls soaked in sunlight and hung with brass and copper pots and pans and a great hearth with inglenooks and deep, deep creamy-white sheep-skin for rugs. They would pile the skins and make love on them, in the dancing leaping shifting light of the flames. Afterward was when he could most look after her. Coffee simmered on the hearth; he would take a cup to her and lift her, still wrapped in the fleeces, hold her while she nuzzled and drank. And she would half wake up, or barely wake up at all, lie tousled and golden and supple, the flamelight on her face, eyes shut, making the warm-cat noises in her throat, smiling maliciously to tease him; then want to go back to bed, and do it again, and sleep, sleep wonderfully. And he would brush her hair, long silky hair she'd grown for him, and she would purr some more and call him childish names and coming from her the brown warm syllables didn't sound wrong. Then at last they would hurry and scramble, both afraid of Time, like kids caught at a cookie jar more than responsible, responding adults; and she would hold him again, briefly, and kiss him once more and—

How did she leave him?

He didn't know.

But the cream walls of the cubicle were alive with light, and beyond them the familiar hated voices hammered.

"Wakey-wakey, Rise and Glow; it's the Dicky Dobson Show. . . ."

While Deidre faded, wraithlike and sad, into mists.

But the days; the long, pointless, Sound-filled days! The hours stretched it seemed interminably until he could call her again. Sleep, for Travers, was impossible against the din; and tranquilizers were equally denied him. Once, drugged, he had tried to summon Deidre and she could not or would not come; she had been just a darkness in the dark, a silhouette that cried and cried as a bird might cry, paled and thinned to vanish into another dawn. Hence, he had never

touched the stuff again. Hence, the games with the plugs.

Deidre disapproved of them when he told her, bit her lip and frowned. She would not tell him why; he sensed the hurt and worry, and felt lost, and a whole irreplaceable hour passed before they were themselves again. After that he said nothing more to her. He had never, as far as he could remember, kept a secret from her before.

Three days later he found out, in part, why she had been concerned. He developed an abscess.

It was very painful. To be more precise, it was as if a small blazing sun had become locked irrevocably and agonizingly onto his jaw. Sleep with it was out of the question; though he sensed the hands of Deidre, the soul and life-force of Deidre, striving to reach him through the blanket of pain. He shouted and cried, banged his head, fainted perhaps; in the morning, at first light or before—before, even, the Dicky Dobson Show—he was forced to seek his doctor.

Four agonizing hours before his appointment. He videoed his studio manager, who laughed at his face, then asked if it would help if he cried and when Travers, wordless, shook his head, laughed a good bit more. By then Travers had become grottesque, the pus bursting and squeezing into new pockets, causing fresh inflammation. Though with the increased swelling the pain was mercifully eased. The spiritual pain was worse now; the knowledge of wrongness and stupidity, of having somehow, through what he had done, hurt Deidre. He needed urgently to see her, explain, hold her in his arms. But that was impossible. Instead, there was Doctor Rees.

The doctor was annoyed. With, Travers suspected, good reason. For the Foreign Bodies Doctor Rees accused him of inserting into his ears—some scraps and oddments were apparently retrieved—were the primary cause of suffering; and Travers' suffering was the primary cause of the doctor wasting his time. Travers was upset. He liked Doctor Rees; or more exactly he tried to like him, conscientiously and seriously. Yet it was difficult; for the doctor had a Trivee clamped to his desk and while he worked and diagnosed, Kandinsky—for the fifth time that week, Travers had counted—fought again his classic fifteen rounds with Bleeding Billy Cheshire. Shafts of color played across the desktop, and there was Sound. Travers was developing, he decided, a re-

KEITH ROBERTS

tentive memory. He had the frantic commentary by heart, nearly word for word; he found himself correspondingly more ready to twitch at every Covering Up, every barrage of Leftsandrightstothetbody, every Scarlet Niagara.

But the doctor was talking.

He was a bland young man with a paunch. And unbelievably, quite extraordinarily, spotty. Secretly, Travers blamed that on the Trivèe. It was another of his theories, equally unscientific: that continued Sound, aimed largely at the head, must in time be absorbed till the tissues, becoming as one might say waterlogged, rejected each new assault of breves and semibreves, each shockwave of octaves and dissonances. Doctor Rees' face sweated Sound, through the entire audio spectrum: forty hz to fifteen thousand, with traces of twentieth harmonic discernible only by oscilloscope. The Harmonic, or Unharmonic, Theory of Pustules. . . .

Travers really must pay attention. He was being sent to a specialist, he understood, because this must stop. Yes, he nodded, yes; he understood and did agree. They had dressed his face for him; it felt clean and comfortable. He would do anything, anything at all; for his own good, he appreciated that. Or there would be real trouble, and Travers, unconsciously and a trifle mysteriously, would be in it.

He told Deidre, that night. She had half a hundred questions for him, about the doctor, and what he had said and done, and the specialist Travers was to see. What sort of specialist?

Travers blushed, feeling foolish. He had been too nervous to ask.

But he thought once more what he had thought many times before, what a splendid nurse Deidre would have made. He saw her in a cool ward, white and starched and tall, with a headdress like a great crisp linen butterfly. He woke for once refreshed, and the image sustained him through his hours at Maschler-Crombie.

In the evening though, there was trouble again.

He had wanted to call Deidre early. Really early, just for once. Because there was so much to say again, about his short, tumultuous day. He'd heard—just heard, mind you, it was only in the wind—about a new position going at Maschler. An upstairs job. He'd asked his studio manager and Rawlinson hadn't refused, definitely hadn't refused. Hummed and hawed maybe and glared over his glasses' tops and doubted this and doubted that, but he hadn't said no, not

THERAPY 2000

outright. There were fifty dollars a week in the change, the chance of an outside room. Travers felt nearly faint at the thought. An outside room, with all the privileges it entailed: a whole wall, one complete side of his existence free from din! In his mind's eye he already saw the room, himself sitting at the window; a summer night maybe, with the millions on millions of winking jewel-lights that were the city shimmering and crawling, a living map spread out far below. . . . After that the reality of Pad 633 was hard to take. Particularly now that he had been forbidden his secret vice. He sat and brooded, in the brightness and yammering din, hands cupped to the sides of his head; lay down on his pallet, tossed, got up, made coffee, drank it, lay down again, sat. The hands of the wallclock crawled with impossible slowness, marking the seconds and minutes sullenly, as if even the clock wished to deprive him of that interlude of peace still so achingly far away.

Toward twenty hundred hours a curious mood took possession of him. For the first time, perhaps in years, he found himself questioning why he, Travers, must be singled out for such bizarre misadventures. The affair of the plugs, for instance; thinking back, reconstructing his every action, he could find no flaw in logic, no point at which one might say "Here, Travers went off the rails." No, he had done what he had done out of need; a quirk perhaps, but basic necessity to him as an individual. Then he took to wondering if there had ever been a time—in the Cambrian for instance, or the lazy, lagoon-haunted Devonian—when there had been Quiet. If there was in fact any place now (apart from those priceless Chapels that had made the fortunes of Walk-In-Light) where Quietness might be said, even briefly, to prevail. Certainly not in what remained of the countryside. He had scraped and saved years enough to buy his one brief vacation away from the city, but it had been pointless. Everywhere, every few yards it seemed, in those carefully-preserved fields, on fragments of beach, in the hills that at one point defined the city's limits, they had set up comfort posts; the tourists, wandering aimless and a little scared, clustered around them plugging in earphones, handsets, recharging the accumulators of MinTrans, drawing a precious ambrosia of Sound into their very souls. There had been nothing for him there. None of those empty beaches

KEITH ROBERTS

of his, or Deidre's dreams, no sighing of wind in grass, splash and chatter of waves and rock and sand. . . .

He found himself, against his will and better judgment and much to his surprise, using his vidphone. The directory numbers flicked past, green and vivid, as he spun through the lists. He found what he was looking for, dialed Post Office, Central Tower, gulped twice and made his complaint as clearly and concisely as he could.

The gentleman who faced him from the small, fizzing screen was sympathetic. Yes, yes, excess of Sound, very regrettable; each citizen was of course strictly controlled, was given a decibel rating in exact accordance with his status; was Travers *sure* local db regulations were being abused?

Travers was sure.

Then, said his new friend and benefactor, action would be taken. Immediately. Central Engineers combed the city constantly in search of defaulters; a van was on call in the locality, was in fact already on the way. Not to worry, Mr. Travers; just sit tight, and wait for the light. . . . With an impersonal, professional grin the complaints clerk erased himself.

I've done it now, thought Travers, with a mixture of terror and exultation. *Deidre, I've really done it now*. . . .

But what if . . . suppose, hope against hope . . . suppose something was actually *done*? Travers imagined, or tried to image, Silence. Spreading like a balm, like the stately ripples on a pool, from his cubicle, through and across the building. He gave himself up to dreaming. He saw himself the patriarch, the archpriest, of a new faith. What if, from its tiny beginning, that faith was to continue to grow? Through the city, the country, leaping seas maybe, to span the world. The vision was giddy and immense. Silence; a new creed gathering hundreds, thousands, millions perhaps of converts. How large a box, he wondered, would be needed to ensure total Quiet? Walls a yard thick, a hundred yards, half a mile? Money would be no object. He saw the tree-lined roads that would radiate from the shrine, the traffic on them crawling and muted. He saw the place with inner vividness, the white square sundrenched block of its walls. Inside, an eternity of Quiet. With Deidre . . .

The caller telltale above the door winked insistently, an angry red eye.

How long had he been engrossed? Minutes only; but

THERAPY 2000

even Sound had temporarily faded from him. He drifted to the door, dreamlike still in his new and temporary exaltation.

There were two engineers. And a vast amount of apparatus, meters, bowl-shaped direction finders, trolleys replete with controls and dials, a microphone on a collapsible stand, its head flattened and jointed like a shining chromium snake. They plugged in this and tested that, logged the time, reported back to headquarters, checked Travers' name and Identicode; consulted sheaves of tables and notes, produced from somewhere a huge plan of the Elbee—they were it seemed wonderfully well equipped—and at last were ready to begin.

Travers prayed silently.

The microphone head turned questing, while the dial needles swung and quivered. Lights flashed off and on; Travers felt sweat break out on his forehead and beneath his arms.

The microphone was snuffling at the ceiling now.

"Negative," said the Post Office man. "Two point eight (something or other) inside max."

They pointed the little machine at the floor.

"Negative there," said the operator, recalibrating. "Five off zero reading."

But the screaming and yelling, the music, the rhythms that mixed and madly overlapped, the brilliant, endless din, this was *negative*? The microphone was deaf, or not adjusted. They were cheating him.

"Look, mister," said the Post Office man. "You got us on a kind of bum call here."

"Wait a minute. . . ."

Fresh hope.

The mike head was pointing at the corner of the floor. Almost, to Travers, it seemed to be quivering. As if scenting a victim.

"We've got a nine five over there," said the operator. "Okay, mister, you got a case."

Direction finders were put into operation. Dials consulted, the plan spread out on Travers' pallet.

"That's the guy," said the Post Office man, pointing. "Name of Lupcheck. That's an eighty dollar fine. Okay, Mr. Travers, thanks for calling us. Can't have people getting all upset by racket. Not good for the system."

And with a final scurrying of leads and flexes, a vanishing

KEITH ROBERTS

of shining, incomprehensible objects into boxes, they were gone.

Travers wrung his hands.

Lupcheck. . . . He knew Lupcheck, well enough. And Lupcheck knew Travers; their paths had crossed once before. Lupcheck drove a crane at the local supermart: a bulky, bright blue affair that raced continuously, with pneumatic hissings and snorts, along the complication of rails suspended above the acre and a half of displayed wares. Grapefruit, canned goods, toilet packs and MinTrans, artificial flowers, eggboxes and cheese, each and every conceivable commodity was seized by Lupcheck from its warehouse rack, flung to its allotted place as the dumps dwindled under the feverish, picking hands of the consumers. Often Travers had admired his dexterity with the crane; till one day some complicated event took place that left a consumer buffeted and hatless and spilled banana clumps and tinned Sevilles and marmalade pots and cereals across the floor. The consumer shouted something angrily at the roof, and was answered, and kept on shouting, till Lupcheck swung down—he had a little spidery unexpected ladder that extended from the side of the crane. Lupcheck was not tall, but he was very broad, and sported orange-gray hair that grew in erratic tufts across his wide skull and thick, reddish forearms. His fists were large, with knuckles that were seamed and cracked; one swipe from one fist and the consumer's spectacles were terribly embedded in the side of his face, and blood was dripping and splashing in big round gobs onto the floor, and the consumer was crying while Lupcheck climbed, still annoyed and grumbling, back to his machine. And Travers walked quickly to the exit, feeling ill and not wanting the things he had bought, wondering with a sort of sick amazement why he had never realized before the full destructive power of the ball of bone at the end of a human arm.

Travers was afraid of Lupcheck. Now he had cost him eighty dollars.

Some time after the decibel hunters had gone, one might or might not have detected a small reduction in the overall uproar from the Trivees. Travers passed a restless night, too miserable for sleep, unable to summon Deidre. As always, disbelief came with the cessation of the din. It was like trying to remember pain; it seemed inconceivable that the

Elbee had not always been wrapped in a breathing quiet. Lights flicked off in the surrounding cubicles till Travers lay staring into velvet dark. In the dark, he cursed himself bitterly. What a little thing it seemed after all, this simple matter of Sound! For no reason at all, or hardly any reason, he had jeopardized the coming morning. And denied himself Deidre, and hurt her; he had no doubt of that. He composed himself for sleep with a species of desperation; but dawn inched up, and Dicky Dobson burst into his daily cacophony, while Travers still lay red-eyed and restless. Now, horrors yawned, for if he avoided Lupcheck, this was in any case the Day of the Specialist.

Lupcheck caught him in the elevator.

Travers thumbed the controls in panic but the other was too fast for him. He rammed a shoulder at the door as it was wheezing shut; the mechanism whistled peevishly, slid open and closed again with Lupcheck inside. The elevator started its smooth descent.

Lupcheck twisted his fingers in the front of Travers' clothing, lifted him to his toes and pushed him against the side of the car. Travers wheezed, staring into bulging pale-blue eyes. As had happened before, he felt curiously detached; a part of his brain realized that Lupcheck was genuinely angry and puzzled over it while his eyes recorded the coarse texture of the other's skin, the networks of tiny branching veins, the individual tousled hairs of the thick brows, some reddish, some white, some gray. A tiny muscle twitched at the corner of Lupcheck's mouth and Travers wondered for an instant of time whether the crane operator might not be as unhappy as he. Then the rage came, swimming and cold. It dictated that Travers should drive his knee into Lupcheck's groin, bring down a disabling fist on the junction between nose and eyes. What he had seen in the supermart held him back. Lupcheck was invincible; there would be other blows, like the blows of a great salty hammer, too terrible to be borne; and things breaking inside Travers' mouth—he could see the blood already and feel the pain. So he hung limp while Lupcheck banged him at the side of the elevator again, and growled and promised and swore.

Whatever happened now Deidre would be angry. Angry at his cowardice, angry if he fought and was uselessly hurt. So Travers had to hear the things Lupcheck said, and make the undertakings Lupcheck required, and scuttle away, when Lupcheck finally released him, grateful and reprieved. The

KEITH ROBERTS

rage still seethed and boiled; it wouldn't leave him now, he knew, till Deidre had suffered for it. As ever, against his will. But suffer she must, if for no other reason, for the folly and incompetence of God.

The rage buoyed Travers on his way to Hospital Block. He had been there once before, years ago, and dimly remembered the way. He shoved along crowded underpasses echoing with the high-pitched clatter of Travelators, the heavier thunder of streetcars. Trivees, set here and there in walls and roofs, competed with the din. Interspersed with them were talking posters and advertisements, around the borders of which blue and pink and scarlet, white and yellow flame-shapes and tartan-patterns raced. Hospital Block was well signposted. It seemed to extend electronic nerve-fibers into the underpasses; soon Travers found himself confronted by the conflicting possibilities of Path, Ear, Nose and Throat, Ophthalmic, Geriatric, Cancer and half a dozen more ominously-labeled departments. The light-trails—follow the Red and Blue—also flashed, confusingly. He went wrong twice, backtracked, found his way eventually to a Travelator that wound smoothly up a steepening incline, deposited him in the reception area of the place.

This too he remembered. The endless concrete walls, the hard white glare of lighting from many troughs; and the din. Loudhailers, aimed in all directions, rasped strings of Identicode numbers, referring outpatients to any of a score of gates and elevators. In line after line of frontless, unpainted cubicles, cases deemed unworthy of admission to the maze above were treated by a frantically-rushing white-coated staff; beyond was Casualty Section, hectic with the influx of an entire city. Ambulances, delivered at intervals of seconds from a range of entry lifts, disgorged stretchers and walking injured; more staff, nurses and orderlies, swarmed around them. There was a constant clanging of alarm bells, a clash and rattle of trolleys. In one place Travers saw the wreckage of a vehicle, transported in the maw of a huge recovery truck, decanted with scant ceremony onto a sloping slipway. Men scuttled forward, one lugging the cylinders of an antique oxyacetylene cutter. The victims would presumably be extracted on the spot, like fresh bright herrings from a can. Travers shuddered and turned away, presented his Identitag to the impersonal scrutiny of an Appointments Monitor. The machine blinked, ticked rapidly

and rewarded him with a punched and coded card. He hurried on, jostled now, deciphering his instructions as he went.

Within the Block proper the din was if anything worse. There were wards, full of noise, bright-glimpsed as he hurried past; corridors echoing with the mechanical clatter of trolleys and utensils. He was harried and buffeted, directed from point to point. At length, high in the building, the wall codings began to make sense. He found his corridor, counted off doors, presented the card to a scanner and was mechanically admitted to a featureless, carpeted ante-room.

At least it was quieter here. A solitary Trivee played, its Sound muted. A receptionist—human at last—took over the direction of Travers' affairs. He was told to sit and wait, given a plastic-leaved magazine to thumb. He read, automatically, words that made no sense. And prayed for Deidre. At other times, other great crises in his life, the technique had worked. He closed his eyes, concentrated. Forced back the light that filtered through the lids, forced back the Sound.

"Mr. Travers. . . ."

Travers looked up with a start at the testy repetition. Again, he was off on the wrong foot. Now he had annoyed the specialist.

He was ushered to an inner office. Here, at last, was Quiet. A Quiet so intense the whick-whick, the slow whirr and rustle of the ceiling-mounted fan sounded loud. The specialist consulted a plastic-covered folder of notes, frowned, clucked and shook his head. Then he steepled his fingers, regarding Travers morosely over their tips as he talked.

The great man made his points carefully, occasionally tapping the desktop for greater emphasis. First, Travers must realize the considerable problem he and others like him posed to a modern society; a society, the specialist stressed, organized on sound historical principles for the greatest good of the greatest number of its members. He repeated, in effect, the admonitions of Doctor Rees; while Travers nodded dumbly, wishing to be no inconvenience. Only wanting, were the truth to be known, to escape once more into his desert of Sound.

But that, it seemed, was not to be. For the specialist was still talking, questioning and probing now, insistently. The direction of the questioning was strange. Things from Travers'

KEITH ROBERTS

childhood, remote events to be dredged up and reexamined and puzzled over. Travers answered the questions, reticent at first then more eager, till at last the whole grief came blubbering and boiling from him, the Need, the great Need of his soul, for Quiet. The notion of the Shrine.

Travers stopped, appalled. But the specialist was beaming now, urging him to continue. The specialist himself understood Travers' problem, he really understood. As for a solution: why, within this modern society, in this best of all possible worlds, anything could be achieved. And the Need was after all very simple to fulfill. The answer? No mile-thick pill-boxes, no apparatus, no romantic, unattainable dreams. . . .

Travers blinked as the full beauty of the solution dawned on him. So simple, so sublimely simple, simple as Relativity, simple as all truly great and original ideas. . . . It would mean of course the sacrifice of his new position, the end of the day-old dream of an outside room; but his mind glowed already with the other, greater possibilities. Happiness, total and complete, for him, and for Deidre. He saw himself already, breaking the wonderful news: of Time, Time unlimited, Time for them to be together. The world faded; he saw nothing but the bright and perfect future. He nodded, feverish, voiceless in his impatience, eager only to sign the forms the specialist proffered him, and begin.

He was conducted to yet another room. Aseptic this time, white and gleaming. The nurse who readied him was brown-skinned and supple. Like Deidre, almost, with silky hair, a wave of it he was sure, hidden by her neat white cap. But she shoved and pushed at him indifferently, as if he were a carcass, a simple hunk of meat unworthy of human consideration. Her eyes, when they once met his, seemed full of a bored contempt; then he saw the MinTran speaker in her ear, the spidery flex running into the collar of her uniform, and was able to return the stare from the height of a loftier indifference.

The local took effect immediately, an icy numbness spreading from jaw to neck and temples. He was led to a chair that molded itself to him as he sat, reclined and tilted at the touch of innumerable shining levers. A lamp was switched on, planet-bright and close; he felt the momentary pulse of heat from it on cheeks and nose before a cloth was laid

THERAPY 2000

neatly over his eyes. His head was turned; fingers probed his dead cheeks, dimpling.

The instruments made little sounds. Ringings, and clinks. Then closer squeaks and gratings, once a crunch; then nothing. Nothing at all.

The cloth was withdrawn; and Travers stared around dazed. The nightmare was ended, cleanly and neatly, in a mere instant of time. No more Dicky Dobson now, no more Rise and Glow; no more people; nothing. So perfect was the technique, they had assured him, that his balance would be unimpaired; just a simple matter of excision, removal of tiny bones that worked in sequences of other tiny bones, alignments functioning with jewel-precision to transmit hell from the four quarters of the globe to the inside of his skull. . . .

The faces were mouthing at him now. Nurse, anesthetist, surgeon; praise or curses, congratulations or contempt. He smiled back, euphorically. He neither knew nor cared.

And there was the silent city, outside. The silent tube-cars and the silent Travelators, the silent people and the silent vehicles. A million silent windows, eyes of cubicles that housed a million silent Trivees. Somewhere Lupcheck drove his silent crane, mimed his silent rage; poor stupid defeated Lupcheck, who now didn't matter at all.

Work was out of the question for today. Travers threaded his way home carefully, watchful for the dizziness they had warned him might possibly occur for a time. He elevated to his room, slid the silent doorpanel closed. Beyond the walls, as ever, electronic patterns danced. He smiled at them too, a smile of benediction.

He undressed slowly, now with all the Time in the world. The worry of the night, the strain of the day, had exhausted him. He curled up on the pallet, pulled the covers around himself and fell almost instantly asleep.

The beach flicked on. And there was Deidre running, running as she had never run before. He ran too, feeling his feet stumble in the sunwarmed sand, arms outstretched. He tried to hug her, but she pushed him away. He saw then, bewildered, the sheen of tears on chin and throat; and her eyes, the terrible accusation there. She fell to her knees, holding her throat and rocking with misery, asking again and again the same silent question, *why, why*, till understanding came at last.

Deidre was dumb.



SIXTH SENSE

MICHAEL G. CONEY

Quite a few science fiction stories have postulated future societies in which everyone spoke telepathically, but few have managed to portray how people would react among each other in such a world so convincingly as does Michael G. Coney's story below.

I DIDN'T REMEMBER any individuals that morning: just a sea of drinking faces between myself and closing time. I know I was busy, and usually when the inn is crowded, time goes quickly. But that morning dragged. My God, how it dragged. I do remember a certain amount of good-natured banter and leg-pulling, as the regular customers realized that my mind was not on my job, and I served them Scotch when they asked for beer, and when they pointed out the error I still couldn't get it right. . . .

At last it was 1500 and I had signified time, and they were drifting out. I closed the door behind the final laggard and pottered around the room, aimlessly picking up glasses

SIXTH SENSE

and putting them down again. . . . I turned on the water, filled the sink, dropped in a few dirty glasses and swirled them around absently.

I couldn't stand it any longer. I left the glasses to drain, opened the door and went outside, my stomach a knot of anticipation. I crossed the lane and walked over the short, springy salt grass to the clifftop. I turned, and gazed inland.

Across the fields, far away, a wraith of dust rose into the still air, moving slowly, too slowly.

As I watched it my thoughts were suddenly carried back by a vivid process of *déjà vu*, and it was once again that hot summer's day, three years ago. . . .

I stood on the doorstep of the inn, thinking of nothing in particular, just watching the sea sparkling in the afternoon sunshine, misting blue-gray with distance so that the horizon was difficult to discern.

It was hot, humid, almost steamy, and for a moment I toyed with the idea of strolling down the hill to the little village at the water's edge, and stripping off, and having a cool swim. From the inn, perched near the clifftop, the water looked clear and inviting in the small cove which formed the village harbor: I could see the bottom, silvery shingle merging into dark green around the base of the cliff. I didn't need to open the bar until 1700; I had plenty of time. . . .

But there were the guests to think about. The paying guests. They had written to say that they would be arriving about mid-afternoon, and it wouldn't look too good if there were no reply when they thumbed the entrmitter, and they had to wait on the doorstep, baffled, while I pounded back up the hill from the village, clutching wet trunks and towel.

They would be hot and tired and they would want baths and drinks. My place has no pretensions to opulence, in fact I only have three letting bedrooms, but I do like to make people feel welcome. In any case, my living depends on it.

So I contented myself with a stroll to the edge of the cliff, some two hundred meters away. There I stood in shirt and shorts, wishing there were a cool breeze, looking at the sea and at the birds wheeling around Gull Crag.

People have climbed Gull Crag, for fun. I've seen them doing it, watching them through the window while stand-

MICHAEL G. CONEY

ing behind the bar. I climbed it myself, once. Never again.

The cliff, where I stood, fell about eighty meters to the quiet, heavy sea. Some twenty meters down was a crumbling shale ledge, a bridge which spanned the unpleasant drop between the cliff and Gull Crag. Gull Crag itself was a towering pinnacle composed of the same shale as the cliff, but rising almost sheer from the water to a point about ten meters above the level of the clifftop, like the gnarled arm of an elderly, drowning giant.

And people climbed it for fun. Holds, they would inform me, were difficult to come by. They broke off in the hand, as soon as you found them.

Yet they would scramble down the cliff to the bridge, and nip across while the sea, on breezier days, sucked and slobbered greedily far below, and start to climb, grinning with fear. Every year a little more of the bridge would collapse into the gorge while the November gales eroded the base of the Crag itself. One day the Crag too would collapse, maybe in my lifetime. Then no more would I see these triumphant fools waving to their friends in the bar from their precarious perch on the summit, ankle-deep in seagull excrement. I sighed, saddened by the decay of a local landmark.

Turning, I saw a trail of dust rising in the still air from the lane which twisted inland among the fields. The guests. Nobody local would be returning from the town at this hour of the afternoon.

I left the clifftop and returned to the inn, practicing my open, welcoming smile.

I went inside, closing the door behind me, and waited. This is something I always do; it gives me a better chance to assess the personalities of new arrivals, before they catch sight of me and are put on their guard, and the barriers go up.

After a while I reached out. Cautiously, so as to avoid detection.

My mind was met with a jumble of confused, ill-tempered acrimony, a sense of sweatiness and discomfort, the feeling of a group of people among whom friendship was a surface veneer which had peeled off with the humidity.

Ah, well, it was going to be one of those weeks. You get all types. I opened the door wide and stepped into the fierce sunlight. It was like stepping back into a furnace. I smiled, exuding *bonhomie*.

SIXTH SENSE

The car was one of those gull-winged jobs, all enamel and platinum, with richly-decorated side-skirts, lying in the road like a wealthy but nevertheless stranded whale. One of the gull-wings rose with expensive smoothness and a tall woman stepped out, her appearance rivaling the car in ostentation.

Her greeting smacked my senses like a broadsword. "Hera Piggott," she introduced herself. She was staring at me haughtily, and I caught an image of myself in the vulgarly unguarded recesses of her mind. I was wearing a smock and across the front were three XXX's. My face was hidden under an enormous floppy hat and my legs were encased in lace-up boots. I recognized an old twentieth-century advertising art-form. I decided I didn't like Mrs. Piggott, but I kept the fact from her. You have to be an expert at that sort of thing in my trade.

"Jack Garner," I gave her back, politely.

Another wing was lifting from the whale, and another. It looked as though invisible flensers were at work. A portly, balding figure rose from the front passenger seat. Hera Piggott had been driving, naturally.

"Mr. Piggott." Rudely, his wife gave him no time to introduce himself, the power of her emission blanketing his feeble wave. "Piggy," she thought to herself, and the chorus of mental sniggers which had been discernible among the other, unseen passengers became derisive as the image of the yokel was joined by a hog.

But there was an element of dissension. A young girl stepped out from the rear of the car, smoothing her short skirt, not amused by the mental caricatures bandied around. "I'm Mandy. It's nice to see you." She meant it, too. She smiled at me and her feelings were a combination of friendliness and an odd kind of sympathy and . . . something else, something which was conveyed by her frank gaze and yet veiled in her mind. She half turned and surveyed the landscape, and I caught a sudden image from her, of Gull Crag. She looked about sixteen but I guessed that she was younger. She was quite tall, and well-built.

"My daughter." This from Hera Piggott, without pride. In fact, with ill-concealed antipathy. Jealousy, perhaps.

"Jim Blantyre," announced the dark-haired gigolo climbing out from the back, assisting his wife ("Joyce," he supplied) with exaggerated chivalry. Joyce looked mousy and downtrodden, the antithesis of Hera.

MICHAEL G. CONEY

I immediately assumed that Jim and Hera were in the throes of something sordid, and that Piggy and Joyce hadn't got the guts to do anything about it. After ten years at the inn I could sum up newly-arrived guests pretty quickly, mental barriers or not.

Introductions over, I was assailed by a jocular yet insistent joint image of four bodies lying in cool baths, drinking cocktails. The fifth person, Mandy, was guarded, or maybe drowned out.

I only possessed one bath, and was not much good at mixing cocktails, but I didn't let on. They would find out.

"Come in. . . . I'll show you to your rooms." They clattered after me and milled around the bar emitting drink images. I ignored them obtusely, concentrating on the idea of getting them to their rooms and bringing the luggage in. "Get everything sorted out first, then a nice quiet drink." I intimated, giving it an intonation of logic and sensibility. They agreed, reluctantly I thought, and I led the way, showed them two doubles and a single, and went down for the luggage.

There was a hell of a lot of it, and in each double room a divergence of opinion as to where it should be placed. "Over there." "No, dear. On the bed, so that we can unpack. No. The other bed, it's nearer the chest of drawers." Et cetera.

"Just stick it anywhere." This was the single, Mandy, and the last suitcase. "I never bring much. Then I don't get this problem of not knowing which dress to wear. It worries Mummy to death, the dress situation on holiday. I've been with her sometimes, we've been just sitting down conversing with Uncle Jim"—an odd underlying image of faint revulsion—"and all the time I can tell that, underneath it all, she's wondering if she's got the right dress on. I keep catching pictures of her, considering herself wearing something different. I decided a long time ago that I would never get like that." She smiled. She was very self-possessed.

It was a pleasure to communicate with her. The word images were beautifully clear and direct, with the sense behind them conveyed in a fluid progression.

She was pretty, too, with short hair in the current fashion, and wide brown eyes in an oval face. A nice wide mouth with faint dimples at the corners. I just caught myself in time, as unguardedly I wondered what it would be like to kiss her. For God's sake, I was getting a bit old for that sort of thing, and she was only a kid.

SIXTH SENSE

"How old are you, Mandy?" I asked.

She chuckled, and flashed a row of numbers at me, big and in old-fashioned script. 21, 20, 19, 18 . . . 17 . . . pausing longer on each numeral, waiting to catch a response from me that I believed her, so that she could stop. I helped her out, and the 17 wavered and disappeared, without being replaced.

"Seventeen," I repeated, privately doing a little more subtraction. "I'd better go and mix those cocktails."

"See you in a minute," she replied, by means of an image of herself coming down the stairs in brief black shorts and a white shirt. I got the impression that she was angling for approval. I grinned and left, without comment.

The drinks revived the guests and the atmosphere became more pleasant as they sat at the bar asking me about the locality. They were surprised when I told them I had been at the inn for ten years.

"Don't you find it dull in the winter?" Hera's question was embroidered by a snowy landscape, with deep drifts against the inn door and footprints conspicuously absent from the road to the village.

I smiled, and gave her the bar at night, the local customers all present, the open fire burning merrily in the grate, reflecting flickering highlights on the glasses.

"Yes, but nothing can ever *happen* here." An image of a gay party with people bursting bright balloons, and Hera herself the center of attraction. Outside, a busy street; above, a milling cloud of helicar.

I tried to explain how I disliked the city: the smells, the crowds, the pressure of just keeping up. How I had lived like that for twenty years, and how glad I was that I had got out of it.

But, as always, I left out the real reason. I don't like to be thought a freak. . . .

Mandy had finished her bath, she had dressed, she was coming down. I was surprised that I could detect her, at that distance. I scanned the others briefly, but they were intent on discussing some party they had attended the night before. Piggy's thoughts were accompanied by a sensation of nausea. The drink had disagreed with him, he was explaining. Someone must have tampered with it. Jim was grinning broadly, recollecting Piggy flat on his back while the dancers revolved around his prone form.

Mandy appeared at the top of the stairs, paused for ef-

MICHAEL G. CONEY

fect, and began to descend. She was wearing, of course, the black shorts and white shirt, and I must admit that she looked delectable. Her legs were long and slim, and I noticed Hera gave her own skirt an involuntary jerk, to conceal thighs which were running to fat.

"You've been long enough. We all want a bath, you know. You might have some consideration for the rest of us, young madam," was Hera's acid comment.

Mandy didn't reply to that; she was conveying the idea of going out for a walk, but she winked at me and I caught a faint image of Gull Crag and the open sea; then she looked at Jim, and the sea grew fierce, and Gull Crag was crumbling, sinking.

That night, after the locals had all stumbled back home and the bar was quiet, we sat around conversing in desultory fashion while Hera and Jim, in particular, got in their quota of drinks following the dry drive from the city.

They told me something about themselves; it appeared that Piggy and Jim were business partners, although the exact nature of the business was not specified. I did, however, get the impression that it was one of those enterprises where you took chances in order to make money fast.

Hera and Piggy had been married for five years, the second marriage for each of them. Mandy was Hera's child by her first husband. While Hera was describing the setup to me I was aware, surprisingly, of a strong bond of mutual respect and affection between Mandy and her stepfather.

Joyce, I fancied, was rather older than Jim. They, too, had been married for about five years, but there were no children. Joyce was unhappy about this and I observed a sad little half-concealed image of herself hanging a row of small clothes on a washing-line.

Jim didn't want kids; that much was clear. Actually, it was apparent that he wanted Hera, but he made a token effort to conceal the fact. From the general setup I deduced that he had married Joyce for her money and was regretting it, but was stuck with her because . . . I suppose because Joyce held the majority shareholding in the business.

Mandy's thoughts were well guarded as she sat a little apart from the others, frowning from time to time at fleeting notions I couldn't catch, and not joining in the general exchanges. She had been for a long walk after dinner, by herself, while the others washed down their food with cock-

SIXTH SENSE

tails. She was sipping a mineral water, glancing at us every now and then, but mainly gazing into her glass.

"Time you were in bed, Mandy." Hera caught her eye.

Mandy didn't receive; she was lost in some private reverie, looking through Hera rather than *at* her.

"Damn kid." Hera increased her power. "She's been nothing but a bloody nuisance all day, moping around. For God's sake have a decent drink, and enjoy yourself."

Mandy remained enigmatic, her gaze shifting to her stepfather.

As the days went by the weather grew more humid and the disposition of the guests more irritable. Each of them hot and uncomfortable, seemed to get on the others' nerves, and even the guessed-at affair between Hera and Jim was wearing a little thin.

By the fourth day they were too exhausted to do anything in the afternoon, and just lay on air-beds on the lawn at the side of the inn, while I trotted to and fro with an endless succession of drinks, tempering my irritation with the thought that I was making a fortune out of them. I don't think that thought occurred to them; I took pains to conceal it, for fear they would suddenly realize that the weather was doing me a good turn, and switch to iced water out of cussedness.

Mandy was not there; she had disappeared immediately after lunch on one of her private expeditions. I missed her. I had not seen a lot of her, but I found her easy to get on with, and her presence made the others bearable. But even she, the last two days, had grown quieter as the weather grew hotter, and her thoughts had tended to be well guarded. My first impression that she was an open, frank sort of kid had undergone a gradual revision. There were depths to Mandy.

As I handed Hera her umpteenth drink she directed an image of the sky at me. "Looks like thunder," she remarked, the words large with relief and a strange anticipation. "It might clear the air a bit," she added enigmatically.

Piggy looked, if anything, more morose than ever. His white, sluglike body was tinted an angry red, and it looked as though he had a nasty case of sunburn due. Why he didn't cover himself up, God knows, unless he had the pathetic notion that his wife would be attracted by the sight of his

MICHAEL G. CONEY

portly form, its nudity mercifully cut short by massive flowered beach trunks.

Jim's body was already tanned; he was the type that was always brown. He glanced at the huge anvil cumulus spreading from the horizon and smiled, and something passed between him and Hera so quickly and intimately that I couldn't catch it.

Mandy was here. She stepped from the lane and walked across the grass toward us, looking extremely hot and flushed, her white shirt sticking to her body and outlining her young breasts. She caught me looking at her, and suddenly there seemed to be all the knowledge of womanhood in her brown eyes. Then she regarded the supine group of drinkers.

"Piggyl" A bright, affectionate word of exclamation. She was staring at her stepfather, not needing to convey further words as she projected a vivid picture of a scarlet, half-cooked lobster feebly waving pincers in its death throes. "Get dressed! You'll be in agony by tonight!"

Piggy rose to his feet obediently and she led him indoors, conveying a sadistic impression of sticky lotion and agonizingly cold hands.

The remaining three called for more drinks and Joyce shifted her position so that she was now sitting, bolt upright in her shaded deckchair, directly between Hera and Jim. Her mousy hair was lank with sweat and she glanced at the gathering thunderclouds worriedly, abstractedly.

The storm broke during dinner. I had given them salad, as nobody could face the thought of a hot meal, and I was clearing away the plates in preparation for the ice cream which was to follow, when the early twilight outside was ionized by a vivid flash of lightning. Rain began immediately to fall, in torrents, streaming down the window.

Communication, which had steadily been getting more difficult, was now well-nigh impossible in the heavy electrical atmosphere. I had to bend close to Mandy to catch her request— "Chocolate ice for me, please. And I think you are very nice." I looked up at the others. I was startled and ridiculously guilt-ridden, but they had noticed nothing. You couldn't even communicate across the table, in this storm. Hera and Jim's eyes met and Hera passed her tongue across her lips, looking oddly excited.

Conversation had now been blanked out completely and the rest of the meal was conducted in mental silence. I've

SIXTH SENSE

never known a storm like it, before or since, when I felt so totally cut off from humanity and social intercourse. Yet at least two of the guests were enjoying it, judging by the secret smile on Hera's lips, and Jim's intent gaze.

They had finished. Mandy's coffee cup clattered to its saucer for the last time; her hand was trembling slightly. Hera and Jim had been watching her, willing the last mouthful down, and now they rose abruptly, followed with less alacrity by Joyce and Piggy and, finally, Mandy. They filed out of the room.

