

NUMBER

CRANK!

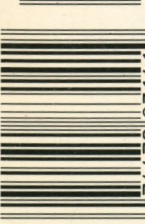
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CRANK!

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WE'RE BACK!

Hi! Welcome to the first issue of *Crank!* in nearly two years. It's been an adventurous time for me (note new address), but recent developments have allowed me to get *Crank!* back on track for regular publication. Not the least of which is that Tor Books will be publishing *The Best of Crank!* in September. Regular readers of *Crank!* will have seen those stories before, of course, but those new to these pages may find it a good way to get acquainted. See the ad in the back of the issue for more information.

I finally have a web site active again. It's at <http://home.earthlink.net/~cranked>. There's information about my publications, writer's guidelines, other projects I'm working on, and so on. As with all such things, it will be subject to continuous modification/improvement and updating of information. The new editorial e-mail address is cranked@earthlink.net. I plan to develop this web-space to do things that are beyond the usual purview of *Crank!*, such as reviews, letters, editorials, and so on. So by the time you see this "virtual *Crank!*" should be taking form.

You may have noticed a few changes to the appearance of *Crank!*, such as the new logo and layout. The cover also no longer has the words "science fiction and fantasy" under the masthead. There hasn't been any change in editorial standards, and I'm still committed to keeping the focus on the most imaginative fiction I can find, it's just that the words science fiction and fantasy don't seem quite adequate to describe the contents, and needlessly limited the potential readership. *Crank!* isn't quite a literary magazine in the traditional sense, either, so it seems best to just call it *Crank!* and leave it at that.

You might also notice that for the first time since 1993, *Crank!* sports cover art not by me! I picked out this art *before* *Crank!* went into limbo, so François has had to wait a while to see it on the newsstands. I think everyone will agree that this is a change for the better. It's been difficult to find art that matches *Crank!*'s particular aesthetic, but this is a feature I hope will continue.

Well, I'll stop blurbling at this point and let you get on to the stories. Enjoy!

– Bryan Cholfin

A IS FOR ABEL, B IS FOR BIRD

CAROL EMSHWILLER

I sing-song out, “Abel, Abel, under the table.” That’s where he is, all hunched up in a little ball, scared of me, I hope, except he looks calm. “Abel isn’t able. Abel isn’t able – to do anything. He can hum, though. I heard you. You can’t pretend you didn’t.”

That boy’s been treated too kind. Maybe he’ll talk pretty soon just so he can tell on me. But probably nobody would listen, especially not his mother. Maybe not much use in talking around here. Maybe that’s how it all began.

They say he never did talk. Not ever. With his big brother it’s different. He talked just like anybody else and then his daddy died and all of a sudden he didn’t anymore. So far, that is. With his big brother it makes some sense, but Abel is nine years younger and never did know his father. He’s just copycatting. But a child needs talk around, good or bad, it doesn’t matter which. At least *I* expect to do a lot of it.

They live far out. I had to hitch a ride with somebody going that way, but they wouldn’t take me on in so I had to walk from their front pasture. The ditches were overflowing and the pasture was too wet. Odd for the desert, but I’d heard about too much water coming down from the mountains this year because of too much snow up there. I thought I’d have to walk through mud, but the road was pretty clear. I could see the house and barns not so far off. You couldn’t miss them with those Lombardy

poplars around. I didn't have a lot to carry, but my books are heavy. I had to stop and rest a couple of times. The road is a desert sort of road, perfectly straight and no trees, so I kept hoping somebody would look out the window and see me and come and help me. Of course now that I've been here a day or so, I know better. I'm surprised the mother got out of bed to greet me at all. (Abel must have been hiding. I didn't meet him till supper. Stuck out here all by himself – I mean with just these three people, he can't have known many strangers.) The mom was all mussed up from having just got out of bed. She looked embarrassed. She said she didn't realize I was coming today, but now that I know her a little bit, I know she always forgets what day it is.

She had stains all down the front of her dress.

Those two brothers look alike except the big one is dark and Abel is a red head. Well, a pink head like their mom, except she's getting gray. (Just try to get her to say something. She will if she has to but she doesn't have to very often.) They thought school would make the big one talk, but they say he ran out the back door every time they put him in the front until they gave up. That's why they got me for Abel. They didn't even try school.

The ranch belongs to the big one even though he's only seventeen. I'm only two years older than he is. If I hadn't already said, I could pretend I was the same age as him.

I do like the big one. I like that he's quiet. And there's things I like about this place, too, though it's all tumble down. You can see how nice it could be with just a little help. I thought to get a can of paint myself or find nails and a hammer. They wouldn't notice if something got fixed anyway. The big sister and brother only do what's necessary for the stock, and the mom does even less than necessary. She does the house stuff. The chickens don't die and the Jersey gets milked.

(I thought that grown up sister was a man when I first came. She seems a lot more like a man than the big brother. I'll bet she doesn't even own a dress. Her clothes are all loose so she looks thick. She stamps around in men's boots. I heard her swearing. Her mother doesn't care. She gave me her room. I don't know where she sleeps now. I wouldn't be surprised if she wasn't sleeping out in the cow barn.)

They couldn't always have been this way – everything gone to pieces. They have a closed up parlor I sneaked into. There's a fancy organ in there. Mice ran out of it when I went into the room. I could see where they'd used the felt to make themselves a nest. Everything is nice in that room. The sofa has gold-colored upholstery. There's a lamp with beaded red fringe. You can tell they never use it. There's sandy dust all over. I'm going

to clean it up and teach in there. I need a place where things aren't falling apart. I won't ask permission, I'll just do it and see what happens. I haven't had a whole lot of elegance in my life. *So far*, that is.

Of course if you want to look out at something nice, there's always those snow-capped mountains. Some people might think I'm a little bit crazy because I talk to mountains when I'm off by myself. I started when I was about three years old. I always did it after I got whipped. I never talk to the highest, just the second or third highest. When I was little I thought the highest wouldn't bother listening to a little girl with little-girl problems. I still do it that way. I wonder if I could get Abel to talk to a mountain? I wonder if there's one he likes better than all the others?

Talk or no, I'm supposed to stuff some learning down him. They said to get to know each other first, but what's to know about somebody who never says a word? He can nod and he can hum. That's what's to know. I told him, "I ask a question, and I don't get some kind of head shake, then one pinch to the funny bone." That hurts and doesn't show. I demonstrated. That's how he ended up under the table.

I tell Abel I never knew my father either. I say, "That doesn't make me special. I was whipped regular as clock-work. Catch me not talking and they'd have put a stop to that soon enough. And *I* say, if you can hum, you can talk, and *I* say, if you think you've got everything just the way you want it here, well, not anymore you don't."

And then I go right down under the table myself and pull him out and give him another pinch to the elbow, but this time I have a good grip on him. He doesn't make a sound but I can tell I hurt him, but he doesn't look scared and I want him scared. I tell him I'm an old witch. I say I'm a hundred years old. I say, "Look at me. You can see the witch color in my eyes." I hold my face real close to his and he looks and then shuts his eyes after. (My eyes are just like anybody else's but he'll think they're not. You tell a little kid things like that and they just about always believe, and, even if they don't exactly believe, they half believe.)

I say, "You watch out when it gets to be the full moon."

So then I tie an old lead rope around his ankle and tie him to the organ and we get to work. "Pay attention to the old witch," I say. I keep my hand near his elbow. He knows why. At first I thought maybe he was stupid as well as mute and that nobody in the family would admit it, but he understands fast enough.

A is for apple, juicy and red.

B is for bird, so sweet to be heard...I change them.

A is for Abel who's ugly as sin.

B is for bee all ready to sting.

C is for crybaby, D is for dumb, B is for empty, F is for false, G is for *Gotcha!*

And I grab him. I'm the only one that laughs.

"Now draw me these letters. Or else you know what."

He does, and nicely, too. That's what I call one time learning, or maybe two time. A couple of pinches is all it takes. Most people don't know about those nerves. I guess I really *am* like a witch. But if anybody has witching eyes, it's Abel. His eyes are sort of the same color as his hair except darker, kind of orangy. I got a good look at them when I made him look at mine.

Next morning the big sister and brother go off to wherever it is they go out – for maybe two days (the sister says she can't say for sure how many) to bring the cows down from the mountains. She says sometimes the cows get where you wouldn't believe. After they leave, the mom cleans up the kitchen and then goes back to bed, which is her usual way. We'll have the whole place to ourselves, me and Abel. Except I can't find him. We have our biscuits with bacon grease and then he's gone. I search all over all kinds of cubby holes. Abel is small for his age (*if they've got his age right*) he'll fit into all sorts of little places. At least I get to know this place better. It really is a run down mess.

Well, I should have been looking up. I should have been thinking monkey. He makes me think of a monkey anyway. Little monkey face and those sad eyes. Orangutan kind of hair color. Those eyes of his are going to be a lot sadder after I get my hands on him. Maybe he thinks I'm scared to get up on the roof. I don't know how he did it, but I'm going to use the ladder. At least it's not the barn roof. That's three times as high. So we chase each other across the ridge and I win, except I tear my skirt. Abel probably tore his pants, but they already have so many tears you can't tell.

No one has ever told that child not to do *anything*. He's climbed everything he wanted to since – well probably *before* he could walk. I don't know how he survived to get to be nine.

This time I tie Abel to me and we go off for a long walk – out where nobody can see or hear us. We sit under a willow beside the stream. There used to be a dam here, but it's been broken through and never repaired. You can see where there was a nice pond. I sing the alphabet song three times. Then I tell Abel to move his lips along with mine so I can see, and that I don't have to hear anything. He does. Obedient little fellow. You'd think he'd refuse. What could I do if he did except the same old pinching?