I cleared away the cups and left them in the kitchen. I could wash up later. Surprisingly, I found the others in the bar, waiting for me. I had half-expected that they would be going out, braving the rain for a night on the town. Hera slipped off her stool as I entered, and came close.

"Scotch, please. Make it a double." She was emitting at full power. "And the same again, three times. And one lemonade." I tried to reach the others as they sat just two or three meters away, but it was like . . . it was like a winter afternoon when a fog is blowing in off the sea, and as you look from the bar window at where Gull Crag rises above the clifftop you think you can see it . . . there is a dark shape beyond the mist . . . or is it imagination? In that swirling mist you can't tell whether visibility is fifty meters or five.

So it was that evening, as the lightning flickered outside and the atmosphere lay thick with static. That evening I didn't know whether I was receiving Mandy's light, direct shapes, or the gray anonymous thought-forms of Joyce. Or whether I was receiving anything at all, apart from the almost painful lightning emissions and the general, crackling electrical fog.

Hera turned, looked out at the storm. It was going to be quite a show, when night came. At present, in the half-light, the edge of the cliff was just visible, and Gull Crag a dim finger behind a curtain of driving rain.

"I beg your pardon?" I had half-received a question from Hera. I leaned forward.

"I said . . . it gets boring, when you can't communicate. Can't go out in this either."

The damned woman seemed to hold me responsible for the weather. She was looking at me expectantly, as though I was an entertainments man about to organize indoor games, but who still had half a cigarette left.

MICHAEL G. CONEY

Then she pointed at the Sensitter behind the bar. I obediently twisted the knob. I don't normally put it on during opening hours because it interferes with conversation, but if she wanted it . . . Anything to keep her happy.

I turned the volume to full and my mind was immediately filled with the melodious music of a large dance orchestra. The power was considerable, battling valiantly with the electrical storm. It's a continuous tape, actually. I rather like dance music; it keeps me going while I'm cleaning out the bar in the mornings. The Sensitter has a coupled Lumibeat as well: it's an expensive model. I turned this on also, and the colored lights flashed out, illuminating the room with rhythmic pulses, *one*, two three *one* two three *red* blue white *red* blue white, in time to the music. Suddenly, the bar looked quite gay.

The guests had brightened and Hera was tapping her fingers on the counter, beating time. If the music was partly blanketed out, even at full volume, at least the lights were getting through.

"Shall we dance?" Hera had risen from her seat and was standing before Jim, hands extended. Jim levered himself out of his chair and stood up, taking her around the waist. They began to waltz slowly, and quite well.

Piggy was watching them miserably, eyes pale in sweaty red face. He looked the type that didn't dance very well. Anyhow, it would have been agony for him to have Hera's long nails digging into his sunburned back. He looked tentatively at Joyce, then Mandy, then thought better of it, his eyes returning to Hera and Jim.

"Would you like to dance with me, Jack?" It was Mandy, on her feet at the bar, confidently lifting the access flap to allow me through to the room. She took hold of me firmly but chastely, and we began to dance. She was light in my arms, and somehow cool and comfortable, an oasis in the oppressive heat of the room. I was beginning to enjoy myself. She was smiling, her thoughts well guarded, and as we turned I saw Piggy smiling too, watching her fondly.

Then, suddenly, it happened.

First I caught an outraged flash from Mandy: raw, unguarded and bitter.

Then, as we turned, myself startled and wondering what the hell caused her outburst, I brushed against Hera and Jim, dancing oblivious to anybody else, heads close together.

Gossamer, obscene threads of thought stroked my mind.

SIXTH SENSE

They grew stronger, then faded into static. Grew stronger again, pulsing.

God, it was revolting. There were these two, in full view of everyone else including a young girl, taking advantage of the weather conditions to indulge in the most outrageous form of mental adultery one could conceive. As I moved Mandy away, hastily, I was pursued by images of naked flesh and rhythmic pulses all overlaid by a sense of sniggering dirtiness and private, triumphant delight. I reckon myself to be pretty broadminded and I've come across some pretty queer circumstances during my years at the inn, but this . . . It was unbelievable.

"I don't think I want to dance any more, thank you." A very small voice in my head. I released her and she sat down, white-faced, not meeting my eyes.

And Hera and Jim danced on and on, lost in their private world of lust, brazenly serene in the knowledge that no one could *know* what was going on, if they even suspected. . . . I'll bet they had planned this in advance when they saw that storm was imminent, and they thought that this would be the only chance they would get, for a week or two. . . .

At last they sat down. Mandy relaxed slightly, her expression one of relief and then compassion, as at last she was able to meet her stepfather's eyes. Something passed between them, without thought, conveyed by the eyes alone. I wondered if he had guessed. He looked a bit sick.

He rose to his feet and approached me. "I think I'll get to bed," he remarked faintly. "Feeling a bit sore. Sunburn. Good night." He went upstairs.

Mandy was furious. I could read the thoughts on her face as she watched her stepfather's retreating back. I must say, I considered his attitude a little weak. He must have suspected something, if only from the look on Hera's face as she danced, but somehow he didn't feel up to a showdown. Perhaps it does seem a little silly to punch a man on the nose because of his thoughts, when he is dancing with your wife; particularly when you don't know what those thoughts are. In any case, it takes two. . . .

They were dancing again and now, with Piggy gone and Joyce apparently asleep in her chair, they were even less guarded, their emissions so strong that I'd swear that from where I was standing I caught a shape or two from Hera, above the static. . . .

Mandy was watching, her eyes unfathomable. Her last

MICHAEL G. CONEY

drink had been a Scotch; the glass now hung empty in her hand. She moved in her chair restlessly, watching. . . .

Jim's lips were parted in a fierce grin, Hera's face was ecstatic.

It was a continuous tape. My God, this could go on all night. I'd never get another customer tonight, not in this weather. It was still just light, the rain sheeting down. I ought to turn the music off.

Time passed.

Mandy had gone; her chair was empty. She must have slipped up to see Piggy while I was watching Jim and Hera. . . .

Piggy was coming downstairs. I caught an image from him as he passed. He was going to break the party up. He had plucked up courage. Things had gone far enough.

I supposed that Mandy had told him what was going on.

He tapped Jim on the shoulder and, as Jim turned and released Hera—and as I expected him to drop Jim with a right—

He took Hera around the waist and began to dance with her clumsily. Hera hardly broke step, looking comically surprised. Jim sat down rather abruptly and watched them as they circled the small space in the center of the room. Conflicting emotions flitted across his face; he was regarding Piggy with a look of respect, almost, although Piggy dancing with Hera was not an impressive sight. She overtopped him by an inch, at least. They danced for quite a time, but I don't think their thoughts were on their steps.

The colossal anticlimax left me feeling curiously disappointed.

Eventually Piggy led Hera to her seat, then approached the bar. "Where's Mandy?" he inquired strongly.

"I don't know," I replied. "I assumed she was with you."

"I haven't seen her. She's not in her room; I looked before I came down. . . . Hera!" The image cut through the static like a knife. "Have you seen Mandy?"

A faint, abashed negative. I wondered exactly what had passed between them, during their dance.

"How long is it since you saw her?"

"An hour, perhaps. I don't know. She's old enough to look after herself."

"Damn it, Hera, she's only fourteen. What the hell's been going on down here? Why has she gone out, on a night like this? It's pitch-black outside. She could have fallen over the

SIXTH SENSE

cliff!" They had gathered around him at the bar in growing alarm. He was surprisingly dominating the group; his concern for Mandy and their guilt in allowing her to go out causing a shift in the usual relationship.

"We'd better start looking for her." This was Joyce, backing him up while Hera and Jim vacillated. "I'll get the waterproofs. Jack, have you got some torches?"

Within minutes we were outside in the night, the driving rain silver streaks in the torchlight, the landscape spasmodically bleached by lightning.

"MANDY!" Piggy projected at full strength, but it was only a whisper against the storm.

"You'll never get through to her, not in this." Joyce was impatient. "We'll just have to start looking. Come on. She might be lying hurt somewhere."

So we separated. Piggy and Hera hurried down to the village; I took the lane inland while Jim and Joyce searched the clifftop and the immediate surroundings. Despite the waterproof cape I was soaked within minutes, rain was trickling down my neck and my trouser legs were sticking to me, clammy and unpleasant. I walked for half an hour as prearranged, then turned and went back. I met the others at the clifftop. Nobody had seen any sign of Mandy.

Piggy was playing his torch beam along the edge of the cliff. "Do you suppose . . ." He tried to cut himself off but I received, faint through the static, the image of a falling figure.

"Don't be damned silly." Hera was edgy.

"It was light when she started out. . . . Maybe she just misjudged the time." A puerile suggestion from Jim.

"And *when* we find her, *if* we find her"—Piggy's thought-shapes were suddenly steel-hard, bitter—"I'm going to have something to say to you, Hera. There's a few things I'd like to get straight."

"I really don't know what you're talking about," replied Hera nervously. "She only went out for a walk. She's been acting strangely all day." Then, with a flash of the old Hera, "I'm going to have a word with *her*, when she gets back. Frightening us all like this."

"You shut up," retorted Piggy roughly. "MANDY!" He tried again, at full strength.

Crackling silence, as we all strained our senses.

No reply. The rain pelted down, we shuffled around uncertainly, wondering what to do next.

MICHAEL G. CONEY

Then . . .

Then suddenly I knew where she was.

With the others following, not really believing, I led the way a few meters along the edge of the cliff. "Wait here," I instructed them. "And give me plenty of light. Shine the torches on me as I climb across, then I'll have to go around the other side, where it's easier. Remember, I won't be able to get through to you, once I'm over there." And I played my torch across the gap, at the scarred, crumbling face of Gull Crag.

I lowered myself over the cliff-edge and began to climb down to the shale bridge.

I was glad I couldn't see the waves below. I held the torch in my teeth as I crawled across the bridge on all fours. The torches from above played about me as I went, lighting up broken rock, disappearing off the edge into a frightening void, swinging back to illuminate the way ahead.

I reached Gull Crag. Taking the torch in my hand, edging around beyond the view of the others, I began to climb.

The rain was lighter, now; it was pitch-dark with the sudden brilliance of lightning flashes in sharp contrast, outlining the rock face with magnesium clarity. I remembered, uncomfortably, an image I had caught from Mandy a few days ago. Of Gull Crag, toppling into the sea. I tried not to think about it but I flinched at every flash, wondering where it would strike. The sea moved restlessly below and the jagged, gritty rock was very slippery. Sometimes I needed both hands to climb, then I had to slip the torch between my teeth, and go by memory.

As I climbed I muttered to myself. I think I was repeating her name. I had to concentrate on something; I am scared witless by heights. I muttered, scrambling on.

Soon, I pulled myself up onto a wide ledge, and the lightning blazed yet again, and I saw a small, frightened face. . . .

She lay on her bed at the inn and we all stood around, so damned glad to see her eyes open, forgetting the irritations and stupidities of the day in our relief that she was unharmed.

"Sorry," she apologized. "I must have passed out." So she had, stone cold, immediately we had reached the safety of the clifftop. "Thanks, Jack," she continued. "It was very silly of me, getting stuck."

SIXTH SENSE

"What on earth possessed you to wander off like that?" Irritation was replacing concern in Hera's emissions, now that it was apparent that things were back to normal.

"Oh . . . I don't know. I got bored, I suppose. The rain had eased off for a bit and . . . I didn't like it in the bar very much. I decided to go for a climb, that's all. And I got stuck."

I thought Hera was going to make a further comment, but she didn't. The color had returned to Mandy's cheeks; she looked fresh and well. The recuperative powers of youth. Myself, I needed another Scotch and a night's sleep.

Hera had switched her attention to me. "How the hell did you know she was up there?" A blustering question, not quite concealing an underlying deep gratitude. "I reckon my senses are pretty keen, but I couldn't pick her up, not in those conditions. You must receive like a deep-space radio."

"Oh, I don't know," I answered modestly. "I'm not *that* sharp. It was a trick of the surroundings. Something to do with where I was standing in relation to Mandy. The cleft in the rock where she was lying must have amplified her emissions and directed them at me. You get some funny effects in a thunderstorm."

Let them think that. It's easier than trying to explain.

An awkward silence followed, the sort you get in a hospital during visiting hours. We stood around, looking at her, and she shifted uncomfortably under the sheets, then suddenly her eyelids fluttered shut, and her breathing became deep and regular. She was asleep.

We shuffled around for a bit, tucking her in and getting in one another's way, then we left her, Hera closing the door quietly after a last look. She smiled uncertainly at Piggy, who grinned back, briefly. The original intention of having a damned good row seemed, somehow, to have been shelved.

"Come on, Jim." Joyce took her husband's arm. "We must get to bed. We want to make an early start tomorrow."

"You're leaving in the morning?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes. We all had a little chat, and Jim and I have decided to move on down the coast for a few days. I don't think it's a good idea for us all to be together too much, seeing the same faces on holiday as we see for the rest of the year. Don't you agree?"

Jim grinned sheepishly.

MICHAEL G. CONEY

They went to their room, actually holding hands. My God, I thought, there's nothing like a bit of a crisis to bring people to their senses.

And now the whirling dust trail was close, and I could hear the whine of the turbine, and presently the small sports model rounded the corner, pulled off the road and ran across the grass toward me. The engine died and the car sank down, settled, a few yards away.

She stepped out and I took both her hands in mine. She was just a little taller, and her dark hair longer. On sensivision, I thought, you always get this cliché. Girls grow up, and suddenly become sophisticated. But it doesn't apply to her. She could never be sophisticated. She is just . . . very lovely.

She smiled, and suddenly I kissed her briefly and impulsively; then we stood apart, both rather taken aback.

"Is this the way you usually greet your new kitchen staff?" she asked, in the clear shapes I remembered so well. "No wonder you have difficulty getting help in the summer. You scare them off as soon as they arrive." She grinned. "I don't think Mummy would have let me come alone, if she'd known you were going to behave like this."

"I expect your mother's glad to get rid of you for a couple of months," I observed. "Anyway, I'm glad to see you, Mandy. It's very good of you to give up your holiday to come and help me out."

"Oh, yes." She gave me a sidelong look. "Actually, I'm not giving up my holiday. I left school a week ago, for good. You might say I'm starting work."

"Oh." A formless exclamation escaped me, full of personal implications. I thought, I'm not all that damned old. Thirty-seven . . . is that old? It's just that Mandy is so young. . . . But she has come back. She *knows* about me; I had to tell her, that night on Gull Crag; and yet she has come back. . . . Oh, what the hell. "So you don't . . . er . . . have to go home, necessarily, at the end of the summer."

"No." Again the sidelong look, and mischievous grin.

She looked around, taking in the sea, the cliffs, the village, the inn, Gull Crag. "It doesn't change does it? I can see why you don't like the cities. It's so peaceful here. . . ."

That's it, of course. That's it exactly. It's difficult, but can you imagine how the cities appear, to someone like me?

SIXTH SENSE

The roar of the spacebound rockets, the incessant chatter of the helicarcs; the grinding, crunching, exploding din of earth-shifting equipment, the whining ultrasonics of the turbine-borne traffic?

You can't imagine it, I know.

Back in the twentieth-century they would have known what I was talking about, before the coming of telepathy, which rendered the sense of hearing unnecessary. A now obsolete sense which was nevertheless a constant source of pain, because of the unbearable clangor of everyday life. Until gradually, mercifully, that sense was lost. . . .

No, you can't imagine it because, like everybody else except me, you can't *hear*.

Am I a freak, a throwback?

If I am, whatever I am, I thank God for it. Because it was this primitive sense which led me to Mandy when she was driven to climb Gull Crag by impulses she was possibly too young to understand. And she got herself trapped on that ledge in the electrical storm, and she gave vent to her fear in a very basic, primitive way, and nobody else could get through to her, nobody else knew where she was, the static was drowning everything out . . .

But I could hear her screaming.



A BOY AND HIS DOG

HARLAN ELLISON

When you see a story by Harlan Ellison with a title like **A BOY AND HIS DOG** you can bet it's used ironically, and that's true to a large extent of this story about a harsh and brutal future and what it makes of its people. Yet this is a love story. . . .

I

I WAS OUT with Blood, my dog. It was his week for annoying me; he kept calling me Albert. He thought that was pretty damned funny. Payson Terhune: ha ha. I'd caught a couple of water rats for him, the big green and ochre ones, and someone's manicured poodle, lost off a leash in one of the downunders; he'd eaten pretty good, but he was cranky. "Come on, son of a bitch," I demanded, "find me a piece of ass." Blood just chuckled, deep in his dog-throat. "You're funny when you get horny," he said.

Maybe funny enough to kick him upside his sphincter asshole, that refugee from a dingo-heap.

A BOY AND HIS DOG

"Find! I ain't kidding!"

"For shame, Albert. After all I've taught you. Not: 'I ain't kidding.' I'm *not* kidding."

He knew I'd reached the edge of my patience. Sullenly, he started casting. He sat down on the crumbled remains of the curb, and his eyelids flickered and closed, and his hairy body tensed. After a while he settled forward on his front paws, and scraped them forward till he was lying flat, his shaggy head on the outstretched paws. The tenseness left him and he began trembling, almost the way he trembled just preparatory to scratching a flea. It went on that way for almost a quarter of an hour, and finally he rolled over and lay on his back, his naked belly toward the night sky, his front paws folded mantis-like, his hind legs extended and open. "I'm sorry," he said. "There's nothing."

I could have gotten mad and booted him, but I knew he had tried. I wasn't happy about it, I really wanted to get laid, but what could I do? "Okay," I said, with resignation, "forget it."

He kicked himself onto his side and quickly got up.

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

"Not much we *can* do, is there?" I was more than a little sarcastic. He sat down again, at my feet, insolently humble. I leaned against the melted stub of a lamppost, and thought about girls. It was painful. "We can always go to a show," I said. Blood looked around the street, at the pools of shadow lying in the weed-overgrown craters, and didn't say anything. The whelp was waiting for me to say okay, let's go. He liked movies as much as I did.

"Okay, let's go."

He got up and followed me, his tongue hanging, panting with happiness. Go ahead and laugh, you eggsucker. No popcorn for *you*!

Our Gang was a roverpak that had never been able to cut it simply foraging, so they'd opted for comfort and gone a smart way to getting it. They were movie-oriented kids, and they'd taken over the turf where the Metropole Theater was located. No one tried to bust their turf, because we all needed the movies, and as long as Our Gang had access to films, and did a better job of keeping the films going, they provided a service, even for solos like me and Blood. *Especially* for solos like us.

They made me check my .45 and the Browning .22 long at the door. There was a little alcove right beside the

HARLAN ELLISON

ticket booth. I bought my tickets first; it cost me a can of Oscar Meyer Philadelphia Scrapple for me, and a tin of sardines for Blood. Then the Our Gang guards with the bren guns motioned me over to the alcove and I checked my heat. I saw water leaking from a broken pipe in the ceiling and I told the checker, a kid with big leathery warts all over his face and lips, to move my weapons where it was dry. He ignored me. "Hey, you! Motherfuckin' toad, move my stuff over the other side . . . it goes to rust fast . . . an' it picks up any spots, man, I'll break your bones!"

He started to give me jaw about it, looked at the guards with the brens, knew if they tossed me out I'd lose my price of admission whether I went in or not, but they weren't looking for any action, probably understrength, and gave him the nod to let it pass, to do what I said. So the toad moved my Browning to the other end of the gun rack, and pegged my .45 under it.

Blood and me went into the theater.

"I want popcorn."

"Forget it."

"Come on, Albert. Buy me popcorn."

"I'm tapped out. You can live without popcorn."

"You're just being a shit." I shrugged: sue me.

We went in. The place was jammed. I was glad the guards hadn't tried to take anything but guns. My spike and knife felt reassuring, lying-up in their oiled sheaths at the back of my neck. Blood found two together, and we moved into the row, stepping on feet. Someone cursed and I ignored him. A Doberman growled. Blood's fur stirred, but he let it pass. There was always *some* hardcase on the muscle, even in neutral ground like the Metropole.

(I heard once about a get-it-on they'd had at the old Loew's Granada, on the South Side. Wound up with ten or twelve rovers and their mutts dead, the theater burned down and a couple of good Cagney films lost in the fire. After that was when the roverpaks had got up the agreement that movie houses were sanctuaries. It was better now, but there was always somebody too messed in the mind to come soft.)

It was a triple feature. *Raw Deal* with Dennis O'Keefe, Claire Trevor, Raymond Burr and Marsha Hunt was the oldest of the three. It'd been made in 1948, seventy-six years ago, God only knows how the damn thing'd hung together all that time; it slipped sprockets and they had to

A BOY AND HIS DOG

stop the movie all the time to rethread it. But it was a good movie. About this solo who'd been japped by his roverpak and was out to get revenge. Gangsters, mobs, a lot of punching and fighting. Real good.

The middle flick was a thing made during the Third War, in '07, two years before I was even born, thing called *Smell of a Chink*. It was mostly gut-spilling and some nice hand-to-hand. Beautiful scene of skirmisher greyhounds equipped with napalm throwers, jellyburning a Chink town. Blood dug it, even though we'd seen this flick before. He had some kind of phony shuck going that these were ancestors of his, and *he* knew I knew he was making it up.

"Wanna burn a baby, hero?" I whispered to him. He got the barb and just shifted in his seat, didn't say a thing, kept looking pleased as the dogs worked their way through the town. I was bored stiff.

I was waiting for the main feature.

Finally it came on. It was a beauty, a beaver flick made in the late 1970's. It was called *Big Black Leather Splits*. Started right out very good. These two blondes in black leather corsets and boots laced all the way up to their crotches, with whips and masks, got this skinny guy down and one of the chicks sat on his face while the other one went down on him. It got really hairy after that.

All around me there were solos playing with themselves. I was about to jog it a little myself when Blood leaned across and said, real soft, the way he does when he's onto something unusually smelly, "There's a chick in here."

"You're nuts," I said.

"I tell you I smell her. She's in here, man."

Without being conspicuous, I looked around. Almost every seat in the theater was taken with solos or their dogs. If a chick had slipped in there'd have been a riot. She'd have been ripped to pieces before any single guy could have gotten into her. "Where?" I asked, softly. All around me, the solos were beating-off, moaning as the blondes took off their masks and one of them worked the skinny guy with a big wooden ram strapped around her hips.

"Give me a minute," Blood said. He was really concentrating. His body was tense as a wire. His eyes were closed, his muzzle quivering. I let him work.

It was possible. Just maybe possible. I knew that they made real dumb flicks in the downunders, the kind of crap they'd made back in the 1930's and '40's, real clean stuff

HARLAN ELLISON

with even married people sleeping in twin beds. Myrna Loy and George Brent kind of flicks. And I knew that once in a while a chick from one of the really strict middle-class down-unders would cumup, to see what a hairy flick was like. I'd heard about it, but it'd never happened in any theater I'd ever been in.

And the chances of it happening in the Metropole, particularly, were slim. There was a lot of twisty trade came to the Metropole. Now, understand, I'm not specially prejudiced against guys coming one another . . . hell, I can understand it. There just aren't enough chicks anywhere. But I can't cut the jockey-and-boxer scene because it gets some weak little boxer hanging on you, getting jealous, you have to hunt for him and all he thinks he has to do is bare his ass to get all the work done for him. It's as bad as having a chick dragging along behind. Made for a lot of bad blood and fights in the bigger roverpaks, too. So I just never swung that way. Well, not *never*, but not for a long time.

So with all the twisties in the Metropole, I didn't think a chick would chance it. Be a toss-up who'd tear her apart first: the boxers or the straights.

And if she *was* here, why couldn't any of the other dogs smell her . . . ?

"Third row in front of us," Blood said. "Aisle seat. Dressed like a solo."

"How's come *you* can whiff her and no other dog's caught her?"

"You forget who I am, Albert."

"I didn't forget, I just don't believe it."

Actually, bottom-line, I guess I *did* believe it. When you'd been as dumb as I'd been and a dog like Blood'd taught me so much, a guy came to believe *everything* he said. You don't argue with your teacher.

Not when he's taught you how to read and write and add and subtract and everything else they used to know that meant you were smart (but doesn't mean much of anything now, except it's good to know it, I guess).

(The reading's a pretty good thing. It comes in handy when you can find some canned goods someplace, like in a bombed-out supermarket; makes it easier to pick out stuff you like when the pictures are gone off the labels. Couple of times the reading stopped me from taking canned beets. Shit, I *hate* beets!)

So I guess I *did* believe why he could whiff a maybe

A BOY AND HIS DOG

chick in here, and no other mutt could. He'd told me all about *that* a million times. It was his favorite story. History he called it. Christ, I'm not *that* dumb! I knew what history was. That was all the stuff that happened before now.

But I liked hearing history straight from Blood, instead of him making me read one of those crummy books he was always dragging in. And *that* particular history was all about him, so he laid it on me over and over, till I knew it by heart . . . no, the word was *rote*. Not *wrote*, like writing, that was something else. I knew it by rote, like it means you got it word-for-word.

And when a mutt teaches you everything you know, and he tells you something rote, I guess finally you *do* believe it. Except I'd never let that leg-lifter know it.

II

What he'd told me rote was: Over fifty years ago, in Los Angeles, before the Third War even got going completely, there was a man named Buesing who lived in Cerritos. He raised dogs as watchmen and sentries and attackers. Dobermans, Danes, schnauzers and Japanese akitas. He had one four-year-old German shepherd bitch named Ginger. She worked for the Los Angeles Police Department's narcotics division. She could smell out marijuana. No matter how well it was hidden. They ran a test on her: there were 25,000 boxes in an auto parts warehouse. Five of them had been planted with marijuana that had been sealed in cellophane, wrapped in tin foil and heavy brown paper, and finally hidden in three separate sealed cartons. Within seven minutes Ginger found all five packages. At the same time that Ginger was working, ninety-two miles further north, in Santa Barbara, cetologists had drawn and amplified dolphin spinal fluid and injected it into Chacma baboons and dogs. Altering surgery and grafting had been done. The first successful product of this cetacean experimentation had been a two-year-old male Puli named Ahbhu, who had communicated sense-impressions telepathically. Crossbreeding and continued experimentation had produced the first skirmisher dogs, just in time for the Third War. Telepathic over short distances, easily trained, able to track gasoline or troops or poison gas or radiation when linked with their

HARLAN ELLISON

human controllers, they had become the shock commandos of a new kind of war. The selective traits had bred true. Dobermans, greyhounds, akitas, pulis and schnauzers had become steadily more telepathic.

Ginger and Ahbhu had been Blood's ancestors.

He had told me so, a thousand times. Had told me the story just that way, in just those words, a thousand times, as it had been told to him. I'd never believed him till now.

Maybe the little bastard *was* special.

I checked out the solo scrunched down in the aisle seat three rows ahead of me. I couldn't tell a damned thing. The solo had his (her?) cap pulled way down, fleece jacket pulled way up.

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be. It's a girl."

"If it is, she's playing with herself just like a guy." Blood snickered. "Surprise," he said sarcastically.

The mystery solo sat through *Raw Deal* again. It made sense, if that was a girl. Most of the solos and all of the members of roverpaks left after the beaver flick. The theater didn't fill up much more, it gave the streets time to empty, he/she could make his/her way back to wherever he/she had come from. I sat through *Raw Deal* again myself. Blood went to sleep.

When the mystery solo got up, I gave him/her time to get weapons if any'd been checked, and start away. Then I pulled Blood's big shaggy ear and said, "Let's do it." He slouched after me, up the aisle.

I got my guns and checked the street. Empty.

"Okay, nose," I said, "where'd he go?"

"Her. To the right."

I started off, loading the Browning from my bandolier. I still didn't see anyone moving among the bombed-out shells of the buildings. This section of the city was crummy, really bad shape. But then, with Our Gang running the Metropole, they didn't have to repair anything else to get their livelihood. It was ironic; the Dragons had to keep an entire power plant going to get tribute from the other roverpaks, Ted's Bunch had to mind the reservoir, the Bastinados worked like field-hands in the marijuana gardens, the Barbados Blacks lost a couple of dozen members every year cleaning out the radiation pits all over the city; and Our Gang only had to run that movie house.

Whoever their leader had been, however many years ago

A BOY AND HIS DOG

it had been that the roverpaks had started forming out of foraging solos, I had to give it to him: he'd been a flinty sharp mother. He knew what services to deal in.

"She turned off here," Blood said.

I followed him as he began loping toward the edge of the city and the bluish-green radiation that still flickered from the hills. I knew he was right, then. The only thing out here was the access dropshaft to the downunder. It was a girl, all right.

The cheeks of my ass tightened as I thought about it. I was going to get laid. It had been almost a month since Blood had whiffed that solo chick in the basement of the Market Basket. She'd been filthy, and I'd gotten the crabs from her, but she'd been a woman, all right, and once I'd tied her down and clubbed her a couple of times she'd been pretty good. She'd liked it, too, even if she did spit on me and tell me she'd kill me if she ever got loose. I left her tied up, just to be sure. She wasn't there when I went back to look, week before last.

"Watch out," Blood said, dodging around a crater almost invisible against the surrounding shadows. Something stirred in the crater.

Trekking across the nomansland I realized why it was that all but a handful of solos or members of roverpaks were guys. The War had killed off most of the girls, and that was the way it always was in wars . . . at least that's what Blood told me. The things getting born were seldom male or female, and had to be smashed against a wall as soon as they were pulled out of the mother.

The few chicks who hadn't gone downunder with the middle-classers were hard, solitary bitches like the one in the Market Basket; tough and stringy and just as likely to cut off your meat with a razor blade once they let you get in. Scuffling for a piece of ass had gotten harder and harder, the older I'd gotten.

But every once in a while a chick got tired of being roverpak property, or a raid was got-up by five or six roverpaks and some unsuspecting downunder was taken, or—like this time, yeah—some middle-class chick from the downunder got hot pants to find out what a beaver flick looked like, and cumup.

I was going to get laid. Oh boy, I couldn't wait!

III

Out here it was nothing but empty corpses of blasted buildings. One entire block had been stomped flat, like a steel press had come down from Heaven and given one solid wham! and everything was powder under it. The chick was scared and skittish, I could see that. She moved erratically, looking back over her shoulder and to either side. She knew she was in dangerous country. Man, if she'd only known *how* dangerous.

There was one building standing all alone at the end of the smash-flat block, like it had been missed and chance let it stay. She ducked inside, and a minute later I saw a bobbing light. Flashlight? Maybe.

Blood and I crossed the street and came up into the blackness surrounding the building. It was what was left of a YMCA.

That meant "Young Men's Christian Association." Blood taught me to read.

So what the hell was a young men's christian association? Sometimes being able to read makes more questions than if you were stupid.

I didn't want her getting out; inside there was as good a place to screw her as any, so I put Blood on guard right beside the steps leading up into the shell, and I went around the back. All the doors and windows had been blown out, of course. It wasn't no big trick getting in. I pulled myself up to the ledge of a window, and dropped down inside. Dark inside. No noise, except the sound of her, moving around on the other side of the old YMCA. I didn't know if she was heeled or not, and I wasn't about to take any chances. I bow-slung the Browning and took out the .45 automatic. I didn't have to snap back the action—there was always a slug in the chamber.

I started moving carefully through the room. It was a locker room of some kind. There was glass and debris all over the floor, and one entire row of metal lockers had the paint blistered off their surfaces; the flash blast had caught them through the windows, a lot of years ago. My sneakers didn't make a sound coming through the room.

The door was hanging on one hinge, and I stepped over—through the inverted triangle. I was in the swimming pool area. The big pool was empty, with tiles buckled down at

A BOY AND HIS DOG

the shallow end. It stunk bad in there; no wonder, there were dead guys, or what was left of them, along one wall. Some lousy cleaner-up had stacked them, but hadn't buried them. I pulled my bandanna up around my nose and mouth, and kept moving.

Out the other side of the pool place, and through a little passage with popped light bulbs in the ceiling. I didn't have any trouble seeing. There was moonlight coming through busted windows and a chunk was out of the ceiling. I could hear her real plain now, just on the other side of the door at the end of the passage. I hung close to the wall, and stepped down to the door. It was open a crack, but blocked by a fall of lath and plaster from the wall. It would make noise when I went to pull it open, that was for certain. I had to wait for the right moment.

Flattened against the wall, I checked out what she was doing in there. It was a gymnasium, big one, with climbing ropes hanging down from the ceiling. She had a big square eight-cell flashlight sitting up on the croup of a vaulting horse. There were parallel bars and a horizontal bar about eight feet high, the high-tempered steel all rusty now. There were swinging rings and a trampoline and a big wooden balancing beam. Over to one side there were wallbars and balancing benches, horizontal and oblique ladders, and a couple of stacks of vaulting boxes. I made a note to remember this joint. It was better for working-out than the jerry-rigged gym I'd set up in an old auto wrecking yard. A guy has to keep in shape if he's going to be a solo.

She was out of her disguise. Standing there in the skin, shivering. Yeah, it was chilly, and I could see a pattern of chicken-skin all over her. She was maybe five six or seven, with nice tits and kind of skinny legs. She was brushing out her hair. It hung way down the back. The flashlight didn't make it clear enough to tell if she had red hair or chestnut, but it wasn't blonde, which was good, and that was because I dug redheads. She had nice tits, though. I couldn't see her face, the hair was hanging down all smooth and wavy and cut off her profile.

The crap she'd been wearing was laying around on the floor, and what she was going to put on was up on the vaulting horse. She was standing in little shoes with a kind of a funny heel on them.

I couldn't move. I suddenly realized I couldn't move. She was nice, really nice. I was getting as big a kick out of

HARLAN ELLISON

just standing there and seeing the way her waist fell inward and her hips fell outward, the way the muscles at the side of her tits pulled up when she reached to the top of her head to brush all that hair down. It was really weird, the kick I was getting out of standing and just staring at a chick do that. Kind of very, well, woman stuff. I liked it a lot.

I'd never even stopped and just looked at a chick like that. All the ones I'd ever seen had been scumbags that Blood had smelled out for me, and I'd snatchn'grabbed them. Or the big chicks in the beaver flicks. Not like this one, kind of soft and very smooth, even with the goose bumps. I could of watched her all night.

She put down the brush, and reached over and took a pair of panties off the pile of clothes, and wriggled into them. Then she got her bra and put it on. I never knew the way chicks did it. She put it on backwards, around her waist, and it had a hook on it. Then she slid it around till the cups were in front, and kind of pulled it up under and scooped herself into it, first one, then the other; then she pulled the straps over her shoulders. She reached for her dress, and I nudged some of the lath and plaster aside, and grabbed the door to give it a yank.

She had the dress up over her head, and her arms up inside the material, and when she stuck her head in, and was all tangled there for a second, I yanked the door and there was a crash as chunks of wood and plaster fell out of the way, and a heavy scraping, and I jumped inside and was on her before she could get out of the dress.

She started to scream, and I pulled the dress off her with a ripping sound, and it all happened for her before she knew what that crash and scrape was all about.

Her face was wild. Just wild. Big eyes: I couldn't tell what color they were because they were in shadow. Real fine features, a wide mouth, little nose, cheekbones just like mine, real high and prominent and a dimple in her right cheek. She stared at me really scared.

And then . . . and this is really weird . . . I felt like I should *say* something to her. I don't know what. Just something. It made me uncomfortable, to see her scared, but what the hell could I do about *that*. I mean, I was going to rape her, after all, and I couldn't very well tell her not to be shrinky about it. She was the one cumup, after all. But even so, I wanted to say hey, don't be scared, I just want to lay you.

A BOY AND HIS DOG

(That never happened before. I never wanted to *say* anything to a chick, just get in, and that was that.)

But it passed, and I put my leg behind hers and tripped her back, and she went down in a pile. I leveled the .45 at her, and her mouth kind of opened in a little o shape. "Now I'm gonna go over there and get one of them wrestling mats, so it'll be better, comfortable, uh-huh? You make a move off that floor and I shoot a leg out from under you, and you'll get screwed just the same, except you'll be without a leg." I waited for her to let me know she was onto what I was saying, and she finally nodded real slow, so I kept the automatic on her, and went over to the big dusty stack of mats, and pulled one off.

I dragged it over to her, and flipped it so the cleaner side was up, and used the muzzle of the .45 to maneuver her onto it. She just sat there on the mat, with her hands behind her, and her knees bent, and stared at me.

I unzipped my pants and started pulling them down off one side, when I caught her looking at me real funny. I stopped with the jeans. "What're *you* lookin' at?"

I was mad. I didn't know why I was mad, but I was.

"What's your name?" she asked. Her voice was very soft, and kind of furry, like it came up through her throat that was all lined with fur or something.

She kept looking at me, waiting for me to answer. "Vic," I said. She looked like she was waiting for more.

"Vic what?"

I didn't know what she meant for a minute, then I did. "Vic. Just Vic. That's all."

"Well, what're your mother and father's names?"

Then I started laughing, and working my jeans down again. "Boy, are you a dumb bitch," I said, and laughed some more. She looked hurt. It made me mad again. "Stop lookin' like that, or I'll bust out your teeth!"

She folded her hands in her lap.

I got the pants down around my ankles. They wouldn't come off over the sneakers. I had to balance on one foot and scuff the sneaker off the other foot. It was tricky, keeping the .45 on her and getting the sneaker off at the same time. But I did it.

I was standing there buck-naked from the waist down and she had sat forward a little, her legs crossed, hands still in her lap. "Get that stuff off," I said.

She didn't move for a second, and I thought she was going

HARLAN ELLISON

to give me trouble. But then she reached around behind and undid the bra. Then she tipped back and slipped the panties off her ass.

Suddenly, she didn't look scared any more. She was watching me very close and I could see her eyes were blue now. Now this is the really weird thing. . . .

I couldn't do it. I mean, not exactly. I mean, I *wanted* to fuck her, see, but she was all soft and pretty and she kept *looking* at me, and no solo I ever met would believe me, but I heard myself *talking* to her, still standing there like some kind of wetbrain, one sneaker off and jeans down around my ankles. "What's *your* name?"

"Quilla June Holmes."

"That's a weird name."

"My mother says it's not that uncommon, back in Oklahoma."

"That where your folks come from?"

She nodded. "Before the Third War."

"They must be pretty old by now."

"They are, but they're okay. I guess."

We were just frozen there, talking to each other. I could tell she was cold, because she was shivering. "Well," I said, sort of getting ready to drop down beside her, "I guess we better—"

Damn it! That damned Blood! Right at that moment he came dashing in from outside. Came skidding through the lath and plaster, raising dust, slid along on his ass till he got to us. "Now what?" I demanded.

"Who're you talking to?" the girl asked.

"Him. Blood."

"*The dog!?!?*"

Blood stared at her and then ignored her. He started to say something, but the girl interrupted him, "Then it's true what they say . . . you can all talk to animals. . . ."

"You going to listen to her all night, or do you want to hear why I came in?"

"Okay, why're you here?"

"You're in trouble, Albert."

"Come on, forget the mickeymouse. What's up?"

Blood twisted his head toward the front door of the YMCA. "Roverpak. Got the building surrounded. I make it fifteen or twenty, maybe more."

"How the hell'd they know we was here?"

Blood looked chagrined. He dropped his head.

A BOY AND HIS DOG

"Well?"

"Some other mutt must've smelled her in the theater."

"Great."

"Now what?"

"Now we stand 'em off, that's what. You got any better suggestions?"

"Just one."

I waited. He grinned.

"Pull your pants up."