I won't beat on him. I don't *ever* do *that* kind of thing. Anyway, I know my pinches hurt just as much. I know because how I learned about them was that they did it to me. But I didn't learn how right away. I had to practice. Even on myself. When I got good at it I got to be a scary person. I always denied it when the other kids tattled on me. Lots of times a teacher looked at somebody's wrist or elbow and said, No harm done that she could see. Teachers liked me because I worked so hard. I always got good grades. I always won the prizes. The teachers never believed anything anybody said against me. They thought the other children were jealous. They gave me good recommendations and then, of course, my grades and prizes proved it. I don't have a bad temper. I don't need one. Things usually work out my way. I'm always very calm. That scares people, too, which stands me in good stead.

It's good the brother and sister are gone because both at noon dinner and also at supper, I tie Abel to his chair and the mom doesn't even notice. She's a terrible cook. Dinner is left-over bacon (left over from when?) and left-over bisquits. Abel takes it like it's always this way. He hums as he eats and kicks the table leg. It's annoying but the mom doesn't say not to. I'll put a stop to that later. (He does this because the big brother isn't here. When he is, Abel eats sitting on his lap. I should put a stop to that, too. You can see why Abel wants to be just like him.)

That night we have beef stew. I think the big sister must have made that. At least the mom found the energy to warm it up. Or maybe it sat at the back of the stove all this time. We'll probably have it tomorrow and the next day, too. There's a lot of it.

That night I tie Abel to the bed, but, of course, he unties himself. He's gone *before* breakfast this time. I look all around again, up and down tops of roofs and way out, but I don't find him. (I do find some old dried up paint – which I throw out – and some hammers and nails.) Abel comes in on his own for noon dinner. I guess he got hungry without his breakfast – those bisquits and bacon grease.

I grab him and pinch him real good. Wrist, too. I know I hurt him but what I see in his eyes isn't fear – unfortunately. There's something calm there. Sort of as if, if he could or would talk, he'd say, "Oh." Just, "Oh," like, "So this is how it is."

I say, "Don't you want to learn anything? You want to be stupid all your life like you are right now? I'll bet your dead daddy wouldn't like that."

He looks away, like he's thinking about it.

“Your dead dad would wallop you good if he knew all what you do.”

But Abel shakes his head, no. Slowly, several times. I can almost hear him say his daddy wouldn’t.

“Yes he would. You never knew him. What do you know?”

But he shakes his head again. “Your mom doesn’t count. She’s too tired to whup you otherwise she’d have done it a long time ago.” He keeps on shaking his head.

“Be that as it may,” I say, “now you’ve gone and done it. I’m going to pull out all my witching. I’m making this big magic circle. You go outside it, you’ll die in excruciating agony. So: the front fence, the rear pasture, the near ditch at the end of the vegetable garden. That leaves you more room than you need.”

Then I pretend to cast a spell. I talk all sorts of nonsense. I make up a fancy sign that I scratch in some of the fence posts and on the ditch gates. Then I make a couple of tiny branding irons out of fence wire, and I make a little fire and when the brands are red-hot I brand Abel D for dumb (I guess he’ll learn the letter D fast enough) and then an arrow. I put these where they don’t show and where they’ll hurt the most, or, anyway, the second most hurtful spot: under his arm. “That arrow always points to me, even if it has to turn around to do it,” I say. “Watch it good and you’ll see.” On myself – on the back of my hand right where he, and everybody, can see it, I burn another arrow. I tell him when he stops being dumb I’ll change his D to a secret lucky sign. But I tell him I don’t expect he’ll ever get that far along. I tell him the arrow means I’ll always be able to catch him, so I don’t have to bother tying him up anymore.

So after we finish with all this I decide I’ll not go on with the alphabet right now. I have a big animal book with hand colored pictures and animal information. I sit Abel down next to me and read to him out of it, and pretty soon he’s really listening. Tigers and elephants and ostriches, and, by the way he looks and listens, I don’t think he’s ever heard of any of them, even elephants. I think: now I’ve got you, but I give him a couple of pinches to show him that just because he’s behaving himself doesn’t mean I’ll stop doing it.

They have quite a few books here, but all from a long time ago. (The home medical advisor says things you wouldn’t believe. And half the book, maybe more, is taken up with sick horses and hoof problems.) That book and the government bulletins on farming might make Abel pay attention, too, so I read to him about poison weeds that kill horses or make cows have two-headed calves. There’s even a picture. I tell him he could

read all this himself if he learned how. “Starting with the alphabet,” I say.

Just as I figured, we have that same stew again for supper.

In spite of all that pretend witching, the next morning Abel is gone again, and I find him outside my magic circle. Not only that, I find a funny little squiggly sign right under all my witch signs. I should have made a bigger brand on him that would have hurt more, like four arrows in all four directions, or five. Maybe witches have five directions. Or most likely seven.

He isn’t hard to find this time. You can practically see him from the house even though he’s far off. I just went to say hello to the mountains as I like to do first thing, and I see him out past the horse field. At first I think he’s a vulture. He’s higher up in a tree than I could ever go up in the tiny branches at the top. When I get out there, I sit down under the tree to think what to do next. I tell him his hands will get stiff as a corpse and he’ll come down in a big crash and break his neck and never walk again let alone climb anything. “You’d better come down now while your hands still work.”

He’s swaying back and forth like there’s a hurricane up there. He’s doing that on purpose. I’ll be blamed if anything happens and it looks as if something will. That child is fearless. “You can’t scare me,” I say, “I’ll just witch you down.” Not that I’ve had much luck with witching so far.

So I pretend to weave another spell. He’s just looking down at me with that, “Oh,” kind of look, so I get louder and I start dancing around. I keep saying, “Sink Down,” and “Low” and “Descent,” between all the gobblede-gook. I say, “Gravity...gravity will get you,” though I’m pretty sure Abel hasn’t ever heard of that and won’t until I tell him about it.

But all of a sudden Abel starts to make a terrible racket, shrieking and howling and his voice is like none I’ve ever heard. It wobbles and wavers and goes on and off by itself. It’s scary. I suppose I should be happy to know he can make any sort of sound at all. If anybody is a witch it has to be Abel. But then he stops the racket and lets go of those little top-of-the-tree branches and comes crashing...or starts to...but then he grabs again and stops himself. It’s like magic. (He’s so light and little. I wonder if the others have noticed how thin he is?) He squats there on a bigger branch like a bird ready to take off.

I say again, “You can’t fly, you know,” but I say it because he looks so much as if he can. “I won’t ever, ever pinch you anymore.” But why should he believe anything I say? “I don’t want you to hurt yourself. I like you. You’re the nicest person I ever did teach.” It’s true, too, he is, though maybe it’s just that he keeps quiet. “I know you wonder why I’ve been

hurting you. I just did that to make you talk.” Of course I didn’t. I did that to everybody I ever taught and practically everybody I got next to. I’m thinking how I hardly ever tell the truth. “It’s *true*,” I say. “Look. This proves it.”

There’s a nest of beavertail cactuses a ways from the tree. I go over and put both my arms right in the middle of them. I don’t feel the pain. But then I realize that if I try to catch him in case he falls, my arms will prick him as if he fell right in the cactuses. Still, I might save him. “I promise I’ll never hurt you again,” I say, “cross my heart.” Except what will I do to make him learn – or do *anything*? I know he hates me. I wanted him to.

“You’re not dumb. I’m sorry I said that and I’m sorry about the D I put on you. I’ll change it.”

But he’s going to jump. I don’t know how I know. His face is as impassive as it always is. He hasn’t moved. He still squats on his branch, balanced, not even hanging on to anything. Then he spreads his arms like wings and drops straight down – into mine – my prickly ones. Safe. “See,” I say, “I knew you couldn’t fly.”

He looks up at me with his witchy eyes – again as if to say, “Oh, so this is how it is.” And then I start to cry which I never do, and my prickles start to hurt, and he looks as if his prickles, that he got from my arms, hurt, too, but he doesn’t cry.

Well, their mom finally bestirs herself enough to help us get the pricklers out, except there’s no way we can get them all. She puts a poltice on the rest, made out of Jimson weed and turpentine and lard and tobacco and goodness knows what all else. She gives us hot wine and puts us to bed. She doesn’t ask how it happened. She really seems to care about Abel. I thought she didn’t. And she treats me kindly. Everybody here is kind. That is, when they remember you exist. They don’t even remember Abel.

The big sister and brother come home pretty soon. Abel is asleep from the wine and I’m kind of groggy. The big sister asks how it happened, but I pretend to be too groggy to talk about it. As I lie there, still half drunk, I think how I like that Abel is, as they say, a clean slate, and that nobody but me will tell him anything – gravity and elephants – the whole world, mine to give. And then I get a real good idea of what to do with him. There’s this little bitty circus that comes around to all the little towns. It’s only one ring, but how many rings can you watch at the same time? We could go. They have plenty of money, they just don’t use it for anything but cows.

I tell the big sister how much Abel likes my animal book. I say Abel should go to some other places and that, as soon as our prickles are better,

I can find out about where the circus is. I say we should stay away maybe a week and let Abel get a good look at the world.

The big sister likes this idea a lot. She must trust me. But the mom objects. I hadn't thought she would. Maybe she saw more of the things I did than I realized. And she does kind of cling to Abel. I didn't see that at first. It isn't noticeable until you get to know her some, but the big sister convinces her. She says, "Talk or no, it'll be good for Abel to leave the ranch." (First chance I get I'll burn a smear over those brands I put on him. I'll leave mine, though. I like it.) When we're out there by ourselves, I'll work on Abel really hard. He won't get away with anything, like I won't let him hum while we're eating. And he won't get away from me. I'll bring along the lead rope.

I might get him a harmonica. I'm surprised nobody thought of that before, the way he hums all the time. Except they don't think of anything. That child doesn't own one single thing. Well, there's his pumpkin patch that he waters pail by pail, dipper by dipper, and he has a couple of railroad spikes. The railroad goes right through here. They stop the train and pick you up in the middle of nowhere, if you let them know ahead. That's how we'll go after we get well enough and after I find out where that circus is.

The mother brings out some old clothes from when the big brother was Abel's size. I guess without this trip nobody would have thought to get them out until Abel couldn't get his backside into his pants, which is just about right now. The so-called "new" clothes are pretty worn out, too, except for a nice mannish jacket they must have used for dress-up only. The minute Abel sees it, he lights up all over. The big sister says it's just to be for good but Abel wants to put it on right away and she lets him. Like I said, he's treated much too kind. Why should he talk when he gets what he wants anyway, with just a gesture?

"Don't you dare climb anything with that on." I whisper it in his ear when I help him into it.

So Abel goes off just walking around as if to show the jacket off to the pigs and chickens and meadowlarks. The jacket's a lot too big. He doesn't know how funny he looks in it. The mother watches him walk away. She's frowning at him. I never know what her expressions mean (though mostly she doesn't have any expression at all, which is just like Abel). But then she gives me money to have Abel's picture taken and she says she'll give him some money and I should let him spend it on anything he wants, even if it's silly. Well, am I supposed to be the teacher or not? I don't say that though.

I have a hard time keeping Abel from bringing his railroad spikes along to town. I keep taking them out of his box and he keeps putting them back in until finally I tie up his box with plenty of knots and put it in my room. He's the one who has to carry it, and I don't want a worn out boy on my hands, though I don't think it would be so easy to wear out Abel.

It's at the circus that I lose him. I just turn around and he's not there. I didn't have him tied to me. Who would need to be tied up at the circus? is what I thought. He was stuffed with red candy and red pop – red was the only kind of anything he wanted. At the hotel he even finished off his beets. First thing, he bought himself a man's tie, but neither of us knows how to tie it properly. Abel looked like he was going to cry when I couldn't do it. That's the first I saw him at all even close to tears. He didn't even cry when I branded him. I pinched him good and that sobered him up. Maybe that's what decided him to run away again. He shouldn't be hard to find though. I could tell the police – if it comes to that: funny colored hair; too-big jacket that he won't take off no matter how hot it gets; flopped over, sideways tie that he won't take off either. But I'm not going to tell anybody quite yet. I'll try to find him myself.

I think of all the things he liked best: fire eater, tallest man in the word. (The fat woman scared him. He shut his eyes. He shut his eyes for the two-headed calf, too. I couldn't make him look, even with a pinch. Those things don't bother me. I can stand anything that's real and the truth.) He liked the snake charmer. *There's* something that wasn't true. I could see right away that snake wasn't even poisonous. I told Abel but he didn't seem to care. "S is for ssssssnake," I said, "and S looks like a snake, too." I wrote that down for him, S and SNAKE. "Pay attention. This whole thing isn't just for fun, you know. I don't care anything about fun."

I wondered if he'd gone back to the hotel? He liked looking out the window, down where people passed by all the time.

So after checking the side shows I start back to the hotel and I find Abel first thing, sooner than I thought, at the edge of the field where the circus is. He's getting pestered by a bunch of boys. He must hardly know what another boy his age is like. They keep pushing him and every time they do he falls over backwards with that, "Oh," look of his and then he gets up and gets pushed over again. You'd think he'd learn not to get up.

I give my special yell. It's a really crazy yell. It's saved me lots of times. I suppose the circus people wonder what sort of animal is out here. Those boys run off right away and then I hear this funny voice saying, "Whiskey, whiskey." It's a crow. That's what Abel bought with the rest of his money;

that, and two more bottles of red pop (I checked his pockets, there's only four pennies left). What will his mom think? It's not my fault, it's *hers* for letting him buy anything he wanted. Should I try to sell it back? Or get rid of it some way? Abel can't tell on me at least. I can do anything I want to, as when have I ever not?

It's a scraggly looking bird. I don't know why he would want it – except it's as run-down as everything on the ranch but the horses and the cows.

“Abel, this crow won't talk for you. It has no sense except its normal crow sense – though maybe not even that, being cooped up like it is. I'll bet it only has five or six words at the most. Of course that's a lot more than you have. Your dead daddy wouldn't like this at all. He wants you to do the talking. He'd whup you good if he saw you with this dumb bird.

The crow says, “Hello, hello, boy. Whiskey, whiskey.” It hops and flutters in a lopsided way because of its clipped wing. “Tommy wants whiskey. Good boy.”

“And this crow can't fly any more than you can. Are you aware of that?”

What will they think if, “Tommy wants whiskey,” are Abel's first words? Or maybe only words ever? But maybe I can use this crow some way. Talk to a mountain? Talk to a crow?

We walk down a ways and find a bench. We sit and Abel drinks his cherry pop and I drink his strawberry pop. He doesn't seem to mind.

“They won't let you take this crow into the hotel, and, anyway, it probably has lice and God knows what else.” The crow has already shat all over the top of the bench.

“Look at that,” I say. “You want that all over your bed? But maybe if you talk to it – maybe then, I'll find a way to get it up to our room secretly.” (Just try to keep something yelling, “Whiskey, whiskey, whiskey,” secret.) “I'll do the best I can. Give it a name and call it that out loud just once and I'll write it down for you.” So I write ABEL and put it on him and MARY CATHERINE and put it on myself. It's not the first time I've done that for him. Abel takes the ABEL and puts it on the crow's perch.

“You mean you're naming the crow Abel?” And he nods yes. “You can't do that. We'll get you all mixed up.”

That's the first I've seen him laugh. I didn't think he could. Or would ever want to, especially not in front of me.

“All right then, Abel Tiny and Abel Teeny Weeny. So if you want me to go to all the trouble and risk-of-my-neck trying to get Abel Teeny Weeny into the hotel room with us, you have to say something. I don't care what. Say, Oh, or, Boo, or, elephant, for heaven's sake.”

He shakes his head, no.

“Well say, no, then. Just no. That’s a good handy word. You can get pretty far with just that.”

But it isn’t as if I don’t know he won’t. It’s not going to happen out of the blue like that. If I’m going to win every battle, I’d better make sure every battle is one I can win.

“All right, we’ll write things instead. We’ll work till supper time and then we’ll have a picnic here on the bench so we won’t have to worry about getting the crow into the hotel – ham if you like – and I won’t have to be embarrassed about your head on the table and all that humming. And then we’ll go to the evening circus. You can stay up as long as you like.” Nobody has ever told that child to go to bed anyway, but I think it’s a good idea for me to treat him as if he’d been brought up like any other boy. Give him some idea of the way normal people are.

(At the hotel Abel and I are in the same room. They put in a folding army cot for Abel but I think he would just as happily sleep on the floor. And he hasn’t got one tiny bit of modesty. He’s like a wild animal. Traipses around naked as though it was the most natural thing. Nobody has thought to teach him the rudiments of anything at all. I tell him we don’t do that. That he should keep his pants on except when with men and boys. “Women don’t like to see that,” I say. Actually I kind of like him jumping around naked, but I’m supposed to be the teacher. And I want to shock him. People learn faster if you shock them and the learning sticks better. Learning has to hurt some. That’s my theory.)

I make Abel write elephant and snake and crow and horse twenty times each. All by himself he draws the crow and writes ABEL underneath it. Then we go back to the circus, crow and all. The crow came with a black cover so we cover him up. I hook the lead rope to Abel’s belt under his jacket and tie him to this scarf kind of thing I wear around my waist. People will notice anyway. Abel is such a noticeable boy. He looks like a clown himself. His hair color doesn’t even look real and, no matter how much plaster his hair down, two minutes later it sticks straight up. (One of these days I’m going to cut most of it off.) So we’ll get noticed anyway, and, after getting a good look at Abel, people are sure to see the lead rope.

But I must have tied a bad knot, and then I was watching the acrobats, which are my favorites, and after them the clown acrobats come which are just as good, and maybe are the same people, and suddenly there’s Abel. Above them, up by the top of the tent, hanging on to some sort of tent rope. He’s got the crow on it’s perch in one hand. The lead rope is dangling out from under his jacket like a long, white tail. How did he climb up

there with only one hand?

At the same time I see him, everybody else does. They think he's part of the clown act. They laugh and clap. Now he's up there with no hands at all, just his legs wrapped around the rope, and everybody claps all the more. He's untying the crow. There's two clown acrobats going up after him.

He lets the crow go. For a minute it looks as if even the crow thinks – or hopes – it can fly, clipped wings or not. It flaps like crazy, but it drops, as I knew it would – flaps just enough to break its fall some and ends up in the sawdust, hopping and flopping.

I feel my heart beating so hard I think I might die. I want to yell out for Abel to climb down and that he should use both hands, for heaven's sake, but everybody's making too much noise. (I hope he doesn't have any secret railroad spikes hidden in his pockets.) I see the clowns are talking to him and I see Abel nodding yes and no. Now the first clown is almost up to him and grabs the dangling lead rope. As if it was planned, Abel lets go right then. There he dangles, his belt up under his arms. I hope it holds. The crowd loves it. It's the funniest act of any. I laugh, too, but mostly because Abel is safe – so far. I laugh and laugh, but I feel all wobbly. Lots of people are standing up, but I don't think I can. And then things quiet down a bit and I hear, clear as day...I hear Abel say, "Caw." And then again, and lots of times. At least it's not whiskey. People laugh like anything.

Another clown down on the ground has picked up the crow and is cawing out to Abel, and they have this crow conversation while they're bringing Abel down, and then all three clowns are in it. Then he's down again, they take him in back behind the bleachers.

So I go back behind the bleachers, too. My legs are like...I hardly know what. And the first thing Abel sees me back there, he says "Caw," right at me. He's got this look in his eyes as if: You wanted a word? So you got one.