IV

The girl, this Quilla June, was pretty safe. I made her a kind of a shelter out of wrestling mats, maybe a dozen of them. She wouldn't get hit by a stray bullet, and if they didn't go right for her, they wouldn't find her. I climbed one of the ropes hanging down from the girders and laid out up there with the Browning and a couple of handfuls of reloads. I wished to God I'd had an automatic, a bren or a Thompson. I checked the .45, made sure it was full, with one in the chamber, and set the extra clips down on the girder. I had a clear line-of-fire all around the gym.

Blood was lying in shadow right near the front door. He'd suggested I try to pick off any dogs with the roverpak first, if I could. That would allow him to operate freely.

That was the least of my worries.

I'd wanted to hole up in another room, one with only a single entrance, but I had no way of knowing if the rovers were already in the building, so I did the best I could with what I had.

Everything was quiet. Even that Quilla June. It'd taken me valuable minutes to convince her she'd damned well better hole up and not make any noise, she was better off with me than with twenty of *them*. "If you ever wanna see your mommy and daddy again," I warned her. After that she didn't give me no trouble, packing her in with mats.

Quiet.

Then I heard two things, both at the same time. From the back in the swimming pool I heard boots crunching plaster. Very soft. And from one side of the front door I heard a tinkle of metal striking wood. So they were going to try a yoke. Well, I was ready.

HARLAN ELLISON

Quiet again.

I sighted the Browning on the door to the pool room. It was still open from when I'd come through. Figure him at maybe five-ten, and drop the sights a foot and a half, and I'd catch him in the chest. I'd learned long ago you don't try for the head. Go for the widest part of the body: the chest and stomach. The trunk.

Suddenly, outside, I heard a dog bark, and part of the darkness near the front door detached itself and moved inside the gym. Directly opposite Blood. I didn't move the Browning.

The rover at the front door moved a step along the wall, away from Blood. Then he cocked back his arm and threw something—a rock, a piece of metal, something—across the room, to draw fire. I didn't move the Browning.

When the thing he'd thrown hit the floor, two rovers jumped out of the swimming pool door, one on either side of it, rifles down, ready to spray. Before they could open up, I'd squeezed off the first shot, tracked across and put a second shot into the other one. They both went down. Dead hits, right in the heart. Bang, they were down, neither one moved.

The mother by the door turned to split, and Blood was on him. Just like that, out of the darkness, riiiiip!

Blood leaped, right over the crossbar of the guy's rifle held at ready, and sank his fangs into the rover's throat. The guy screamed, and Blood dropped, carrying a piece of the guy with him. The guy was making awful bubbling sounds and went down on one knee. I put a slug into his head, and he fell forward.

It went quiet again.

Not bad. Not bad atall atall. Three takeouts and they still didn't know our positions. Blood had fallen back into the murk by the entrance. He didn't say a thing, but I knew what he was thinking: maybe that was three out of seventeen, or three out of twenty, or twenty-two. No way of knowing; we could be faced-off in here for a week and never know if we'd gotten them all, or some, or none. They could go and get poured full again, and I'd find myself run out of slugs and no food and that girl, that Quilla June, crying and making me divide my attention, and daylight—and they'd be still laying out there, waiting till we got hungry enough to do something dumb, or till we ran out of slugs, and then they'd cloud up and rain all over us.

A BOY AND HIS DOG

A rover came dashing straight through the front door at top speed, took a leap, hit on his shoulders, rolled, came up going in a different direction and snapped off three rounds into different corners of the room before I could track him with the Browning. By that time he was close enough under me where I didn't have to waste a .22 slug. I picked up the .45 without a sound and blew the back off his head. Slug went in neat, came out and took most of his hair with it. He fell right down.

"Blood! The rifle!"

Came out of the shadows, grabbed it up in his mouth and dragged it over to the pile of wrestling mats in the far corner. I saw an arm poke out from the mass of mats, and a hand grabbed the rifle, dragged it inside. Well, it was at least safe there, till I needed it. Brave little bastard: he scuttled over to the dead rover and started worrying the ammo bandolier off his body. It took him a while; he could have been picked off from the doorway or outside one of the windows, but he did it. Brave little bastard. I had to remember to get him something good to eat, when we got out of this. I smiled, up there in the darkness: *if* we got out of this, I wouldn't have to worry about getting him something tender. It was lying all over the floor of that gymnasium.

Just as Blood was dragging the bandolier back into the shadows, two of them tried it with their dogs. They came through a ground floor window, one after another, hitting and rolling and going in opposite directions, as the dogs—a mother-ugly Akita, big as a house, and a Doberman bitch the color of a turd—shot through the front door and split in the unoccupied two directions. I caught one of the dogs, the Akita, with the .45 and it went down thrashing. The Doberman was all over Blood.

But firing, I'd given away my position. One of the rovers fired from the hip and .30-06 soft-nosed slugs spanged off the girders around me. I dropped the automatic, and it started to slip off the girder as I reached for the Browning. I made a grab for the .45 and that was the only thing saved me. I fell forward to clutch at it, it slipped away and hit the gym floor with a crash, and the rover fired at where I'd been. But I was flat on the girder, arm dangling, and the crash startled him. He fired at the sound, and right at that instant I heard another shot, from a Winchester, and the other rover, who'd made it safe into the shadows, fell

HARLAN ELLISON

forward holding a big pumping hole in his chest. That Quilla June had shot him, from behind the mats.

I didn't even have time to figure out what the fuck was happening . . . Blood was rolling around with the Doberman and the sounds they were making were awful . . . the rover with the .30-06 chipped off another shot and hit the muzzle of the Browning, protruding over the side of the girder, and wham it was gone, falling down. I was naked up there without clout, and the sonofabitch was hanging back in shadow waiting for me.

Another shot from the Winchester, and the rover fired right into the mats. She ducked back behind, and I knew I couldn't count on her for anything more. But I didn't need it; in that second, while he was focused on her, I grabbed the climbing rope, flipped myself over the girder, and howling like a burnpit-screamer, went sliding down, feeling the rope cutting my palms. I got down far enough to swing, and kicked off. I swung back and forth, whipping my body three different ways each time, swinging out and over, way over, each time. The sonofabitch kept firing, trying to track a trajectory, but I kept spinning out of his line of fire. Then he was empty, and I kicked back as hard as I could, and came zooming in toward his corner of shadows, and let loose all at once and went ass-over-end into the corner, and there he was, and I went right into him and he spanged off the wall, and I was on top of him, digging my thumbs into his eye-sockets. He was screaming and the dogs were screaming and that girl was screaming, and I pounded the motherfucker's head against the floor till he stopped moving, then I grabbed up the empty .30-06 and whipped his head till I knew he wasn't gonna give me no more aggravation.

Then I found the .45 and shot the Doberman.

Blood got up and shook himself off. He was cut up bad. "Thanks," he mumbled, and went over and lay down in the shadows to lick himself off.

I went and found that Quilla June, and she was crying. About all the guys we'd killed. Mostly about the one *she'd* killed. I couldn't get her to stop bawling, so I cracked her across the face, and told her she'd saved my life, and that helped some.

Blood came dragassing over. "How're we going to get out of this, Albert?"

"Let me think."

A BOY AND HIS DOG

I thought, and knew it was hopeless. No matter how many we got, there'd be more. And it was a matter of *macho* now. Their honor.

"How about a fire?" Blood suggested.

"Get away while it's burning?" I shook my head. "They'll have the place staked-out all around. No good."

"What if we don't leave? What if we burn up with it?"

I looked at him. Brave . . . and smart as hell.

V

We gathered all the lumber and mats and scaling ladders and vaulting boxes and benches and anything else that would burn, and piled the garbage against a wooden divider at one end of the gym. Quilla June found a can of kerosene in a storeroom, and we set fire to the whole damn pile. Then we followed Blood to the place he'd found for us. The boiler room way down under the YMCA. We all climbed into the empty boiler, and dogged down the door, leaving a release vent open for air. We had one mat in there with us, and all the ammo we could carry, and the extra rifles and sidearms the rovers'd had on them.

"Can you catch anything?" I asked Blood.

"A little. Not much. I'm reading one guy. The building's burning good."

"You be able to tell when they split?"

"Maybe. *If* they split."

I settled back. Quilla June was shaking from all that had happened. "Just take it easy," I told her. "By morning the place'll be down around our ears and they'll go through the rubble and find a lot of dead meat and maybe they won't look too hard for a chick's body. And everything'll be all right . . . if we don't get choked off in here."

She smiled, very thin, and tried to look brave. She was okay, that one. She closed her eyes and settled back on the mat and tried to sleep. I was beat. I closed my eyes, too.

"Can you handle it?" I asked Blood.

"I suppose. You better sleep."

I nodded, eyes still closed, and fell to my side. I was out before I could think about it.

When I came back, I found the girl, that Quilla June, snuggled up under my armpit, her arm around my waist,

HARLAN ELLISON

dead asleep. I could hardly breathe. It was like a furnace; hell, it *was* a furnace. I reached out a hand and the wall of the boiler was so damned hot I couldn't touch it. Blood was up on the mattress with us. That mat had been the only thing'd kept us from being singed good. He was asleep, head buried in his paws. She was asleep, still naked.

I put a hand on her tit. It was warm. She stirred and cuddled into me closer. I got a hard on.

Managed to get my pants off, and rolled on top of her. She woke up fast when she felt me pry her legs apart, but it was too late by then. "Don't . . . stop . . . what are you doing . . . no, don't. . ."

But she was half-asleep, and weak, and I don't think she really wanted to fight me anyhow.

She cried when I broke her, of course, but after that it was okay. There was blood all over the wrestling mat. And Blood just kept sleeping.

It was really different. Usually, when I'd get Blood to track something down for me, it'd be grab it and punch it and get away fast before something bad could happen. But when she came, she rose up off the mat, and hugged me around the back so hard I thought she'd crack my ribs, and then she settled back down slow slow slow, like I do when I'm doing leg-lifts in the makeshift gym I rigged in the auto wrecking yard. And her eyes were closed, and she was relaxed looking. And happy. I could tell.

We did it a lot of times, and after a while it was her idea, but I didn't say no. And then we lay out side-by-side and talked.

She asked me about how it was with Blood, and I told her how the skirmisher dogs had gotten telepathic, and how they'd lost the ability to hunt food for themselves, so the solos and roverbaks had to do it for them, and how dogs like Blood were good at finding chicks for solos like me. She didn't say anything to that.

I asked her about what it was like where she lived, in one of the downunders.

"It's very nice. But it's always very quiet. Everyone is very polite to everyone else. It's just a small town."

"Which one you live in?"

"Topeka. It's real close to here."

"Yeah, I know. The access dropshaft is only about half a mile from here. I went out there once, to take a look around."

A BOY AND HIS DOG

"Have you ever been in a downunder?"

"No. But I don't guess I want to be, either."

"Why? It's very nice. You'd like it."

"Shit."

"That's very crude."

"I'm very crude."

"Not all the time."

I was getting mad. "Listen, you ass, what's the matter with you? I grabbed you and pushed you around, I raped you half a dozen times, so what's so good about me, huh? What's the matter with you, don't you even have enough smarts to know when somebody's—"

She was smiling at me. "I didn't mind. I liked doing it. Want to do it again?"

I was really shocked. I moved away from her. "What the hell is wrong with you? Don't you know that a chick from downunder like you can be really mauled by solos? Don't you know chicks get warnings from their parents in the downunders, 'Don't cumup, you'll get snagged by them dirty, hairy, slobbering solos!' Don't you know that?"

She put her hand on my leg and started moving it up, the fingertips just brushing my thigh. I got another hard on. "My parents never said that about solos," she said. Then she pulled me over her again, and kissed me and I couldn't stop from getting in her again.

God, it just went on like that for hours. After a while Blood turned around and said, "I'm not going to keep pretending I'm asleep. I'm hungry. And I'm hurt."

I tossed her off me—she was on top by this time—and examined him. That Doberman had taken a good chunk out of his right ear, and there was a rip right down his muzzle, and blood-matted fur on one side. He was a mess. "Jesus, man, you're a mess," I said.

"You're no fucking rose garden yourself, Albert!" he snapped. I pulled my hands back.

"Can we get out of here?" I asked him.

He cast around, and then shook his head. "I can't get any readings. Must be a pile of rubble on top of this boiler. I'll have to go out and scout."

We kicked that around for a while, and finally decided if the building was razed, and had cooled a little, the rover-pak would have gone through the ashes by now. The fact that they hadn't tried the boiler indicated that we were probably buried pretty good. Either that, or the building

HARLAN ELLISON

was still smoldering overhead. In which case, they'd still be out there, waiting to sift the remains.

"Think you can handle it, the condition you're in?"

"I guess I'll *have* to, won't I?" Blood said. He was really surly. "I mean, what with you busy fucking your brains out, there won't be much left for staying alive, will there?"

I sensed real trouble with him. He didn't like Quilla June. I moved around him and undogged the boiler hatch. It wouldn't open. So I braced my back against the side, and jacked my legs up, and gave it a slow, steady shove.

Whatever had fallen against it from outside, resisted for a minute, then started to give, then tumbled away with a crash. I pushed the door open all the way, and looked out. The upper floors had fallen in on the basement, but by the time they'd given, they'd been mostly cinder and lightweight rubble. Everything was smoking out there. I could see daylight through the smoke.

I slipped out, burning my hands on the outside lip of the hatch. Blood followed. He started to pick his way through the debris. I could see that the boiler had been almost completely covered by the gunk that had dropped from above. Chances are good the roverpak had taken a fast look, figured we'd been fried, and moved on. But I wanted Blood to run a recon, anyway. He started off, but I called him back. He came.

"What is it?"

I looked down at him. "I'll tell you what it is, man. You're acting very shitty."

"Sue me."

"Goddammit, dog, what's got your ass up?"

"Her. That nit chick you've got in there."

"So what? Big deal . . . I've had chicks before."

"Yeah, but never any that hung on like this one. I warn you, Albert, she's going to make trouble."

"Don't be dumb!" He didn't reply. Just looked at me with anger, and then scampered off to check out the scene. I crawled back inside and dogged the hatch. She wanted to make it again. I said I didn't want to; Blood had brought me down. I was bugged. And I didn't know which one to be pissed off at.

But God she was pretty.

She kind of pouted, and settled back with her arms wrapped around her. "Tell me some more about the down-under," I said.

A BOY AND HIS DOG

At first she was cranky, wouldn't say much, but after a while she opened up and started talking freely. I was learning a lot. I figured I could use it some time, maybe.

There were only a couple of hundred downunders in what was left of the United States and Canada. They'd been sunk on the sites of wells or mines or other kinds of deep holes. Some of them, out in the West, were in natural cave formations. They went way down, maybe two to five miles. They were like big caissons, stood on end. And the people who'd settled them were squares of the worst kind. Southern Baptists, Fundamentalists, Lawandorder goofs, real middle-class squares with no taste for the wild life. And they'd gone back to a kind of life that hadn't existed for a hundred and fifty years. They'd gotten the last of the scientists to do the work, invent the how and why, and then they'd run them out. They didn't want any progress, they didn't want any dissent, they didn't want anything that would make waves. They'd had enough of that. The best time in the world had been just before the First War, and they figured if they could keep it like that, they could live quiet lives and survive. *Shit!* I'd go nuts in one of the downunders.

Quilla June smiled, and snuggled up again, and this time I didn't turn her off. She started touching me again, down there and all over, and then she said, "Vic?"

"Uh-huh."

"Have you ever been in love?"

"What?"

"In love? Have you ever been in love with a girl?"

"Well, I damn well guess I haven't!"

"Do you know what love is?"

"Sure. I guess I do."

"But if you've never been in love . . . ?"

"Don't be dumb. I mean, I've never had a bullet in the head, and I know I wouldn't like it."

"You don't know what love is, I'll bet."

"Well, if it means living in a downunder, I guess I just don't wanna find out."

We didn't go on with the conversation much after that. She pulled me down and we did it again. And when it was over, I heard Blood scratching in the boiler. I opened the hatch and he was standing out there. "All clear," he said.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sure. Put your pants on," he said it with

HARLAN ELLISON

a sneer in the tone, "and come on out here. We have to talk some stuff."

I looked at him, and he wasn't kidding. I got my jeans and sneakers on, and climbed down out of the boiler.

He trotted ahead of me, away from the boiler, over some black-soot beams, and outside the gym. It was down. Looked like a rotted stump tooth.

"Now what's lumbering you?" I asked him.

He scampered up on a chunk of concrete till he was almost nose-level with me.

"You're going dumb on me, Vic."

I knew he was serious. No Albert shit, straight Vic. "How so?"

"Last night, man. We could have cut out of there and left her for them. *That* would've been smart."

"I wanted her."

"Yeah, I know. That's what I'm talking about. It's today now, not last night. You've had her about half a hundred times. Why're we hanging around?"

"I want some more."

Then he got angry. "Yeah, well, listen, chum. . . . I want a few things myself. I want something to eat, and I want to get rid of this pain in my side, and I want away from this turf. Maybe they *don't* give up this easy."

"Take it easy. We can handle all that. Don't mean she can't go with us."

"*Doesn't* mean," he corrected me. "And so *that's* the new story. Now we travel three, is that right?"

I was getting *très* uptight myself. "You're starting to sound like a poodle!"

"And you're starting to sound like a boxer."

I hauled back to crack him one. He didn't move. I dropped the hand. I'd never hit Blood. I didn't want to start now.

"Sorry," he said, softly.

"That's okay."

But we weren't looking at each other.

"Vic, man, you've got responsibility to me, you know."

"You don't have to tell me that."

"Well, I guess maybe I do. Maybe I have to remind you of some stuff. Like the time that burnpit-screamer came up out of the street and made a grab for you."

I shuddered. The motherfucker'd been green. Righteous

A BOY AND HIS DOG

stone green, glowing like fungus. My gut heaved, just thinking.

"And I went for him, right?"

I nodded. Right, mutt, right.

"And I could have been burned bad, and died, and that would've been all of it for me, right or wrong, isn't that true?" I nodded again. I was getting pissed off proper. I didn't like being made to feel guilty. It was a fifty-fifty with Blood and me. He knew that. "But I did it, right?" I remembered the way that green thing had screamed. Christ, it was like ooze and eyelashes.

"Okay, okay, don't hanger me."

"*Harangue*, not hanger."

"Well WHATEVER!" I shouted. "Just knock off the crap, or we can forget the whole fucking arrangement!"

Then Blood blew. "Well, maybe we *should*, you simple dumb *putz*!"

"What's a *putz*, you little turd . . . is that something bad . . . yeah, it must be . . . you watch your fucking mouth, son of a bitch, I'll kick your ass!"

We sat there and didn't talk for fifteen minutes. Neither one of us knew which way to go.

Finally, I backed off a little. I talked soft and I talked slow. I was about up to here with him, but told him I was going to do right by him, like I always had, and he threatened me, saying I'd damned well better because there were a couple of very hip solos making it around the city, and they'd be delighted to have a sharp tail-scent like him. I told him I didn't like being threatened, and he'd better watch his fucking step or I'd break his leg. He got furious and stalked off. I said screw you and went back to the boiler to take it out on that Quilla June again.

But when I stuck my head inside the boiler, she was waiting, with a pistol one of the dead rovers had supplied. She hit me good and solid over the right eye with it, and I fell straight forward across the hatch, and was out cold.

VI

"I told you she was no good." He watched me as I swabbed out the cut with disinfectant from my kit, and painted the tear with iodine. He smirked when I flinched.

HARLAN ELLISON

I put away the stuff, and rummaged around in the boiler, gathering up all the spare ammo I could carry, and ditching the Browning in favor of the heavier .30-06. Then I found something that must've slipped out of her clothes.

It was a little metal plate, about 3½ inches long and an inch-and-a-half high. It had a whole string of numbers on it, and there were holes in it, in random patterns. "What's this?" I asked Blood.

He looked at it, sniffed it.

"Must be an identity card of some kind. Maybe it's what she used to get out of the downunder."

That made my mind up.

I jammed it in a pocket and started out. Toward the access dropshaft.

"Where the hell are you going?" Blood yelled after me. "Come on back, you'll get killed out there!"

"I'm hungry, dammit!"

"Albert, you sonofabitch! Come back here!"

I kept on walking. I was gonna find that bitch and brain her. Even if I had to go downunder to find her.

It took me an hour to walk to the access dropshaft leading down to Topeka. I thought I saw Blood following, but hanging back a ways. I didn't give a damn. I was mad.

Then, there it was. A tall, straight, featureless pillar of shining black metal. It was maybe twenty feet in diameter, perfectly flat on top, disappearing straight into the ground. It was a cap, that was all. I walked straight up to it, and fished around in my pocket for that metal card. Then something was tugging at my right pants leg.

"Listen, you moron, you can't go down there!"

I kicked him off, but he came right back.

"Listen to me!"

I turned around and stared at him.

Blood sat down; the powder puffed up around him. "Albert . . ."

"My name is Vic, you little eggsucker."

"Okay, okay, no fooling around. Vic." His tone softened. "Vic. Come on, man." He was trying to get through to me. I was really boiling, but he was trying to make sense. I shrugged, and crouched down beside him.

"Listen, man," Blood said, "this chick has bent you way out of shape. You *know* you can't go down there. It's all square and settled and they know everyone; they hate solos. Enough roverpaks have raided downunders and raped their

A BOY AND HIS DOG

broads, and stolen their food, they'll have defenses set up. They'll *kill* you, man!"

"What the hell do you care? You're always saying you'd be better off without me." He sagged at that.

"Vic, we've been together almost three years. Good and bad. But this can be the worst. I'm scared, man. Scared you won't come back. And I'm hungry, and I'll have to go find some dude who'll take me on . . . and you know most solos are in paks now, I'll be low mutt. I'm not that young any more. And I'm hurt."

I could dig it. He was talking sense. But all I could think of was how that bitch, that Quilla June, had rapped me. And then there were images of her soft tits, and the way she made little sounds when I was in her, and I shook my head, and knew I had to go get even.

"I got to do it, Blood. I got to."

He breathed deep, and sagged a little more. He knew it was useless. "You don't even see what she's done to you, Vic."

I got up. "I'll try to get back quick. Will you wait . . . ?"

He was silent a long while, and I waited. Finally, he said, "For a while. Maybe I'll be here, maybe not."

I understood. I turned around and started walking around the pillar of black metal. Finally, I found a slot in the pillar, and slipped the metal card into it. There was a soft humming sound, then a section of the pillar dilated. I hadn't even seen the lines of the sections. A circle opened and I took a step through. I turned and there was Blood, watching me. We looked at each other, all the while that pillar was humming.

"So long, Vic."

"Take care of yourself, Blood."

"Hurry back."

"Do my best."

"Yeah. Right."

Then I turned around and stepped inside. The access portal irised closed behind me.

VII

I should have known. I should have suspected. Sure, every once in a while a chick came up to see what it was like on the surface, what had happened to the cities; sure, it hap-

HARLAN ELLISON

pened. Why I'd believed her when she'd told me, cuddled up beside me in that steaming boiler, that she'd wanted to see what it was like when a girl did it with a man, that all the flicks she'd seen in Topeka were sweet and solid and dull, and the girls in her school'd talked about beaver flicks, and one of them had a little eight-page comic book and she'd read it with wide eyes . . . sure, I'd believed her. It was logical. I should have suspected something when she left that metal i.d. plate behind. It was too easy. Blood'd tried to tell me. Dumb? Yeah!

The second that access iris swirled closed behind me, the humming got louder, and some cool light grew in the walls. Wall. It was a circular compartment with only two sides to the wall: *inside* and *outside*. The wall pulsed up light and the humming got louder, and then the floor I was standing on dilated just the way the outside port had done. But I was standing there, like a mouse in a cartoon, and as long as I didn't look down I was cool, I wouldn't fall.

Then I started settling. Dropped through the floor, the iris closed overhead, I was dropping down the tube, picking up speed but not too much, just dropping steadily. Now I knew what a dropshaft was.

Down and down I went and every once in a while I'd see something like 10 LEV or ANTIPOLL 55 or BREEDERCON or PUMP SE 6 on the wall, and faintly I could make out the sectioning of an iris . . . but I never stopped dropping.

Finally, I dropped all the way to the bottom and there was TOPEKA CITY LIMITS POP. 22,860 on the wall, and I settled down without any strain, bending a little from the knees to cushion the impact, but even that wasn't much.

I used the metal plate again, and the iris—a much bigger one this time—swirled open, and I got my first look at a downunder.

It stretched away in front of me, twenty miles to the dim shining horizon of tin can metal where the wall behind me curved and curved and curved till it made one smooth, encircling circuit and came back around around around to where I stood, staring at it. I was down at the bottom of a big metal tube that stretched up to a ceiling an eighth of a mile overhead, twenty miles across. And in the bottom of that tin can, someone had built a town that looked for all the world like a photo out of one of the water-logged books in the library on the surface. I'd seen a town like this in the books. Just like this. Neat little houses, and curvy little

A BOY AND HIS DOG

streets, and trimmed lawns, and a business section and everything else that a Topeka would have.

Except a sun, except birds, except clouds, except rain, except snow, except cold, except wind, except ants, except dirt, except mountains, except oceans, except big fields of grain, except stars, except the moon, except forests, except animals running wild, except . . .

Except freedom.

They were canned down here, like dead fish. Canned.

I felt my throat tighten up. I wanted to get out. Out! I started to tremble, my hands were cold and there was sweat on my forehead. This had been insane, coming down here. I had to get out. Out!

I turned around, to get back in the dropshaft, and then it grabbed me.

That bitch Quilla June! I shoulda suspected!

The thing was low, and green, and boxlike, and had cables with mittens on the ends instead of arms, and it rolled on tracks, and it grabbed me.

It hoisted me up on its square flat top, holding me with them mittens on the cables, and I couldn't move, except to try kicking at the big glass eye in the front, but it didn't do any good. It didn't bust. The thing was only about four feet high, and my sneakers almost reached the ground, but not quite, and it started moving off into Topeka, hauling me along with it.

People were all over the place. Sitting in rockers on their front porches, raking their lawns, hanging around the gas station, sticking pennies in gumball machines, painting a white stripe down the middle of the road, selling newspapers on a corner, listening to an oompah band on a shell in a park, playing hopscotch and pussy-in-the-corner, polishing a fire engine, sitting on benches reading, washing windows, pruning bushes, tipping boaters to ladies, collecting milk bottles in wire carrying racks, grooming horses, throwing a stick for a dog to retrieve, diving into a communal swimming pool, chalking vegetable prices on a slate outside a grocery, walking hand-in-hand with a girl, all of them watching me go past on that metal motherfucker.

I could hear Blood speaking, saying just what he'd said before I'd entered the dropshaft: *It's all square and settled and they know everyone; they hate solos. Enough roverpaks have raided downunders and raped their broads, and stolen*

HARLAN ELLISON

their food, they'll have defenses set up. They'll kill you, man!

Thanks, mutt.

Goodbye.

VIII

The green box tracked through the business section and turned in at a shopfront with the words BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU on the window. It rolled right inside the open door, and there were half a dozen men and old men and very old men in there, waiting for me. Also a couple of women. The green box stopped.

One of them came over and took the metal plate out of my hand. He looked at it, then turned around and gave it to the oldest of the old men, a withered cat wearing baggy pants and a green eyeshade and garters that held up the sleeves of his striped shirt. "Quilla June, Lew," the guy said to the old man. Lew took the metal plate and put it in the top left drawer of a rolltop desk. "Better take his guns, Aaron," the old coot said. And the guy who'd taken the plate cleaned me.

"Let him loose, Aaron," Lew said.

Aaron stepped around the back of the green box and something clicked, and the cable-mittens sucked back inside the box, and I got down off the thing. My arms were numb where the box had held me. I rubbed one, then the other, and I glared at him.

"Now, boy . . ." Lew started.

"Suck wind, asshole!"

The woman blanched. The men tightened their faces.

"I told you it wouldn't work," another of the old men said to Lew.

"Bad business, this," said one of the younger ones.

Lew leaned forward in his straight-back chair and pointed a crumbled finger at me. "Boy, you better be nice."

"I hope all your fuckin' children are harelipped!"

"This is no good, Lew!" another man said.

"Guttersnipe," a woman with a beak snapped.

Lew stared at me. His mouth was a nasty little black line. I knew the sonofabitch didn't have a tooth in his crummy head that wasn't rotten and smelly. He stared at

A BOY AND HIS DOG

me with vicious little eyes, God he was ugly, like a bird ready to pick meat off my bones. He was getting set to say something I wouldn't like. "Aaron, maybe you'd better put the sentry back on him." Aaron moved to the green box.

"Okay, hold it," I said, holding up my hand.

Aaron stopped, looked at Lew, who nodded. Then Lew leaned forward again, and aimed that bird-claw at me. "You ready to behave yourself, son?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"You'd better be *dang* sure."

"Okay. I'm *dang* sure. Also *fuckin'* sure!"

"And you'll watch your mouth."

I didn't reply. Old coot.

"You're a bit of an experiment for us, boy. We tried to get one of you down here other ways. Sent up some good folks to capture one of you little scuts, but they never came back. Figgered it was best to lure you down to us."

I sneered. That Quilla June. I'd take care of her!

One of the women, a little younger than Bird-Beak, came forward and looked into my face. "Lew, you'll never get this one to cow-tow. He's a filthy little killer. Look at those eyes."

"How'd you like the barrel of a rifle jammed up your ass, bitch?" She jumped back. Lew was angry again. "Sorry," I said, "I don't like bein' called names. *Macho*, y'know?"

He settled back and snapped at the woman. "Mez, leave him alone. I'm trying to talk a bit of sense here. You're only making it worse."

Mez went back and sat with the others. Some Better Business Bureau these creeps werel

"As I was saying, boy: you're an experiment for us. We've been down here in Topeka close to twenty years. It's nice down here. Quiet, orderly, nice people who respect each other, no crime, respect for the elders, and just all around a good place to live. We're growing and we're prospering."

I waited.

"But, well, we find now that some of our folks can't have no more babies, and the women that do, they have mostly girls. We need some men. Certain special kind of men."

I started laughing. This was too good to be true. They wanted me for stud service. I couldn't stop laughing.

"Crude!" one of the women said, scowling.

"This's awkward enough for us, boy, don't make it no harder." Lew was embarrassed.

Here I'd spent most of Blood's and my time aboveground

HARLAN ELLISON

hunting up tail, and down here they wanted me to service the local ladyfolk. I sat down on the floor and laughed till tears ran down my cheeks.

Finally, I got up and said, "Sure. Okay. But if I do, there's a couple of things *I* want."

Lew looked at me close.

"The first thing I want is that Quilla June. I'm gonna fuck her blind, and then I'm gonna bang her on the head the way she did me!"

They huddled for a while, then came out and Lew said, "We can't tolerate any violence down here, but I s'pose Quilla June's as good a place to start as any. She's capable, isn't she, Ira?"

A skinny, yellow-skinned man nodded. He didn't look happy about it. Quilla June's old man, I bet.

"Well, let's get started," I said. "Line 'em up." I started to unzip my jeans.

The women screamed, the men grabbed me, and they hustled me off to a boarding house where they gave me a room, and they said I should get to know Topeka a little bit before I went to work, because it was, uh, er, well, awkward, and they had to get the folks in town to accept what was going to have to be done . . . on the assumption, I suppose, that if I worked out okay, they'd import a few more young bulls from aboveground, and turn us loose.

So I spent some time in Topeka, getting to know the folks, seeing what they did, how they lived. It was nice, real nice. They rocked in rockers on the front porches, they raked their lawns, they hung around the gas station, they stuck pennies in gumball machines, they painted white stripes down the middle of the road, they sold newspapers on the corners, they listened to oompah bands on a shell in the park, they played hopscotch and pussy-in-the-corner, they polished fire engines, they sat on benches reading, they washed windows and pruned bushes, they tipped their boaters to ladies, they collected milk bottles in wire carrying racks, they groomed horses and threw sticks for their dogs to retrieve, they dove into the communal swimming pool, they chalked vegetable prices on a slate outside the grocery, they walked hand-in-hand with some of the ugliest chicks I've ever seen, and they bored the ass off me.

Inside a week I was ready to scream.

I could feel that tin can closing in on me.

I could feel the weight of the earth over me.

A BOY AND HIS DOG

They ate artificial shit: artificial peas and fake meat and make-believe chicken and ersatz corn and bogus bread and it all tasted like chalk and dust to me.

Polite? Christ, you could puke from the lying, hypocritical crap they called civility. Hello Mr. This and Hello Mrs. That. And how are you? And how is little Janie? And how is business? And are you going to the sodality meeting Thursday? And I started gibbering in my room at the boarding house.

The clean, sweet, neat, lovely way they lived was enough to kill a guy. No wonder the men couldn't get it up and make babies that had balls instead of slots.

The first few days, everyone watched me like I was about to explode and cover their nice whitewashed fences with shit. But after a while, they got used to seeing me. Lew took me over to the mercantile, and got me fitted out with a pair of bib overalls and a shirt that any solo could've spotted a mile away. That Mez, that dippy bitch who'd called me a killer, she started hanging around, finally said she wanted to cut my hair, make me look civilized. But I was hip to where she was at. Wasn't a bit of the mother in her.

"What's a matter, cunt," I pinned her. "Your old man isn't taking care of you?"

She tried to stick her fist in her mouth, and I laughed like a loon. "Go cut off his balls, baby. My hair stays the way it is." She cut and run. Went like she had a diesel tailpipe.

It went on like that for a while. Me just walking around, them coming and feeding me, keeping all their young meat out of my way till they got the town stacked-away for what was coming with me.

Jugged like that, my mind wasn't right for a while. I got all claustrophobed, clutched, went and sat under the porch in the dark, at the rooming-house. Then that passed, and I got piss-mean, snapped at them, then surly, then quiet, then just mud dull. Quiet.

Finally, I started getting hip to the possibilities of getting out of there. It began with me remembering the poodle I'd fed Blood one time. It had to of come from a downunder. And it couldn't of got up through the dropshaft. So that meant there were other ways out.

They gave me pretty much the run of the town, as long as I kept my manner around me and didn't try anything

HARLAN ELLISON

sudden. That green sentry box was always somewhere nearby.

So I found the way out. Nothing so spectacular; it just had to be there, and I found it.

Then I found out where they kept my weapons, and I was ready. Almost.

IX

It was a week to the day when Aaron and Lew and Ira came to get me. I was pretty goofy by that time. I was sitting out on the back porch of the boarding house, smoking a corncob pipe with my shirt off, catching some sun. Except there wasn't no sun. Goofy.

They came around the house. "Mornin', Vic," Lew greeted me. He was hobbling along with a cane, the old fart. Aaron gave me a big smile. The kind you'd give a big black bull about to stuff his meat into a good breed cow. Ira had a look that you could chip off and use in your furnace.

"Well, howdy, Lew. Mornin', Aaron, Ira."

Lew seemed right pleased by that.

Oh, you lousy bastards, just you wait!

"You bout ready to go meet your first lady?"

"Ready as I'll ever be, Lew," I said, and got up.

"Cool smoke, isn't it?" Aaron said.

I took the corncob out of my mouth. "Pure dee-light." I smiled. I hadn't even lit the fucking thing.

They walked me over to Marigold Street and as we came up on a little house with yellow shutters and a white picket fence, Lew said, "This's Ira's house. Quilla June is his daughter."

"Well, land sakes," I said, wide-eyed.

Ira's lean jaw muscles jumped.

We went inside.

Quilla June was sitting on the settee with her mother, an older version of her, pulled thin as a withered muscle. "Miz Holmes," I said, and made a little curtsy. She smiled. Strained, but smiled.

Quilla June sat with her feet right together, and her

A BOY AND HIS DOG

hands folded in her lap. There was a ribbon in her hair. It was blue.

Matched her eyes.

Something went thump in my gut.

"Quilla June," I said.

She looked up. "Mornin', Vic."

Then everyone sort of stood around looking awkward, and finally Ira began yapping and yipping about get in the bedroom and get this unnatural filth over with so they could go to Church and pray the Good Lord wouldn't Strike All Of Them Dead with a bolt of lightning in the ass, or some crap like that.

So I put out my hand, and Quilla June reached for it without looking up, and we went in the back, into a small bedroom, and she stood there with her head down.

"You didn't tell 'em, did you?" I asked.

She shook her head.

And suddenly, I didn't want to kill her at all. I wanted to hold her. Very tight. So I did. And she was crying into my chest, and making little fists and beating on my back, and then she was looking up at me and running her words all together: "Oh, Vic, I'm sorry, so sorry, I didn't mean to, I had to, I was sent out to, I was so scared, and I love you and now they've got you down here, and it isn't dirty, is it, it isn't the way my Poppa says it is, is it?"

I held her and kissed her and told her it was okay, and then I asked her if she wanted to come away with me, and she said yes yes yes she really did. So I told her I might have to hurt her Poppa to get away, and she got a look in her eyes that I knew real well.

For all her propriety, Quilla June Holmes didn't much like her prayer-shouting Poppa.

I asked her if she had anything heavy, like a candlestick or a club, and she said no. So I went rummaging around in that back bedroom, and found a pair of her Poppa's socks, in a bureau drawer. I pulled the big brass balls off the headboard of the bed, and dropped them into the sock. I hefted it. Oh. Yeah.

She stared at me with big eyes. "What're you going to do?"

"You want to get out of here?"

She nodded.

"Then just stand back behind the door. No, wait a minute, I got a better idea, Get on the bed."

HARLAN ELLISON

She laid down on the bed. "Okay," I said, "now pull up your skirt, pull off your pants, and spread out." She gave me a look of pure horror. "Do it," I said. "If you want out."

So she did it, and I rearranged her so her knees were bent and her legs open at the thighs, and I stood to one side of the door, and whispered to her, "Call your Poppa. Just him."

She hesitated a long moment, then she called out, in a voice she didn't have to fake, "Poppa! Poppa, come here, please!" Then she clamped her eyes shut tight.

Ira Holmes came through the door, took one look at his secret desire, his mouth dropped open, I kicked the door closed behind him and walloped him as hard as I could. He squished a little, and spattered the bedspread, and went very down.

She opened her eyes when she heard the thunk, and when the stuff splattered her legs she leaned over and puked on the floor. I knew she wouldn't be much good to me in getting Aaron into the room, so I opened the door, stuck my head around, looked worried, and said, "Aaron, would you come here a minute, please?" He looked at Lew, who was rapping with Mrs. Holmes about what was going on in the back bedroom, and when Lew nodded him on, he came into the room. He took a look at Quilla Jean's naked bush, at the blood on the wall and bedspread, at Ira on the floor, and opened his mouth to yell, just as I whacked him. It took two more to get him down, and then I had to kick him in the chest to put him away. Quilla June was still puking.

I grabbed her by the arm and swung her up off the bed. At least she was being quiet about it, but man did she stink. "Come on!"

She tried to pull back, but I held on, and opened the bedroom door. As I pulled her out, Lew stood up, leaning on his cane. I kicked the cane out from under the old fart and down he went in a heap. Mrs. Holmes was staring at us, wondering where her old man was: "He's back in there," I said, heading for the front door. "The Good Lord got him in the head."

Then we were out in the street, Quilla June stinking along behind me, dry-heaving and bawling and probably wondering what had happened to her underpants.