The clown is still cawing out at Abel and Abel is cawing back. You can see he loves doing it. His voice sounds funny. As if he really doesn't know how to use it. Kind of an animal voice. More like a real crow than it ought to be. It worries me about whether he can manage other words, though. Caw doesn't take a lot of moving your mouth around. I wonder if he could say any other word, especially if it wasn't an, ah, word?

"Are you his mother?"

"Certainly not." (How could anybody think that?)

I can feel myself blushing. I hate when I do that. I don't even know why I'm doing it. Why would I blush in front of three ridiculous clowns with

false noses? Of course they're acrobats. And they are the same ones that did the show just before, because one slips off his clown suit and under it there's the skin-tight acrobat suit. When he does that, I blush again just when I thought it was over. And I step on Abel's dangling lead rope and almost pull him down and trip myself up, too. I'm wishing I'd never heard of him and that tumble-down ranch and I'm ashamed of the lead rope. "He keeps climbing things," I say, and they say they noticed that. And then they say, "This is our crow, you know. Somebody stole it."

"He didn't do that. He used up all his money on it. Somebody else must have stolen it and sold it to him." (They probably don't believe me.) "But he'll give it back anyway."

Abel looks like he really will cry. He tries to hold it in, but this time he can't. Tears and he's actually making a sound – a little animal sound. One of the clowns takes out a bandana – three times as big as usual – and wipes them up, but they keep on coming.

"This is a special crow," one of the clowns says. "He has a little cap and jacket. His tongue's been clipped so he can talk. He can turn summersaults."

So the long and the short of it is, I get rid of the crow which I never wanted to be bothered with anyway. I grab the lead rope and we sneak out the back way. I make Abel take off his jacket and tie so nobody will recognize us, but they probably will anyway.

"If you cared so much about that crow, why did you let it go free, anyway?"

But he just goes on making that little sound. Makes me think of a kitten.

"Well, now you've gone and done it. You're never going to go see a circus again as long as you live and that's that." (At least it's a sound. I figure any sound at all is good practice for him.) "And caw is not a good word. Find a better one or we're going home on the next train."

But all this cawing. We can't go home with that. What if they say, "Pass the stew," and Abel says, "Caw?" What if they pick us up at the train tracks and they ask us, did we have a good time? and Abel says, "Caw?" I have to stop him, and we have to stay here until I do.

There's still plenty of light since it's hardly eight o'clock, so I get a good hold on Abel's lead rope and start us up along the creek that runs through town. I'm thinking to go a long ways up to be out of ear shot just in case Abel makes a lot of noise. He's still making that little mewling sound every time he takes a breath. He's just pretending to cry. I know all about nine

year olds. I tell him, "Life is full of disappointments and you have to get used to it and the sooner the better. *You* disappoint me all the time. Here you have a real man's tie and a real man's jacket, not to mention getting to go to the circus. What more do you want? What do you think life is all about anyway? And me? What do you think my life is like, having to watch out for you all the time?"

Of course he just keeps making that sound.

We keep on climbing...up through the aspen and willows that line the creek.

And I start thinking about how Abel doesn't have any sort of animal of his own and that he needs one. There are plenty out there at the ranch but I don't think any of them are Abel's. (A pumpkin patch just isn't the same.) Seems as if nobody even thought to get him a horse and let him go out and help push cows. They forget how old he is like they forget everything else about him.

"You're not nine years old. You're a little dwarf and you don't even know it yourself. You're small so they think you must still be a child. On the other hand, if you really *are* a child, you can't be nine. More like seven."

Abel doesn't pay me any attention that I can tell. He's up ahead as far as the lead rope allows. If I pulled on it I could pull him down real easy.

"You ought to have a horse you know. I don't know why you don't except they forgot to give you one. And you could get your own crow. Climb up and get yourself a chick and train it from the start. You could climb up no matter how high it was."

That makes him look back at me for a second, but I can't tell what he's thinking. I do pull on the rope just to see what will happen and no great harm done but a little dirt on his so-called "new" pants.

I'm thinking when we're well out of ear shot I'll give him what-for so he'll never dare say caw again as long as he lives, but as we walk, I begin to realize that the more I hurt him, the more he'll get even with me. He always finds a way. He'll say caw exactly the time it'll be the worst for me, so I decide we'll just go up here for a walk and I'll be nice to him. Except I *have* been nice. Just about as nice as anybody could be. Has anybody else bothered to take him to the circus?

I pull on the rope again and I sit us down right then and there. (If I'm not going to give him what-for, we don't need to be far off.) I say, does he realize not one single person but me has bothered doing anything for him at all? "And am I to blame that they took back your crow? If you hadn't gone off climbing where you weren't supposed to, you'd have it still, so

that's your own fault. That should teach you something, though I don't suppose it will. What have you learned through all this? Anything at all?"

I pinch him good even though I've decided not to anymore. Well, this will be the last time.

"Caw," I say. "Hear what that's like? Caw, caw, caw, and caw. What if that was all I would say?"

He's looking that look – that: Oh, so-this-is-the-way-it-is look. His witchy eyes right into mine.

"Caw," I say. It comes out all by itself. "You're driving me caw."

Why does he just sit and stare like that? I want to say, let me go, because all of a sudden it doesn't seem as if he's tied to me, but that I'm tied to him.

I get up and start back down. I'm in front this time. I don't want to see those orangy eyes of his. I limp. I flutter. I make sure not to try to say anything for fear it will be caw.

GALACTIC BUSINESS

ELIOT FINTUSHEL

Arnby's the name. I don't wear no cologne. You wanna catch my left upside your noggin, call me a *transcat's tail*. My last client – Murder One – turned out to be a *transcategorical*: her scalp was a part of the Horsehead Nebula, her feet were the square root of two, her cuticle was Supernova 1987A, her left breast was from April 7 to July 8th of the year 2297 – *and so forth*. The sockdolager? I was her tail. When she wagged, I wiggled.

I am not partial to this sort of action. Nights, if the transcat I was part of happened to feel restless, I'd wave and shimmy between the sheets. I could be cross-examining some skank, left-handed protein hustler from the asteroid belt, and I'd start to wag. My clients dwindled. I drank. I squashed a few Vandals.

Then I took up causes. Anything to forget. Boycott clockwhammers. Save the vorkils. Earth for Earthlings. You name it. When the Rev and his Kelloggites hit the inner planets with their gospel of sexual purity, I guess I was ripe for conversion. Protect The Unconceived? Every Spermatozoan Is A Potential Person? I was the Rev's man, one hundred percent.

That's how I found myself in a half-second slot at the Beulah County chrono-clinker. The John Laws had busted our picket at the Boy Scout camp in the Sea of Tranquility. Those little boys have got an orgone box up there in which they do unspeakable things to themselves – in a circle. I never thought the ultravioletes would have the cajones to buck a statute

maven like yours truly, but here I was, squished to a timewall, eyeballing my own fanny.

Was I surprised when the Rev himself showed up to pay my bail? I just managed to keep my Adam's apple inside my collar. I knew it couldn't be my cologne.

He was a pale leptosome in the Kelloggite flat black slicker, just like the posters and vidoxes. "Mr. Arnby?"

"Call me Chuck, Rev. You gonna spring me from this joint?"

"Sure, Chuck. I think you can help me in a special way." The Rev jerked his head into the next minute and summoned the turnkey. "You! Here! Now!" We were out of there a couple of seconds before they'd locked me in. The Rev's chauffeur let me into his cushy chrono-coupe. I hesitated just a second, trying to remember whether or not it was *ca se fait* to tip him.

No.

The Rev skipped us about three days in that chrome and platinum baby with the engine in the pluperfect ("where it *should* be") and we were reclining in adjoining deck chairs on a Kelloggite sloop in synchronous orbit over what used to be the Pacific. Below, terpene and sulfur dioxide clouds, big nimbi, were swirling and massing like dirty bath water at the plug hole.

"Give me the lowdown, Rev!" I said. "You know I'm your man one hundred percent."

"Have you ever heard of SN 1987A?"

"No, I haven't, but if it's some kind of awful position those tropicals do, I'll be on the picket line tomorrow."

"It's a supernova, Arnby."

"I knew that."

"Yes. Sanduleak. Little star in the Magellanics. It was a blue supergiant when it exploded a couple of hundred thousand years ago, Arnby – fifty or sixty thousand parsecs from here. Light reached Earth in 1987. Suck a Vandal?"

"No thanks. I'm giving them up."

"Good for *you!*" He peeled both packs, warmed them up in his hands as he spoke, then squashed them all over his mouth, staining the deep cleft in his chin violet. It set me craving, I can tell you, but I hung tight. He lapped and sucked it all in. Then he took a deep, happy breath and commenced to lean over me, snoot to snoot, tipping his chaise longue *en point*. "What I'm about to tell you is highly sensitive, Arnby."

"I'm a highly sensitive guy."

“Right. You’re a highly dead guy if any of this leaks out. And so am I.”

“Trust me.”

“Yes. SN 1987A was not just an exploding star. It was – is – a last ditch effort by the Guardians of our galactic group to save the Milky Way from moral annihilation.”

Before I could fully drop my jaw, the Rev’s chauffeur floored the accelerator, and we blurred over to a Stone Age cavern. “We’ll have more privacy here,” said the Rev.

I shook my head to reconfigure the contents and looked around. There were casks of Martian zoot-rot arranged by century in a cabinet carved into the living rock. On the wall above it was a mural of some beefy quadruped bristling with arrows; it was still wet. The only light came from a row of torches dipped in meat drippings. Homey.

We were sitting across from each other at a round, glass table supported by a pretty Venusian slave girl, squatting as if to pee. She was naked as a full moon. The table was decked with sweets and aromatics, somewhat occulting the view. However, I was able to take advantage of our conversation to expressively tilt my head now and then; the resulting librations enabled me to see the Venusian’s more fetching qualities refracted through the table top.