They kept my weapons in a locked case at the Better Business Bureau, and we detoured around by my boarding house where I pulled the crowbar I'd swiped from the gas station out from under the back porch. Then we cut across

A BOY AND HIS DOG

behind the Grange and into the business section, and straight into the BBB. There was a clerk who tried to stop me, and I split his gourd with the crowbar. Then I pried the latch off the cabinet in Lew's office, and got the .30-06 and my .45 and all the ammo, and my spike, and my knife, and my kit, and loaded up. By that time Quilla June was able to make some sense.

"Where we gonna go, where we gonna go, oh Poppa Poppa Poppa . . . !"

"Hey, listen, Quilla June, Poppa me no Poppas. You said you wanted to be with me . . . well, I'm goin' *up*, baby, and if you wanna go with, you better stick close."

She was too scared to object.

I stepped out the front of the shopfront, and there was that green box sentry, coming on like a whippet. It had its cables out, and the mittens were gone. It had hooks.

I dropped to one knee, wrapped the sling of the .30-06 around my forearm, sighted clean, and fired dead at the big eye in the front. One shot, spang!

Hit that eye, the thing exploded in a shower of sparks, and the green box swerved and went through the front window of The Mill End Shoppe, screeching and crying and showering the place with flames and sparks. Nice.

I turned around to grab Quilla June, but she was gone. I looked off down the street, and here came all the vigilantes, Lew hobbling along with his cane like some kind of weird grasshopper.

And right then the shots started. Big, booming sounds. The .45 I'd given Quilla June. I looked up, and on the porch around the second floor, there she was, the automatic down on the railing like a pro, sighting into that mob and snapping off shots like maybe Wild Bill Elliott in a 40's Republic flick.

But dumb! Mother, dumb! Wasting time on that, when we had to get away.

I found the outside staircase going up there, and took it three steps at a time. She was smiling and laughing, and every time she'd pick one of those boobs out of the pack her little tongue-tip would peek out of the corner of her mouth, and her eyes would get all slick and wet and wham! down the boob would go.

She was really into it.

Just as I reached her, she sighted down on her scrawny mother. I slammed the back of her head and she missed the

HARLAN ELLISON

shot, and the old lady did a little dance-step and kept coming. Quilla June whipped her head around at me, and there was kill in her eyes. "You made me miss." The voice gave me a chill.

I took the .45 away from her. Dumb. Wasting ammunition like that.

Dragging her behind me, I circled the building, found a shed out back, dropped down onto it and had her follow. She was scared at first, but I said, "Chick can shoot her old lady as easy as you do shouldn't be worried about a drop this small." She got out on the edge, other side of the railing and held on. "Don't worry," I said, "you won't wet your pants. You haven't got any."

She laughed, like a bird, and dropped. I caught her, we slid down the shed door, and took a second to see if that mob was hard on us. Nowhere in sight.

I grabbed Quilla June by the arm and started off toward the south end of Topeka. It was the closest exit I'd found in my wandering, and we made it in about fifteen minutes, panting and weak as kittens.

And there it was.

A big air-intake duct.

I pried off the clamps with the crowbar, and we climbed up inside. There were ladders going up. There had to be. It figured. Repairs. Keep it clean. Had to be. We started climbing.

It took a long, long time.

Quilla June kept asking me, from down behind me, whenever she got too tired to climb, "Vic, do you love me?" I kept saying yes. Not only because I meant it. It helped her keep climbing.

X

We came up a mile from the access dropshaft. I shot off the filter covers and the hatch bolts, and we climbed out. They should have known better down there. You don't fuck around with Jimmy Cagney.

They never had a chance.

Quilla June was exhausted. I didn't blame her. But I didn't want to spend the night out in the open; there were

A BOY AND HIS DOG

things out there I didn't like to think about meeting even in daylight. It was getting on toward dusk.

We walked toward the access dropshaft.

Blood was waiting.

He looked weak. But he'd waited.

I stooped down and lifted his head. He opened his eyes, and very softly he said, "Hey."

I smiled at him. Jesus, it was good to see him. "We made it back, man."

He tried to get up, but he couldn't. The wounds on him were in ugly shape. "Have you eaten?" I asked.

"No. Grabbed a lizard yesterday . . . or maybe it was day before. I'm hungry, Vic."

Quilla June came up then, and Blood saw her. He closed his eyes. "We'd better hurry, Vic," she said. "Please. They might come up from the dropshaft."

I tried to lift Blood. He was dead weight. "Listen, Blood, I'll leg it into the city and get some food. I'll come back quick. You just wait here."

"Don't go in there, Vic," he said. "I did a recon the day after you went down. They found out we weren't fried in that gym. I don't know how. Maybe mutts smelled our track. I've been keeping watch, and they haven't tried to come out after us. I don't blame them. You don't know what it's like out here at night, man . . . you don't know. . . ."

He shivered.

"Take it easy, Blood."

"But they've got us marked lousy in the city, Vic. We can't go back there. We'll have to make it someplace else."

That put it on a different stick. We couldn't go back, and with Blood in that condition we couldn't go forward. And I knew, good as I was solo, I couldn't make it without him. And there wasn't anything out here to eat. He had to have food, at once, and some medical care. I had to do something. Something good, something fast.

"Vic"—Quilla June's voice was high and whining—"come on! He'll be all right. We have to hurry."

I looked up at her. The sun was going down. Blood trembled in my arms.

She got a pouty look on her face. "If you love me, you'll come on!"

I couldn't make it alone out there without him. I knew it. If I loved her. She asked me, in the boiler, do you know what love is?

HARLAN ELLISON

It was a small fire, not nearly big enough for any rover-pak to spot from the outskirts of the city. No smoke. And after Blood had eaten his fill, I carried him to the air-duct a mile away, and we spent the night inside, on a little ledge. I held him all night. He slept good. In the morning, I fixed him up pretty good. He'd make it; he was strong.

He ate again. There was plenty left from the night before. I didn't eat. I wasn't hungry.

We started off across the blast wasteland that morning. We'd find another city, and make it.

We had to move slow, because Blood was still limping. It took a long time before I stopped hearing her calling in my head. Asking me, asking me: *Do you know what love is?*

Sure I know.

A boy loves his dog.



AND SO SAY ALL OF US

BRUCE MC ALLISTER

Science fiction likes to postulate a link between esp and mental illness, not just because there seems to be some evidence for this but also because the combination of the two makes for dramatic story situations. This story deals with such a combination, but in a surprising way.

ROBERT SAT UP slowly and cautiously on his bed in the white, quiet room. Like a membrane on the infinitely clean skeleton of his immediate universe the rumpled sheet relaxed across his legs, curving maternally around the mattress corners like the wings of a great albino bat. Shifting his eyes from side to side with nervous prudence, Robert held himself still for an hour, then two, and three—then he jumped in surprise when air happened to whistle through his own nostrils. Under the flaccid marble of his brow, morning thoughts continued to swarm from his two personalities. But he was always calm, so his walls were smooth, *sans* pads.

BRUCE MC ALLISTER

"Oh, I've been here a long time, and, oh, I haven't moved in a long long time. I'd like to move, to straighten that wrinkle on this bed—grab that fly right out of this room's sky. But let me tell you, if I started to do either of those things, Dad would warn me not to. It's as simple as that. Dad's always around and he knows what I shouldn't do, and he tells me.

"Oh, if I stretched my arm and touched the fly, Dad would stretch his arm from wherever he is and touch my face. And the power of Dad's slapping hand would be like my hand squashing that fly.

"That woman with the tray of food—she calls herself a nurse and tells me that I'm in a hospital—but I must be at home if Dad's voice is here as it is all the time. See the tray and the nurse? I'd call to her right now but Dad would hear me and smack me.

"Dad lets me eat breakfast, lunch and dinner. So I'm stretching out my hand and touching the tray. Dad lets me chew, too, and swallow, which I'm doing.

"There is also pie on the tray. It smells good and—"

No, Bobby! That pie is sweet, bad for you, for your teeth. Bad for your veins, bad for your mind. I've told you a thousand times—eat to live, don't live to eat. It says so in the Bible and Benjamin Franklin, great man of the United States of America, said so, too. No pie. Tell pie goodbye.

"Goodbye, pie. See, Dad knows what I shouldn't eat and he tells me what not to eat. If I had licked one bit of that lemon pie I would have blood on my nose now or bruised red cheeks or purple eyes like those Dad always gives me when I do bad things."

You ask me again what it was like back then. Before Robert. Mainly I was young, a researcher for *Decade*. I wrote my bit for the magazine but I was basically as unaware as anyone else in the nation. Do you really think my memory is worth anything? Okay, but it's your ear that will suffer.

P for Parapsychology and Petrocelle. Let's begin with the doctor, since he is credited—or blamed—for starting it all.

Dr. Sebastian Petrocelle led the invasion of the mental hospitals in 1997. As a persecuted member of the Defense Department he had the right and the obligation to do just that. In fact, it had been one of his own colleagues—the lone mystic found in the department—who had discovered

AND SO SAY ALL OF US

that the mentally ill seemed to possess awesome powers in precognition (called ESPerception), telekines (ESConception), telepathy (both ESP and ESC) et para-cetera.

When the initial report on the significant correlations was at last released, psychologists, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts around the world arose, wide-eyed and bushy-brained, seized the problem by the throat and wrote the equivalent of five thousand volumes of *War and Peace* in just one month after the discovery. Older doctors of the psyche who were reluctant to accept the fact of extrasensory perception and conception (ESPC) did miss the boat and failed to adorn themselves with all those doctorate degrees that went up for grabs because of the giant litter of possible thesis topics sired by the Discovery.

Doctors willing to admit the existence of ESPC—with, of course, a scientist's self-assurance that *extrasensory* merely involved some yet undiscovered sense that had its own easily comprehensible laws of order—embraced the crucial question: "Is the presence of extrasensory perception and conception in the mentally ill the *result* or the *cause* of the mental illnesses?"

Of the five thousand rambling nonfictive books written to answer that question, one thousand responded: "Illness is the cause."

One thousand claimed: "Illness is the result."

The remaining three thousand concluded in faddish anti-Black Box manner, "The two cannot be considered independently—no clear-cut cause-effect relationship is evident."

Dr. Petrocelle did eventually read one of the five thousand Great World Articles written on the ESPC-mental illness subject. That article happened to be the prototype of all of them and had been written by a colleague. Consistent with Petrocelle's usual MO, his perusal of the article came twelve months after he led the invasion of the mental hospitals, twelve months after his grandiose *faux pas* with Robert Johnson. Petrocelle, having spilled the Defense Department's milk, was in a rest home when he finally got around to reading it.

In the beginning, Petrocelle's sole concern was for the power potential in the ESPC-mental illness correlation.

"Power for progress," he was known to say, "and progress in competition with the Enemy—who hasn't always been the enemy but happens to be now."

Dr. Petrocelle received easy finance for his search for the

BRUCE MC ALLISTER

power potential simply because his usual skepticism about parapsychology and other occult fields was well known. His was also a skepticism recognized, respected, and matched by the feelings of men who doled out Defense Department coin.

"If our Dr. Petrocelle really sees something in this mental illness-mental power stuff, then there must be something to it."

Little did they know that was understatement. As it was, Dr. Petrocelle was grasping for straws and could not truly chance being skeptical. His career in the Defense Department was at stake.

When questioned about the rather nebulous nature of parapsychology and his search for ESPC-fertile minds, Dr. Petrocelle said, "We are encouraged." This meant that he and his colleagues hadn't contributed significantly to National Defense for more than five years, that they feared, therefore, admissions of anything but optimism and that for personal survival's sake Petrocelle *et al.* were willing to try anything that verged on being science.

As typical of frantic government antics, a machine was somehow thrown together, constructed to test roughly for the presence of what the public now was terming "mind power." Petrocelle and associates chose, instead, to call this power FA—for *fortiter animae*—a feeble incorporation of an overly romantic Latin phrase for adding dignity to their work—while at the same time they refrained from entering the Greek nomenclature tradition out of fear that a failure on their part would taint that wonderful medical language.

The machine was called an electroFAgraph.

Dr. Petrocelle was encouraged as soon as his electroFAgraph discovered a Breton State mental patient with a sizzling FA potential. At first Petrocelle remained uncertain about the degree of the power latent in the discovered patient—but his uncertainty soon vanished when the final shock treatment prescribed for the patient brought the poor man abruptly from his mental and physical immobility. Unfortunately the shock therapy only gave the patient motion—he still remained quite insane. A policeman had to shoot him to death when he used his FA to puncture a ten-foot hole in the hospital wall, hoping to escape.

The officer shot him because, in the lawman's own words, "He just wouldn't stop coming." And everyone did

AND SO SAY ALL OF US

admit that the man in blue couldn't have handled the FA maniac with his bare hands.

Before the bullet punctured a much smaller but equally formidable hole in his belly, the FA wielder spoke his not-soon-to-be-forgotten words: "I must get away!"

Everyone assumed this was a reference to hospital confinement.

The policeman was not the sort of man who usually shot at mental patients. The variable factor this time was that all the plaster flying from the hospital wall reminded him of a grade-B movie he had once seen, called *Earth versus the Mind Master*: a film that had offered a hot scene where a policeman was lucky enough to shoot the first seven-foot mind master that landed on Earth—lucky because after that incident no human being was in any mental condition to shoot at anything.

After the accidental execution of his prodigy Petrocelle grew cautious and more scientific. He snapped into action, brought more men to his side—allegedly for recording, experimenting, and learning, but actually for verbal support of the doctor in case the FA venture didn't progress fast enough for the government's taste.

At Adaja State mental hospital Dr. Petrocelle and the FA machine discovered a second patient. His electroFAgraph sizzled in a way nostalgically similar to the late Breton State patient's.

"So you've given me the clinical report on Robert," Professor Stapleton said. "But I don't understand how you're going to cure his schizophrenia with my machine and on top of that get him to work for the government with his FA when he is cured. I'm a professor, Dr. Petrocelle, not a doctor or a government mind."

"I know that, Stapleton. But you do know that machine of yours, and that's all the reason I want you here."

Stapleton nodded doubtfully.

"What we're going to do," Dr. Petrocelle continued, patting the teaching machine, "is crawl inside Robert's mind. Instead of teaching a sleeping student with your influential voice, you're going to crawl inside Robert's mind and you're going to convince both sides of his mind—the father and son halves that render his whole being immobile and his FA only potential. Convince them that they should work together. Tell him that they agreed on things once upon a

BRUCE MC ALLISTER

time and they should agree again forever. Robert will interpret your voice, Stapleton, as another father-voice, and his Bobby-son-voice will fuse with the critical father-voice he's created for himself. Then when you pull out of his mind, you'll leave the father and son reconciled, happy together, and Robert will be able to move again and to utilize his FA. When he's of one mind once more—pardon the expression—he'll be in our hands. What we must do is tell him that those disc-shaped wireless electrodes for the teaching machine are really just hearing aids so he can hear his father better—Bobby will put them on and give us no trouble. He's never heard of a teaching machine and its apparatus before. Besides, he seems to be subnormal in intelligence."

"How do you expect to get him to use his FA for the government? He might use it for himself to become a criminal, you know. That's what everyone has predicted for a situation like this."

"In the morass of words in that report you're holding, it says Robert is both very religious and very patriotic—as his real father was. Unfortunately for Robert's mental state—but fortunately for our goals—his father was also very strict. The patriotism, religious devotion and also the disciplinarianism of the father-voice in Robert's mind will induce in the boy a fear of being unpatriotic—among other things. We should have no problems."

Stapleton looked a little pained, a little dubious. Dr. Petrocelle decided immediately on verbal anesthesia, his special talent.

Petrocelle began: "Robert—motherless since he was seven—has always had a problem. His father was a paragon of discipline, matched only by the Inquisition with its brutality-for-a-higher-morality's sake. When very young, Robert grew accustomed to having his father criticize his every move with fiery words and physical abuse. Robert withdrew into himself, ceasing to function in any social way, barely eating, because even hidden in his own mind he could not escape the voice of his father. He's not autistic or catatonic, technically, but he's in a bad way. The habituation to criticism demanded that Robert fashion for himself a paternal gargoyle for his mind's shoulder. The father-voice is very real to Robert, though it is only a manifestation of his own generalized guilt feelings and conditioning. Unfortunately, or

AND SO SAY ALL OF US

fortunately—we haven't yet decided which—Robert isn't very smart.

"There was a certain method to Robert's father's disciplinary madness but Robert, very young and not too intelligent, couldn't discern it. Robert concluded subconsciously that his father in an ideal state would criticize everything a son did. So the father-voice now attacks most every one of Robert's motions or verbalizations. His survival instinct—to put it simply—forces Robert to believe his father wouldn't criticize a son's eating of the barest essentials—but sometimes the boy does nearly starve to death. Sometimes, though very infrequently, as when he is waking, he'll speak words that express his omnipresent fear of his omnipotent and seemingly omnisagacious father."

Ears numb, Professor Stapleton muttered, "Dear God."

"So," Petrocelle concluded, his voice bursting from its monotone, "I want you, Stapleton, to get father and son together. Have a man to man talk with father and son. Okay?"

Robert blinked and shifted on the bed. His tailbone was feeling all tingly numb and he shifted again, then looked at his hands slowly. His temples were adorned with disc-like attachments.

"Oh, I want to bite my fingernail. Bite it with my teeth until it comes off like a crescent moon. But, oh, I know I shouldn't, so I'll be good and think of other things. The sun is nice through the window. But it makes my nose itch and I want to scratch it."

Bob, my son, scratching your nose is crass. It's bad manners. You could infect your nose, get it all red and puffy and look all diseased, too. You wouldn't want that, would you? If you scratch your nose, you'll look like some urchin that hasn't had any upbringing, so—

BOBBY! ROBERT! BOB!

"What is that? Someone calling me. And it's not Dad."

If someone's calling you, Bobby, don't listen! Don't just listen to any voice you hear. You can't always believe everything you hear. Listen to your father. Don't—

BOBBY! BOBBY'S FATHER! BOBBY AND BOBBY'S DAD, YOU SHOULD NOT BE QUARRELING.

A new voice was telling him things.

Don't listen to the voice!

YOU ARE YOUR FATHER'S SON, BOBBY. YOU ARE OF THE SAME BLOOD. YOUR FATHER LOVES YOU,

BRUCE MC ALLISTER

EVEN WHEN HE HITS YOU. BUT HE WON'T HIT YOU ANY MORE OR SCREAM AT YOU ANY MORE, WILL YOU, BOBBY'S FATHER? YOU ARE FATHER AND SON AND MUST ACT AND THINK IT. YOU MUST DO WHAT YOU WANT TO DO, BOBBY—YOUR FATHER REALLY WANTS YOU TO DO WHAT YOU WANT. YOU ARE HIS SON, HE IS YOUR FATHER. YOURS IS THE GREATEST RELATIONSHIP IN THE WORLD—YOU MUSTⁿ WORK TOGETHER, GET THINGS DONE TOGETHER.

"Should I answer the voice? I think I'll answer the voice."

No! The voice is of evil.

"Why is the voice evil?"

"I'M NOT A VOICE OF EVIL. I AM THE VOICE OF GOOD, THE SPIRIT OF GOODNESS OF FATHER AND SON.

"So the voice is good, Dad?"

I don't know, Bob. The voice could be good or bad.

"Should I move from the bed to open the window to let cool air in while I listen to the new voice, which told me to do as I want?"

YES, OPEN THE WINDOW, BOB. YOUR FATHER WANTS YOU TO OPEN THE WINDOW, TO DO WHATEVER YOU WANT. YOU ARE STRONG AND A GOOD BOY, AND YOU HAVE A GREAT POWER TO HELP PEOPLE AND MAKE YOURSELF HAPPY BY DOING WHAT YOU WANT. OPEN THE WINDOW, IF YOU WANT TO.

"Should I open the window?"

DO WHAT YOU WANT, BOBBY.

Yes, I guess you should do just exactly what you want to do, Bobby.

Dr. Petrocelle was excited. "Stapleton, did you see the way he finally decided to open that window? The crash of that window was a sound for sore ears. And he didn't even touch it. He just sat on his bed and finally let go of his will to open that window, so hard that it actually slammed open. What FA!"

"Yes, I saw it and heard it, too." Stapleton was uncomfortable in the presence of the doctor's enthusiasm. He also felt guilty. "I'm glad we got out of his mind, though. A boy, just like a man, has a right to certain privacy of mind."

"Certainly, certainly. Robert will be working for us now." Suddenly Petrocelle's enthusiasm waned slightly and he

AND SO SAY ALL OF US

said, "I do wish you had said something to him about working for the nation, using his power for his country."

"I told him he had the power to help others."

"Yes, I know, but you should have said something about the nation. Well, anyway, he's patriotic—his father was very patriotic. Robert's been talking to everyone all morning—all the orderlies and doctors—so we'll be able to make our point about his country easily enough."

Robert smiled, said "hello" loudly to himself and stretched, keeping eyes proudly on the window. The sheets felt cool and he stroked them hard for the first time ever.

"Oh, that window went up with quite a noise, didn't it?"

Yes, Bob, it did.

"The voice was right. I've got quite a power now."

Yes, a good power, Bob.

"I wish, dear Dad, that I knew what the voice came for, where it came from, what it was. It was like a ghost—far-away sounding. But it made sense. Father and son. I love you, Dad, like a son should love his father."

And I love you too, son. The ghost voice was good to come and talk and be with us—to make us understand what we should do, what you should do with your power. Whatever you want to do, isn't that right, Bob?

Whatever you want, right?

"Of course. I just wish I knew where the voice came from, what it was. I liked the voice. I'd like it to come back, you know."

I'd like it to come back too, Bob. We both want it to come back and be with us. It made us feel good, didn't it, Bob?

"Yes, it sure did. Maybe if we listened hard we could hear it again. Can you hear it?"

I don't know.

"I think I can hear it, barely."

I think I can hear it. We both love it and we want it to come back. I think I can hear it.

"We can hear it."

Yes, I think we can hear it.

CAN YOU HEAR ME? I'VE COME BACK TO BE WITH YOU. THE THREE OF US NOW. CAN YOU HEAR ME?

"Yes, we can hear you. But who are you, why are you here?"

Yes, why are you here?

BRUCE MC ALLISTER

LET ME THINK. I AM HERE. WHO AM I? WHY AM I HERE? LET ME THINK.

"I will think about you, too."

Both of us, father and son, will think about you and why you're here and who you are.

ALL THREE OF US WILL THINK ABOUT ME—ME, THE GHOST VOICE, THE GOOD VOICE THAT COMES TO FATHER AND SON AND SHOWS THE SON HE HAS A GREAT POWER TO HELP PEOPLE. LET US THINK.

As soon as Stapleton and Petrocelle left Robert's room the boy shut the door and began staring through the window at the sky. Four steps from the door outside, Petrocelle stopped the professor.

He asked, "What was he talking about? The ghost voice is back? I didn't even get a chance to talk to him about it—he just kept talking so damn cryptically about the ghost voice."

Stapleton was angry. "He has imagined the teaching machine's voice—my voice—has returned. We have compounded now his schizophrenia. He has three voices in his head now."

"Calm down. Nothing at all is wrong." Petrocelle looked him in the eye. "He has the power and nothing is going to change that, because he's happy now—he's found an out, a way out of his frustration and misery from the critical father-voice. And he likes his FA power. The father-voice is all for that power now, too. The ghost voice he's imagined won't harm him. Now all we've got to do is talk to him about working for the defense of this nation."

"Can't we just leave him alone with himself—with his new selves—for awhile. He looks so damn tired. He's gone through a great change."

"We'll give him a night by himself and talk to him in the morning. Government dragons will be breathing down my neck if I don't get Robert moving on something productive soon. Ah, when they see him open windows as he can, kill flies as he can—"

Petrocelle was ecstatic. Stapleton mumbled.

Hospital nurses, guards, local police and, without a doubt, CIA, FBI and other representatives were scurrying around the hospital. It took Stapleton thirty minutes to find Dr. Petrocelle.

AND SO SAY ALL OF US

The doctor was leaning over a desk telephone in the main hospital office, his face a dirty-sheet color and his eyes twitching with dark thoughts.

"Robert's gone," Petrocelle said, the words slipping from limp lips.

Stapleton sighed, shrugging his shoulders. "What did you expect? He was a boy on the move."

"We didn't even get to talk about the nation and the country's defense plans for the next ten years. His power was to be the main focus."

"He's a boy and he's just discovered a kind father and a new voice inside his head. Did you really think he'd stay inside the hospital when there's a whole world outside he can voyage through—and when there's his power, a great big toy he can play with?"

"Good Lord, Stapleton—he's a patriotic boy, isn't he? He wouldn't harm his own country, would he? His power is so great—"

"No, I don't think he'll hurt us. Tom Sawyer pranks at worst. Not unless you tried to stop him from going where he wants to. I'll think he'll be back soon. Even back to this place. You can talk with him then about the nation's defense. He's not going to wreck anything—don't worry. At least you can be confident he won't go over to the other side." Stapleton allowed a little sarcasm to show. "His fine religious and patriotic upbringing—or should I say conditioning—has made sure of that."

The professor left the doctor and returned to his teaching machine, which was crated and ready for the move back to the university. He was smiling and chuckling—for fear of crying.

Like the yellow eye of a cyclops, the sun blinked overhead and Robert continued walking peacefully along the path.

"I am the Son and I have the power to help people. There are six billion people on this earth and all of them have hurts in six billion different ways. I am the Son, with power. I have the power of good and I discovered who the ghost voice is."

And you discovered who you really are, Son. We know now who the ghost voice is and who I am.

AND YOU, FATHER OF THE SON, DISCOVERED WHO YOU REALLY ARE. I AM THE GHOST AND WE

BRUCE MC ALLISTER

ARE ONE AND THE SON HAS THE POWER. WE
HOLY THREE.

"I am moving and I am not going to stop moving until
I can hear not just two but six billion voices. Until those six
billion on this earth can hear my three voices."

Our three voices.

OUR THREE VOICES.



SHIP OF SHADOWS

FRITZ LEIBER

Fritz Leiber seems equally at home writing about magic and the supernatural or mankind's science-laden future, and he always does it with imagination and conviction. Those qualities are very much in evidence in this story of an eerie spaceship of tomorrow.

"Issiot! Ffool! Lushsh!" hissed the cat and bit Spar somewhere.

The fourfold sting balanced the gut-wretchedness of his looming hangover, so that Spar's mind floated as free as his body in the blackness of Windrush, in which shone only a couple of running lights dim as churning dream-glow and infinitely distant as the Bridge or the Stern.

The vision came of a ship with all sails set creaming through blue, wind-ruffled sea against a blue sky. The last

FRITZ LEIBER

two nouns were not obscene now. He could hear the whistle of the salty wind through shrouds and stays, its drumming against the taut sails, and the creak of the three masts and all the rest of the ship's wood.

What was wood? From somewhere came the answer: plastic alive-o.

And what force flattened the water and kept it from breaking up into great globules and the ship from spinning away, keel over masts, in the wind?

Instead of being blurred and rounded like reality, the vision was sharp-edged and bright—the sort Spar never told, for fear of being accused of second sight and so of witchcraft.

Windrush was a ship too, was often called the Ship. But it was a strange sort of ship, in which the sailors lived forever in the shrouds inside cabins of all shapes made of translucent sails welded together.

The only other things the two ships shared were the wind and the unending creaking. As the vision faded, Spar began to hear the winds of Windrush softly moaning through the long passageways, while he felt the creaking in the vibrant shroud to which he was clipped wrist and ankle to keep him from floating around in the Bat Rack.

Sleepday's dreams had begun good, with Spar having Crown's three girls at once. But Sleepday night he had been half-waked by the distant grinding of Hold Three's big chewer. Then werewolves and vampires had attacked him, solid shadows diving in from all six sides, while witches and their familiars tittered in the black shadowy background. Somehow he had been protected by the cat, familiar of a slim witch whose bared teeth had been an ivory blur in the larger silver blur of her wild hair. Spar pressed his rubbery gums together. The cat had been the last of the supernatural creatures to fade. Then had come the beautiful vision of the ship.

His hangover hit him suddenly and mercilessly. Sweat shook off him until he must be surrounded by a cloud of it. Without warning his gut reversed. His free hand found a floating waste tube in time to press its small trumpet to his face. He could hear his acrid vomit gurgling away, urged by a light suction.

His gut reversed again, quick as the flap of a safety hatch when a gale blows up in the corridors. He thrust the waste tube inside the leg of his short, loose slopsuit and caught

SHIP OF SHADOWS

the dark stuff, almost as watery and quite as explosive as his vomit. Then he had the burning urge to make water.

Afterward, feeling blessedly weak, Spar curled up in the equally blessed dark and prepared to snooze until Keeper woke him.

"Ssotl" hissed the cat. "Sleep no more! Ssee! Ssee shsharp-lyl!"

In his left shoulder, through the worn fabric of his slopsuit, Spar could feel four sets of prickles, like the touch of small thorn clusters in the Gardens of Apollo or Diana. He froze.

"Sspar," the cat hissed more softly, quitting to prickle. "I wishsh you all besst. Mosst ashshuredly."

Spar warily reached his right hand across his chest, touched short fur softer than Suzy's, and stroked gingerly.

The cat hissed very softly, almost purring, "Ssturdy Sspar! Ssee ffar! Ssee fforever! Fforessee! Afftssee!"

Spar felt a surge of irritation at this constant talk of seeing—bad manners in the cat!—followed by an irrational surge of hope about his eyes. He decided that this was no witch cat left over from his dream, but a stray which had wormed its way through a wind tube into the Bat Rack, setting off his dream. There were quite a few animal strays in these days of the witch panic and the depopulation of the Ship, or at least of Hold Three.

Dawn struck the Bow then, for the violet fore-corner of the Bat Rack began to glow. The running lights were drowned in a growing white blaze. Within twenty heartbeats Windrush was bright as it ever would be on Workday or any other morning.

Out along Spar's arm moved the cat, a black blur to his squinting eyes. In teeth Spar could not see, it held a smaller gray blur. Spar touched the latter. It was even shorter furred, but cold.

As if irked, the cat took off from his bare forearm with a strong push of hind legs. It landed expertly on the next shroud, a wavery line of gray that vanished in either direction before reaching a wall.

Spar unclipped himself, curled his toes around his own pencil-thin shroud, and squinted at the cat.

The cat stared back with eyes that were green blurs which almost coalesced in the black blur of its outsize head.

Spar asked, "Your child? Dead?"

FRITZ LEIBER

The cat loosed its gray burden, which floated beside its head.

"Chchild!" All the former scorn and more were back in the sibilant voice. "It izz a rat I sslew her, issiot!"

Spar's lips puckered in a smile. "I like you, cat. I will call you Kim."

"Kim-shlim!" the cat spat. "I'll call you Lushsh! Or ssot!"

The creaking increased, as it always did after dayspring and noon. Shrouds twanged. Walls cracked.

Spar swiftly swiveled his head. Though reality was by its nature a blur, he could unerringly spot movement.

Keeper was slowly floating straight at him. On the round of his russet body was mounted the great, pale round of his face, its bright pink target-center drawing attention from the tiny, wide-set, brown blurs of his eyes. One of his fat arms ended in the bright gleam of pliofilm, the other in the dark gleam of steel. Far beyond him was the dark red aft corner of the Bat Rack, with the great gleaming torus, or doughnut, of the bar midway between.

"Lazy, pampered he-slut," Keeper greeted. "All Sleepday you snored while I stood guard, and now I bring your morning pouch of moonmist to your sleeping shroud.

"A bad night, Spar," he went on, his voice growing sententious. "Werewolves, vampires, and witches loose in the corridors. But I stood them off, not to mention rats and mice. I heard through the tubes that the vamps got Girlie and Sweetheart, the silly sluts! Vigilance, Spar! Now suck your moonmist and start sweeping. The place stinks."

He stretched out the pliofilm-gleaming hand.

His mind hissing with Kim's contemptuous words, Spar said, "I don't think I'll drink this morning, Keeper. Corn gruel and moonbrew only. No, water."

"What, Spar?" Keeper demanded. "I don't believe I can allow that. We don't want you having convulsions in front of the customers. Earth strangle me!—what's that?"

Spar instantly, launched himself at Keeper's steel-gleaming hand. Behind him his shroud twanged. With one hand he twisted a cold, thick barrel. With the other he pried a plump finger from a trigger.

"He's not a witch cat, only a stray," he said as they tumbled over and kept slowly rotating.

"Unhand me, underling!" Keeper blustered. "I'll have you in irons. I'll tell Crown."

"Shooting weapons are as much against the law as knives

SHIP OF SHADOWS

or needles," Spar countered boldly, though he already was feeling dizzy and sick. "It's you should fear the brig." He recognized beneath the bullying voice the awe Keeper always had of his ability to move swiftly and surely, though half-blind.

They bounced to rest against a swarm of shrouds. "Loose me, I say," Keeper demanded, struggling weakly. "Crown gave me this pistol. And I have a permit for it from the Bridge." The last at least, Spar guessed, was a lie. Keeper continued, "Besides, it's only a line-shooting gun reworked for heavy, elastic ball. Not enough to rupture a wall, yet sufficient to knock out drunks—or knock in the head of a witch cat!"

"Not a witch cat, Keeper," Spar repeated, although he was having to swallow hard to keep from spewing. "Only a well-behaved stray, who has already proved his use to us by killing one of the rats that have been stealing our food. His name is Kim. He'll be a good worker."

The distant blur of Kim lengthened and showed thin blurs of legs and tail, as if he were standing out rampant from his line. "Asset izz I," he boasted. "Ssanitary. Uzze wasste tubes. Sslay ratss, micece! Sspy out witchchess, vampss ffor youl"

"He speaks!" Keeper gasped. "Witchcraft!"

"Crown has a dog who talks," Spar answered with finality. "A talking animal's no proof of anything."

All this while he had kept firm hold of barrel and finger. Now he felt through their grappled bodies a change in Keeper, as though inside his blubber the master of the Bat Rack were transforming from stocky muscle and bone into a very thick, sweet syrup that could conform to and flow around anything.

"Sorry, Spar," he whispered unctuously. "It was a bad night and Kim startled me. He's black like a witch cat. An easy mistake on my part. We'll try him out as catcher. He must earn his keep! Now take your drink."

The pliant double pouch filling Spar's palm felt like the philosopher's stone. He lifted it toward his lips, but at the same time his toes unwittingly found a shroud, and he dove swiftly toward the shining torus, which had a hole big enough to accommodate four barmen at a pinch.

Spar collapsed against the opposite inside of the hole. With a straining of its shrouds, the torus absorbed his impact. He had the pouch to his lips, its cap unscrewed, but

FRITZ LEIBER

had not squeezed. He shut his eyes and with a tiny sob blindly thrust the pouch back into the moonmist cage.

Working chiefly by touch, he took a pouch of corn gruel from the hot closet, snitching at the same time a pouch of coffee and thrusting it into an inside pocket. Then he took a pouch of water, opened it, shoved in five salt tablets, closed it, and shook and squeezed it vigorously.

Keeper, having drifted behind him, said into his ear, "So you drink anyhow. Moonmist not good enough, you make yourself a cocktail. I should dock it from your scrip. But all drunks are liars, or become so."

Unable to ignore the taunt, Spar explained, "No, only salt water to harden my gums."

"Poor Spar, what'll you ever need hard gums for? Planning to share rats with your new friend? Don't let me catch you roasting them in my grill! I should dock you for the salt. To sweeping, Spar!" Then, turning his head toward the violet fore-corner and speaking loudly: "And you! Catch micel!"

Kim had already found the small chewer tube and thrust the dead rat into it, gripping tube with foreclaws and pushing rat with aft. At the touch of the rat's cadaver against the solid wrist of the tube, a grinding began there which would continue until the rat was macerated and slowly swallowed away toward the great cloaca which fed the Gardens of Diana.

Three times Spar manfully swished salt water against his gums and spat into a waste tube, vomiting a little after the first gargle. Then, facing away from the Keeper as he gently squeezed the pouches, he forced into his throat the coffee—dearer than moonmist, the drink distilled from moonbrew—and some of the corn gruel.

He apologetically offered the rest to Kim, who shook his head. "Jusst had a mousse."

Hastily Spar made his way to the green starboard corner. Outside the hatch he heard some drunks calling with weary and mournful anger, "Unzip!"

Grasping the heads of two long waste tubes, Spar began to sweep the air, working out from the green corner in a spiral, quite like an orb spider building her web.

From the torus, where he was idly polishing its thin titanium, Keeper upped the suction on the two tubes, so that reaction sped Spar in his spiral. He need use his

SHIP OF SHADOWS

body only to steer course and to avoid shrouds in such a way that his tubes didn't tangle.

Soon Keeper glanced at his wrist and called, "Spar, can't you keep track of the time? Open up!" He threw a ring of keys which Spar caught, though he could see only the last half of their flight. As soon as he was well headed toward the green door, Keeper called again and pointed aft and aloft. Spar obediently unlocked and unzipped the dark and also the blue hatch, though there was no one at either, before opening the green. In each case he avoided the hatch's gummy margin and the sticky emergency hatch hinged close beside.

In tumbled three brewos, old customers, snatching at shrouds and pushing off from each other's bodies in their haste to reach the torus, and meanwhile cursing Spar.

"Sky strangle you!"

"Earth bury you!"

"Seas sear you!"

"Language, boys!" Keeper reproved. "Though I'll agree my helper's stupidity and sloth tempt a man to talk foul."

Spar threw the keys back. The brewos lined up elbow to elbow around the torus, three grayish blobs with heads pointing toward the blue corner.

Keeper faced them. "Below, below!" he ordered indignantly. "You think you're gents?"

"But you're serving no one aloft yet."

"There's only us three."

"No matter," Keeper replied. "Propriety, suckers! Unless you mean to buy by the pouch, invert."

With low grumbles the brewos reversed their bodies so that their heads pointed toward the black corner.

Himself not bothering to invert, Keeper tossed them a slim and twisty faint red blur with three branches. Each grabbed a branch and stuck it in his face.

The pudge of his fat hand on glint of valve, Keeper said, "Let's see your scrip first."

With angry mumbles each unwadded something too small for Spar to see clearly, and handed it over. Keeper studied each item before feeding it to the cashbox. Then he decreed, "Six seconds of moonbrew. Suck fast," and looked at his wrist and moved the other hand.

One of the brewos seemed to be strangling, but he blew out through his nose and kept sucking bravely.

Keeper closed the valve.

FRITZ LEIBER

Instantly one brewo splutteringly accused, "You cut us off too soon. That wasn't six."

The treacle back in his voice, Keeper explained, "I'm squirting it to you four and two. Don't want you to drown. Ready again?"

The brewos greedily took their second squirt and then, at times wistfully sucking their tubes for remnant drops, began to shoot the breeze. In his distant circling, Spar's keen ears heard most of it.

"A dirty Sleepday, Keeper."

"No, a good one, brewo—for a drunken sucker to get his blood sucked by a lust-tickling vamp."

"I was dossed safe at Pete's, you fat ghoul."

"Pete's safe? That's news!"

"Dirty Atoms to you! But vamps did get Girlie and Sweetheart. Right in the starboard main drag, if you can believe it. By Cobalt Ninety, Windrush is getting lonely! Third Hold, anyhow. You can swim a whole passageway by day without meeting a soul."

"How do you know that about the girls?" the second brewo demanded. "Maybe they've gone to another hold to change their luck."

"Their luck's run out. Suzy saw them snatched."

"Not Suzy," Keeper corrected, now playing umpire. "But Mable did. A proper fate for drunken sluts."

"You've got no heart, Keeper."

"True enough. That's why the vamps pass me by. But speaking serious, boys, the werethings and witches are running too free in Three. I was awake all Sleepday guarding. I'm sending a complaint to the Bridge."

"You're kidding."

"You wouldn't."

Keeper solemnly nodded his head and crossed his left chest. The brewos were impressed.

Spar spiraled back toward the green corner, sweeping farther from the wall. On his way he overtook the black blob of Kim, who was circling the periphery himself, industriously leaping from shroud to shroud and occasionally making dashes along them.

A fair-skinned, plump shape twice circled by blue-bra and culottes—swam in through the green hatch.

"Morning, Spar," a soft voice greeted. "How's it going?"

"Fair and foul," Spar replied. The golden cloud of blonde

SHIP OF SHADOWS

hair floating loose touched his face. "I'm quitting moonmist, Suzy."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Spar. Work a day, loaf a day, play a day, sleep a day—that way it's best."

"I know. Workday, Loafday, Playday, Sleepday. Ten days make a terranth, twelve terranth make a sunth, twelve sunths make a starth, and so on, to the end of time. With corrections, some tell me. I wish I knew what all those names mean."

"You're too serious. You should— Oh, a kitten! How darling!"

"Kitten-shmitten!" the big-headed black blur hissed as it leaped past them. "Izz cat. Izz Kim."

"Kim's our new catcher," Spar explained. "He's serious too."

"Quit wasting time on old Toothless Eyeless, Suzy," Keeper called, "and come all the way in."

As Suzy complied with a sigh, taking the easy route of the ratlines, her soft taper fingers brushed Spar's crumpled cheek. "Dear Spar . . ." she murmured. As her feet passed his face, there was a jingle of her charm-anklet—all gold-washed hearts, Spar knew.

"Hear about Girlie and Sweetheart?" a brewo greeted ghoulishly. "How'd you like your carotid or outside iliac sliced, your—?"

"Shut up, sucker!" Suzy wearily cut him off. "Gimme a drink, Keeper."

"Your tab's long, Suzy. How you going to pay?"

"Don't play games, Keeper, please. Not in the morning, anyhow. You know all the answers, especially to that one. For now, a pouch of moonbrew, dark. And a little quiet."

"Pouches are for ladies, Suzy. I'll serve you aloft. You got to meet your marks, but—"

There was a shrill snarl which swiftly mounted to a scream of rage. Just inside the aft hatch, a pale figure in vermilion culottes and bra—no, wider than that, jacket or short coat—was struggling madly, somersaulting and kicking.

Entering carelessly, like too swiftly, the slim girl had got parts of herself and her clothes stuck to the hatch's inside margin and the emergency hatch.

Breaking loose by frantic main force while Spar dove toward her and the brewos shouted advice, she streaked to-

ward the torus, jerking at the ratlines, black hair streaming behind her.

Coming up with a *bong* of hip against titanium, she grabbed together her vermilion—yes, clutch coat—with one hand and thrust the other across the rocking bar.

Drifting in close behind, Spar heard her say, "Double pouch of moonmist, Keeper. Make it fast."

"The best of mornings to you, Rixende," Keeper greeted. "I would gladly serve you goldwater, except, well—" The fat arms spread. "—Crown doesn't like his girls coming to the Bat Rack by themselves. Last time he gave me strict orders to—"

"What the smoke! It's on Crown's account I came here, to find something he lost. Meanwhile, moonmist. Double!" She pounded on the bar until reaction started her aloft, and she pulled back into place with Spar's unthanked help.

"Softly, softly, lady," Keeper gentled, the tiny brown blurs of his eyes vanishing with his grinning. "What if Crown comes in while you're squeezing?"

"He won't!" Rixende denied vehemently, though glancing past Spar quickly—black blur, blur of pale face, black blur again. "He's got a new girl. I don't mean Phanette or Doucette, but a girl you've never seen. Name of Almodie. He'll be busy with the skinny bitch all morning. And now uncease that double moonmist, you dirty devil!"

"Softly, Rixie. All in good time. What is it Crown lost?"

"A little black bag. About so big." She extended her slender hand, fingers merged. "He lost it here last Playday night, or had it lifted."

"Hear that, Spar?" Keeper said.

"No little black bags," Spar said very quickly. "But you did leave your big orange one here last night, Rixende. I'll get it." He swung inside the torus.

"Oh, damn both bags. Gimme that double!" the black-haired girl demanded frantically. "Earth Mother!"

Even the brewos gasped. Touching hands to the sides of his head, Keeper begged: "No big obscenities, please. They sound worse from a dainty girl, gentle Rixende."

"Earth Mother, I said! Now cut the fancy, Keeper, and give, before I scratch your face off and rummage your cages!"

"Very well, very well. At once, at once. But how will you pay? Crown told me he'd get my license revoked if I ever put you on his tab again. Have you scrip? Or . . . coins?"

SHIP OF SHADOWS

"Use your eyes! Or you think this coat's got inside pockets? She spread it wide, flashing her upper body, then clutched it tight again. "Earth Mother! Earth Mother! Earth Mother!" The brewos babbled scandalized. Suzy snorted mildly in boredom.

With one fat hand-blob Keeper touched Rixende's wrist where a yellow blur circled it closely. "You've got gold," he said in hushed tones, his eyes vanishing again, this time in greed.

"You know damn well they're welded on. My anklets too."

"But these?" His hand went to a golden blur close beside her head.

"Welded too. Crown had my ears pierced."

"But . . ."

"Oh, you atom-dirty devil! I get you, all right. Well, then, *all right!*" The last words ended in a scream more of anger than pain as she grabbed a gold blur and jerked. Blood swiftly blobbed out. She thrust forward her fisted hand. "Now *give!* Gold for a double moonmist."

Keeper breathed hard but said nothing as he scrabbled in the moonmist cage, as if knowing he had gone too far. The brewos were silent too. Suzy sounded completely unimpressed as she said, "And my dark." Spar found a fresh dry sponge and expertly caught up the floating scarlet blobs with it before pressing it to Rixende's torn ear.

Keeper studied the heavy gold pendant, which he held close to his face. Rixende milked the double pouch pressed to her lips and her eyes vanished as she sucked blissfully. Spar guided Rixende's free hand to the sponge, and she automatically took over the task of holding it to her ear. Suzy gave a hopeless sigh, then reached her whole plump body across the bar, dipped her hand into a cool cage, and helped herself to a double of dark.

A long, wiry, very dark brown figure in skintight dark violet jumpers mottled with silver arrowed in from the dark red hatch at a speed half again as great as Spar ever dared and without brushing a single shroud by accident or intent. Midway the newcomer did a half somersault as he passed Spar; his long, narrow bare feet hit the titanium next to Rixende. He accordioned up so expertly that the torus hardly swayed.

One very dark brown arm snaked around her. The other plucked the pouch from her mouth, and there was a snap as he spun the cap shut.

FRITZ LEIBER

A lazy musical voice inquired, "What'd we tell you would happen, baby, if you ever again took a drink on your own?"

The Bat Rack held very still. Keeper was backed against the opposite side of the hole, one hand behind him. Spar had his arm in his lost-and-found nook behind the moonbrew and moonmist cages and kept it there. He felt fear-sweat beading on him. Suzy kept her dark close to her face.

A brewo burst into violent coughing, choked it to a wheezing end, and gasped subserviently, "Excuse me, coroner. Salutations."

Keeper chimed dully, "Morning . . . Crown."

Crown gently pulled the clutch coat off Rixende's far shoulder and began to stroke her. "Why, you're all goose-flesh, honey, and rigid as a corpse. What frightened you? Smooth down, skin. Ease up, muscles. Relax, Rix, and we'll give you a squirt."

His hand found the sponge, stopped, investigated, found the wet part, then went toward the middle of his face. He sniffed.

"Well, boys, at least we know none of you are vamps," he observed softly. "Else we'd found you sucking at her ear."

Rixende said very rapidly in a monotone, "I didn't come for a drink, I swear to you. I came to get that little bag you lost. Then I was tempted. I didn't know I would be. I tried to resist, but Keeper led me on. I—"

"Shut up," Crown said quietly. "We were just wondering how you paid him. Now we know. How were you planning to buy your third double? Cut off a hand or a foot? Keeper . . . show me your other hand. We said show it. That's right. Now unfist."

Crown plucked the pendant from Keeper's opened hand-blob. His yellow-brown eye-blurs on Keeper all the while, he wagged the precious bauble back and forth, then tossed it slowly aloft.

As the golden blur moved toward the open blue hatch at unchanging pace, Keeper opened and shut his mouth twice, then babbled, "I didn't tempt her, Crown, honest. I didn't. I didn't know she was going to hurt her ear. I tried to stop her, but—"

"We're not interested," Crown said. "Put the double on our tab." His face never leaving Keeper's, he extended his arm aloft and pinched the pendant just before it straight-lined out of reach.

SHIP OF SHADOWS

"Why's this home of jollity so dead?" Snaking a long leg across the bar as easily as an arm, Crown pinched Spar's ear between his big and smaller toes, pulled him close and turned him round. "How're you coming along with the saline, baby? Gums hardening? Only one way to test it." Gripping Spar's jaw and lip with his other toes, he thrust the big one into Spar's mouth. "Come on, bite me, baby."

Spar bit. It was the only way not to vomit. Crown chuckled. Spar bit hard. Energy flooded his shaking frame. His face grew hot and his forehead throbbed under its drenching of fear-sweat. He was sure he was hurting Crown, but the Coroner of Hold Three only kept up his low, delighted chuckle and when Spar gasped, withdrew his foot.

"My, my, you're getting strong, baby. We almost felt that. Have a drink on us."

Spar ducked his stupidly wide-open mouth away from the thin jet of moonmist. The jet struck him in his eye and stung so that he had to knot his fists and clamp his aching gums together to keep from crying out.

"Why's this place so dead, I ask again? No applause for baby and now baby's gone temperance on us. Can't you give us just one tiny laugh?" Crown faced each in turn. "What's the matter? Cat got your tongues?"

"Cat? We have a cat, a new cat, came just last night, working as catcher," Keeper suddenly babbled. "It can talk a little. Not as well as Hellhound, but it talks. It's very funny. It caught a rat."

"What'd you do with the rat's body, Keeper?"

"Fed it to the chewer. That is, Spar did. Or the cat."

"You mean to tell us that you disposed of a corpse without notifying us? Oh, don't go pale on us, Keeper. That's nothing. Why, we could accuse you of harboring a witch cat. You say he came last night, and that was a wicked night for witches. Now don't go green on us too. We were only putting you on. We were only looking for a small laugh."

"Spar! Call your cat! Make him say something funny."

Before Spar could call, or even decide whether he'd call Kim or not, the black blur appeared on a shroud near Crown, green eye-blurs fixed on the yellow-brown ones.

"So you're the joker, eh? Well . . . joke."

Kim increased in size. Spar realized it was his fur standing on end.

"Go ahead, Joke . . . like they tell us you can. Keeper,

you wouldn't be kidding us about this cat being able to talk?

"Spar! Make your cat joke!

"Don't bother. We believe he's got his own tongue too. That the matter, Blackie?" He reached out his hand. Kim lashed at it and sprang away. Crown only gave another of his low chuckles.

Rixende began to shake uncontrollably. Crown examined her solicitously yet leisurely, using his outstretched hand to turn her head toward him, so that any blood that might have been coming from it from the cat's slash would have gone into the sponge.

"Spar swore the cat could talk," Keeper babbled. "I'll—"

"Quiet," Crown said. He put the pouch to Rixende's lips, squeezed until her shaking subsided and it was empty, then flicked the crumpled pliofilm toward Spar.

"And now about that little black bag, Keeper," Crown said flatly.

"Spar!"

The latter dipped into his lost-and-found nook, saying quickly, "No little black bags, coroner, but we did find this one the lady Rixende forgot last Playday night," and he turned back holding out something big, round, gleamingly orange, and closed with drawstrings.

Crown took and swung it slowly in a circle. For Spar, who couldn't see the strings, it was like magic. "Bit too big, and a mite the wrong shade. We're certain we lost the little black bag here, or had it lifted. You making the Bat Rack a tent for dips, Keeper?"

"Spar—?"

"We're asking *you*, Keeper."

Shoving Spar aside, Keeper groped frantically in the nook, pulling aside the cages of moonmist and moonbrew pouches. He produced many small objects. Spar could distinguish the largest—an electric hand-fan and a bright red footglove. They hung around Keeper in a jumble.

Keeper was panting and had scrabbled his hands for a full minute in the nook without bringing out anything more, when Crown said, his voice lazy again, "That's enough. The little black bag was of no importance to us in any case."

Keeper emerged with a face doubly blurred, surrounded by a haze of sweat. He pointed an arm at the orange bag.

"It might be inside that one!"

SHIP OF SHADOWS

Crown opened the bag, began to search through it, changed his mind, and gave the whole bag a flick. Its remarkably numerous contents came out and moved slowly aloft at equal speeds, like an army on the march in irregular order. Crown scanned them as they went past.

"No, not here." He pushed the bag toward Keeper. "Return Rix's stuff to it and have it ready for us the next time we dive in—"

Putting his arm around Rixende, so that it was his hand that held the sponge to her ear, he turned and kicked off powerfully for the aft hatch. After he had been out of sight for several seconds, there was a general sigh; the three brewos put out new scrip-wads to pay for another squirt. Suzy asked for a second double dark, which Spar handed her quickly, while Keeper shook off his daze and ordered Spar, "Gather up all the floating trash, especially Rixie's, and get that back in her purse. On the jump, lubber!" Then he used the electric hand-fan to cool and dry himself.

It was a mean task Keeper had set Spar, but Kim came to help, darting after objects too small for Spar to see. Once he had them in his hands, Spar could readily finger or sniff which was which.

When his impotent rage at Crown had faded, Spar's thoughts went back to Sleepday night. Had his vision of vamps and werewolves been dream only?—now that he knew the werethings had been abroad in force. If only he had better eyes to distinguish illusion from reality! Kim's "Ssee! Ssee shsharply!" hissed in his memory. What would it be like to see sharply? Everything brighter? Or closer?

After a weary time the scattered objects were gathered and he went back to sweeping and Kim to his mouse hunt. As Workday morning progressed, the Bat Rack gradually grew less bright, though so gradually it was hard to tell.

A few more customers came in, but all for quick drinks, which Keeper served them glumly; Suzy judged none of them worth cottoning up to.

As time slowly passed, Keeper grew steadily more fretfully angry, as Spar had known he would after groveling before Crown. He tried to throw out the three brewos, but they produced more crumpled scrip, which closest scrutiny couldn't prove counterfeit. In revenge he short-squirted them and there were arguments. He called Spar off his sweeping to ask him nervously, "That cat of yours—he scratched Crown, didn't he? We'll have to get rid of him; Crown said

he might be a witch cat, remember?" Spar made no answer. Keeper set him renewing the glue of the emergency hatches, claiming that Rixende's tearing free from the aft one had shown it must be drying out. He gobbled appetizers and drank moonmist with tomato juice. He sprayed the Bat Rack with some abominable synthetic scent. He started counting the boxed scrip and coins but gave up the job with a slam of self-locking drawer almost before he'd begun. His grimace fixed on Suzy.

"Spar!" he called. "Take over! And over-squirt the brewos on your peril!"

Then he locked the cash box, and giving Suzy a meaningful jerk of his head toward the scarlet starboard hatch, he pulled himself toward it. With an unhappy shrug toward Spar, she wearily followed.

As soon as the pair were gone, Spar gave the brewos an eight-second squirt, waving back their scrip, and placed two small serving cages—of fritos and yeast balls—before them. They grunted their thanks and fell to. The light changed from healthy bright to corpse white. There was a faint, distant roar, followed some seconds later by a brief crescendo of creakings. The new light made Spar uneasy. He served two more suck-and-dives and sold a pouch of moonmist at double purser's prices. He started to eat an appetizer, but just then Kim swam in to proudly show him a mouse. He conquered his nausea, but began to dread the onset of real withdrawal symptoms.

A potbellied figure clad in sober black dragged itself along the ratlines from the green hatch. On the aloft side of the bar there appeared a visage in which the blur of white hair and beard almost hid leather-brown flesh, though accentuating the blurs of gray eyes.

"Doc!" Spar greeted, his misery and unease gone, and instantly handed out a chill pouch of three-star moonbrew. Yet all he could think to say in his excitement was the banal, "A bad Sleepday night, eh, Doc? Vamps and—"

"—And other doltish superstitions, which wax every sunth, but never wane," an amiable, cynical old voice cut in. "Yet, I suppose I shouldn't rob you of your illusions, Spar, even the terrifying ones. You've little enough to live by, as it is. And there is viciousness astir in Windrush. Ah, that smacks good against my tonsils."

Then Spar remembered the important thing. Reaching deep inside his slopsuit, he brought out, in such a way as

SHIP OF SHADOWS

to hide it from the brewos below, a small flat narrow black bag.

"Here, Doc," he whispered, "you lost it last Playday. I kept it safe for you."

"Dammit, I'd lose my jumpers, if I ever took them off," Doc commented, hushing his voice when Spar put finger to lips. "I suppose I started mixing moonmist with my moon-brew—again?"

"You did, Doc. But you didn't lose your bag. Crown or one of his girls lifted it, or snagged it when it sat loose beside you. And then I . . . I, Doc, lifted it from Crown's hip pocket. Yes, and kept that secret when Rixende and Crown came in demanding it this morning."

"Spar, my boy, I am deeply in your debt," Doc said. "More than you can know. Another three-star, please. Ah, nectar. Spar, ask any reward of me, and if it lies merely within the realm of the first transfinite infinity, I will grant it."

To his own surprise, Spar began to shake—with excitement. Pulling himself forward halfway across the bar, he whispered hoarsely, "Give me good eyes, Doc!" adding impulsively, "and teeth!"

After what seemed a long while, Doc said in a dreamy, sorrowful voice, "In the Old Days, that would have been easy. They'd perfected eye transplants. They could regenerate cranial nerves, and sometimes restore scanning power to an injured cerebrum. While transplanting tooth buds from a stillborn was intern's play. But now . . . Oh, I might be able to do what you ask in an uncomfortable, antique, inorganic fashion, but . . ." He broke off on a note that spoke of the misery of life and the uselessness of all effort.

"The Old Days," one brewo said from the corner of his mouth to the brewo next to him. "Witch talk!"

"Witch-smitch!" the second brewo replied in like fashion. "The flesh mechanic's only senile. He dreams all four days, not just Sleepday."

The third brewo whistled against the evil eye a tune like the wind.

Spar tugged at the long-armed sleeve of Doc's black jumper. "Doc, you promised. I want to see sharp, bite sharp!"

Doc laid his shrunken hand commiseratingly on Spar's forearm. "Spar," he said softly, "seeing sharply would only make you very unhappy. Believe me, I *know*. Life's easier to bear when things are blurred, just as it's best when thoughts are blurred by brew or mist. And while there are

FRITZ LEIBER

people in Windrush who yearn to bite sharply, you are not their kind. Another three-star, if you please."

"I quit moonmist this morning, Doc," Spar said somewhat proudly as he handed over the fresh pouch.

Doc answered with sad smile, "Many quit moonmist every Workday morning and change their minds when Playday comes around."

"Not me, Doc! Besides," Spar argued, "Keeper and Crown and his girls and even Suzy all see sharply, and they aren't unhappy."

"I'll tell you a secret, Spar," Doc replied. "Keeper and Crown and the girls are all zombies. Yes, even Crown with his cunning and power. To them Windrush is the universe."

"It isn't, Doc?"

Ignoring the interruption, Doc continued, "But you wouldn't be like that, Spar. You'd want to know more. And that would make you far unhappier than you are."

"I don't care, Doc," Spar said. He repeated accusingly, "You promised."

The gray blurs of Doc's eyes almost vanished as he frowned in thought. Then he said, "How would this be, Spar? I know moonmist brings pains and sufferings as well as easings and joys. But suppose that every Workday morning and Loafday noon I should bring you a tiny pill that would give you all the good effects of moonmist and none of the bad. I've one in this bag. Try it now and see. And every Playday night I would bring you without fail another sort of pill that would make you sleep soundly with never a nightmare. Much better than eyes and teeth. Think it over."

As Spar considered that, Kim drifted up. He eyed Doc with his close-set green blurs. "Respectful greetingsss, ssir," he hissed. "Name izz Kim."

Doc answered, "The same to you, sir. May mice be ever abundant." He softly stroked the cat, beginning with Kim's chin and chest. The dreaminess returned to his voice. "In the Old Days, all cats talked, not just a few sports. The entire feline tribe. And many dogs, too—pardon me, Kim. While as for dolphins and whales and apes . . ."

Spar said eagerly, "Answer me one question, Doc. If your pills give happiness without hangover, why do you always drink moonbrew yourself and sometimes spike it with moonmist?"

"Because for me—" Doc began and then broke off with a grin. "You've trapped me, Spar. I never thought you used

SHIP OF SHADOWS

your mind. Very well, on your own mind be it. Come to my office this Loafday—you know the way? Good!—and we'll see what we can do about your eyes and teeth. And now a double pouch for the corridor."

He paid in bright coins, thrust the big squinchy three-star in a big pocket, said, "See you, Spar. So long, Kim," and tugged himself toward the green hatch, zigzagging.

"Ffarewell, ssir," Kim hissed after him.

Spar held out the small black bag. "You forgot it again, Doc."

As Doc returned with a weary curse and pocketed it, the scarlet hatch unzipped and Keeper swam out. He looked in a good humor now and whistled the tune of "I'll Marry the Man on the Bridge" as he began to study certain rounds on scrip-till and moonbrew valves, but when Doc was gone he asked Spar suspiciously, "What was that you handed the old geezer?"

"His purse," Spar replied easily. "He forgot it just now." He shook his loosely fisted hand and it chinked. "Doc paid in coins, Keeper." Keeper took them eagerly. "Back to sweeping, Spar."

As Spar dove toward the scarlet hatch to take up larboard tubes, Suzy emerged and passed him with face averted. She sidled up to the bar and unsmilingly snatched the pouch of moonmist Keeper offered her with mock courtliness.

Spar felt a brief rage on her behalf, but it was hard for him to keep his mind on anything but his coming appointment with Doc. When Workday night fell swiftly as a hurled knife, he was hardly aware of it and felt none of his customary unease. Keeper turned on full all the lights in the Bat Rack. They shone brightly while beyond the translucent walls there was a milky churning.

Business picked up a little. Suzy made off with the first likely mark. Keeper called Spar to take over the torus, while he himself got a much-erased sheet of paper and, holding it to a clipboard held against his bent knees, wrote on it laboriously, as if he were thinking out each word, perhaps each letter, often wetting his pencil in his mouth. He became so absorbed in his difficult task that without realizing he drifted off toward the black below hatch, rotating over and over. The paper got dirtier and dirtier with his scrawlings and smudgings, new erasures, saliva and sweat.

The short night passed more swiftly than Spar dared hope,

FRITZ LEIBER

so that the sudden glare of Loafday dawn startled him. Most of the customers made off to take their siestas.

Spar wondered what excuse to give Keeper for leaving the Bat Rack, but the problem was solved for him. Keeper folded the grimy sheet, and sealed it with hot tape. "Take this to the Bridge, loafer, to the Exec. Wait." He took the repacked orange bag from its nook and pulled on the cords to make sure they were drawn tight. "On your way deliver this at Crown's Hole. With all courtesy and subservience, Spar! Now, on the jump!"

Spar slid the sealed message into his only pocket with working zipper and drew that tight. Then he dove slowly toward the aft hatch, where he almost collided with Kim. Recalling Keeper's talk of getting rid of the cat, he caught hold of him around the slim furry chest under the forelegs and gently thrust him inside his slopsuit, whispering, "You'll take a trip with me, little Kim." The cat set his claws in the thin material and steadied himself.

For Spar, the corridor was a narrow cylinder ending in mist either way and decorated by lengthwise blurs of green and red. He guided himself chiefly by touch and memory, this time remembering that he must pull himself against the light wind hand-over-hand along the centerline. After curving past the larger cylinders of the fore-and-aft gangways, the corridor straightened. Twice he worked his way around centrally slung fans whirring so softly that he recognized them chiefly by the increase in breeze before passing them and the slight suction after.

Soon he began to smell soil and green stuff growing. With a shiver he passed a black round that was the elastic-curtained door to Hold Three's big chewer. He met no one—odd even for Loafday. Finally he saw the green of the Gardens of Apollo and beyond it a huge black screen, in which hovered toward the aft side a small, smoky-orange circle that always filled Spar with inexplicable sadness and fear. He wondered in how many black screens that doleful circle was portrayed, especially in the starboard end of Windrush. He had seen it in several.

So close to the gardens that he could make out wavering green shoots and the silhouette of a floating farmer, the corridor right-angled below. Two dozen pulls along the line and he floated by an open hatch, which both memory for distance and the strong scent of musky, mixed perfumes told him was the entry to Crown's Hole. Peering in, he could see

SHIP OF SHADOWS

the intermelting black and silver spirals of the decor of the great globular room. Directly opposite the hatch was another large black screen with the red-mottled dun disk placed similarly off-center.

From under Spar's chin, Kim hissed very softly, but urgently, "Sstop! Ssilencee, on your liffel" The cat had poked his head out of the slopsuit's neck. His ears tickled Spar's throat. Spar was getting used to Kim's melodrama, and in any case the warning was hardly needed. He had just seen the half-dozen floating naked bodies and would have held still if only from embarrassment. Not that Spar could see genitals any more than ears at the distance. But he could see that save for hair, each body was of one texture: one very dark brown and the other five—or was it four? no, five—fair. He didn't recognize the two with platinum and golden hair, who also happened to be the two palest. He wondered which was Crown's new girl, name of Almodie. He was relieved that none of the bodies were touching.

There was the glint of metal by the golden-haired girl, and he could just discern the red blur of a slender, five-forked tube which went from the metal to the five other faces. It seemed strange that even with a girl to play bartender, Crown should have moonbrew served in such plebeian fashion in his palatial Hole. Of course the tube might carry moonwine, or even moonmist.

Or was Crown planning to open a rival bar to the Bat Rack? A poor time, these days, and a worse location, he mused as he tried to think of what to do with the orange bag.

"Sslink off!" Kim urged still more softly.

Spar's fingers found a snap-ring by the hatch. With the faintest of clicks he secured it around the draw-cords of the pouch and then pulled back the way he had come.

But faint as the click had been, there was a response from Crown's Hole—a very deep, long growl.

Spar pulled faster at the centerline. As he rounded the corner leading inboard, he looked back.

Jutting out from Crown's hatch was a big, prick-eared head narrower than a man's and darker even than Crown's.

The growl was repeated.

It was ridiculous he should be so frightened of Hellhound, Spar told himself as he jerked himself and his passenger along. Why, Crown sometimes even brought the big dog to the Bat Rack.

FRITZ LEIBER

Perhaps it was that Hellhound never growled in the Bat Rack, only talked in a hundred or so monosyllables.

Besides, the dog couldn't pull himself along the center-line at any speed. He lacked sharp claws. Though he might be able to bound forward, caroming from one side of the corridor to another.

This time the center-slit black curtains of the big chewer made Spar veer violently. He was a fine one—going to get new eyes today and frightened as a child!

"Why did you try to scare me back there, Kim?" he asked angrily.

"I ssaw shsheer evil, issiot!"

"You saw five folk sucking moonbrew. And a harmless dog. This time you're the fool, Kim; you're the idiot!"

Kim shut up, drawing in his head, and refused to say another word. Spar remembered about the vanity and touchiness of all cats. But by now he had other worries. What if the orange bag were stolen by a passerby before Crown noticed it? And if Crown did find it, wouldn't he know Spar, forever Keeper's errandboy, had been peeping? That all this should happen on the most important day of his life! His verbal victory over Kim was small consolation.

Also, although the platinum-haired girl had interested him most of the two strange ones, something began to bother him about the girl who'd been playing bartender, the one with golden hair like Suzy's, but much slimmer and paler—he had the feeling he'd seen her before. And something about her had frightened him.

When he reached the central gangways, he was tempted to go to Doc's office before the Bridge. But he wanted to be able to relax at Doc's and take as much time as needed, knowing all errands were done.

Reluctantly he entered the windy violet gangway and dove at a fore angle for the first empty space on the central gang-line, so that his palms were only burned a little before he had firm hold of it and was being sped fore at about the same speed as the wind. Keeper was a miser, not to buy him handgloves, let alone footgloves!—but he had to pay sharp attention to passing the shroud-slung roller bearings that kept the thick, moving line centered in the big corridor. It was an easy trick to catch hold of the line ahead of the bearing and then get one's other hand out of the way, but it demanded watchfulness.

There were few figures traveling on the line and fewer

SHIP OF SHADOWS

still being blown along the corridor. He overtook a doubled-up one tumbling over and over and crying out in an old cracked voice, "Jacob's Ladder, Tree of Life, Marriage Lines . . ."

He passed the squeeze in the gangway marking the division between the Third and Second Holds without being stopped by the guard there and then he almost missed the big blue corridor leading aloft. Again he slightly burned his palms making the transfer from one moving gang-line to another. His fretfulness increased.

"Spar, you issiot—!" Kim began.

"Ssh!—we're in officers' territory," Spar cut him off, glad to have that excuse for once more putting down the impudent cat. And true enough, the blue spaces of Windrush always did fill him with awe and dread.

Almost too soon to suit him, he found himself swinging from the gang-line to a stationary monkey jungle of tubular metal just below the deck of the Bridge. He worked his way to the aloft-most bars and floated there, waiting to be spoken to.

Much metal, in many strange shapes, gleamed in the Bridge, and there were irregularly pulsing rainbow surfaces, the closest of which sometimes seemed ranks and files of tiny lights going on and off—red, green, all colors. Aloft of everything was an endless velvet-black expanse very faintly blotched by churning, milky glintings.

Among the metal objects and the rainbows floated figures all clad in the midnight blue of officers. They sometimes gestured to each other, but never spoke a word. To Spar, each of their movements was freighted with profound significance. These were the gods of Windrush, who guided everything, if there were gods at all. He felt reduced in importance to a mouse, which would be chased off chittering if it once broke silence.

After a particularly tense flurry of gestures, there came a brief distant roar and a familiar creaking and crackling. Spar was amazed, yet at the same time realized he should have known that the Captain, the Navigator, and the rest were responsible for the familiar diurnal phenomena.

It also marked Loafday noon. Spar began to fret. His errands were taking too long. He began to lift his hand tentatively toward each passing figure in midnight blue. None took the least note of him.

Finally he whispered, "Kim—?"

The cat did not reply. He could hear a purring that might be a snore. He gently shook the cat. "Kim, let's talk."

"Shshut off! I ssleep! Ssh!" Kim resettled himself and his claws and recommenced his purring snore—whether natural or feigned, Spar could not tell. He felt very despondent.

The lunths crept by. He grew desperate and weary. He must not miss his appointment with Doc! He was nerving himself to move farther aloft and speak, when a pleasant, young voice said, "Hello, grandpa, what's on your mind?"

Spar realized that he had been raising his hand automatically and that a person as dark-skinned as Crown, but clad in midnight blue, had at last taken notice. He unzipped the note and handed it over. "For the Exec."

"That's my department." A trilled crackle—fingernail slitting the note? A larger crackle—note being opened. A brief wait. Then, "Who's Keeper?"

"Owner of the Bat Rack, sir. I work there."

"Bat Rack?"

"A moonbrew mansion. Once called the Happy Torus, I've been told. In the Old Days, Wine Mess Three, Doc told me."

"Hmm. Well, what's all this mean, gramps? And what's your name?"

Spar stared miserably at the dark-mottled gray square. "I can't read, sir. Name's Spar."

"Hmm. Seen any . . . er . . . supernatural beings in the Bat Rack?"

"Only in my dreams, sir."

"Mmm. Well, we'll have a look in. If you recognize me, don't let on. I'm Ensign Drake, by the way. Who's your passenger, grandpa?"

"Only my cat, Ensign," Spar breathed in alarm.

"Well, take the black shaft down." Spar began to move across the monkey jungle in the direction pointed out by the blue arm-blur.

"And next time remember animals aren't allowed on the Bridge."

As Spar traveled below, his warm relief that Ensign Drake had seemed quite human and compassionate was mixed with anxiety as to whether he still had time to visit Doc. He almost missed the shift to the gang-line grinding aft in the dark red main-drag. The corpse-light brightening into the false dawn of late afternoon bothered him. Once more he passed the tumbling bent figure, this time croaking, "Trinity, Trellis, Wheat Ear . . ."

SHIP OF SHADOWS

He was fighting down the urge to give up his visit to Doc and pull home to the Bat Rack, when he noticed he had passed the second squeeze and was in Hold Four with the passageway to Doc's coming up. He dove off, checked himself on a shroud and began the hand-drag to Doc's office, as far larboard as Crown's Hole was starboard.

He passed two figures clumsy on the line, their breaths malty in anticipation of Playday. Spar worried that Doc might have closed his office. He smelled soil and greenery again, from the Gardens of Diana.

The hatch was shut, but when Spar pressed the bulb, it unzipped after three honks, and the white-haloed gray-eyed face peered out.

"I'd just about given up on you, Spar."

"I'm sorry, Doc. I had to—"

"No matter. Come in, come in. Hello, Kim—take a look around if you want."

Kim crawled out, pushed off from Spar's chest, and soon was engaged in a typical cat's tour of inspection.

And there was a great deal to inspect, as even Spar could see. Every shroud in Doc's office seemed to have objects clipped along its entire length. There were blobs large and small, gleaming and dull, light and dark, translucent and solid. They were silhouetted against a wall of the corpse-light Spar feared, but had no time to think of now. At one end was a band of even brighter light.

"Careful, Kim!" Spar called to the cat as he landed against a shroud and began to paw his way from blob to blob.

"He's all right," Doc said. "Let's have a look at you, Spar. Keep your eyes open."

Doc's hands held Spar's head. The gray eyes and leathery face came so close they were one blur.

"Keep them open, I said. Yes, I know you have to blink them, that's all right. Just as I thought. The lenses are dissolved. You've suffered the side-effect which one in ten do who are infected with the Lethean rickettsia."

"Styx ricks, Doc?"

"That's right, though the mob's got hold of the wrong river in the Underworld. But we've all had it. We've all drunk the water of Lethe. Though sometimes when we grow very old we begin to remember the beginning. Don't squirm."

"Hey, Doc, is it because I've had the Styx ricks I can't remember anything back before the Bat Rack?"

"It could be. How long have you been at the Rack?"

FRITZ LEIBER

"I don't know, Doc. Forever."

"Before I found the place, anyhow. When the Rumdum closed here in Four. But that's only a starth ago."

"But I'm awful old, Doc. Why don't I start remembering?"

"You're not old, Spar. You're just bald and toothless and etched by moonmist and your muscles have shriveled. Yes, and your mind has shriveled too. Now open your mouth."

One of Doc's hands went to the back of Spar's neck. The other probed. "Your gums are tough, anyhow. That'll make it easier."

Spar wanted to tell about the salt water, but when Doc finally took his hand out of Spar's mouth, it was to say, "Now open wide as you can."

Doc pushed into his mouth something big as a handbag and hot. "Now bite down hard."

Spar felt as if he had bitten fire. He tried to open his mouth, but hands on his head and jaw held it closed. Involuntarily he kicked and clawed air. His eyes filled with tears.

"Stop writhing! Breathe through your nose. It's not that hot. Not hot enough to blister, anyhow."

Spar doubted that, but after a bit decided it wasn't quite hot enough to bake his brain through the roof of his mouth. Besides, he didn't want to show Doc his cowardice. He held still. He blinked several times and the general blur became the blurs of Doc's face and the cluttered room silhouetted by the corpse-glare. He tried to smile, but his lips were already stretched wider than their muscles could ever have done. That hurt too; he realized now that the heat was abating a little.

Doc was grinning for him. "Well, you would ask an old drunkard to use techniques he'd only read about. To make it up on you, I'll give you teeth sharp enough to sever shrouds. Kim, please get away from that bag."

The black blur of the cat was pushing off from a black blur twice his length. Spar mumbled disapprovingly at Kim through his nose and made motions. The larger blur was shaped like Doc's little bag, but bigger than a hundred of them. It must be massive too, for in reaction to Kim's push it had bent the shroud to which it was attached and—the point—the shroud was very slow in straightening.

"That bag contains my treasure, Spar," Doc explained, and when Spar lifted his eyebrows twice to signal another question, went on, "No, not coin and gold and jewels, but a

SHIP OF SHADOWS

second transfinite infinitude—sleep and dreams and nightmares for every soul in a thousand Windrushes.” He glanced at his wrist. “Time enough now. Open your mouth.” Spar obeyed, though it cost him new pain.

Doc withdrew what Spar had bitten on, wrapped in it gleam, and clipped it to the nearest shroud. Then he looked in Spar’s mouth again.

“I guess I did make it a bit too hot,” he said. He found a small pouch, set it to Spar’s lips, and squeezed it. A mist filled Spar’s mouth and all pain vanished.

Doc tucked the pouch in Spar’s pocket. “If the pain returns, use it again.”

But before Spar could thank Doc, the latter had pressed a tube to his eye. “Look, Spar, what do you see?”

Spar cried out, he couldn’t help it, and jerked his eye away.

“What’s wrong, Spar?”

“Doc, you gave me a dream,” Spar said hoarsely. “You won’t tell anyone, will you? And it tickled.”

“What was the dream like?” Doc asked eagerly.

“Just a picture, Doc. The picture of a goat with the tail of a fish. Doc, I saw the fish’s”—his mind groped—“scales! Everything had . . . edges! Doc, is *that* what they mean when they talk about seeing sharply?”

“Of course, Spar. This is good. It means there’s no cerebral or retinal damage. I’ll have no trouble making up field glasses—that is, if there’s nothing seriously wrong with my antique pair. So you still see things sharp-edged in dreams—that’s natural enough. But why were you afraid of me telling?”

“Afraid of being accused of witchcraft, Doc. I thought seeing things like that was clairvoyance. The tube tickled my eye a little.”

“Isotopes and insanity! It’s supposed to tickle. Let’s try the other eye.”

Again Spar wanted to cry out, but he restrained himself, and this time he had no impulse to jerk his eye away, although there was again the faint tickling. The picture was that of a slim girl. He could tell she was female because of her general shape. But he could see her edges. He could see . . . details. For instances, her eyes weren’t mist-bounded colored ovals. They had points at both ends, which were china-white . . . triangles. And the pale violet round between the triangles had a tiny black round at its center.

She had silvery hair, yet she looked young, he thought, though it was hard to judge such matters when you could

see edges. She made him think of the platinum-haired girl he'd glimpsed in Crown's Hole.

She wore a long, gleaming white dress, which left her shoulders bare, but either art or some unknown force had drawn her hair and her dress toward her feet. In her dress it made . . . folds.

"What's her name, Doc? Almodie?"

"No. Virgo. The Virgin. You can see her edges?"

"Yes, Doc. Sharp. I get it!—like a knife. And the goat-fish?"

"Capricorn," Doc answered, removing the tube from Spar's eye.

"Doc, I know Capricorn and Virgo are the names of lunths, terranth, sunths, and starths, but I never knew they had pictures. I never knew they *were* anything."

"You— Of course, you've never seen watches, or stars, let alone the constellations of the zodiac."