I finished dropping my jaw. “Save the galactic group, huh? You don’t say!”

“My entire public life, Arnby, my ministry, this candidacy, the many campaigns – the Guardians have guided me in all of it.”

I nodded. I had no idea what he was talking about. It didn’t matter. suddenly we were over Callisto, the eighth moon of Jupiter, in a small, rotating space station the Rev used for whistle stops. The walls were stuffed, upholstered naugahyde – banana yellow, my fave. The Venusian girl was still with us; she was pouring me a tumbler of the zoot-rot, a hella good year.

“Forgive the change of venue, counselor. Secrecy is essential. We mustn’t be caught at this. We mustn’t be seen.

“Who by?”

“I’ll get to that. The main thing you have to know, Chuck, is that we are at a moment of crisis. Hundreds of millennia of sacrifice and planning are about to spill into a hanky. The Guardians arranged the Sanduleak explosion in anticipation of the current situation.”

“Current situation?”

“Moral decay. Depravity.” I had to squint. Old Sol was just coming into view in the huge quartz window behind the Rev. “People think what hap-

pens in the closet doesn't count, but it does, Chuck. There are beings who *feed* off it, winking and licking their cosmic lips, gorging themselves on it, pulsing in rhythm..."

"Start with a 'c'?" I guessed. "The Cepheids? Like the ones in the Small Magellanic Cloud?"

"Exactly." He shot a glance at the Venusian girl, and she decanted a steam blast of zoot-rot into my tumbler. "The Magellanic Clouds! A mass of malevolent stars anchoring our galaxy by the Magellanic Stream – a flow of non-ionized hydrogen gas, a black tide across two hundred thousand light-years! When the Cephean puppet masters feel like jerking us around, that's the strings. That's their path of influence. They feed off our vital energy, Arnby! And do you know what keeps them from flying off, dissipating into endless space, leaving us alone?"

"Gravity?"

"No, Chuck. Think again. I'll give you a hint: it has nothing to do with dark matter."

I made a loose fist, positioned it palm upward a hand's span below my navel, and I moved it rhythmically toward and away from my groin the universal sign.

"Exactly." The Rev looked around nervously. The Venusian inclined her head forward to see if something new was being required of her, but that wasn't it. "Let's get out of here. The walls have psi."

We were huddled in a bathyscaph in shallow tropical waters, and I longed for a change of underwear. Octopi, rainbow fish, and sluggish creatures in glittering spiral shells danced through sun-dappled coral. The chair I sat in, like a burnished throne, was the Venusian girl's buttocks. The Rev was wearing a jock strap and a doo-rag. My drink was half-empty.

"Good. It's about eight hundred years ago. They won't think to look here. They peep everywhere, Chuck, and everywhen, but there are still some places .

"Look," – waxing intimate, leaning in toward me at butt-horn distance "it is the specific vibration accompanying solitary *rhythmic friction*, either vulvar or penile, that keeps the Magellanic Cepheids choking us. Their very existence, and that of the Magellanic Stream that binds our galaxy to theirs is sensitively dependent on *IT*. The Big M sustains them."

Across his lean face passed a sneer of the sort that I would give half my frontal lobe to be able to pull off in the courtroom. "It's *them* pumping in the rhythm for your friction, like oil to a refinery."

"Oh, yes. By the way, this is the best zoot-rot I've ever had. Do you have

a different chair, though?" She kept shifting her balance under me, and I was afraid of embarrassing myself before the Rev.

"The Guardians were willing to sacrifice anything in order to save us, the Milky Way, you and me, Arnby. They penetrated deep into the Magellanics to plant the Sanduleak supernova – you can't imagine the expense involved in stellarportation. The idea was to interrupt the, er, frictional activities we have been discussing, but something stopped it."

"What something?" *Think about interstellar distances.*

"Law, Chuck, intergalactic law."

"Well, that's it then. We can't change *that*." *Never mind the dorsal friction, think numbers, lines, paragraphs, sections...* "Believe you me, Rev, I've been around that block a few times. So happens, I was the shark who represented the outer planets in the thermal inertia squabble of '047."

"You?"

"Well, a pal of mine. Never a cleaner case of unjust market manipulation, and he couldn't get to base one." *I'm not here. I'm somewhere else, somewhere boring and cold.*

"Look, Chuck, I *know* you can do this! The Cepheans over in the Magellanics have stacked the legislature since before nucleosynthesis. Secret alliances, back room deals, you name it! Chuck," – his beefy hand on my shoulder increasing, through its pressure, the shared surface area of my gluteus maximus and that of my Venusian chaise, an unwelcome development – "we need you! You are an Anti-frictive *and* a damned good lawyer. You could plead our case before the Ylemic Congress. Am I wrong, Chuck?"

"You're right, Rev!" She was inching down on knees and elbows, lowering me unsteadily backwards.

"The rest of the light from SN 1987A, and the neutrinos and other exploded material, have all been blocked by bogus legal maneuvers from reaching the Milky Way. All that energy and matter carry codes designed to interdict the M-impulse. We've got to have it released. We've got to have the absorbing media abolished."

"I'm your man, I think."

"Get off my slave girl, Arnby."

"Yes, sir."

The Rev let me off too early – chronoburetor problems, space-time mixture a little lean – and I landed in the clinker again a couple hours before his arrival. My cell mate was snoozing on his plank, rolled up in a ratty blanket in foetal position, facing the wall. Who could blame him? As Mof

Tutman sang, when he found himself in the lockup on that time draft up from 1938:

Them chrono-pokies am a loopy locus.
Make you loco with they hokey-pocus.

But when I looked a little closer, I noticed that the palpitations under his covers were not the beating of his heart. *Accelerando*. *Crescendo*. Shifting and moaning.

“Cool down, Jack,” I says, “you may not know it, but there is *galactic business* at stake here.” No response. “Hey! Cut it out.” Sighing and squeaking. “Did you hear me?”

So I pull off the blanket, and there’s the Venusian girl, covered with sweat and twisted like a braided egg loaf. For the second time that day, my jaw drops – this time I get to complete the maneuver in the same locale.

“Galactic business, huh, white man? You don’t know the half of it.”

The Venusian and I lock weepers. That Louise Brooks hair gift-wrapping her dimples! The green eyeliner only slightly smeared! The lips so full they seem to be pouting, even in repose! The saucy jutting chin, the breasts like cumuli! The groove of her belly, the tuck of her hips! I distend. I perspire. I wear no cologne.

“You’re the Rev’s slave girl! What are you doing here?”

“The Rev’s ‘Guardians’ are *Pop Twoers*, Earth scum!” She bellies to my belly and delivers a little I-mean-business shove to the chest area. “So happens, Arnby, that the presence of life in the Milky Way Galaxy is a cause of concern to them. It increases the psionic radiance acting on the Population Two stars, a noose of ancient stars tightening around our galaxy, and *that, counselor*, affects the preparation of certain traditional confections – certain *treats* enjoyed by the Pop Twoers during their pupal phase.

“Do you suck Vandals, Arnby?”

“I’m trying to.... Wait a minute! Are you saying that the Guardians, the Rev’s sponsors, want to end life in our galaxy, so they can suck their Vandals?”

“That’s about the size of it, Arnby. And stick on this: you’re being used. The Rev’s crowd wanted you in with them because of your *transcat connection*, not just your Bulova goddam legal mind.”

(*Obiter dicta*. “Transcat connection,” huh? So she knew about my lifer client, the *transcategorical* who was up the river for Murder One. Did the Venusian know that *I* was the transcat’s tail? What kind of connection did

the Venusian know about, her and her titular boss, the Rev? And did they realize what I was thinking inside this parenthesis?)

I'd been about to give her one of my business cards. I shoved it back into my wallet. Instead, I gave her one of my primo barrister scowls, designed to shake the truth out of a giant redwood. (Those babies cover acreage these days.) She didn't shake. She just stood there in her funky, post-orgasmic cool, inclining her cranium toward the wispy time currents sizzling off the grate of our chrono-cell. They stank of inmates, both future and past, including Mofo Tutman, who used to sing:

Dames lie.

"I'm a Cephean, Arnby, a Magellanic. I'm the girl your Rev warned you about. But we're trying to save your galacto-centric little asses. For the time being, we've managed to counter the Sanduleak blast. If not for us pumping you up (and you pumping what you pump *back*) that blast would interdict your *rhythmic friction*, disconnecting you from the Magellanic Clouds and exposing the Milky Way to the bald power of the Pop Twoers, who would snuff you out for their frigging Vandals.

"You, Arnby, are part of the transcat of which Sanduleak is also a part. We know that. *They* know that. Do I have to draw you a picture?"

"They want to bypass your blockade of the 'Protection Blast' through *me!*"

"Give the man a pipe of Venusian fecals!" she laughed.

For the first time, as she raised her arms in mock triumph, her armpits were visible, hairless and slick as a canopied evening in Tuscany – and without offensive odor. The tendons defining them tugged up her perfect, small breasts, so that the nipples stared straight at me. And part of me, willy nilly, was staring straight back.

Dream Sequence

Mind you, this is all circumstantial. I did not, *in punto factorum*, slide back in time to chrono-snoop on the Rev's activities. However, knowing what I now know, *ex post facto*, I can surmise that at the moment of this diminutive intercourse betwixt me and the Cephean Party of the Second Part, the bum was luxuriating on one of his personal asteroids, chitchatting with a chauffeur.

(Excuse me while I download my creative writing faculty – Cerebral Data Insert #2333-cw – into active recall.... There.)