Spar was about to ask what all *those* were, but then he saw that the corpse-light was all gone, although the ribbon of brighter light had grown very wide.

"At least in this stretch of your memory," Doc added. "I should have your new eyes and teeth ready next Loafday. Come earlier if you can manage. I may see you before that at the Bat Rack, Playday Night or earlier."

"Great, Doc, but now I've got to haul. Come on, Kim! Sometimes business heavies up Loafday night, Doc, like it was Playday night come at the wrong end. Jump in, Kim."

"Sure you can make it back to the Bat Rack all right, Spar? It'll be dark before you get there."

"Course I can, Doc."

But when night fell, like a heavy hood jerked down over his head, halfway down the first passageway, he would have gone back to ask Doc to guide him, except he feared Kim's contempt, even though the cat still wasn't talking. He pulled ahead rapidly, though the few running lights hardly let him see the centerline.

The fore gangway was even worse—completely empty and its lights dim and flickering. Seeing by blurs bothered him now that he knew what seeing sharp was like. He was beginning to sweat and shake and cramp from his withdrawal from alcohol, and his thoughts were a tumult. He wondered if *any* of the weird things that had happened since meeting Kim were real or dream. Kim's refusal—or inability?—to talk any more was disquieting. He began seeing

SHIP OF SHADOWS

the misty rims of blurs that vanished when he looked straight toward them. He remembered Keeper and the brewos talking about vamps and witches.

Then, instead of waiting for the Bat Rack's green hatch, he dove off into the passageway leading to the aft one. This passageway had no lights at all. Out of it he thought he could hear Hellhound growling, but couldn't be sure because the big chewer was grinding. He was scrabbling with panic when he entered the Bat Rack through the dark red hatch, remembering barely in time to avoid the new glue.

The place was jumping with light and excitement and dancing figures, and Keeper at once began to shout abuse at him. He dove into the torus and began taking orders and serving automatically, working entirely by touch and voice, because withdrawal now had his vision swimming—a spinning blur of blurs.

After a while that got better, but his nerves got worse. Only the unceasing work kept him going—and shut out Keeper's abuse—but he was getting too tired to work at all. As Playday dawned, with the crowd around the torus getting thicker all the while, he snatched a pouch of moonmist and set it to his lips.

Claws dug his chest. "Issiot! Ssot! Sslave of ffear!"

Spar almost went into convulsions, but put back the moonmist. Kim came out of the slopsuit and pushed off contemptuously, circled the bar and talked to various of the drinkers, soon became a conversation piece. Keeper started to boast about him and quit serving. Spar worked on and on and on through sobriety more nightmarish than any drunk he could recall. And far, far longer.

Suzu came in with a mark and touched Spar's hand when he served her dark to her. It helped.

He thought he recognized a voice from below. It came from a kinky-haired, slopsuited brewo he didn't know. But then he heard the man again and thought he was Ensign Drake. There were several brewos he didn't recognize.

The place started really jumping. Keeper upped the music. Singly or in pairs, somersaulting dancers bounded back and forth between shrouds. Others toed a shroud and shimmied. A girl in black did splits on one. A girl in white dove through the torus. Keeper put it on her boyfriend's check. Brewos tried to sing.

Spar heard Kim recite:

"Izz a cat.

FRITZ LEIBER

"Killzz a rat.

"Greetss each guy,

"Thin or ffat.

"Ssay dolls, hil"

Playday night fell. The pace got hotter. Doc didn't come. But Crown did. Dancers parted and a whole section of drinkers made way aloft for him and his girls and Hellhound, so that they had a third of the torus to themselves, with no one below in that third either. To Spar's surprise they all took coffee except the dog, who when asked by Crown, responded, "Bloody Mary," drawing out the words in such deep tones that they were little more than a low "Bluh-Muh" growl.

"Iss that sspeech, I assk you?" Kim commented from the other side of the torus. Drunks around him choked down chuckles.

Spar served the pouched coffee piping hot with felt holders and mixed Hellhound's drink in a self-squeezing syringe with sipping tube. He was very groggy and for the moment more afraid for Kim than himself. The face blurs tended to swim, but he could distinguish Rixende by her black hair, Phanette and Doucette by their matching red-blond hair and oddly red-mottled fair skins, while Almodie *was* the platinum-haired pale one, yet she looked horribly right between the dark brown, purple-vested blur to one side of her and the black, narrower, prick-eared silhouette to the other.

Spar heard Crown whisper to her, "Ask Keeper to show you the talking cat." The whisper was very low and Spar wouldn't have heard it except that Crown's voice had a strange excited vibrancy Spar had never known in it before.

"But won't they fight then?—I mean Hellhound," she answered in a voice that sent silvery tendrils around Spar's heart. He yearned to see her face through Doc's tube. She would look like Virgo, only more beautiful. Yet, Crown's girl, she could be no virgin. It was a strange and horrible world. Her eyes *were* violet. But he was sick of blurs. Almodie sounded very frightened, yet she continued, "Please don't, Crown." Spar's heart was captured.

"But that's the whole idea, baby. And nobody don't's us. We thought we'd schooled you to that. We'd teach you another lesson here, except tonight we smell high fuzz—lots of it. Keeper!—our new lady wishes to hear your cat talk. Bring it over."

"I really don't . . ." Almodie began and went no further.

SHIP OF SHADOWS

Kim came floating across the torus while Keeper was shouting in the opposite direction. The cat checked himself against a slender shroud and looked straight at Crown. "Yess?"

"Keeper, shut that junk off." The music died abruptly. Voices rose, then died abruptly too. "Well, cat, talk."

"Shshall ssing insstead," Kim announced and began an eerie caterwauling that had a pattern but was not Spar's idea of music.

"It's an abstraction," Almodie breathed delightedly. "Listen, Crown, that was a diminished seventh."

"A demented third, I'd say," Phanette commented from the other side.

Crown signed them to be quiet.

Kim finished with a high trill. He slowly looked around at his baffled audience and then began to groom his shoulder.

Crown gripped a ridge of the torus with his left hand and said evenly, "Since you will not talk to us, will you talk to our dog?"

Kim stared at Hellhound sucking his Bloody Mary. His eyes widened, their pupils slitted, his lips writhed back from needle-like fangs.

He hissed, "Schschweinhund!"

Hellhound launched himself, hind paws against the palm of Crown's left hand, which threw him forward toward the left, where Kim was dodging. But the cat switched directions, rebounding hindward from the next shroud. The dog's white-jagged jaws snapped sideways a foot from their mark as his great-chested black body hurtled past.

Hellhound landed with four paws in the middle of a fat drunk, who puffed out his wind barely before his swallow, but the dog took off instantly on reverse course. Kim bounced back and forth between shrouds. This time hair flew when jaws snapped, but also a rigidly spread paw slashed.

Crown grabbed Hellhound by his studded collar, restraining him from another dive. He touched the dog below the eye and smelled his fingers. "That'll be enough, boy," he said. "Can't go around killing musical geniuses." His hand dropped from his nose to below the torus and came up loosely fisted. "Well, cat, you've talked with our dog. Have you a word for us?"

"Yess!" Kim drifted to the shroud nearest Crown's face. Spar pushed off to grab him back, while Almodie gazed at Crown's fist and edged a hand toward it.

FRITZ LEIBER

Kim loudly hissed, "Hellzz sspawn! Ffiend!"

Both Spar and Almodie were too late. From between two of Crown's fisted fingers a needle-stream jetted and struck Kim in his open mouth.

After what seemed to Spar a long time, his hand interrupted the stream. Its back burned acutely.

Kim seemed to collapse into himself, then launched himself away from Crown, toward the dark, open-jawed.

Crown said, "That's mace, an antique weapon like Greek fire, but well-known to our folk. The perfect answer to a witch cat."

Spar sprang at Crown, grappled his chest, tried to butt his jaw. They moved away from the torus at half the speed with which Spar had sprung.

Crown got his head aside. Spar closed his gums on Crown's throat. There was a *snick*. Spar felt wind on his bare back. Then a cold triangle pressed his flesh over his kidneys. Spar opened his jaws and floated limp. Crown chuckled.

A blue fuzz-glare, held by a brewo, made everyone in the Bat Rack look more corpse-like than larboard light. A voice commanded, "Okay, folks, break it up. Go home. We're closing the place."

Sleepday dawned, drowning the fuzz-glare. The cold triangle left Spar's back. There was another *snick*. Saying, "Bye-bye, baby," Crown pushed off through the white glare toward four women's faces and one dog's. Phanette's and Doucette's faintly red-mottled ones were close beside Hellhound's, as if they might be holding his collar.

Spar sobbed and began to hunt Kim. After a while Suzy came to help him. The Bat Rack emptied. Spar and Suzy cornered Kim. Spar grasped the cat around the chest. Kim's forelegs embraced his wrist, claws pricking. Spar got out the pouch Doc had given him and shoved its mouth between Kim's jaws. The claws dug deep. Taking no note of that, Spar gently sprayed. Gradually the claws came out and Kim relaxed. Spar hugged him gently. Suzie bound up Spar's wounded wrist.

Keeper came up followed by two brewos, one of them Ensign Drake, who said, "My partner and I will watch today by the aft and starboard hatches." Beyond them the Bat Rack was empty.

Spar said, "Crown has a knife." Drake nodded.

SHIP OF SHADOWS

Suzy touched Spar's hand and said, "Keeper, I want to stay here tonight. I'm scared."

Keeper said, "I can offer you a shroud."

Drake and his mate dove slowly toward their posts.

Suzy squeezed Spar's hand. He said, rather heavily, "I can offer you my shroud, Suzy."

Keeper laughed and, after looking toward the Bridge men, whispered, "I can offer you mine, which, unlike Spar, I own. And moonmist. Otherwise, the passageways."

Suzy sighed, paused, then went off with him.

Spar miserably made his way to the fore-corner. Had Suzy expected him to fight Keeper? The sad thing was that he no longer wanted her, except as a friend. He loved Crown's new girl. Which was sad too.

He was very tired. Even the thought of new eyes tomorrow didn't interest him. He clipped his ankle to a shroud and tied a rag over his eyes. He gently clasped Kim, who had not spoken. He was asleep at once.

He dreamed of Almodie. She looked like Virgo, even to the white dress. She held Kim, who looked sleek as polished black leather. She was coming toward him, smiling. She kept coming without getting closer.

Much later—he thought—he woke in the grip of withdrawal. He sweat and shook, but that was minor. His nerves were jumping. Any moment, he was sure, they would twitch all his muscles into a stabbing spasm of sinew-snapping agony. His thoughts were moving so fast he could hardly begin to understand one in ten. It was like speeding through a curving, ill-lit passageway ten times faster than the main drag. If he touched a wall, he would forget even what little Spar knew, forget he was Spar. All around him black shrouds whipped in perpetual sine curves.

Kim was no longer by him. He tore the rag from his eyes. It was dark as before. Sleepday night. But his body stopped speeding and his thoughts slowed. His nerves still crackled, and he still saw the black snakes whipping, but he knew them for illusion. He even made out the dim glows of three running lights.

Then he saw two figures floating toward him. He could barely make out their eye-blurs, green in the smaller, violet in the other, whose face was spreadingly haloed by silvery glints. She was pale and whiteness floated around her. And, instead of a smile, he could see the white horizontal blur of bared teeth. Kim's teeth too were bared.

FRITZ LEIBER

Suddenly he remembered the golden-haired girl who he'd thought was playing bartender in Crown's Hole. She was Suzy's one-time friend Sweetheart, snatched last Sleepday by vamps.

He screamed, which in Spar was a hoarse, retching bellow, and scrabbled at his clipped ankle.

The figures vanished. Below, he thought.

Lights came on. Someone dove and shook Spar's shoulder. "What happened, gramps?"

Spar gibbered while he thought what to tell Drake. He loved Almodie and Kim. He said, "Had a nightmare. Vamps attacked me."

"Description?"

"An old lady and a . . . a . . . little dog."

The other officer dove in. "The black hatch is open."

Drake said, "Keeper told us that was always locked. Follow through, Fenner." As the other dove below, "You're sure this was a nightmare, gramps? A *little* dog? And an *old* woman?"

Spar said, "Yes," and Drake dove after his comrade, out through the black hatch.

Workday dawned. Spar felt sick and confused, but he set about his usual routine. He tried to talk to Kim, but the cat was as silent as yesterday afternoon. Keeper bullied and found many tasks—the place was a mess from Playday. Suzy got away quickly. She didn't want to talk about Sweetheart or anything else. Drake and Fenner didn't come back.

Spar swept and Kim patrolled, out of touch. In the afternoon Crown came in and talked with Keeper while Spar and Kim were out of earshot. They mightn't have been there for all notice Crown took of them.

Spar wondered about what he had seen last night. It might really have been a dream, he decided. He was no longer impressed by his memory-identification of Sweetheart. Stupid of him to have thought that Almodie and Kim, dream or reality, were vamps. Doc had said vamps were superstitions. But he didn't think much. He still had withdrawal symptoms, only less violent.

When Loafday dawned, Keeper gave Spar permission to leave the Bat Rack without his usual prying questions. Spar looked around for Kim, but couldn't see his black blob. Besides, he didn't really want to take the cat.

He went straight to Doc's office. The passageways weren't

SHIP OF SHADOWS

as lonely as last Loafday. For a third time he passed the bent figure croaking, "Seagull, Kestrel, Cathedral . . ."

Doc's hatch was unzipped, but Doc wasn't there. Kim waited a long while, uneasy in the corpse-light. It wasn't like Doc to leave his office unzipped and unattended. And he hadn't turned up at the Bat Rack last night, as he'd half promised.

Finally Spar began to look around. One of the first things he noticed was that the big black bag, which Doc had said contained his treasure, was missing.

Then he noticed the gleaming pliofilm bag in which Doc had put the mold of Spar's gums, now held something different. He unclipped it from its shroud. There were two items in it.

He cut a finger on the first, which was half circle, half pink and half gleaming. He felt out its shape more cautiously then, ignoring the tiny red blobs welling from his finger. It had irregular depressions in its pink top and bottom. He put it in his mouth. His gums mated with the depressions. He opened his mouth, then closed it, careful to keep his tongue back. There was a *snick* and a dull *click*. He had teeth!

His hands were shaking, not just from withdrawal, as he felt the second item.

It was two thick rounds joined by a short bar and with a thicker long bar ending in a semicircle going back from each.

He thrust a finger into one of the rounds. It tickled, just as the tube had tickled his eyes, only more intensely, almost painfully.

Hands shaking worse than ever, he fitted the contraption to his face. The semicircles went around his ears, the rounds circled his eyes, not closely enough to tickle.

He could see sharply! *Everything* had edges, even his spread-fingered hands and the . . . clot of blood on one finger. He cried out—a low, wondering wail—and scanned the office. At first the scores and dozens of sharp-edged objects, each as distinct as the pictures of Capricorn and Virgo had been, were too much for him. He closed his eyes.

When his breathing was a little even and his shaking less, he opened them cautiously and began to inspect the objects clipped to the shrouds. Each one was a wonder. He didn't know the purpose of half of them. Some of them with which he was familiar by use or blurred sight startled him

FRITZ LEIBER

greatly in their appearance—a comb, a brush, a book with pages (that infinitude of ranked black marks), a wrist watch (the tiny pictures around the circular margin of Capricorn and Virgo, and of the Bull and the Fishes, and so on, and the narrow bars radiating from the center and swinging swiftly or slowly or not at all—and pointing to the signs of the zodiac.

Before he knew it, he was at the corpse-glow wall. He faced it with a new courage, though it forced from his lips another wondering wail.

The corpse-glow didn't come from everywhere, though it took up the central quarter of his field of vision. His fingers touched taut, transparent pliofilm. What he saw beyond—a great way beyond, he began to think—was utter blackness with a great many tiny . . . points of bright light in it. Points were even harder to believe in than edges, he had to believe what he saw.

But centrally, looking much bigger than all the blackness, was a vast corpse-white round pocked with faint circles and scored by bright lines and mottled with slightly darker areas.

It didn't look as if it were wired for electricity, and it certainly didn't look afire. After a while Spar got the weird idea that its light was reflected from something much brighter *behind* Windrush.

It was infinitely strange to think of so much *space* around Windrush. Like thinking of a reality containing reality.

And if Windrush were between the hypothetical brighter light and the pocked white round, its shadow ought to be on the latter. Unless Windrush were almost infinitely small. Really these speculations were utterly too fantastic to deal with.

Yet could anything be too fantastic? Werewolves, witches, points, edges, size and space beyond any but the most insane belief.

When he had first looked at the corpse-white object, it had been round. And he had heard and felt the creakings of Loafday noon, without being conscious of it at the time. But now the round had its fore edge evenly sliced off, so that it was lopsided. Spar wondered if the hypothetical incandescence behind Windrush were moving, or the white round. Such thoughts, especially the last, were dizzying almost beyond endurance.

He made for the open door, wondering if he should zip it behind him, decided not to. The passageway was another

SHIP OF SHADOWS

amazement, going off and off and off, and narrowing as it went. Its walls bore . . . arrows, the red pointing to larboard, the way from which he'd come, the green pointing starboard, the way he was going. The arrows were what he'd always seen as dash-shaped blurs. As he pulled himself along the strangely definite dragline, the passageway stayed the same diameter, all the way up to the violet main drag.

He wanted to jerk himself as fast as the green arrows to the starboard end of Windrush to verify the hypothetical incandescence and see the details of the orange-dun round that always depressed him.

But he decided he ought first to report Doc's disappearance to the Bridge. He might find Drake there. And report the loss of Doc's treasure too, he reminded himself.

Passing faces fascinated him. Such a welter of noses and ears! He overtook the croaking, bent shape. It was that of an old woman whose nose almost met her chin. She was doing something twitchy with her fingers to two narrow sticks and a roll of slender, fuzzy line. He impulsively dove off the dragline and caught hold of her, whirling them around.

"What are you doing, grandma?" he asked.

She puffed with anger. "Knitting," she answered indignantly.

"What are the words you keep saying?"

"Names of knitting patterns," she replied, jerking loose from him and blowing on. "Sand Dunes, Lightning, Soldiers Marching . . ."

He started to swim for the dragline, then saw he was already at the blue shaft leading aloft. He grabbed hold of its speeding centerline, not minding the burn, and speeded to the Bridge.

When he got there, he saw there was a multitude of stars aloft. The oblong rainbows were all banks of multi-colored lights winking on and off. But the silent officers—they looked very old, their faces stared as if they were sleep-swimming, their gestured orders were mechanical. He wondered if they knew where Windrush was going—or anything at all, beyond the Bridge of Windrush.

A dark, young officer with tightly curly hair floated to him. It wasn't until he spoke that Spar knew he was Ensign Drake.

"Hello, gramps. Say, you look younger. What are those things around your eyes?"

"Field glasses. They help me see sharp."

FRITZ LEIBER

"But field glasses have tubes. They're a sort of binocular telescope."

Spar shrugged and told about the disappearance of Doc and his big, black treasure bag.

"But you say he drank a lot and he told you his treasures were dreams? Sounds like he was wacky and wandered off to do his drinking somewhere else."

"But Doc was a regular drinker. He always came to the Bat Rack."

"Well, I'll do what I can. Say, I've been pulled off the Bat Rack investigation. I think that character Crown got at someone higher up. The old ones are easy to get at—not so much greed as going by custom, taking the easiest course. Fenner and I never did find the old woman and the little dog, or any female and animal . . . or anything."

Spar told about Crown's earlier attempt to steal Doc's little black bag.

"So you think the two cases might be connected. Well, as I say, I'll do what I can."

Spar went back to the Bat Rack. It was very strange to see Keeper's face in detail. It looked old and its pink target center was a big red nose crisscrossed by veins. His brown eyes were not so much curious as avid. He asked about the things around Spar's eyes. Spar decided it wouldn't be wise to tell Keeper about seeing sharply.

"They're a new kind of costume jewelry, Keeper. Blasted Earth, I don't have any hair on my head, ought to have something."

"Language, Spar! It's like a drunk to spend precious scrip on such a grotesque bauble."

Spar neither reminded Keeper that all the scrip he'd earned at the Bat Rack amounted to no more than a wad as big as his thumb-joint, nor that he'd quit drinking. Nor did he tell him about his teeth, but kept them hidden behind his lips.

Kim was nowhere in sight. Keeper shrugged. "Gone off somewhere. You know the way of strays, Spar."

Yes, thought Spar, *this one's stayed put too long.*

He kept being amazed that he could see *all* of the Bat Rack sharply. It was a hexagon crisscrossed by shrouds and made up of two pyramids put together square base to square base. The apexes of the pyramids were the violet fore and dark red aft corners. The four other corners were the starboard green, the black below, the larboard scarlet, and

SHIP OF SHADOWS

the blue aloft, if you named them from aft in the way the hands of a watch move.

Suzy drifted in early Playday. Spar was shocked by her blowsy appearance and bloodshot eyes. But he was touched by her signs of affection and he felt the strong friendship between them. Twice when Keeper wasn't looking he switched her nearly empty pouch of dark for a full one. She told him that, yes, she'd once known Sweetheart and that, yes, she'd heard people say Mable had seen Sweetheart snatched by vamps.

Business was slow for Playday. There were no strange brewos. Hoping against fearful, gut-level certainty, Spar kept waiting for Doc to come in zigzagging along the ratlines and comment on the new gadgets he'd given Spar and spout about the Old Days and his strange philosophy.

Playday night Crown came in with his girls, all except Almodie. Doucette said she'd had a headache and stayed at the Hole. Once again, all of them ordered coffee, though to Spar all of them seemed high.

Spar covertly studied their faces. Though nervous and alive, they all had something in their stares akin to those he'd seen in most of the officers on the Bridge. Doc had said they were all zombies. It was interesting to find out that Phanette's and Doucette's red-mottled appearance was due to . . . freckles, tiny reddish star-clusters on their white skins.

"Where's that famous talking cat?" Crown asked Spar.

Spar shrugged. Keeper said, "Strayed. For which I'm glad. Don't want a little feline who makes fights like last night."

Keeping his yellow-brown irised eyes on Spar, Crown said, "We believe it was that fight last Playday gave Almodie her headache, so she didn't want to come back tonight. We'll tell her you got rid of the witch cat."

"I'd have got rid of the beast if Spar hadn't," Keeper put in. "So you think it was a witch cat, coroner?"

"We're certain. What's that stuff on Spar's face?"

"A new sort of cheap eye jewelry, coroner, such as attracts drunks."

Spar got the feeling that this conversation had been pre-arranged, that there was a new agreement between Crown and Keeper. But he just shrugged again. Suzy was looking angry, but she said nothing.

Yet she stayed behind again after the Bat Rack closed. Keeper put no claim on her, though he leered knowingly before disappearing with a yawn and a stretch through the

FRITZ LEIBER

scarlet hatch. Spar checked that all six hatches were locked and shut off the lights, though that made no difference in the morning glare, before returning to Suzy, who had gone to his sleeping shroud.

Suzy asked, "You didn't get rid of Kim?"

Spar answered, "No, he just strayed, as Keeper said at first. I don't know where Kim is."

Suzy smiled and put her arms around him. "I think your new eye-things are beautiful," she said.

Spar said, "Suzy, did you know that Windrush isn't the Universe? That it's a ship going through space around a white round marked with circles, a round much bigger than all Windrush?"

Suzy replied, "I know Windrush is sometimes called the Ship. I've seen that round—in pictures. Forget all wild thoughts, Spar, and lose yourself in me."

Spar did so, chiefly from friendship. He forgot to clip his ankle to the shroud. Suzy's body didn't attract him. He was thinking of Almodie.

When it was over, Suzy slept. Spar put the rag around his eyes and tried to do the same. He was troubled by withdrawal symptoms only a little less bad than last Sleepday's. Because of that little, he didn't go to the torus for a pouch of moonmist. But then there was a sharp jab in his back, as if a muscle had spasmed there, and the symptoms got much worse. He convulsed, once, twice, then just as the agony became unbearable, blanked out.

Spar woke, his head throbbing, to discover that he was not only clipped, but lashed to his shroud, his wrists stretched in one direction, his ankles in the other, his hands and his feet both numb. His nose rubbed the shroud.

Light made his eyelids red. He opened them a little at a time and saw Hellhound poised with bent hind legs against the next shroud. He could see Hellhound's great stabbing teeth very clearly. If he had opened his eyes a little more swiftly, Hellhound would have dove at his throat.

He rubbed his sharp metal teeth together. At least he had more than gums to meet an attack on his face.

Beyond Hellhound he saw black and transparent spirals. He realized he was in Crown's Hole. Evidently the last jab in his back had been the injection of a drug.

But Crown had not taken away his eye jewelry, nor noted his teeth. He had thought of Spar as old Eyeless Toothless.

Between Hellhound and the spirals, he saw Doc lashed to

SHIP OF SHADOWS

a shroud and his big black bag clipped next to him. Doc was gagged. Evidently he had tried to cry out. Spar decided not to. Doc's gray eyes were open and Spar thought Doc was looking at him.

Very slowly Spar moved his numb fingers on top of the knot lashing his wrists to the shroud and slowly contracted all his muscles and pulled. The knot slid down the shroud a millimeter. So long as he did something slowly enough, Hellhound could not see it. He repeated his action at intervals.

Even more slowly he swung his face to the left. He saw nothing more than that the hatch to the corridor was zipped shut, and that beyond the dog and Doc, between the black spirals, was an empty and unfurnished cabin whose whole starboard side was stars. The hatch to that cabin was open, with its black-striped emergency hatch wavering beside it.

With equal slowness he swung his face to the right, past Doc and past Hellhound, who was eagerly watching him for signs of life or waking. He had pulled down the knot on his wrists two centimeters.

The first thing he saw was a transparent oblong. In it were more stars and, by its aft edge, the smoky orange round. At last he could see the latter more clearly. The smoke was on top, the orange underneath and irregularly placed. The whole was about as big as Spar's palm could have covered, if he had been able to stretch out his arm to full length. As he watched, he saw a bright flash in one of the orange areas. The flash was short, then it turned to a tiny black round pushing out through the smoke. More than ever, Spar felt sadness.

Below the transparency, Spar saw a horrible tableau. Suzy was strapped to a bright metal rack guyed by shrouds. She was very pale and her eyes were closed. From the side of her neck went a red sipping-tube which forked into five branches. Four of the branches went into the red mouths of Crown, Rixende, Phanette, and Doucette. The fifth was shut by a small metal clip, and beyond it Almodie floated cowering, hands over her eyes.

Crown said softly, "We want it all. Strip her, Rixie."

Rixende clipped shut the end of her tube and swam to Suzy. Spar expected her to remove the blue culottes and bra, but instead she simply began to massage one of Suzy's legs, pressing always from ankle toward waist, driving her remaining blood nearer her neck.

Crown removed his sipping tube from his lips long enough

FRITZ LEIBER

to say, "Ahh, good to the last drop." Then he had mouthed the blood that had spurted out in the interval and had the tube in place again.

Phanette and Doucette convulsed with soundless giggles.

Almodie peered between her parted fingers, out of her mass of platinum hair, then scissored them shut again.

After a while Crown said, "That's all we'll get. Phan and Doucie, feed her to the big chewer. If you meet anyone in the passageway, pretend she's drunk. Afterward we'll get Doc to dose us high, and give him a little brew if he behaves, then we'll drink Spar."

Spar had his wrist knot more than halfway to his teeth. Hellhound kept watching eagerly for movement, unable to see movement that slow. Slaver made tiny gray globes besides his fangs.

Phanette and Doucette opened the hatch and steered Suzy's dead body through it.

Embracing Rixende, Crown said expansively toward Doc, "Well, isn't it the right thing, old man? Nature bloody in tooth and claw, a wise one said. They've poisoned everything there." He pointed toward the smoky orange round sliding out of sight. "They're still fighting, but they'll soon all be dead. So death should be the rule too for this gimcrack, so-called survival ship. Remember they are aboard her. When we've drunk the blood of everyone aboard Windrush, including their blood, we'll drink our own, if our own isn't theirs."

Spar thought, *Crown thinks too much in they's*. The knot was close to his teeth. He heard the big chewer start to grind.

In the empty next cabin, Spar saw Drake and Fenner, clad once more as brewos, swimming toward the open hatch.

But Crown saw them too. "Get 'em, Hellhound," he directed, pointing. "It's our command."

The big black dog bulleted from his shroud through the open hatch. Drake pointed something at him. The dog went limp.

Chuckling softly, Crown took by one tip a swastika with curved, gleaming, razor-sharp blades and sent it spinning off. It curved past Spar and Doc, went through the open hatch, missed Drake and Fenner—and Hellhound—and struck the wall of stars.

There was a rush of wind, then the emergency hatch smacked shut. Spar saw Drake, Fenner, and Hellhound,

SHIP OF SHADOWS

wavery through the transparent pliofilm, spew blood, bloat, burst bloodily open. The empty cabin they had been in disappeared. Windrush had a new wall and Crown's Hole was distorted.

Far beyond, growing ever tinier, the swastika spun toward the stars.

Phanette and Doucette came back. "We fed in Suzy. Someone was coming, so we beat it." The big chewer stopped grinding.

Spar bit cleanly through his wrist lashings and immediately doubled over to bite his ankles loose.

Crown dove at him. Pausing to draw knives, the four girls did the same.

Phanette, Doucette, and Rixende went limp. Spar had the impression that small black balls had glanced from their skulls.

There wasn't time to bite his feet loose, so he straightened. Crown hit his chest as Almodie bit his feet.

Crown and Spar giant-swung around the shroud. Then Almodie had cut Spar's ankles loose. As they spun off along the tangent, Spar tried to knee Crown in the groin, but Crown twisted and evaded the blow as they moved toward the inboard wall.

There was the *snick* of Crown's knife unfolding. Spar saw the dark wrist and grabbed it. He butted at Crown's jaw. Crown evaded. Spar set his teeth in Crown's neck and bit.

Blood covered Spar's face, spurted over it. He spat out a hunk of flesh. Crown convulsed. Spar fought off the knife. Crown went limp. That the pressure in a man should work against him.

Spar shook the blood from his face. Through its beads, he saw Keeper and Kim side by side. Almodie was clutching his ankles. Phanette, Doucette, Rixende floated.

Keeper said proudly, "I shot them with my gun for drunks. I knocked them out. Now I'll cut their throats, if you wish."

Spar said, "No more throat-cutting. No more blood." Shaking off Almodie's hands, he took off for Doc, picking up Doucette's floating knife by the way.

He slashed Doc's lashings and cut the gag from his face.

Meanwhile Kim hissed, "Sstole and ssecreted Keeper's scrip from the boxx. Ashshured him you sstole it, Sspar. You and Ssuzzy. Sso he came. Keeper izz a shshlemiel."

Keeper said, "I saw Suzy's foot going into the big chewer.

FRITZ LEIBER

I knew it by its anklet of hearts. After that I had the courage to kill Crown or anyone. I loved Suzy."

Doc cleared his throat and croaked, "Moonmist." Spar found a triple pouch and Doc sucked it all. Doc said, "Crown spoke the truth. Windrush is a plastic survival ship from Earth. Earth"—he motioned toward the dull orange round disappearing aft in the window—"poisoned herself with smog pollution and nuclear war. She spent gold for war, plastic for survival. Best forgotten. Windrush went mad. Understandably. Even without the Lethean rickettsia, or Styx ricks, as you call it. Thought Windrush was the cosmos. Crown kidnapped me to get my drugs, kept me alive to know the doses."

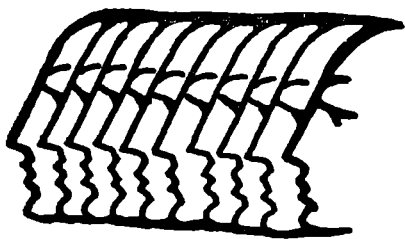
Spar looked at Keeper. "Clean up here," he ordered. "Feed Crown to the big chewer."

Almodie pulled herself from Spar's ankles to his waist. "There was a second survival ship. Circumluna. When Windrush went mad, my father and mother—and you—were sent here to investigate and cure. But my father died and you got Styx ricks. My mother died just before I was given to Crown. She sent you Kim."

Kim hissed, "My fforebear ccame from Ccircumluna to Windrushsh, too. Great-grandmother. Taught me the ffigures for Windrushsh . . . Radiuss from moon-ccenter, two thousand five hundred miless. Period, ssixx hourss—sso, the sshort dayss. A terranth izz the time it takess Earth to move through a cconstellation, and sso on."

Doc said, "So, Spar, you're the only one who remembers without cynicism. You'll have to take over. It's all yours, Spar."

Spar had to agree.



NINE LIVES

URSULA K. LE GUIN

Ursula LeGuin was covered with plaudits when she published her novel *THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS*, dealing with the effects on man of an altered sexual system. In this fascinating novelette she takes up much the same kind of material—how altered genetics might affect people—and shows why she is one of the most admired writers in the field today.

SHE WAS ALIVE inside, but dead outside, her face a black and dun net of wrinkles, tumors, cracks. She was bald and blind. The tremors that crossed Libra's face were mere quiverings of corruption: underneath, in the black corridors, the halls beneath the skin, there were crepitations in darkness, ferments, chemical nightmares that went on for centuries. "Oh the damned flatulent planet," Pugh murmured as the dome shook and a boil burst a kilometer to the southwest, spraying silver pus across the sunset. The sun had been

URSULA K. LE GUIN

setting for the last two days. "I'll be glad to see a human face."

"Thanks," said Martin.

"Yours is human to be sure," said Pugh, "but I've seen it so long I can't see it."

Radvid signals cluttered the communicator which Martin was operating, faded, returned as face and voice. The face filled the screen, the nose of an Assyrian king, the eyes of a samurai, skin bronze, eyes the color of iron: young, magnificent. "Is that what human beings look like?" said Pugh with awe. "I'd forgotten."

"Shut up, Owen, we're on."

"Libra Exploratory Mission Base, come in please, this is *Passerine* launch."

"Libra here. Beam fixed. Come on down, launch."

"Expulsion in seven E-seconds. Hold on." The screen blanked and sparkled.

"Do they all look like that? Martin, you and I are uglier men than I thought."

"Shut up, Owen. . . ."

For twenty-two minutes Martin followed the landing-craft down by signal and then through the cleared dome they saw it, small star in the blood-colored east, sinking. It came down neat and quiet, Libra's thin atmosphere carrying little sound. Pugh and Martin closed the headpieces of their im-suits, zipped out of the dome airlocks, and ran with soaring strides, Nijinsky and Nureyev, toward the boat. Three equipment modules came floating down at four-minute intervals from each other and hundred-meter intervals east of the boat. "Come on out," Martin said on his suit radio, "we're waiting at the door."

"Come on in, the methane's fine," said Pugh.

The hatch opened. The young man they had seen on the screen came out with one athletic twist and leaped down onto the shaky dust and clinkers of Libra. Martin shook his hand, but Pugh was staring at the hatch, from which another young man emerged with the same neat twist and jump, followed by a young woman who emerged with the same neat twist, ornamented by a wriggle, and the jump. They were all tall, with bronze skin, black hair, high-bridged noses, epicanthic fold, the same face. They all had the same face. The fourth was emerging from the hatch with a neat twist and jump. "Martin bach," said Pugh, "we've got a clone."

NINE LIVES

"Right," said one of them, "we're a tenclone. John Chow's the name. You're Lieutenant Martin?"

"I'm Owen Pugh."

"Alvaro Guillen Martin," said Martin, formal, bowing slightly. Another girl was out, the same beautiful face; Martin stared at her and his eye rolled like a nervous pony's. Evidently he had never given any thought to cloning, and was suffering technological shock. "Steady," Pugh said in the Argentine dialect, "it's only excess twins." He stood close by Martin's elbow. He was glad himself of the contact.

It is hard to meet a stranger. Even the greatest extrovert meeting even the meekest stranger knows a certain dread, though he may not know he knows it. Will he make a fool of me wreck my image of myself invade me destroy me change me? Will he be different from me? Yes, that he will. There's the terrible thing: the strangeness of the stranger.

After two years on a dead planet, and the last half year isolated as a team of two, oneself and one other, after that it's even harder to meet a stranger, however welcome he may be. You're out of the habit of difference, you've lost the touch; and so the fear revives, the primitive anxiety, the old dread.

The clone, five males and five females, had got done in a couple of minutes what a man might have got done in twenty: greeted Pugh and Martin, had a glance at Libra, unloaded the boat, made ready to go. They went, and the dome filled with them, a hive of golden bees. They hummed and buzzed quietly, filled up all silences, all spaces with a honey-brown swarm of human presence. Martin looked bewilderedly at the long-limbed girls, and they smiled at him, three at once. Their smile was gentler than that of the boys, but no less radiantly self-possessed.

"Self-possessed," Owen Pugh murmured to his friend, "that's it. Think of it, to be oneself ten times over. Nine seconds for every motion, nine ayes on every vote. It would be glorious!" But Martin was asleep. And the John Chows had all gone to sleep at once. The dome was filled with their quiet breathing. They were young, they didn't snore. Martin sighed and snored, his hershey-bar-colored face relaxed in the dim afterglow of Libra's primary, set at last. Pugh had cleared the dome and stars looked in, Sol among them, a great company of lights, a clone of splendors. Pugh slept and dreamed of a one-eyed giant who chased him through the shaking halls of Hell.

URSULA K. LE GUIN

From his sleeping-bag Pugh watched the clone's awakening. They all got up within one minute except for one pair, a boy and a girl, who lay snugly tangled and still sleeping in one bag. As Pugh saw this there was a shock like one of Libra's earthquakes inside him, a very deep tremor. He was not aware of this, and in fact thought he was pleased at the sight; there was no other such comfort on this dead hollow world, more power to them, who made love. One of the others stepped on the pair. They woke and the girl sat up flushed and sleepy, with bare golden breasts. One of her sisters murmured something to her; she shot a glance at Pugh and disappeared in the sleeping-bag, followed by a giant giggle, from another direction a fierce stare, from still another direction a voice: "Christ, we're used to having a room to ourselves. Hope you don't mind, Captain Pugh."

"It's a pleasure," Pugh said half-truthfully. He had to stand up then, wearing only the shorts he slept in, and he felt like a plucked rooster, all white scrawn and pimples. He had seldom envied Martin's compact brownness so much. The United Kingdom had come through the Great Famines well, losing less than half its population: a record achieved by rigorous food-control. Black-markeeters and hoarders had been executed. Crumbs had been shared. Where in richer lands most had died and a few had thriven, in Britain fewer died and none throve. They all got lean. Their sons were lean, their grandsons lean, small, brittle-boned, easily infected. When civilization became a matter of standing in lines, the British had kept queue, and so had replaced the survival of the fittest with the survival of the fair-minded. Owen Pugh was a scrawny little man. All the same, he was there.

At the moment he wished he wasn't.

At breakfast a John said, "Now if you'll brief us, Captain Pugh—"

"Owen, then."

"Owen, we can work out our schedule. Anything new on the mine since your last report to your Mission? We saw your reports when *Passerine* was orbiting Planet V, where they are now."

Martin did not answer, though the mine was his discovery and project, and Pugh had to do his best. It was hard to talk to them. The same faces, each with the same expression of intelligent interest, all leaned toward him across

NINE LIVES

the table at almost the same angle. They all nodded together.

Over the Exploitation Corps insignia on their tunics each had a nameband, first name John and last name Chow of course, but the middle names different. The men were Aleph, Kaph, Yod, Gimel, and Samedh; the women Sadhe, Daleth, Zayin, Beth, and Resh. Pugh tried to use the names but gave it up at once; he could not even tell sometimes which one had spoken, for the voices were all alike.

Martin buttered and chewed his toast, and finally interrupted: "You're a team. Is that it?"

"Right," said two Johns.

"God, what a team! I hadn't seen the point. How much do you each know what the others are thinking?"

"Not at all, properly speaking," replied one of the girls, Zayin. The others watched her with the proprietary, approving look they had. "No ESP, nothing fancy. But we think alike. We have exactly the same equipment. Given the same stimulus, the same problem, we're likely to be coming up with the same reactions and solutions at the same time. Explanations are easy—don't even have to make them, usually. We seldom misunderstand each other. It does facilitate our working as a team."

"Christ yes," said Martin. "Pugh and I have spent seven hours out of ten for six months misunderstanding each other. Like most people. What about emergencies, are you as good at meeting the unexpected problem as a nor . . . an unrelated team?"

"Statistics so far indicate that we are," Zayin answered readily. Clones must be trained, Pugh thought, to meet questions, to reassure and reason. All they said had the slightly bland and stilted quality of answers furnished to the Public. "We can't brainstorm as singletons can, we as a team don't profit from the interplay of varied minds; but we have a compensatory advantage. Clones are drawn from the best human material, individuals of IIQ 99th percentile, Genetic Constitution alpha double A, and so on. We have more to draw on than most individuals do."

"And it's multiplied by a factor of ten. Who is—who was John Chow?"

"A genius surely," Pugh said politely. His interest in cloning was not so new and avid as Martin's.

"Leonardo Complex type," said Yod. "Biomath, also a cellist, and an undersea hunter, and interested in structural

URSULA K. LE GUIN

engineering problems, and so on. Died before he'd worked out his major theories."

"Then you each represent a different facet of his mind, his talents?"

"No," said Zayin, shaking her head in time with several others. "We share the basic equipment and tendencies, of course, but we're all engineers in Planetary Exploitation. A later clone can be trained to develop other aspects of the basic equipment. It's all training; the genetic substance is identical. We *are* John Chow. But we were differently trained."

Martin look shell-shocked. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

"You say he died young— Had they taken germ cells from him beforehand or something?"

Gimel took over: "He died at twenty-four in an aircar crash. They couldn't save the brain, so they took some intestinal cells and cultured them for cloning. Reproductive cells aren't used for cloning since they have only half the chromosomes. Intestinal cells happen to be easy to despecialize and reprogram for total growth."

"All chips off the old block," Martin said valiantly. "But how can . . . some of you be women . . . ?"

Beth took over: "It's easy to program half the clonal mass back to the female. Just delete the male gene from half the cells and they revert to the basic, that is, the female. It's trickier to go the other way, have to hook in artificial Y chromosomes. So they mostly clone from males, since clones function best bisexually."

Gimel again: "They've worked these matters of technique and function out carefully. The taxpayer wants the best for his money, and of course clones are expensive. With the cell-manipulations, and the incubation in Ngama Placentae, and the maintenance and training of the foster-parent groups, we end up costing about three million apiece."

"For your next generation," Martin said, still struggling, "I suppose you . . . you breed?"

"We females are sterile," said Beth with perfect equanimity; "you remember that the Y chromosome was deleted from our original cell. The males can interbreed with approved singletons, if they want to. But to get John Chow again as often as they want, they just reclone a cell from this clone."

Martin gave up the struggle. He nodded and chewed cold

NINE LIVES

toast. "Well," said one of the Johns, and all changed mood, like a flock of starlings that change course in one wingflick, following a leader so fast that no eye can see which leads. They were ready to go. "How about a look at the mine? Then we'll unload the equipment. Some nice new models in the roboats; you'll want to see them. Right?" Had Pugh or Martin not agreed they might have found it hard to say so. The Johns were polite but unanimous; their decisions carried. Pugh, Commander of Libra Base 2, felt a qualm. Could he boss around this superman-woman-entity-of-ten? and a genius at that? He stuck close to Martin as they suited for outside. Neither said anything.

Four apiece in the three large jetsleds, they slipped off north from the dome, over Libra's dun rugose skin, in starlight.

"Desolate," one said.

It was a boy and girl with Pugh and Martin. Pugh wondered if these were the two that had shared a sleeping-bag last night. No doubt they wouldn't mind if he asked them. Sex must be as handy as breathing, to them. Did you two breathe last night?

"Yes," he said, "it is desolate."

"This is our first time Off, except training on Luna." The girl's voice was definitely a bit higher and softer.

"How did you take the big hop?"

"They doped us. I wanted to experience it." That was the boy; he sounded wistful. They seemed to have more personality, only two at a time. Did repetition of the individual negate individuality?

"Don't worry," said Martin, steering the sled, "you can't experience no-time because it isn't there."

"I'd just like to once," one of them said. "So we'd know."

The Mountains of Merioneth showed lepotic in starlight to the east, a plume of freezing gas trailed silvery from a vent-hole to the west, and the sled tilted groundward. The twins braced for the stop at one moment, each with a slight protective gesture to the other. Your skin is my skin, Pugh thought, but literally, no metaphor. What would it be like, then, to have someone as close to you as that? Always to be answered when you spoke, never to be in pain alone. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. . . . That hard old problem was solved. The neighbor was the self: the love was perfect.

And here was Hellmouth, the mine.

URSULA K. LE GUIN

Pugh was the Exploratory Mission's ET geologist, and Martin his technician and cartographer; but when in the course of a local survey Martin had discovered the U-mine, Pugh had given him full credit, as well as the onus of prospecting the lode and planning the Exploitation Team's job. These kids had been sent out from Earth years before Martin's reports got there, and had not known what their job would be until they got here. The Exploitation Corps simply sent out teams regularly and blindly as a dandelion sends out its seeds, knowing there would be a job for them on Libra or the next planet out or one they hadn't even heard about yet. The Government wanted uranium too urgently to wait while reports drifted home across the light-years. The stuff was like gold, old-fashioned but essential, worth mining extraterrestrially and shipping interstellar. Worth its weight in people, Pugh thought sourly, watching the tall young men and women go one by one, glimmering in starlight, into the black hole Martin had named Hellmouth.

As they went in their homeostatic forehead-lamps brightened. Twelve nodding gleams ran along the moist, wrinkled walls. Pugh heard Martin's radiation counter peeping twenty to the dozen up ahead. "Here's the drop-off," said Martin's voice in the suit intercom, drowning out the peeping and the dead silence that was around them. "We're in a side-fissure; this is the main vertical vent in front of us." The black void gaped, its far side not visible in the headlamp beams. "Last vulcanism seems to have been a couple of thousand years ago. Nearest fault is twenty-eight kilos east, in the Trench. This region seems to be as safe seismically as anything in the area. The big basalt-flow overhead stabilizes all these substructures, so long as it remains stable itself. Your central lode is thirty-six meters down and runs in a series of five bubble-caverns northeast. It is a lode, a pipe of very high-grade ore. You saw the percentage figures, right? Extraction's going to be no problem. All you've got to do is get the bubbles topside."

"Take off the lid and let 'em float up." A chuckle. Voices began to talk, but they were all the same voice and the suit radio gave them no location in space. "Open the thing right up. —Safer that way. —But it's a solid basalt roof, how thick, ten meters here? —Three to twenty, the report said. —Blow good ore all over the lot. —Use this access we're in, straighten it a bit and run slider-rails for the robos.

NINE LIVES

—Import burros. —Have we got enough propping material? —What's your estimate of total payload mass, Martin?"

"Say over five million kilos and under eight."

"Transport will be here in ten E-months. —It'll have to go pure. —No, they'll have the mass problem in NAFAL shipping licked by now; remember it's been sixteen years since we left Earth last Tuesday. —Right, they'll send the whole lot back and purify it in Earth orbit. —Shall we go down, Martin?"

"Go on. I've been down."

The first one—Aleph? (Heb., the ox, the leader)—swung onto the ladder and down; the rest followed. Pugh and Martin stood at the chasm's edge. Pugh set his intercom to exchange only with Martin's suit, and noticed Martin doing the same. It was a bit wearing, this listening to one person think aloud in ten voices, or was it one voice speaking the thoughts of ten minds?

"A great gut," Pugh said, looking down into the black pit, its veined and warted walls catching stray gleams of headlamps far below. "A cow's bowel. A bloody great constipated intestine."

Martin's counter peeped like a lost chicken. They stood inside the epileptic planet, breathing oxygen from tanks, wearing suits impermeable to corrosives and harmful radiations, resistant to a two-hundred-degree range of temperatures, tear-proof, and as shock-resistant as possible given the soft vulnerable stuff inside.

"Next hop," Martin said, "I'd like to find a planet that has nothing whatever to exploit."

"You found this."

"Keep me home next time."

Pugh was pleased. He had hoped Martin would want to go on working with him, but neither of them was used to talking much about their feelings, and he had hesitated to ask. "I'll try that," he said.

"I hate this place. I like caves, you know. It's why I came in here. Just spelunking. But this one's a bitch. Mean. You can't ever let down in here. I guess this lot can handle it, though. They know their stuff."

"Wave of the future, whatever," said Pugh.

The wave of the future came swarming up the ladder, swept Martin to the entrance, gabbled at and around him: "Have we got enough material for supports? —If we con-

URSULA K. LE GUIN

vert one of the extractor-servos to anneal, yes. —Sufficient if we miniblast? —Kaph can calculate stress.”

Pugh had switched his intercom back to receive them; he looked at them, so many thoughts jabbering in an eager mind, and at Martin standing silent among them, and at Hellmouth, and the wrinkled plain. “Settled! How does that strike you as a preliminary schedule, Martin?”

“It’s your baby,” Martin said.

Within five E-days the Johns had all their material and equipment unloaded and operating, and were starting to open up the mine. They worked with total efficiency. Pugh was fascinated and frightened by their effectiveness, their confidence, their independence. He was no use to them at all. A clone, he thought, might indeed be the first truly stable, self-reliant human being. Once adult it would need nobody’s help. It would be sufficient to itself physically, sexually, emotionally, intellectually. Whatever he did, any member of it would always receive the support and approval of his peers, his other selves. Nobody else was needed.

Two of the clone stayed in the dome doing calculations and paperwork, with frequent sled-trips to the mine for measurements and tests. They were the mathematicians of the clone, Zayin and Kaph. That is, as Zayin explained, all ten had had thorough mathematical training from age three to twenty-one, but from twenty-one to twenty-three she and Kaph had gone on with math while the others intensified other specialties, geology, mining engineering, electronic engineering, equipment robotics, applied atomics, and so on. “Kaph and I feel,” she said, “that we’re the element of the clone closest to what John Chow was in his singleton lifetime. But of course he was principally in biomath, and they didn’t take us far in that.”

“They needed us most in this field,” Kaph said, with the patriotic priggishness they sometimes evinced.

Pugh and Martin soon could distinguish this pair from the others, Zayin by gestalt, Kaph only by a discolored left fourth fingernail, got from an ill-aimed hammer at the age of six. No doubt there were many such differences, physical and psychological, among them; nature might be identical, nurture could not be. But the differences were hard to find. And part of the difficulty was that they really never talked to Pugh and Martin. They joked with them, were polite, got along fine. They gave nothing. It was nothing one could

NINE LIVES

complain about; they were very pleasant, they had the standardized American friendliness. "Do you come from Ireland, Owen?"

"Nobody comes from Ireland, Zayin."

"There are lots of Irish-Americans."

"To be sure, but no more Irish. A couple of thousand in all the island, the last I knew. They didn't go in for birth-control, you know, so the food ran out. By the Third Famine there were no Irish left at all but the priesthood, and they were all celibate, or nearly all."

Zayin and Kaph smiled stiffly. They had no experience of either bigotry or irony. "What are you then, ethnically?" Kaph asked, and Pugh replied, "A Welshman."

"Is it Welsh that you and Martin speak together?"

None of your business, Pugh thought, but said, "No, it's his dialect, not mine: Argentinean. A descendant of Spanish."

"You learned it for private communication?"

"Whom had we here to be private from? It's just that sometimes a man likes to speak his native language."

"Ours is English," Kaph said unsympathetically. Why should they have sympathy? That's one of the things you give because you need it back.

"Is Wells quaint?" asked Zayin.

"Wells? Oh, Wales, it's called. Yes. Wales is quaint." Pugh switched on his rock-cutter, which prevented further conversation by a synapse-destroying whine, and while it whined he turned his back and said a profane word in Welsh.

That night he used the Argentine dialect for private communication. "Do they pair off in the same couples, or change every night?"

Martin looked surprised. A prudish expression, unsuited to his features, appeared for a moment. It faded. He too was curious. "I think it's random."

"Don't whisper, man, it sounds dirty. I think they rotate."

"On a schedule?"

"So nobody gets omitted."

Martin gave a vulgar laugh and smothered it. "What about us? Aren't we omitted?"

"That doesn't occur to them."

"What if I proposition one of the girls?"

"She'd tell the others and they'd decide as a group."

"I am not a bull," Martin said, his dark, heavy face heating up. "I will not be judged—"

URSULA K. LE GUIN

"Down, down, *machismo*," said Pugh. "Do you mean to proposition one?"

Martin shrugged, sullen. "Let 'em have their incest."

"Incest is it, or masturbation?"

"I don't care, if they'd do it out of earshot!"

The clone's early attempts at modesty had soon worn off, unmotivated by any deep defensiveness of self or awareness of others. Pugh and Martin were daily deeper swamped under the intimacies of its constant emotional-sexual-mental interchange: swamped yet excluded.

"Two months to go," Martin said one evening.

"To what?" snapped Pugh. He was edgy lately and Martin's sullenness got on his nerves.

"To relief."

In sixty days the full crew of their Exploratory Mission were due back from their survey of the other planets of the system. Pugh was aware of this.

"Crossing off the days on your calendar?" he jeered.

"Pull yourself together, Owen."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say."

They parted in contempt and resentment.

Pugh came in after a day alone on the Pampas, a vast lava-plain the nearest edge of which was two hours south by jet. He was tired, but refreshed by solitude. They were not supposed to take long trips alone, but lately had often done so. Martin stooped under bright lights, drawing one of his elegant, masterly charts: this one was of the whole face of Libra, the cancerous face. The dome was otherwise empty, seeming dim and large as it had before the clone came. "Where's the golden horde?"

Martin grunted ignorance, crosshatching. He straightened his back to glance around at the sun, which squatted feebly like a great red toad on the eastern plain, and at the clock, which said 18:45. "Some big quakes today," he said, returning to his map. "Feel them down there? Lot of crates were falling around. Take a look at the seismo."

The needle jiggled and wavered on the roll. It never stopped dancing here. The roll had recorded five quakes of major intensity back in mid-afternoon; twice the needle had hopped off the roll. The attached computer had been activated to emit a slip reading, "Epicenter 61' N by 4'24" E."

NINE LIVES

"Not in the Trench this time."

"I thought it felt a bit different from usual. Sharper."

"In Base One I used to lie awake all night feeling the ground jump. Queer how you get used to things."

"Go spla if you didn't. What's for dinner?"

"I thought you'd have cooked it."

"Waiting for the clone."

Feeling put upon, Pugh got out a dozen dinnerboxes, stuck two in the Instobake, pulled them out. "All right, here's dinner."

"Been thinking," Martin said, coming to the table. "What if some clone cloned itself? Illegally. Made a thousand duplicates—ten thousand. Whole army. They could make a tidy power-grab, couldn't they?"

"But how many millions did this lot cost to rear? Artificial placentae and all that. It would be hard to keep secret, unless they had a planet to themselves. . . . Back before the Famines when Earth had national governments, they talked about that: clone your best soldiers, have whole regiments of them. But the food ran out before they could play that game."

They talked amicably, as they used to do.

"Funny," Martin said, chewing. "They left early this morning, didn't they?"

"All but Kaph and Zayin. They thought they'd get the first payload aboveground today. What's up?"

"They weren't back for lunch."

"They won't starve, to be sure."

"They left at seven."

"So they did." Then Pugh saw it. The air-tanks held eight hours' supply.

"Kaph and Zayin carried out spare cans when they left. Or they've got a heap out there."

"They did, but they brought the whole lot in to re-charge." Martin stood up, pointing to one of the stacks of stuff that cut the dome into rooms and alleys.

"There's an alarm signal on every imsuit."

"It's not automatic."

Pugh was tired and still hungry. "Sit down and eat, man. That lot can look after themselves."

Martin sat down, but did not eat. "There was a big quake, Owen. The first one. Big enough, it scared me."

After a pause Pugh sighed and said, "All right."

Unenthusiastically, they got out the two-man sled that

URSULA K. LE GUIN

was always left for them, and headed it north. The long sunrise covered everything in poisonous red jello. The horizontal light and shadow made it hard to see, raised walls of fake iron ahead of them through which they slid, turned the convex plain beyond Hellmouth into a great dimple full of bloody water. Around the tunnel entrance a wilderness of machinery stood, cranes and cables and servos and wheels and diggers and jobocarts and sliders and control-huts, all slanting and bulking incoherently in the red light. Martin jumped from the sled, ran into the mine. He came out again, to Pugh. "Oh God, Owen, it's down," he said. Pugh went in and saw, five meters from the entrance, the shiny, moist, black wall that ended the tunnel. Newly exposed to air, it looked organic, like visceral tissue. The tunnel entrance, enlarged by blasting and double-tracked for robocarts, seemed unchanged until he noticed thousands of tiny spiderweb cracks in the walls. The floor was wet with some sluggish fluid.

"They were inside," Martin said.

"They may be still. They surely had extra air-cans—"

"Look, Owen, look at the basalt flow, at the roof; don't you see what the quake did, look at it."

The low hump of land that roofed the caves still had the unreal look of an optical illusion. It had reversed itself, sunk down, leaving a vast dimple or pit. When Pugh walked on it he saw that it too was cracked with many tiny fissures. From some a whitish gas was seeping, so that the sunlight on the surface of the gas-pool was shafted as if by the waters of a dim red lake.

"The mine's not on the fault. There's no fault here!"

Pugh came back to him quickly. "No, there's no fault, Martin. Look, they surely weren't all inside together."

Martin followed him and searched among the wrecked machines dully, then actively. He spotted the airsled. It had come down heading south, and stuck at an angle in a pothole of colloidal dust. It had carried two riders. One was half sunk in the dust, but his suit-meters registered normal functioning; the other hung strapped onto the tilted sled. Her insuit had burst open on the broken legs, and the body was frozen hard as any rock. That was all they found. As both regulation and custom demanded, they cremated the dead at once with the laser-guns they carried by regulation and had never used before. Pugh, knowing he was going to be sick, wrestled the survivor onto the two-man sled and

NINE LIVES

sent Martin off to the dome with him. Then he vomited, and flushed the waste out of his suit, and finding one four-man sled undamaged followed after Martin, shaking as if the cold of Libra had got through to him.

The survivor was Kaph. He was in deep shock. They found a swelling on the occiput that might mean concussion, but no fracture was visible.

Pugh brought two glasses of food-concentrate and two chasers of aquavit. "Come on," he said. Martin obeyed, drinking off the tonic. They sat down on crates near the cot and sipped the aquavit.

Kaph lay immobile, face like beeswax, hair bright black to the shoulders, lips stiffly parted for faintly gasping breaths.

"It must have been the first shock, the big one," Martin said. "It must have slid the whole structure sideways. Till it fell in on itself. There must be gas layers in the lateral rocks, like those formations in the Thirty-first Quadrant. But there wasn't any sign—" As he spoke the world slid out from under them. Things leaped and clattered, hopped and jiggled, shouted Ha! Ha! Ha! "It was like this at fourteen hours," said Reason shakily in Martin's voice; amidst the unfastening and ruin of the world. But Unreason sat up, as the tumult lessened and things ceased dancing, and screamed aloud.

Pugh leaped across his spilled aquavit and held Kaph down. The muscular body flailed him off. Martin pinned the shoulders down. Kaph screamed, struggled, choked; his face blackened. "Oxy," Pugh said, and his hand found the right needle in the medical kit as if by homing instinct; while Martin held the mask he struck the needle home to the vagus nerve, restoring Kaph to life.

"Didn't know you knew that stunt," Martin said, breathing hard.

"The Lazarus Jab; my father was a doctor. It doesn't often work," Pugh said. "I want that drink I spilled. Is the quake over? I can't tell."

"Aftershocks. It's not just you shivering."

"Why did he suffocate?"

"I don't know, Owen. Look in the book."

Kaph was breathing normally and his color was restored, only the lips were still darkened. They poured a new shot of courage and sat down by him again with their medical guide. "Nothing about cyanosis or asphyxiation under 'shock' or 'concussion.' He can't have breathed in anything with his

URSULA K. LE GUIN

suit on. I don't know. We'd get as much good out of *Mother Mog's Home Herbalist*. . . . 'Anal Hemorrhoids,' fyl" Pugh pitched the book to a crate-table. It fell short, because either Pugh or the table was still unsteady.

"Why didn't he signal?"

"Sorry?"

"The eight inside the mine never had time. But he and the girl must have been outside. Maybe she was in the entrance, and got hit by the first slide. He must have been outside, in the control-hut maybe. He ran in, pulled her out, strapped her onto the sled, started for the dome. And all that time never pushed the panic button in his imsuit. Why not?"

"Well, he'd had that whack on his head. I doubt he ever realized the girl was dead. He wasn't in his senses. But if he had been I don't know if he'd have thought to signal us. They looked to one another for help."

Martin's face was like an Indian mask, grooves at the mouth-corners, eyes of dull coal. "That's so. What must he have felt, then, when the quake came and he was outside, alone—"

In answer Kaph screamed.

He came up off the cot in the heaving convulsions of one suffocating, knocked Pugh right down with his flailing arm, staggered into a stack of crates and fell to the floor, lips blue, eyes white. Martin dragged him back onto the cot and gave him a whiff of oxygen, then knelt by Pugh, who was just sitting up, and wiped at his cut cheekbone. "Owen, are you all right, are you going to be all right, Owen?"

"I think I am," Pugh said. "Why are you rubbing that on my face?"

It was a short length of computer-tape, now spotted with Pugh's blood. Martin dropped it. "Thought it was a towel. You clipped your cheek on that box there."

"Is he out of it?"

"Seems to be."

They stared down at Kaph lying stiff, his teeth a white line inside dark parted lips.

"Like epilepsy. Brain damage maybe?"

"What about shooting him full of meprobamate?"

Pugh shook his head. "I don't know what's in that shot I already gave him for shock. Don't want to overdose him."

"Maybe he'll sleep it off now."

NINE LIVES

"I'd like to myself. Between him and the earthquake I can't seem to keep on my feet."

"You got a nasty crack there. Go on, I'll sit up a while."

Pugh cleaned his cut cheek and pulled off his shirt, then paused.

"Is there anything we ought to have done—have tried to do—"

"They're all dead," Martin said heavily, gently.

Pugh lay down on top of his sleeping-bag, and one instant later was wakened by a hideous, sucking, struggling noise. He staggered up, found the needle, tried three times to jab it in correctly and failed, began to massage over Kaph's heart. "Mouth-to-mouth," he said, and Martin obeyed. Presently Kaph drew a harsh breath, his heartbeat steadied, his rigid muscles began to relax.

"How long did I sleep?"

"Half an hour."

They stood up sweating. The ground shuddered, the fabric of the dome sagged and swayed. Libra was dancing her awful polka again, her Totentanz. The sun, though rising, seemed to have grown larger and redder; gas and dust must have been stirred up in the feeble atmosphere.

"What's wrong with him, Owen?"

"I think he's dying with them."

"Them— But they're dead, I tell you."

"Nine of them. They're all dead, they were crushed or suffocated. They were all him, he is all of them. They died, and now he's dying their deaths one by one."

"Oh pity of God," said Martin.

The next time was much the same. The fifth time was worse, for Kaph fought and raved, trying to speak but getting no words out, as if his mouth were stopped with rocks or clay. After that the attacks grew weaker, but so did he. The eighth seizure came at about four-thirty; Pugh and Martin worked till five-thirty doing all they could to keep life in the body that slid without protest into death. They kept him, but Martin said, "The next will finish him." And it did; but Pugh breathed his own breath into the inert lungs, until he himself passed out.

He woke. The dome was opaqued and no light on. He listened and heard the breathing of two sleeping men. He slept, and nothing woke him till hunger did.

The sun was well up over the dark plains, and the planet

URSULA K. LE GUIN

had stopped dancing. Kaph lay asleep. Pugh and Martin drank tea and looked at him with proprietary triumph.

When he woke Martin went to him: "How do you feel, old man?" There was no answer. Pugh took Martin's place and looked into the brown, dull eyes that gazed toward but not into his own. Like Martin he quickly turned away. He heated food-concentrate and brought it to Kaph. "Come on, drink."

He could see the muscles in Kaph's throat tighten. "Let me die," the young man said.

"You're not dying."

Kaph spoke with clarity and precision: "I am nine-tenths dead. There is not enough of me left alive."

That precision convinced Pugh, and he fought the conviction. "No," he said, peremptory. "They are dead. The others. Your brothers and sisters. You're not them, you're alive. You are John Chow. Your life is in your own hands."

The young man lay still, looking into a darkness that was not there.

Martin and Pugh took turns taking the Exploitation hauler and a spare set of robes over to Hellmouth to salvage equipment and protect it from Libra's sinister atmosphere, for the value of the stuff was, literally, astronomical. It was slow work for one man at a time, but they were unwilling to leave Kaph by himself. The one left in the dome did paper-work, while Kaph sat or lay and stared into his darkness, and never spoke. The days went by silent.

The radio spat and spoke: the Mission calling from ship. "We'll be down on Libra in five weeks, Owen. Thirty-four E-days nine hours I make it as of now. How's tricks in the old dome?"

"Not good, chief. The Exploit team were killed, all but one of them, in the mine. Earthquake. Six days ago."

The radio crackled and sang starsong. Sixteen seconds lag each way; the ship was out around Planet 11 now. "Killed, all but one? You and Martin were unhurt?"

"We're all right, chief."

Thirty-two seconds.

"*Passerine* left an Exploit team out here with us. I may put them on the Hellmouth project then, instead of the Quadrant Seven project. We'll settle that when we come down. In any case you and Martin will be relieved at Dome Two. Hold tight. Anything else?"

NINE LIVES

"Nothing else."

Thirty-two seconds.

"Right then. So long, Owen."

Kaph had heard all this, and later on Pugh said to him, "The chief may ask you to stay here with the other Exploit team. You know the ropes here." Knowing the exigencies of Far Out Life, he wanted to warn the young man. Kaph made no answer. Since he had said, "There is not enough of me left alive," he had not spoken a word.

"Owen," Martin said on suit intercom, "he's spla. Insane. Psycho."

"He's doing very well for a man who's died nine times."

"Well? Like a turned-off android is well? The only emotion he has left is hate. Look at his eyes."

"That's not hate, Martin. Listen, it's true that he has, in a sense, been dead. I cannot imagine what he feels. But it's not hatred. He can't even see us. It's too dark."

"Throats have been cut in the dark. He hates us because we're not Aleph and Yod and Zayin."

"Maybe. But I think he's alone. He doesn't see us or hear us, that's the truth. He never had to see anyone else before. He never was alone before. He had himself to see, talk with, live with, nine other selves all his life. He doesn't know how you go it alone. He must learn. Give him time."

Martin shook his heavy head. "Spla," he said. "Just remember when you're alone with him that he could break your neck one-handed."

"He could do that," said Pugh, a short, soft-voiced man with a scarred cheekbone; he smiled. They were just outside the dome airlock, programming one of the servos to repair a damaged hauler. They could see Kaph sitting inside the great half-egg of the dome like a fly in amber.

"Hand me the insert pack there. What makes you think he'll get any better?"

"He has a strong personality, to be sure."

"Strong? Crippled. Nine-tenths dead, as he put it."

"But he's not dead. He's a live man: John Kaph Chow. He had a jolly queer upbringing, but after all every boy has got to break free of his family. He will do it."

"I can't see it."

"Think a bit, Martin bach. What's this cloning for? To repair the human race. We're in a bad way. Look at me. My IIQ and GC are half this John Chow's. Yet they wanted me so badly for the Far Out Service that when I volun-

URSULA K. LE GUIN

teered they took me and fitted me out with an artificial lung and corrected my myopia. Now if there were enough good sound lads about would they be taking one-lunged shortsighted Welshmen?"

"Didn't know you had an artificial lung."

"I do then. Not tin, you know. Human, grown in a tank from a bit of somebody; cloned, if you like. That's how they make replacement-organs, the same general idea as cloning, but bits and pieces instead of whole people. It's my own lung now, whatever. But what I am saying is this, there are too many like me these days, and not enough like John Chow. They're trying to raise the level of the human genetic pool, which is a mucky little puddle since the population crash. So then if a man is cloned, he's a strong and clever man. It's only logic, to be sure."

Martin grunted; the servo began to hum.

Kaph had been eating little; he had trouble swallowing his food, choking on it, so that he would give up trying after a few bites. He had lost eight or ten kilos. After three weeks or so, however, his appetite began to pick up, and one day he began to look through the clone's possessions, the sleeping-bags, kits, papers which Pugh had stacked neatly in a far angle of a packing-crate alley. He sorted, destroyed a heap of papers and oddments, made a small packet of what remained, then relapsed into his walking coma.

Two days later he spoke. Pugh was trying to correct a flutter in the tape-player, and failing; Martin had the jet out, checking their maps of the Pampas. "Hell and damnation!" Pugh said, and Kaph said in a toneless voice, "Do you want me to do that?"

Pugh jumped, controlled himself, and gave the machine to Kaph. The young man took it apart, put it back together, and left it on the table.

"Put on a tape," Pugh said with careful casualness, busy at another table.

Kaph put on the topmost tape, a chorale. He lay down on his cot. The sound of a hundred human voices singing together filled the dome. He lay still, his face blank.

In the next days he took over several routine jobs, unasked. He undertook nothing that wanted initiative, and if asked to do anything he made no response at all.

"He's doing well," Pugh said in the dialect of Argentina.

"He's not. He's turning himself into a machine. Does what

NINE LIVES

he's programmed to do, no reaction to anything else. He's worse off than when he didn't function at all. He's not human any more."

Pugh sighed. "Well, good night," he said in English. "Good night, Kaph."

"Good night," Martin said; Kaph did not.

Next morning at breakfast Kaph reached across Martin's plate for the toast. "Why don't you ask for it," Martin said with the geniality of repressed exasperation. "I can pass it."

"I can reach it," Kaph said in his flat voice.

"Yes, but look. Asking to pass things, saying good night or hello, they're not important, but all the same when somebody says something a person ought to answer. . . ."

The young man looked indifferently in Martin's direction; his eyes still did not seem to see clear through to the person he looked toward. "Why should I answer?"

"Because somebody has said something to you."

"Why?"

Martin shrugged and laughed. Pugh jumped up and turned on the rock-cutter.

Later on he said, "Lay off that, please, Martin."

"Manners are essential in small isolated crews, some kind of manners, whatever you work out together. He's been taught that, everybody in Far Out knows it. Why does he deliberately flout it?"

"Do you tell yourself good night?"

"So?"

"Don't you see Kaph's never known anyone but himself?"

Martin brooded and then broke out, "Then by God this cloning business is all wrong. It won't do. What are a lot of duplicate geniuses going to do for us when they don't even know we exist?"

Pugh nodded. "It might be wiser to separate the clones and bring them up with others. But they make such a grand team this way."

"Do they? I don't know. If this lot had been ten average inefficient ET engineers, would they all have been in the same place at the same time? Would they all have got killed? What if, when the quake came and things started caving in, what if all those kids ran the same way, farther into the mine, maybe, to save the one that was farthest in? Even Kaph was outside and went in. . . . It's hypothetical. But I keep thinking, out of ten ordinary confused guys, more might have got out."

URSULA K. LE GUIN

"I don't know. It's true that identical twins tend to die at about the same time, even when they have never seen each other. Identity and death, it is very strange. . . ."

The days went on, the red sun crawled across the dark sky, Kaph did not speak when spoken to, Pugh and Martin snapped at each other more frequently each day. Pugh complained of Martin's snoring. Offended, Martin moved his cot clear across the dome and also ceased speaking to Pugh for some while. Pugh whistled Welsh dirges until Martin complained, and then Pugh stopped speaking for a while.

The day before the Mission ship was due, Martin announced he was going over to Merioneth.

"I thought at least you'd be giving me a hand with the computer to finish the rock-analyses," Pugh said, aggrieved.

"Kaph can do that. I want one more look at the Trench. Have fun," Martin added in dialect, and laughed, and left.

"What is that language?"

"Argentinean. I told you that once, didn't I?"

"I don't know." After a while the young man added, "I have forgotten a lot of things, I think."

"It wasn't important, to be sure," Pugh said gently, realizing all at once how important this conversation was. "Will you give me a hand running the computer, Kaph?" He nodded.

Pugh had left a lot of loose ends, and the job took them all day. Kaph was a good co-worker, quick and systematic, much more so than Pugh himself. His flat voice, now that he was talking again, got on the nerves; but it didn't matter, there was only this one day left to get through and then the ship would come, the old crew, comrades and friends.

During tea-break Kaph said, "What will happen if the Explorer ship crashes?"

"They'd be killed."

"To you, I mean."

"To us? We'd radio SOS all signals, and live on half rations till the rescue cruiser from Area Three Base came. Four and a half E-years away it is. We have life-support here for three men for, let's see, maybe between four and five years. A bit tight, it would be."

"Would they send a cruiser for three men?"

"They would."

Kaph said no more.

"Enough cheerful speculations," Pugh said cheerfully, rising to get back to work. He slipped sideways and the chair

NINE LIVES

avoided his hand; he did a sort of half-pirouette and fetched up hard against the dome-hide. "My goodness," he said, reverting to his native idiom, "what is it?"

"Quake," said Kaph.

The teacups bounced on the table with a plastic cackle, a litter of papers slid off a box, the skin of the dome swelled and sagged. Underfoot there was a huge noise, half sound half shaking, a subsonic boom.

Kaph sat unmoved. An earthquake does not frighten a man who died in an earthquake.

Pugh, white-faced, wiry black hair sticking out, a frightened man, said, "Martin is in the Trench."

"What trench?"

"The big fault line. The epicenter for the local quakes. Look at the seismograph." Pugh struggled with the stuck door of a still-jittering locker.

"Where are you going?"

"After him."

"Martin took the jet. Sleds aren't safe to use during quakes. They go out of control."

"For God's sake, man, shut up."

Kaph stood up, speaking in a flat voice as usual. "It's unnecessary to go out after him now. It's taking an unnecessary risk."

"If his alarm goes off, radio me," Pugh said, shut the headpiece of his suit, and ran to the lock. As he went out Libra picked up her ragged skirts and danced a belly-dance from under his feet clear to the red horizon.

Inside the dome, Kaph saw the sled go up, tremble like a meteor in the dull red daylight, and vanish to the northeast. The hide of the dome quivered; the earth coughed. A vent south of the dome belched up a slow-flowing bile of black gas.

A bell shrilled and a red light flashed on the central control board. The sign under the light read Suit Two and scribbled under that, A.G.M. Kaph did not turn the signal off. He tried to radio Martin, then Pugh, but got no reply from either.

When the aftershocks decreased he went back to work, and finished up Pugh's job. It took him about two hours. Every half hour he tried to contact Suit One, and got no reply, then Suit Two and got no reply. The red light had stopped flashing after an hour.

URSULA K. LE GUIN

It was dinnertime. Kaph cooked dinner for one, and ate it. He lay down on his cot.

The aftershocks had ceased except for faint rolling tremors at long intervals. The sun hung in the west, oblāte, pale-red, immense. It did not sink visibly. There was no sound at all.

Kaph got up and began to walk about the messy, half-packed-up, overcrowded, empty dome. The silence continued. He went to the player and put on the first tape that came to hand. It was pure music, electronic, without harmonies, without voices. It ended. The silence continued.

Pugh's uniform tunic, one button missing, hung over a stack of rock-samples. Kaph stared at it a while.

The silence continued.

The child's dream: There is no one else alive in the world but me. In all the world.

Low, north of the dome, a meteor flickered.

Kaph's mouth opened as if he were trying to say something, but no sound came. He went hastily to the north wall and peered out into the gelatinous red light.

The little star came in and sank. Two figures blurred the airlock. Kaph stood close beside the lock as they came in. Martin's imsuit was covered with some kind of dust so that he looked raddled and warty like the surface of Libra. Pugh had him by the arm.

"Is he hurt?"

Pugh shucked his suit, helped Martin peel off his. "Shaken up," he said, curt.

"A piece of cliff fell onto the jet," Martin said, sitting down at the table and waving his arms. "Not while I was in it, though. I was parked, see, and poking about that carbon-dust area when I felt things humping. So I went out onto a nice bit of early igneous I'd noticed from above, good footing and out from under the cliffs. Then I saw this bit of the planet fall off onto the flyer, quite a sight it was, and after a while it occurred to me the spare aircans were in the flyer, so I leaned on the panic button. But I didn't get any radio reception, that's always happening here during quakes, so I didn't know if the signal was getting through either. And things went on jumping around and pieces of the cliff coming off. Little rocks flying around, and so dusty you couldn't see a meter ahead. I was really beginning to wonder what I'd do for breathing in the small hours, you know, when I saw old Owen buzzing up the

NINE LIVES

Trench in all that dust and junk like a big ugly bat—"Want to eat?" said Pugh.

"Of course I want to eat. How'd you come through the quake here, Kaph? No damage? It wasn't a big one actually, was it, what's the seismo say? My trouble was I was in the middle of it. Old Epicenter Alvaro. Felt like Richter Fifteen there—total destruction of planet—"

"Sit down," Pugh said. "Eat."

After Martin had eaten a little his spate of talk ran dry. He very soon went off to his cot, still in the remote angle where he had removed it when Pugh complained of his snoring. "Good night, you one-lunged Welshman," he said across the dome.

"Good night."

There was no more out of Martin. Pugh opaqued the dome, turned the lamp down to a yellow glow less than a candle's light, and sat doing nothing, saying nothing, withdrawn.

The silence continued.

"I finished the computations."

Pugh nodded thanks.

"The signal from Martin came through, but I couldn't contact you or him."

Pugh said with effort, "I should not have gone. He had two hours of air left even with only one can. He might have been heading home when I left. This way we were all out of touch with one another. I was scared."

The silence came back, punctuated now by Martin's long, soft snores.

"Do you love Martin?"

Pugh looked up with angry eyes: "Martin is my friend. We've worked together, he's a good man." He stopped. After a while he said, "Yes, I love him. Why did you ask that?"

Kaph said nothing, but he looked at the other man. His face was changed, as if he were glimpsing something he had not seen before; his voice too was changed. "How can you . . . ? How do you . . . ?"

But Pugh could not tell him. "I don't know," he said, "it's practice, partly. I don't know. We're each of us alone, to be sure. What can you do but hold your hand out in the dark?"

Kaph's strange gaze dropped, burned out by its own intensity.

URSULA K. LE GUIN

"I'm tired," Pugh said. "That was ugly, looking for him in all that black dust and muck, and mouths opening and shutting in the ground. . . . I'm going to bed. The ship will be transmitting to us by six or so." He stood up and stretched.