"Beauregard," says the Rev, half through those black hole nostrils caked

with Xesan snuff, “Beauregard, my good man, tighten up that withe round my thigh a notch, would you? Hie up those leathers, and another go-round of the truncheon, ey, love? Delicious! Delicious! By the by where’s that Venusian whore I bought from the Proximans last month...? Oh, never mind! Just cap me before I blow. I don’t want to feed vibes to the Magellanics. Pity!”

“Sire, Lord, Your Majesty, Most Awful Candidate Magnifipotens, and Minister Non-Plus-Ultra of the Anti-Sexualites, not to mention Loyal Spy Plenipotentiary and Secret Ambassador sans Portfolio to the Too-Terrible-To-Be-Even-Alluded-To-or-Begun-To-Be-Thought-Of Master Beings of the Globular Clusteroids of Population Two...”

“Yeah?”

“Isn’t it so that only those vibrations produced by solitary vice will help the Magellanics – vile Cephean bumlickers – and prevent our masters’ ungluing the Milky Way?”

“Yes, dodo, only solitary. Conjunctions of any sort mutually damp. In the words of Saint Kellogg:

Only lonely self-abuse
Will produce
The hateful juice.

“That is, the hateful *wavelength*, of course. However, I am taking no chances, since you, Beauregard, dodo, my lowly ancillary, are so close to being non-existent, after all. There, that’s it! Cap it now. Ah! Ah!”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

I imagine the Rev as being very hairy. Bristly, in fact. Forested. Beauregard degreases him, and they slide into one of his fleet of late-model hurries – four-door: two present, one a bit future, one well into the past – for a pilgrimage down the time shaft to one of his favorite religious events. At Havrod College Observatory in a year variously described as 1908, 1912, or 1914, *Harriet Fneep*, let’s say, to protect the innocent, is squinting through her bottle-bottom cheaters and a tube full of concaves and convexes at a number of yellow giants and supergiants blinking in and out of sight. Every one of these pinpricks is as bright as ten thousand suns, give or take, but someone is fingering their dimmer switch; they glow and fade, glow and fade.

“This is it,” whispers the Rev. Beauregard shifts the hurry into transparent hover and idles just behind Harriet’s swivel chair. “The naming of the Beast!”

Harriet sucks the stem of her spectacles, and she glances back and forth between the telescope's eyepiece and the charts, graphs, and dog-eared sheets full of calculations scattered across a nearby table. "The longer the cycle, the brighter the star," she mumbles. (*The angle of the dangle, the heat of the meat.* Under his breath, Beauregard, amazed, rehearses the ancient, forbidden trope.) Her stars pulse, collapse, and push out again. It is one of those *Ah!* experiences – Harriet grasps the principle of the Cepheid stars!

"Let's get out of here." The Rev urgently nudges Beauregard.

"Why sir, if I may ask? Why don't we ever stay beyond this point?"

"I should thrash you for the impertinence of asking a question. However, I'll explain," says the Rev as Beauregard noses the hurry back up the shaft toward Time Present. "Another minute and we might see her sink to a squat, supported on her crucials by one heel, causing her to oscillate, Cepheid-like, producing the hateful wave length in irresistible sympathy with the Beast she has just named. The ancient Cepheids above, the masturbators below, primed and pumped, all resonating to the same infernal rhythm! I prefer to leave on an up note.

"Now, Beauregard, while we're in the twentieth century, let's scan the aboriginals to see what progress we're making."

"We want to get them to stop solooscillating, right, Your Eminence," I'll have Beauregard say here, "so our Pop Two paymasters can jimmy the stars and dust of the Milky Way, button from hole, *nicht vahr?*"

"That's the idea, dodo. Set the hurry for time lapse, so we can check their progress. But first bend over, so I can kick you for asking."

As Beau rubs his buns, he and the Rev shiver through a series of time-walls to make comparative observations. There is some progress to report in Africa. The Ashanti have been warning their small boys not to. The Lepchi (Himalyans) abstain. For the Siriono, a nono: the men may tug and tap, but it never leads to the undesirable wavelength.

"Not enough!" the Rev fulminates, or so I surmise. "Angle the afferent toward the Pop Two stars, Beauregard, and flick her into Receive & Accumulate mode."

"We are aligned with the Clusteroids, Oh Captain, My Captain. The ammo banks are flooding full."

"Now blast those aboriginals."

In the time windows, a net of dark reflections like the compound eyes of a gigantic gnat, one simultaneous flash. The Trukese, sizzled, tumble out of their trees. The Chuckchee are abashed. In New Hebrides, the Seniangs take sudden notice of the whereabouts of their children's fingers.

"Delicious! Delicious!" sings the Rev.

“Boss man Nonpareil, those African men beating up the women, are they not Azande?” Beaugard queries cautiously.

“Yes. They caught the wenches at play with wooden roots interiorly.”

“And the Apinaye, how fiercely they thrash their children!”

“If not, the Clusteroid purpose were dulled.”

“Look, in New Guinea, two minutes from now and upstage center, the women are hitting the boys’ crucials with sticks.”

“And with nettles! The brutes distended. Now *here’s* progress! Look how shame can do what sticks will not. Look where our blast shattered the Manus, the Americans, the Dahomeans....

“They scatter. They hide. They censor. They abjure. They writhe in self-loathing, fearing blindness, insanity, damnation, death, pimples!”

“Not bad! Bend down again, Beaugard.” As the Rev, crucials distantly responding, thwacks him, Beaugard maneuvers the hurry as best he can, to Time Present and the stately pleasure domes of the Rev’s personal asteroid.

That’s when I figure the Pop Two bosses themselves put the tug on his threads. In the tank of heavy water that occupies most of the subterranean area of the asteroid, a rod slightly distends with the passage of a gravitational wave – a prearranged signal from the Rev’s lords, prearranged, that is, by twenty billion years, in a compromise act of the Ylemic Congress, one half-second Post Bang.

The Rev cross-checks the strength of the incoming vibrations against local planetary transmissions of known amplitudes, moving back and forth between bands – a technique used by radio-astronomers for centuries and still known as the Dicke Switch. “It’s them, all right.”

“What are you doing down there, Earth jissom? Why is there still a Milky Way Galaxy? Did we not give you specific orders to advance its annihilation?”

The Rev delivers a vicious slap to Beaugard’s *a posteriori* and intones into the transceiver: “Yes, but...”

“Why are some of the beings down there still feeding the Cepheid pigs of the Magellanics, horrid scrofules, by bumping and grinding between their lonely bed sheets?”

“It’ll soon stop, my lords. We’ve got a good plan this time. We’re giving it an altruistic twist. It’s to save the lives of the spermatozoa, see...?”

“They’ll never buy it.”

“It worked with pre-human foetuses. We’ve got kinaesthetics and everything. It’s a movement.”

“Well, they’re still doing it.”

“It’s not my fault. Whenever you ask anybody, they deny it. You can’t *find* anybody in civilized places who is actually doing it.”

“Well, *somebody’s* doing it. We look up at our sky, and we see you all still there, and we are greatly displeased, Earth jissom.”

“I’m sorry.

The asteroid trembles. Volatile liquids spontaneously combust, blowing the lids off cans and bottles. Pleasure domes dip and shimmy like bobbers on a rip tide. The Rev is just maintaining bowel control. A seal unzips from the skylight, sucking artificial air into the thirsty asteroidal void. The blasts create an eerie high-pitched screaming noise, like that of a woman terrified.

I wish I could have been there to see it, providing it went that way:

“*You’re sorry!*” The walls say it. The floor says it. The chauffeur says it with every orifice ‘but his mouth, which, like the skylight, is screaming. “You and your Kelloggites! I’ll cut off your Vandals, you syphilitic blow hole! First the Cepheans obstruct our counterblast: Sanduleak and all its planets and peoples destroyed for naught! Then they set the Earthlings to self-stroking – *rhythmic friction* – a planetary amplifier for their insidious galactic shield. Then, when we ask you to stop it, surely a simple matter for a local with our full backing, you defer.”

“I am your servant!” The Rev is trembling so hard the teeth shoot out of his gums like skyrockets. His skin curdles and shakes off his bones in hunks the shape of pork rinds. This is so tasty I will not even trouble my imagination about what gut buggy *Beauregard* is filling.

“You may yet redeem your ignoble self.”

“How? How? Just tell me how!”

“Get us a lawyer – a transcategorical. When we exploded Sanduleak, we noticed it was the cuticle of a space-and-time-disjunct being one of whose other members was a certain small-time Earthside ambulance chaser who passed his bar via Cerebral Data Inserts and *chutzpah*. We subsequently received his promotional flyer in a bulk mailing. Looks good. Get him. Get us Arnby. Over and out.”

Below, the circles in the heavy water wink out. The rod falls into repose. The Rev’s complexion regains its youthful luster and the volatiles return to their cans. Everything is okay. Everything is fine. Get Arnby.

“Bend over, Beauregard, you are a very bad boy.”

The guard saw us, but she couldn’t do anything, because she happened to be a couple minutes ahead of us at the time, so she could only gnash her teeth and remember what we were up to. Tasty, yes?

“Come with me, Arnby.” It was a difficult offer to refuse. She pulled on her grey Beulah County issue, a hooded one-piece. With her left hand she formed the ancient rune: thumb and forefinger touched, making a little circle, and the other digits extended like the whiskers of a tropical fish – OK. “Jump through.”

“Jump through *what*, sweetheart?”

The guard was accelerating backtime towards our *when*. She was sure to be displeased with our little intercourse. Also, the Rev would be arriving in fifteen seconds, as I recalled. How was I going to explain Venus?

She pushed her rune in my face again: OK.

I shrugged. I scowled. I rolled my eyes. Life is not logical. I jumped. Naturally, this world being the ridiculous fruitcake it is, I made it, all six foot one of me, through this inch and a half hole. Venus jumped in after me, like Ouro-Bulova-goddam-bouros swallowing its tail.

At this time, the only part of me I could locate was my business cards. I wish I could say I was not used to this. I jumped through Venus’s OK with one paw shielding my crucials, and the other around my business cards; when the ride got rough, I let the crucials go. Everything was dark and tingly. In this place – I use the term loosely – it was impossible to tell, Your Honor, which tingles were me and which were not-me. *This, here*, might have been *thinking*, for example, but then again, it might have been a cloudburst of pigeon shit. I don’t wear no cologne.

“You ought to,” – a voice from nowhere.

“Is that me talking?”

“No, it’s *me*.”

“Very illuminating. Venus?”

“Yes. My name is Kaybuffer, Arnby.”

“Call me Chuck.” A reflex.

“Chuck, do you believe what I told you? We’re on the same side, Chuck.”

“Where the hell are we?”

“Safe. In a chrono-bubble.”

“Very illuminating. A what?”

“Forget it. We’re safe. Are you with me or not?”

“Listen, Buff girl, I don’t want to be unpleasant, but I don’t happen to like what I saw you doing under that blanket. It disinclines me to form an alliance, if you catch my drift.”

“I was helping hold the galaxy together, Chuck. Don’t *you*...?”

“Certainly not. I don’t believe in it. And it would be murder, Kaybuffer. All those little whiptails carrying my DNA.”

“That’s Pop Two propaganda.”

“Well, I *don’t*.”

“The tenth one lies.”

“What?”

“The tenth one lies. It’s an old saying. ‘Nine out of ten boys do it, and the tenth one lies.’”

“Well, I’m the eleventh.”

I could feel her sidling up to me, but you have to subtract both sides of the sidle; still, empty as it was, fore and aft my sensorium, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, I felt our intimacy waxing in that tingling, absolute, non-clocked night-hole. I just loved the tickle of her voice, I gotta say, when Kaybuffer said, “As soon as we take care of the Rev, I’ll FTL you to the Magellanics.”

“What am I, a flower arrangement?”

“FTL, Arnby, not FTD – *Faster Than Light!*”

“I knew that.”

“I’ve been hanging around the Rev for two years in both directions, waiting to euchre him like this,” said Kaybuffer.

“Look,” I said, “they’ve got it all wrong. I’m no use to the Pop Twoers. Can you wiggle your ears? I can’t. I can’t wiggle my ears, and I can’t do anything with SN-Bulova-goddam-1987A, whether it’s connected to me or not.”

“Well, Chuck, the Rev’s boys could mangle you pretty good trying to teach you. They wouldn’t even have to touch your proper body, would they? If those Globular Clusteroids got hold of that transcat client of yours up the river, they could wag you like a tail, couldn’t they?”

A tough customer. “Why should I believe you? The Rev is crusading against solitary vice. He poured me the best zoot-rot I ever had in my life.”

“– I did that –”

“Plus he’s gonna throw a lot of fat-cat clients in my direction. What can you do?”

“Save the galaxy. Just play along for a while, Chuck. You make up your own mind. You don’t have to do anything special...yet. I’ll show you that I’m telling you the truth – with your own experience.”

Maybe if I could have seen her just then or smelled her or been able to put my linger on the place where she stopped and I began, I wouldn’t have liked her so Bulova goddam much. Human affection is a pain in the butt. And as Mofu Tutman observed, “Dames lie.”

I felt myself hypostatizing out of the chrono-bubble and back into my cell at the Beulah County clinker. It was like the blood rushing back into

your arm after it's fallen asleep, but this was my whole body and mind blinking back into one of the normal worlds.

I looked around. Kaybuffer wasn't there. My business cards were in one hand, and in the other, my crucials. I tucked them both out of sight. The Rev was just arriving.

"Mr. Arnby?"

"Call me Chuck, Rev. You gonna spring me from this joint?"

"Sure, Chuck. I think you can help me in a special way." Those vermiceilli lips were doing the hokey pokey, and I could see from the wrinkling and unwrinkling around his eyes that he was quashing a grin. I am a jury watcher of some experience.

"You! Here! Now!" – barking like a mad dog, then snarling at the cowed turnkey. So that's the cash value of Kellogg's *megillah!* The perfection of character, huh? Here's this lepto, umpteen years a Kelloggite monk, now he wears the flat black and runs for office on their dough. What's it got him? A bad disposition. Maybe Kellogg was just a front man for sadistic Pop Two Globular Clusteroids after all. Maybe Kellogg was wrong:

Keeping hands from center stage
Builds patience and reduces rage.

We are on the sloop again, a few hundred kilometers above the Pacific remains "Have you ever heard of SN 1987A?" – and then it was the cavern with zoot-rot and bull totems. Kaybuffer squatted to support the glass table, and this time I caught her wink. This time I caught a lot of things. I wasn't busy kissing the Rev's ass or trying to cop a look at the Buff. I didn't like the pinch the Rev gave his chauffeur; Exhibit B, *sub rosa*, while he lubed me with zoot.

"Secrecy is of the essence..." Instead of watching my tumbler fill with zoot-rot from Kaybuffer's decanter, I eyeballed the Rev through my brows. Now he was elbowing Mr. Steeringwheel, pointing at me and snickering. When I lifted my chin, he put a lid on it, wrinkled his forehead, frowned.

Kaybuffer must have seen me wince. She was standing discretely back apace, let the record show, and a look of motherly concern animated her sweet puss. She liked me. I liked her. As of that glance, although the prosecution had not yet rested by a long shot, I switched my allegiance.

And Kaybuffer knew it. She smiled, then blushed and looked away, sloshing zoot-rot onto her lovely brown forearms...and we were huddled in the bathyscaph in shallow tropical waters, tailbone to tailbone.

"...A last ditch effort by the Guardians of our galactic group to save the

Milky Way from moral annihilation...”

“Cut the crap, Rev. I know this spiel.”

He looked confused for a moment. Then he smiled, that is, his lips smiled, but not the eyes. “Ah! I see. A time-crossing. *Deja-do!* We’ve done this moment before, is that it? Very good, Arnby! Then you’ve already done your sleuthing for us, ey? You’ve found a basis for legal action, a loophole...” He was sashaying to a low metal cabinet, nonchalantly reaching into a drawer.

“*Presque* you, Rev. Neg the heater while you’re at it. You blast me, and I jet straight to the Magellanics and cut your SN 1987A and your little Globular Clusteroid butt out of my galaxy forever.”

“Why, Arnby,” – removing a pack of Vandals from the drawer, tearing off end, pulling string down – “you surprise me. Suck a Vandal?”

“Forget it.” My chair was getting clammy. Schools of fish crisscrossed behind the Rev. A glove of sea weed held the bathy; its fingers were doing the hula hula. I could see Beauregard outside in his wetsuit, sucking on a SCUBA and paddling flippers. He chased the little fishies round, angling for lunch.

You could say I was a little disoriented.

“Suit yourself.” He squashed the stuff all over his lying mandibles and never stopped talking. I watched his tongue stain violet and his breathing slow. “Arnby – Chuck – I don’t know who’s poisoned you against us! Sounds like some Magellanic has bumfuzzled you. Can’t you see that the truth is on our side? And our side is your side, after all!”

“You Kelloggite codpiece, I’m wise to you!” My chair was getting nervous. “I know all about the Pop Twoers trying to stiff the Milky Way. I know who the good guys are, you dumb wang tournament.”

Beauregard was just irising in. He flipped over to the Rev, dripping algae on Kaybuffer’s calves. He spat out his mouthpiece. “Boss, you gotta believe me! I’ve been tracking him every second, me and the Callisto boys, and they’re *good!* We didn’t see any Magellanics approach him! The Pop Twoers checked out the whole scenario!”

“Shut up! Shut up!” – Vandal steam spidering from under the Rev’s eyelids and from the creases on his forehead. The Rev’s knuckles replaced the SCUBA gear in Beauregard’s mouth, and Beauregard keeled over to fully appreciate their flavor.

“Excuse my chauffeur.” Massaging the knucks.

“Think nothing of it,” I said.

“He becomes overwrought, especially in these depths. Obviously, Chuck, someone has been playing games with you. Just what do you

imagine our intentions are, hmm?”

“Your Pop Twoers are trying to throttle us, that’s all.”

“Hmm!” Nothing fazed this guy. “Chuck, Chuck, Chuck! I had no idea how far you would go to protect your precious little ritual.”

“Huh?”

Now he made the universal sign, list wagging between his legs *in proxima genitalibus*.

“C’mon, Rev, this has nothing to do with that.”

“Doesn’t it? Isn’t that what this is really about, Chuck? You heard my speeches, and something touched you. Something moved you. You wanted to get right and to spread the news, to end the sin of autoeroticism. I then revealed to you, Chuck, the deeper truth of the evil of these practices imposed on us by the Cepheans and all the Magellanic stars behind them. You were with us, Chuck. I know you were. Your mind was clear. Your hands were clean.”

His paws were on my shoulders, his hobnails on Kaybuffer’s wrists. He was leaning over me. His violet maw filled my courtroom. “You are a backslider, Chuck Arnby.”

“No!”

“All you want to do is stoke your own chimney.”

“That’s not true!”

“Somebody’s bumfied you, Arnby. Use your brains, for Kellogg’s sake.”

“Your chauffeur just spilled the beans, for Kellogg’s sakes! He as much as confessed your Clusteroid connection.”

“Too much nitrogen in his blood. He was delirious. If I hadn’t decked him, he might have gotten violent. Come clean, Chuck. I know you believe in us. Maybe you’ve soiled yourself, my boy, but you can be rehabilitated. You’re important to us, Chuck. You can help us save the galaxy. Tell me who you’ve been talking to.”

Beaugard lifted his head, spat out a few teeth and moaned. “Shut up!” said the Rev. Then to me: “It was a Cephean, wasn’t it, Arnby? She’s using you, you and half a trillion like you, to enslave the entire galaxy.”