"It's a clone," Kaph said. "The other Exploit team they're bringing with them."

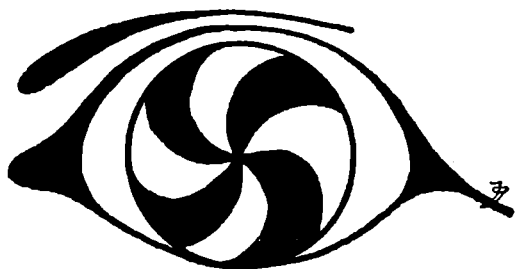
"Is it, then?"

"A twelveclone. They came out with us on the *Passerine*."

Kaph sat in the small yellow aura of the lamp seeming to look past it at what he feared: the new clone, the multiple self of which he was not part. A lost piece of a broken set, a fragment, inexpert at solitude, not knowing even how you go about giving love to another individual, now he must face the absolute, closed self-sufficiency of the clone of twelve; that was a lot to ask of the poor fellow, to be sure. Pugh put a hand on his shoulder in passing. "The chief won't ask you to stay here with a clone. You can go home. Or since you're Far Out maybe you'll come on farther out with us. We could use you. No hurry deciding. You'll make out all right."

Pugh's quiet voice trailed off. He stood unbuttoning his coat, stooped a little with fatigue. Kaph looked at him and saw the thing he had never seen before: saw him: Owen Pugh, the other, the stranger who held his hand out in the dark.

"Good night," Pugh mumbled, crawling into his sleeping-bag and half asleep already, so that he did not hear Kaph reply after a pause, repeating, across darkness, benediction.



THE BIG FLASH

NORMAN SPINRAD

Norman Spinrad is very interested in the implications of our McLuhanesque media age, as he showed in **BUG JACK BARRON**. Even more to the point is this powerful story of a rock group, and television, and the bomb.

T minus 200 days . . . and counting . . .

They came on freaky for my taste—but that's the name of the game: freaky means a draw in the rock business. And if the Mandala was going to survive in LA, competing with a network-owned joint like *The American Dream*, I'd just have to hold my nose and out-freak the opposition. So after I had dug the Four Horsemen for about an hour, I took them into my office to talk turkey.

I sat down behind my Salvation Army desk (the Mandala is the world's most expensive shoestring operation) and the Horsemen sat down on the bridge chairs sequentially, establishing the group's pecking order.

NORMAN SPINRAD

First, the head honcho, lead guitar and singer, Stony Clarke—blond shoulder-length hair, eyes like something in a morgue when he took off his steel-rimmed shades, a reputation as a heavy acid-head and the look of a speed-freak behind it. Then Hair, the drummer, dressed like a Hell's Angel, swastikas and all, a junkie, with fanatic eyes that were a little too close together, making me wonder whether he wore swastikas because he grooved behind the Angel thing or made like an Angel because it let him groove behind the swastika in public. Number three was a cat who called himself Super Spade and wasn't kidding—he wore earrings, natural hair, a Stokeley Carmichael sweatshirt, and on a thong around his neck a shrunken head that had been whitened with liquid shoe polish. He was the utility infielder: sitar, base, organ, flute, whatever. Number four, who called himself Mr. Jones, was about the creepiest cat I had ever seen in a rock group, and that is saying something. He was their visuals, synthesizer and electronics man. He was at least forty, wore Early Hippy clothes that looked like they had been made by Sy Devore, and was rumored to be some kind of Rand Corporation dropout. There's no business like show business.

"Okay, boys," I said, "you're strange, but you're my kind of strange. Where you worked before?"

"We ain't, baby," Clarke said. "We're the New Thing. I've been dealing crystal and acid in the Haight. Hair was drummer for some plastic group in New York. The Super Spade claims it's the reincarnation of Bird and it don't pay to argue. Mr. Jones, he don't talk too much. Maybe he's a Martian. We just started putting our thing together."

One thing about this business, the groups that don't have square managers, you can get cheap. They talk too much.

"Groovy," I said. "I'm happy to give you guys your start. Nobody knows you, but I think you got something going. So I'll take a chance and give you a week's booking. One A.M. to closing, which is two, Tuesday through Sunday, four hundred a week."

"Are you Jewish?" asked Hair.

"What?"

"Cool it," Clarke ordered. Hair cooled it. "What it means," Clarke told me, "is that four hundred sounds like pretty light bread."

"We don't sign if there's an option clause," Mr. Jones said.

"The Jones-thing has a good point," Clarke said. "We do

THE BIG FLASH

the first week for four hundred, but after that it's a whole new scene, dig?"

I didn't feature that. If they hit it big, I could end up not being able to afford them. But on the other hand four hundred was light bread, and I needed a cheap closing act pretty bad.

"Okay," I said. "But a verbal agreement that I get first crack at you when you finish the gig."

"Word of honor," said Stony Clarke.

That's this business—the word of honor of an ex-dealer and speed-freak.

T minus 199 days . . . and counting . . .

Being unconcerned with ends, the military mind can be easily manipulated, easily controlled, and easily confused. Ends are defined as those goals set by civilian authority. Ends are the conceded province of civilians; means are the province of the military, whose duty it is to achieve the ends set for it by the most advantageous application of the means at its command.

Thus the confusion over the war in Asia among my uniformed clients at the Pentagon. The end has been duly set: eradication of the guerrillas. But the civilians have overstepped their bounds and meddled in means. The Generals regard this as unfair, a breach of contract, as it were. The Generals (or the faction among them most inclined to paranoia) are beginning to see the conduct of the war, the political limitation on means, as a ploy of the civilians for performing a putsch against their time-honored prerogatives.

This aspect of the situation would bode ill for the country, were it not for the fact that the growing paranoia among the Generals has enabled me to manipulate them into presenting both my scenarios to the President. The President has authorized implementation of the major scenario, provided that the minor scenario is successful in properly molding public opinion.

My major scenario is simple and direct. Knowing that the poor flying weather makes our conventional airpower, with its dependency on relative accuracy, ineffectual, the enemy has fallen into the pattern of grouping his forces into larger units and launching punishing annual offensives during the monsoon season. However, these larger units are highly vulnerable to tactical nuclear weapons, which do not depend upon accuracy for effect. Secure in the knowledge that do-

NORMAN SPINRAD

mestic political considerations preclude the use of nuclear weapons, the enemy will once again form into division-sized units or larger during the next monsoon season. A parsimonious use of tactical nuclear weapons, even as few as twenty one-hundred-kiloton bombs, employed simultaneously and in an advantageous pattern, will destroy a minimum of two hundred thousand enemy troops, or nearly two-thirds of his total force, in a twenty-four-hour period. The blow will be crushing.

The minor scenario, upon whose success the implementation of the major scenario depends, is far more sophisticated, due to its subtler goal: public acceptance of, or, optimally, even public clamor for, the use of tactical nuclear weapons. The task is difficult, but my scenario is quite sound, if somewhat exotic, and with the full, if to-some-extent-clandestine support of the upper military hierarchy, certain civil government circles and the decision-makers in key aerospace corporations, the means now at my command would seem adequate. The risks, while statistically significant, do not exceed an acceptable level.

T minus 189 days . . . and counting . . .

The way I see it, the network deserved the shafting I gave them. They shafted me, didn't they? Four successful series I produce for those bastards, and two bomb out after thirteen weeks and they send me to the salt mines! A discotheque, can you imagine they make me producer at a lousy discotheque! A remittance man they make me, those schlockmeisters. Oh, those schnorrers made the American Dream sound like a kosher deal—twenty percent of the net, they say. And you got access to all our sets and contract players, it'll make you a rich man, Herm. And like a yuk, I sign, being broke at the time, without reading the fine print. I should know they've set up the American Dream as a tax loss? I should know that I've *gotta* use their lousy sets and stiff contract players and have it written off against my gross? I should know their shtick is to run the American Dream at a loss and then do a network TV show out of the joint from which I don't see a penny? So I end up running the place for them at a paper loss, living on salary, while the network rakes it in off the TV show that I end up paying for out of my end.

Don't bums like that deserve to be shafted? It isn't enough they use me as a tax loss patsy, they gotta tell me

THE BIG FLASH

who to book! "Go sign the Four Horsemen, the group that's packing them in at the Mandala," they say. "We want them on *A Night With The American Dream*. They're hot."

"Yeah, they're hot," I say, "which means they'll cost a mint. I can't afford it."

They show me more fine print—next time I read the contract with a microscope. I *gotta* book whoever they tell me to and I gotta absorb the cost on my books! It's enough to make a Litvak turn anti-semit.

So I had to go to the Mandala to sign up these hippies. I made sure I didn't get there till twelve-thirty so I wouldn't have to stay in that nuthouse any longer than necessary. Such a dive! What Bernstein did was take a bankrupt Hollywood-Hollywood club on the Strip, knock down all the interior walls and put up this monster tent inside the shell. Just thin white screening over two-by-fours. Real shlock. Outside the tent, he's got projectors, lights, speakers, all the electronic mumbo jumbo and inside is like being surrounded by movie screens. Just the tent and the bare floor, not even a real stage, just a platform on wheels they shlepp in and out of the tent when they change groups.

So you can imagine he doesn't draw exactly a class crowd. Not with the American Dream up the street being run as a network tax loss. What they get is the smelly, hard-core hippies I don't let in the door and the kind of j.d. high school kids that think it's smart to hang around putzes like that. A lot of dope-pushing goes on. The cops don't like the place and the rousts draw professional troublemakers.

A real den of iniquity—I felt like I was walking onto a Casbah set. The last group had gone off and the Horsemen hadn't come on yet, so what you had was this crazy tent filled with hippies, half of them on acid or pot or amphetamine or for all I know Ajax, high school would-be hippies, also mostly stoned and getting ugly, and a few crazy schwartzes looking to fight cops. All of them standing around waiting for something to happen, and about ready to make it happen. I stood near the door, just in case. As they say, "the vibes were making me uptight."

All of a sudden the house lights go out and it's black as a network executive's heart. I hold my hand on my wallet—in this crowd, tell me there are no pickpockets. Just the pitch-black and dead silence for what, ten beats, something crawling along my bones, but I know it's some kind of

NORMAN SPINRAD

subsonic effect and not my imagination, because all the hippies are standing still and you don't hear a sound.

Then from a monster speaker so loud you feel it in your teeth, a heartbeat, but heavy, slow, half-time like maybe a whale's heart. The thing crawling along my bones seems to be synchronized with the heartbeat and I feel almost like I am that big dumb heart beating there in the darkness.

Then a dark red spot—so faint it's almost infrared—hits the stage which they have wheeled out. On the stage are four uglies in crazy black robes—you know, like the Grim Reaper wears—with that ugly red light all over them like blood. Creepy. Boom-ba-boom. Boom-ba-boom. The heartbeat still going, still that subsonic bone-crawl and the hippies are staring at the Four Horsemen like mesmerized chickens.

The bass player, a regular jungle-bunny, picks up the rhythm of the heartbeat. Dum-da-dum. Dum-da-dum. The drummer beats it out with earsplitting rim-shots. Then the electric guitar, tuned like a strangling cat, makes with horrible heavy chords. Whang-ka-whang. Whang-ka-whang.

It's just awful, I feel it in my guts, my bones; my eardrums are just like some great big throbbing vein. Everybody is swaying to it, I'm swaying to it. Boom-ba-boom. Boom-ba-boom.

Then the guitarist starts to chant in rhythm with the heartbeat, in a hoarse, shrill voice like somebody dying: "*The big flash . . . The big flash . . .*"

And the guy at the visuals console diddles around and rings of light start to climb the walls of the tent, blue at the bottom becoming green as they get higher, then yellow, orange and finally as they become a circle on the ceiling, eye-killing neon-red. Each circle takes exactly one heartbeat to climb the wall.

Boy, what an awful feeling! Like I was a tube of toothpaste being squeezed in rhythm till the top of my head felt like it was gonna squirt up with those circles of light through the ceiling.

And then they start to speed it up gradually. The same heartbeat, the same rim-shots, same chords, same circles, same base, same subsonic bone-crawl, but just a little faster. . . . Then faster! Faster!

Thought I would die! Knew I would die! Heart beating like a lunatic. Rim-shots like a machine gun. Circles of light sucking me up the walls, into that red neon hole.

THE BIG FLASH

Oy, incredible! Over and over faster and faster till the voice was a scream and the heartbeat a boom and the rimshots a whine and the guitar howled feedback and my bones were jumping out of my body—

Every spot in the place came on and I went blind from the sudden light—”

An awful explosion-sound came over every speaker, so loud it rocked me on my feet—

I felt myself squirting out of the top of my head and loved it.

Then:

The explosion became a rumble—

The light seemed to run together into a circle on the ceiling, leaving everything else black.

And the circle became a fireball.

The fireball became a slow-motion film of an atomic bomb cloud as the rumbling died away. Then the picture faded into a moment of total darkness and the house lights came on.

What a number!

Gevalt, what an act!

So after the show, when I got them alone and found out they had no manager, not even an option to the Mandala, I thought faster than I ever had in my life.

To make a long story short and sweet, I gave the network the royal screw. I signed the Horsemen to a contract that made me their manager and gave me twenty percent of their take. Then I booked them into the American Dream at ten thousand a week, wrote a check as proprietor of the American Dream, handed the check to myself as manager of the Four Horsemen, then resigned as a network flunky, leaving them with a ten thousand bag and me with twenty percent of the hottest group since the Beatles.

What the hell, he who lives by the fine print shall perish by the fine print.

T minus 148 days . . . and counting . . .

“You haven’t seen the tape yet, have you, B.D.?” Jake said. He was nervous as hell. When you reach my level in the network structure, you’re used to making subordinates nervous, but Jake Pitkin was head of network continuity, not some office boy, and certainly should be used to dealing with executives at my level. Was the rumor really true?

NORMAN SPINRAD

We were alone in the screening room. It was doubtful that the projectionist could hear us.

"No, I haven't seen it yet," I said. "But I've heard some strange stories."

Jake looked positively deathly. "About the tape?" he said.

"About you, Jake," I said, deprecating the rumor with an easy smile. "That you don't want to air the show."

"It's true, B.D.," Jake said quietly.

"Do you realize what you're saying? Whatever our personal tastes—and I personally think there's something unhealthy about them—the Four Horsemen are the hottest thing in the country right now and that dirty little thief Herm Gellman held us up for a quarter of a million for an hour show. It cost another two hundred thousand to make it. We've spent another hundred thousand on promotion. We're getting top dollar from the sponsors. There's over a million dollars one way or the other riding on that show. That's how much we blow if we don't air it."

"I know that, B.D.," Jake said. "I also know this could cost me my job. Think about that. Because knowing all that, I'm still against airing the tape. I'm going to run the closing segment for you. I'm sure enough that you'll agree with me to stake my job on it."

I had a terrible feeling in my stomach. I have superiors too and The Word was that *A Trip With The Four Horsemen* would be aired, period. No matter what. Something funny was going on. The price we were getting for commercial time was a precedent and the sponsor was a big aerospace company which had never bought network time before. What really bothered me was that Jake Pitkin had no reputation for courage; yet here he was laying his job on the line. He must be pretty sure I would come around to his way of thinking or he wouldn't dare. And though I couldn't tell Jake, I had no choice in the matter whatsoever.

"Okay, roll it," Jake said into the intercom mike. "What you're going to see," he said as the screening room lights went out, "is the last number."

On the screen:

A shot of empty blue sky, with soft, lazy electric guitar chords behind it. The camera pans across a few clouds to an extremely long shot on the sun. As the sun, no more than a tiny circle of light, moves into the center of the screen, a sitar-drone comes in behind the guitar.

Very slowly, the camera begins to zoom in on the sun.

THE BIG FLASH

As the image of the sun expands, the sitar gets louder and the guitar begins to fade and a drum starts to give the sitar a beat. The sitar gets louder, the beat gets more pronounced and begins to speed up as the sun continues to expand. Finally, the whole screen is filled with unbearably bright light behind which the sitar and drum are in a frenzy.

Then over this, drowning out the sitar and drum, a voice like a sick thing in heat: "*Brighter . . . than a thousand suns . . .*"

The light dissolves into a close-up of a beautiful dark-haired girl with huge eyes and moist lips, and suddenly there is nothing on the sound track but soft guitar and voices crooning low: "*Brighter . . . Oh God, it's brighter . . . brighter . . . than a thousand suns . . .*"

The girl's face dissolves into a full shot of the Four Horsemen in their Grim Reaper robes and the same melody that had played behind the girl's face shifts into a minor key, picks up whining, reverberating electric guitar chords and a sitar-drone and becomes a dirge: "*Darker . . . the world grows darker . . .*"

And a series of cuts in time to the dirge:

A burning village in Asia strewn with bodies—

"*Darker . . . the world grows darker . . .*"

The corpse-heap at Auschwitz—

"*Until it gets so dark . . .*"

A gigantic auto graveyard with gaunt Negro children dwarfed in the foreground—

"*I think I'll die . . .*"

A Washington ghetto in flames with the Capitol misty in the background—

"*. . . before the daylight comes . . .*"

A jump-cut to an extreme close-up on the lead singer of the Horsemen, his face twisted into a mask of desperation and ecstasy. And the sitar is playing double-time, the guitar is wailing and he is screaming at the top of his lungs: "*But before I die, let me make that trip before the nothing comes . . .*"

The girl's face again, but transparent, with a blinding yellow light shining through it. The sitar beat gets faster and faster with the guitar whining behind it and the voice is working itself up into a howling frenzy: "*. . . the last big flash to light my sky . . .*"

Nothing but the blinding light now—

"*. . . and zap! the world is done . . .*"

NORMAN SPINRAD

An utterly black screen for a beat that becomes black fading to blue at a horizon—

“ . . . but before we die let's dig that high that frees us from our binds . . . that blows all cool that ego-drool and burns us from our mind . . . the last big flash, mankind's last gas, the trip we can't take twice . . . ”

Suddenly, the music stops dead for half a beat. Then:

The screen is lit up by an enormous fireball—

A shattering rumble—

The fireball coalesces into a mushroom-pillar cloud as the roar goes on. As the roar begins to die out, fire is visible inside the monstrous nuclear cloud. And the girl's face is faintly visible superimposed over the cloud.

A soft voice, amplified over the roar, obscenely reverential now: *Brighter . . . great God, it's brighter . . . brighter than a thousand suns . . .*

And the screen went blank and the lights came on.

I looked at Jake. Jake looked at me.”

“That's sick,” I said. “That's really sick.”

“You don't want to run a thing like that, do you, B.D.?” Jake said softly.

I made some rapid mental calculations. The loathsome thing ran something under five minutes . . . it could be done. . . .

“You're right, Jake,” I said “We won't run a thing like that. We'll cut it out of the tape and squeeze in another commercial at each break. That should cover the time.”

“You don't understand,” Jake said. “The contract Herm rammed down our throats doesn't allow us to edit. The show's a package—all or nothing. Besides, the whole show's like that.”

“All like that? What do you mean, all like that?”

Jake squirmed in his seat. “Those guys are . . . well, perverts, B.D.,” he said.

“Perverts?”

“They're . . . well, they're in love with the atom bomb or something. Every number leads up to the same thing.”

“You mean . . . they're *all* like that?”

“You got the picture, B.D.,” Jake said. “We run an hour of *that* or we run nothing at all.”

“Jesus.”

I knew what I wanted to say. Burn the tape and write off the million dollars. But I also knew it would cost me my job. And I knew that five minutes after I was out the

THE BIG FLASH

door, they would have someone in my job who would see things their way. Even my superiors seemed to be just handing down The Word from higher up. I had no choice. There was no choice.

"I'm sorry, Jake," I said. "We run it."

"I resign," said Jake Pitkin, who had no reputation for courage.

T minus 10 days . . . and counting . . .

"It's a clear violation of the Test-Ban Treaty," I said.

The Undersecretary looked as dazed as I felt. "We'll call it a peaceful use of atomic energy, and let the Russians scream," he said.

"It's insane."

"Perhaps," the Undersecretary said. "But you have your orders, General Carson, and I have mine. From higher up. At exactly eight fifty-eight P.M. local time on July fourth, you will drop a fifty-kiloton atomic bomb on the designated ground zero at Yucca Flats."

"But the people . . . the television crews . . ."

"Will be at least two miles outside the danger zone. Surely, SAC can manage that kind of accuracy under 'laboratory conditions.'"

I stiffened. "I do not question the competence of any bomber crew under my command to perform this mission," I said. "I question the reason for the mission. I question the sanity of the orders."

The Undersecretary shrugged, smiled weakly. "Welcome to the club."

"You mean you don't know what this is all about either?"

"All I know is what was transmitted to me by the Secretary of Defense, and I got the feeling he doesn't know everything, either. You know that the Pentagon has been screaming for the use of tactical nuclear weapons to end the war in Asia—you SAC boys have been screaming the loudest. Well, several months ago, the President conditionally approved a plan for the use of tactical nuclear weapons during the next monsoon season."

I whistled. The civilians were finally coming to their senses. Or were they?

"But what does that have to do with—?"

"Public opinion," the Undersecretary said. "It was conditional upon a drastic change in public opinion. At the time the plan was approved, the polls showed that seventy-

NORMAN SPINRAD

eight point eight percent of the population opposed the use of tactical nuclear weapons, nine point eight percent favored their use and the rest were undecided or had no opinion. The President agreed to authorize the use of tactical nuclear weapons by a date, several months from now, which is still top secret, provided that by that date at least sixty-five percent of the population approved their use and no more than twenty percent actively opposed it."

"I see. . . . Just a ploy to keep the Joint Chiefs quiet."

"General Carson," the Undersecretary said, "apparently you are out of touch with the national mood. After the first Four Horsemen show, the polls showed that twenty-five percent of the population approved the use of nuclear weapons. After the second show, the figure was forty-one percent. It is now forty-eight percent. Only thirty-two percent are now actively opposed."

"You're trying to tell me that a rock group—"

"A rock group and the cult around it. It's become a national hysteria. There are imitators. Haven't you seen those buttons?"

"The ones with a mushroom cloud on them that say 'Do it'?"

The Undersecretary nodded. "Your guess is as good as mine whether the National Security Council just decided that the Horsemen hysteria could be used to mold public opinion, or whether the Four Horsemen were their creatures to begin with. But the results are the same either way—the Horsemen and the cult around them have won over precisely that element of the population which was most adamantly opposed to nuclear weapons: hippies, students, dropouts, draft-age youth. Demonstrations against the war and against nuclear weapons have died down. We're pretty close to that sixty-five percent. Someone—perhaps the President himself—has decided that one more big Four Horsemen show will put us over the top."

"The President is behind this?"

"No one else can authorize the detonation of an atomic bomb, after all," the Undersecretary said. "We're letting them do the show live from Yucca Flats. It's being sponsored by an aerospace company heavily dependent on defense contracts. We're letting them truck in a live audience. Of course the government is behind it."

"And SAC drops an A-bomb as the show-stopper?"

"Exactly."

THE BIG FLASH

"I saw one of those shows," I said. "My kids were watching it. I got the strangest feeling . . . I almost wanted that red telephone to ring. . . ."

"I know what you mean," the Undersecretary said. "Sometimes I get the feeling that whoever's behind this has gotten caught up in the hysteria themselves . . . that the Horsemen are now using whoever was using them . . . a closed circle. But I've been tired lately. The war's making us all so tired. If only we could get it all over with. . . ."

"We'd all like to get it over with one way or the other," I said.

T minus 60 minutes . . . and counting . . .

I had orders to muster *Backfish's* crew for the live satellite relay of *The Four Horsemen's Fourth*. Superficially, it might seem strange to order the whole Polaris fleet to watch a television show, but the morale factor involved was quite significant.

Polaris subs are frustrating duty. Only top sailors are chosen and a good sailor craves action. Yet if we are ever called upon to act, our mission will have been a failure. We spend most of our time honing skills that must never be used. Deterrence is a sound strategy but a terrible drain on the men of the deterrent forces—a drain exacerbated in the past by the negative attitude of our countrymen toward our mission. Men who, in the service of their country, polish their skills to a razor edge and then must refrain from exercising them have a right to resent being treated as pariahs.

Therefore the positive change in the public attitude toward us that seems to be associated with the Four Horsemen has made them mascots of a kind to the Polaris fleet. In their strange way they seem to speak for us and to us.

I chose to watch the show in the missile control center, where a full crew must always be ready to launch the missiles on five-minute notice. I have always felt a sense of communion with the duty watch in the missile control center that I cannot share with the other men under my command. Here we are not Captain and crew but mind and hand. Should the order come, the will to fire the missiles will be mine and the act will be theirs. At such a moment, it will be good not to feel alone.

All eyes were on the television set mounted above the main console as the show came on and . . .

NORMAN SPINRAD

The screen was filled with a whirling spiral pattern, metallic yellow on metallic blue. There was a droning sound that seemed part sitar and part electronic and I had the feeling that the sound was somehow coming from inside my head and the spiral seemed etched directly on my retinas. It hurt mildly, yet nothing in the world could have made me turn away.

Then two voices, chanting against each other:

"Let it all come in. . . ."

"Let it all come out. . . ."

"In . . . out . . . in . . . out . . . in . . . out . . ."

My head seemed to be pulsing—in-out, in-out, in-out—and the spiral pattern began to pulse color-changes with the words: yellow-on-blue (in) . . . green-on-red (out) . . . In-out-in-out-in-out . . .

In the screen . . . out my head. . . . I seemed to be beating against some kind of invisible membrane between myself and the screen as if something were trying to embrace my mind and I were fighting it. . . . But why was I fighting it?

The pulsing, the chanting, got faster and faster till in could not be told from out and negative spiral afterimages formed in my eyes faster than they could adjust to the changes, piled up on each other faster and faster till it seemed my head would explode—

The chanting and the droning broke and there were the Four Horsemen, in their robes, playing on some stage against a backdrop of clear blue sky. And a single voice, soothing now: *"You are in. . . ."*

Then the view was directly above the Horsemen and I could see that they were on some kind of circular platform. The view moved slowly and smoothly up and away and I saw that the circular stage was atop a tall tower; around the tower and completely circling it was a huge crowd seated on desert sands that stretched away to an empty infinity.

"And we are in and they are in. . . ."

I was down among the crowd now; they seemed to melt and flow like plastic, pouring from the television screen to enfold me. . . .

"And we are all in here together. . . ."

A strange and beautiful feeling . . . the music got faster and wilder, ecstatic . . . the hull of the *Backfish* seemed unreal . . . the crowd was swaying to it around me . . . the distance between myself and the crowd seemed to dis-

THE BIG FLASH

solve . . . I was there . . . they were here. . . . We were transfixed. . . .

"Oh yeah, we are all in here together . . . together. . . ."

T minus 45 minutes . . . and counting . . .

Jeremy and I sat staring at the television screen, ignoring each other and everything around us. Even with the short watches and the short tours of duty, you can get to feeling pretty strange down here in a hole in the ground under tons of concrete, just you and the guy with the other key, with nothing to do but think dark thoughts and get on each other's nerves. We're all supposed to be as stable as men can be, or so they tell us, and they must be right because the world's still here. I mean, it wouldn't take much—just two guys on the same watch over the same three Minutemen flipping out at the same time, turning their keys in the dual lock, pressing the three buttons. . . . Pow! World War III!

A bad thought, the kind we're not supposed to think or I'll start watching Jeremy and he'll start watching me and we'll get a paranoia feedback going. . . . But that can't happen; we're too stable, too responsible. As long as we remember that it's healthy to feel a little spooky down here, we'll be all right.

But the television set is a good idea. It keeps us in contact with the outside world, keeps it real. It'd be too easy to start thinking that the missile control center down here is the only real world and that nothing that happens up there really matters. . . . Bad thought!

The Four Horsemen . . . somehow these guys help you get it all out. I mean that feeling that it might be better to release all that tension, get it all over with. Watching the Four Horsemen, you're able to go with it without doing any harm, let it wash over you and then through you. I suppose they are crazy; they're all the human craziness in ourselves that we've got to keep very careful watch over down here. Letting it all come out watching the Horsemen makes it surer that none of it will come out down here. I guess that's why a lot of us have taken to wearing those "Do it" buttons off duty. The brass doesn't mind; they seem to understand that it's the kind of inside sick joke we need to keep us functioning.

Now that spiral thing they had started the show with—and the droning—came back on. Zap! I was right back

NORMAN SPINRAD

in the screen again, as if the commercial hadn't happened.

"We are all in here together. . . ."

And then a close-up of the lead singer, looking straight at me, as close as Jeremy and somehow more real. A mean-looking guy with something behind his eyes that told me he knew where everything lousy and rotten was at.

A bass began to thrum behind him and some kind of electronic hum that set my teeth on edge. He began playing his guitar, mean and low-down. And singing in that kind of drop-dead tone of voice that starts brawls in bars:

"I stabbed my mother and I mugged my paw. . . ."

A riff of heavy guitar-chords echoed the words mockingly as a huge swastika (red-on-black, black-on-red) pulsed like a naked vein on the screen—

The face of the Horsemen, leering—

"Nailed my sister to the toilet door. . . ."

Guitar behind the pulsing swastika—

"Drowned a puppy in a ce-ment machine. . . . Burned a kitten just to hear it scream. . . ."

On the screen, just a big fire burning in slow-motion, and the voice became a slow, shrill, agonized wail:

"Oh God, I've got this red-hot fire burning in the marrow of my brain. . . ."

"Oh yes, I got this fire burning . . . in the stinking marrow of my brain. . . ."

"Gotta get me a blowtorch . . . and set some naked flesh on flame. . . ."

The fire dissolved into the face of a screaming Oriental woman, who ran through a burning village clawing at the napalm on her back.

"I got this message . . . boiling in the bubbles of my blood. . . . A man ain't nothing but a fire burning . . . in a dirty glob of mud. . . ."

A film-clip of a Nuremburg rally: a revolving swastika of marching men waving torches—

. Then the leader of the Horsemen superimposed over the twisted flaming cross:

"Don't you hate me, baby, can't you feel somethin' screaming in your mind?"

"Don't you hate me, baby, feel me drowning you in slime!"

Just the face of the Horsemen howling hate—

"Oh yes, I'm a monster, mother. . . ."

A long view of the crowd around the platform, on their

THE BIG FLASH

feet, waving arms, screaming soundlessly. Then a quick zoom in and a kaleidoscope of faces, eyes feverish, mouths open and howling—

"Just call me—"

The face of the Horseman superimposed over the crazed faces of the crowd—

"Mankind!"

I looked at Jeremy. He was toying with the key on the chain around his neck. He was sweating. I suddenly realized that I was sweating too and that my own key was throbbing in my hand alive. . . .

T minus 13 minutes . . . and counting . . .

A funny feeling, the Captain watching the Four Horsemen here in the *Backfish's* missile control center with us. Sitting in front of my console watching the television set with the Captain kind of breathing down my neck. . . . I got the feeling he knew what was going through me and I couldn't know what was going through him . . . and it gave the fire inside me a kind of greasy feel I didn't like. . . .

Then the commercial was over and that spiral-thing came on again and whoosh! it sucked me right back into the television set and I stopped worrying about the Captain or anything like that. . . .

Just the spiral going yellow-blue, red-green, and then starting to whirl and whirl, faster and faster, changing colors and whirling, whirling, whirling. . . . And the sound of a kind of Coney Island carousel tinkling behind it, faster and faster and faster, whirling and whirling and whirling, flashing red-green, yellow-blue, and whirling, whirling, whirling. . . .

And this big hum filling my body and whirling, whirling, whirling. . . . My muscles relaxing, going limp, whirling, whirling, whirling, all limp, whirling, whirling, whirling, oh so nice, just whirling, whirling. . . .

And in the center of the flashing spiraling colors, a bright dot of colorless light, right at the center, not moving, not changing, while the whole world went whirling and whirling in colors around it, and the humming was coming from the spinning colors and the dot was humming its song to me. . . .

The dot was a light way down at the end of a long, whirling, whirling tunnel. The humming started to get a

NORMAN SPINRAD

little louder. The bright dot started to get a little bigger. I was drifting down the tunnel toward it, whirling, whirling, whirling. . . .

T minus 11 minutes . . . and counting . . .

Whirling, whirling, whirling down a long, long tunnel of pulsing colors, whirling, whirling, toward the circle of light way down at the end of the tunnel. . . . How nice it would be to finally get there and soak up the beautiful hum filling my body and then I could forget that I was down here in this hole in the ground with a hard brass key in my hand, just Duke and me, down here in a cave under the ground that was a spiral of flashing colors, whirling, whirling toward the friendly light at the end of the tunnel, whirling, whirling. . . .

T minus 10 minutes . . . and counting . . .

The circle of light at the end of the whirling tunnel was getting bigger and bigger and the humming was getting louder and louder and I was feeling better and better and the *Backfish's* missile control center was getting dimmer and dimmer as the awful weight of command got lighter and lighter, whirling, whirling, and I felt so good I wanted to cry, whirling, whirling. . . .

T minus 9 minutes . . . and counting . . .

Whirling, whirling . . . I was whirling, Jeremy was whirling, the hole in the ground was whirling, and the circle of light at the end of the tunnel whirled closer and closer and—I was through! A place filled with yellow light. Pale metal-yellow light. Then pale metallic blue. Yellow. Blue. Yellow. Blue. Yellow-blue-yellow-blue-yellow-blue-yellow . . .

Pure light pulsing . . . and pure sound droning. And just the *feeling* of letters I couldn't read between the pulses—not-yellow and not-blue—too quick and too faint to be visible, but important, very important. . . .

And then a voice that seemed to be singing from inside my head, almost as if it were my own:

"Oh, oh, oh . . . don't I really wanna know. . . . Oh, oh, oh . . . don't I really wanna know. . . ."

The world pulsing, flashing around those words I couldn't read, couldn't quite read, had to read, could *almost* read. . . .

"Oh, oh, oh . . . great God I really wanna know. . . ."

THE BIG FLASH

Strange amorphous shapes clouding the blue-yellow-blue flickering universe, hiding the words I had to read. . . . Dammit, why wouldn't they get out of the way so I could find out what I had to know!

"Tell me tell me tell me tell me tell me. . . . Gotta know gotta know gotta know gotta know. . . ."

T minus 7 minutes . . . and counting . . .

Couldn't read the words! Why wouldn't the Captain let me read the words?

And that voice inside me: *"Gotta know . . . gotta know . . . gotta know why it hurts me so. . . ."* Why wouldn't it shut up and let me read the words? Why wouldn't the words hold still? Or just slow down a little? If they'd slow down a little, I could read them and then I'd know what I had to do. . . .

T minus 6 minutes . . . and counting . . .

I felt the sweaty key in the palm of my hand. . . . I saw Duke stroking his own key. Had to know! Now—through the pulsing blue-yellow-blue light and the unreadable words that were building up an awful pressure in the back of my brain—I could see the Four Horsemen. They were on their knees, crying, looking up at something and begging: *"Tell me tell me tell me tell me. . . ."*

Then soft billows of rich red-and-orange fire filled the world and a huge voice was trying to speak. But it couldn't form the words. It stuttered and moaned—

The yellow-blue-yellow flashing around the words I couldn't read—the same words, I suddenly sensed, that the voice of the fire was trying so hard to form—and the Four Horsemen on their knees begging: *"Tell me tell me tell me. . . ."*

The friendly warm fire trying so hard to speak—

"Tell me tell me tell me tell me. . . ."

T minus 4 minutes . . . and counting . . .

What were the words? What was the order? I could sense my men silently imploring me to tell them. After all, I was their Captain, it was my duty to tell them. It was my duty to find out!

"Tell me tell me tell me . . ." the robed figures on their knees implored through the flickering pulse in my

NORMAN SPINRAD

brain and I could almost make out the words . . . almost.

...
"Tell me tell me tell me. . . ." I whispered to the warm orange fire that was trying so hard but couldn't quite form the words. The men were whispering it too: "Tell me tell me. . . ."

T minus 3 minutes . . . and counting . . .

The question burning blue and yellow in my brain. WHAT WAS THE FIRE TRYING TO TELL ME? WHAT WERE THE WORDS I COULDN'T READ?

Had to unlock the words! Had to find the key!

A key. . . . *The* key? *THE* KEY! And there was the lock that imprisoned the words, right in front of me! Put the key in the lock. . . . I looked at Jeremy Wasn't there some reason, long ago and far away, why Jeremy might try to stop me from putting the key in the lock?

But Jeremy didn't move as I fitted the key into the lock. . . .

T minus 2 minutes . . . and counting . . .

Why wouldn't the Captain tell me what the order was? The fire knew, but it couldn't tell. My head ached from the pulsing, but I couldn't read the words.

"Tell me tell me tell me . . ." I begged.

Then I realized that the Captain was asking too.

T minus 90 seconds . . . and counting . . .

"*Tell me tell me tell me . . .*" the Horsemen begged. And the words I couldn't read were a fire in my brain.

Duke's key was in the lock in front of us. From very far away, he said: "We have to do it together."

Of course . . . our keys . . . our keys would unlock the words!

I put my key into the lock. One, two, three, we turned our keys together. A lid on the console popped open. Under the lid were three red buttons. Three signs on the console lit up in red letters: ARMED.

T minus 60 seconds . . . and counting . . .

The men were waiting for me to give some order. I didn't know what the order was. A magnificent orange fire was trying to tell me but it couldn't get the words out. . . . Robed figures were praying to the fire. . . .

THE BIG FLASH

Then, through the yellow-blue flicker that hid the words I had to read, I saw a vast crowd encircling a tower. The crowd was on its feet begging silently—

The tower in the center of the crowd became the orange fire that was trying to tell me what the words were—

Became a great mushroom of billowing smoke and blinding orange-red glare. . . .

T minus 30 seconds . . . and counting . . .

The huge pillar of fire was trying to tell Jeremy and me what the words were, what we had to do. The crowd was screaming at the cloud of flame. The yellow-blue flicker was getting faster and faster behind the mushroom cloud. I could almost read the words! I could see that there were two of them!

T minus 20 seconds . . . and counting . . .

Why didn't the Captain tell us? I could almost see the words!

Then I heard the crowd around the beautiful mushroom cloud shouting: "DO IT! DO IT! DO IT! DO IT! DO IT!"

T minus 10 seconds . . . and counting . . .

"DO IT! DO IT! DO IT! DO IT! DO IT! DO IT! DO IT!"

What did they want me to do? Did Duke know?

9

The men were waiting! What was the order? They hunched over the firing controls, waiting. . . . The firing controls . . . ?

"DO IT! DO IT! DO IT! DO IT! DO IT!"

8

"DO IT! DO IT! DO IT! DO IT! DO IT!": the crowd screaming. "Jeremy!" I shouted. "I can read the words!"

7

My hands hovered over my bank of firing buttons. . . .

"DO IT! DO IT! DO IT! DO IT!" the words said.

Didn't the Captain understand?

6

"What do they want us to do, Jeremy?"

NORMAN SPINRAD

5

Why didn't the mushroom cloud give the order? My men were waiting! A good sailor craves action.

Then a great voice spoke from the pillar of fire: "DO IT . . . DO IT . . . DO IT. . ."

4

"There's only ~~one~~ thing we can do down here, Duke."

3

"The order, men! Action! Fire!"

2

Yes, yes, yes! Jeremy—

1

I reached for my bank of firing buttons. All along the console, the men reached for their buttons. But I was too fast for them! I would be first!

0

THE BIG FLASH

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