“You’re crazy. It’s not like that at all.”

“Come back aboard with us, Chuck. We’ll set you up the way you deserve. A guy like you, you should be pleading cases before the Ylemic Congress, not plea bargaining for Venusian gifters and transcat trash. This Pop Two case is just the beginning.”

“Her story seemed so convincing! She came to me in the lockup.” I felt myself fade like the moon at dawn; the Rev was glowing and rising. The sky was red.

“Of course it seemed convincing, Chuck. That’s her business. Where did she tell you she was from – Neptune?”

“Venus.”

“Venus!” He threw his head back and laughed. “Well, there you have it! The Cephean witch says she’s from Venus. From *Venus*, Chuck! And you swallowed it!”

“I feel pretty silly, Rev.”

“We all have our little weak spots, Chuck.... Beauregard, get Chuck some of that good zoot-rot, why don’t you, if you’re feeling up to it?”

“Yes, Your Hiny.” Beauregard rubs his jaw, shakes his head, rises.

The Rev is feeling expansive. “But really, Chuck! Venusian! Look there – the girl you’re sitting on, she’s a Venusian. Got her a few weeks ago from a Proximan trader. Did the Cepheid bitch look the least little bit like her?”

I had to lock my legs around her to keep Kaybuffer from bucking. “I’ve been a fool, Rev.”

“We all have our little weak spots. You’re with us *now*. That’s all that counts. Suck a Vandal?”

“No thanks, Rev. Can you ever forgive me?”

“Of course! Of course!” He was tugging another pack open with his teeth. Beauregard was pouring my Zoot-rot. The Buff was bridling between my stirrups.

“Beauregard, let’s went, boy! This has been one tough afternoon, boy!” The second Vandal was kicking in. In a zootful, we were standing on carbonaceous chondrite on the Rev’s personal asteroid – which I had figured for the next stop.

Kaybuffer looked more beautiful than ever in a Fratellini collar with velvet ruffles down to her sweetly dimpled knees. She was coming from the Rev’s pleasure dome with a tray of aromatics. She smiled, then dropped the tray and drew a clockwharnmer on the Rev.

“Don’t scratch,” she said, “or I’ll blast you back to foetal.”

Meanwhile, I was using more primitive means on the chauffeur – an arm lock followed by a jab to the carotid artery, a move popularized in ancient times by Killer Kawalski in his grudge match with Yukon Eric. It was immediately effective, as the poor sap went down again.

“You are a fool, Arnby.” Clenching and unclenching his fists, the Rev spat out Vandal stems. The ground was vibrating.

“No, you’re a *genius*, Chuck! I almost believed you myself.” Kaybuffer smiled. Case closed; judgment for the plaintiff. “Now we’ve got the bum disarmed on his home turf. I bet this place is the com center for the whole galactic operation. And with your transcat link we can close down Sandu-

leak for good.”

Below us, however, let the record show, a gigantic rod was microscopically distending as the Population Two overlords broadcast another cheery message to their man in the Milky Way. The ground shook, lightning flashed, Kay girl looked up in alarm, and the Rev began to like the odds again. The sky screamed: “Good! Good! You have obtained the transcat for us.”

The Rev looked up and chuckled. “He says he won’t do it!”

I’d been laughed at before, but I’d never been laughed. Now I know how an uvula feels. Kaybuffer was in the same pickle. We and the landscape were being shaken like dice in a cup. The Rev didn’t seem to mind. Those Pop Twoers have quite a sense of humor.

But when the Pop Two bosses stopped laughing, I was still dancing!

“It’s the transcat!” Kaybuffer still managed to train the clockwhammer on the Rev’s crucials, but an element of doubt had entered the picture. “She’s *doing* you, Chuck! Oh, Chuck!”

The Rev regained his composure. “Exactly! *Murder One!* We traced her from Sanduleak to the Beulah County Prison and upriver to the Total Security where they keep the lifers. Your ex-client is your mainframe, Arnby. You’re just a peripheral. She’s the brains and heart. We’ve got her, so we’ve got you too, transcat butt.”

“Tail,” I said. Call me pedantic. My teeth were falling out.

“We have everything now!” – booming from the sun on one side and Jupiter on the other – “The lawyer’s transcat connection to Sanduleak cinches it! We can feel it! We can feel the Milky Way ungluing!”

“Get away from here, Kay girl!” I stuttered. “Get back to the Magellanics! Forget about me! I’m shaking to pieces!”

The Rev was radiant. He slid open the decorative facing of a nearby rock. He fiddled with a few dials and transformed half of the southern sky into a honeycomb of space-time monitors, each one featuring a different species or human culture in the control epoch, twentieth century Earth, and its special solitary vice, or – as they hoped – the absence of same.

“*Our own, our delight, our true child, who art called ‘Rev,’ thou hast done well to open these views before us, that we may delight in our triumph!*” This time, it was the clockwhammer singing the Pop Twoers’ *basso profundo*, and Kaybuffer dropped the thing before she knew what was happening.

The Buffer and I have been reduced to rug rats in the teevee parlor. Daddy adjusts his inner and outer garbs and gazes at his rock. On Monitor Number One we see five or six Trobriand Islanders, each alone, seated on a broad beach front, men and women, *rhythmically fricting*.

“Ikivayna kwila!” the men laugh to themselves.

“*Ibasi wila o yamala!*” The women ooh and ah.

“What are they saying?” The Rev smiles stiffly, one palsied eye on the Globular Clusteroid empyrean. His face barely moves when he speaks.

“Manipulate the *kwilaf*,” half-translates the faithful chauffeur. “Pierce the *wila* with the hand!”

“Let’s try the Alorese,” the Rev suggests, the Copper Eskimos, the Cree, the Dusun, Easter Islanders, Flathead, Ganda, Hopi...! Everywhere he looks, it’s rhythmic friction: in the closet, in the bedroom, in the cave, in the hutch. Maybe there is something wrong with the sets? Jiggle the joystick! Manipulate the dials! There are the Ifugao, the Lesu, Marquesans, Ojibwa, Panapacans, Pukapukans, Samoans, Tikopians, Tinguans, Trukese, Wogeo, Yapese... *rhythmic friction!* Over the Rev’s shoulder – the restive heat lightning of Clusteroid watchers.

Try other species! In the far eastern bank of screens, there is wild activity: female spider monkeys creating *rhythmic friction* with their long, prehensile tails; male apes lollypopping their own twangers; baboons and rhesus, mates despite, *rhythmically fricting*, *rhythmically fricting*. Porcupines straddle a long stick, imbuing it with their own scent for circular excitement. Male elephants become enamored of their trunks. Dolphins fondle the engorged extremity in their water intake jets, *rhythmically*, *rhythmically*, and ho ho ho!

What’s this? Male stags rubbing antler tips against low-hanging branches – *rhythmically fricting* and ho, ho, ho! – extrude from their sheathes and reach cadence after fifteen seconds, ho, ho, ho! The grey-cheeked mangabey rubs her swollen perineum against...whatever’s handy. *Rhythmic friction!* *Rhythmic friction!*

Back to Homo sapiens, the Rev, horror-stricken, sees wifeys and hubbies, bookend-like, one in the pantry, the other in the den, doing it, doing it. Others join the dance: businessfolks phoning their brokers; old men lolling in geriatric homes; young girls, breathlessly, for the very first time, eyes squeezed tight, brows ascending like embers from bonfires; young boys, *amazed*; people reading *Playboy*, reading Shakespeare, reading Von Krafft Ebbing, reading *Teen Romance*; the President of the United States of America, in his oval office, between briefings, with the shades drawn; the Pope, when the Cardinals are sleeping; and the Cardinals, in their sleep.

Saving the galaxy, that’s why, boys and girls, *fricting in the rhythm* of the universal beat!

The Rev slips toward panic like a dragged pizzle toward orgasm. “What

about Truk?” He finds their window, a minute ago, down two and left. Several Trukese men, unknown to one another, are hiding in branches as a woman bathes in a brook shaded by a thick grove of trees. The boughs vibrate *rhythmically*. Exhalations flutter the fragrant leaves.

Moi, je wear no cologne. (CDI #4932-FL– Romantic Languages.)

“Perverts!” The Rev’s nostrils swell to apogee, and his lips contract to perigee, as he tries to coopt his overlords’ wrath.

In Siberia, the Chuckchee women are making strange, solitary use of the large calf muscle from a reindeer. In Tikopia it’s maniok roots and bananas. Fingers among the Crow and the Aranda, in adjacent windows but opposite sides *orbis terrae*! More heel squatting among New Ireland’s

Lesu! The Hottentots are hot. Pukapuka parents pooh-pooh it. In Seniang no one gives a hang...

“Impossible!” trumpet the moons of Jupiter. “You jerk! You punk! You low-count jissom!” The Rev is quaking like jello on a jeep – make that Majello. “How have you screwed up now? We have him! We have the transcat! We have the tail! We have Sanduleak! We have everything! Why are your beings down there still doing it? We have disarmed the Magellanic Cepheids! Who is priming the pump?”

Suddenly I stopped shaking. A vapor puffed out of my flesh, like gaseous sweat. I have never been partial to gaseous sweat. It was reddish-brown, like iodine vapor, and there were little Paisleys floating around in it. “What the Bulova goddam hell is going on here?”

Then Kaybuffer started laughing.

“What are you laughing about?” the Rev said, terrified, just before a screaming, blue lightning bolt streaked down from what was left of the sky and parboiled him *instante*.

“Let’s get out of here, Chuck.” Kaybuffer flashed me the old rune again.

Beaugard had fallen through a sinkhole and was dog paddling in a tank of heavy water. I jumped through Kaybuffer’s OK without any cross or redirect, because the whole Bulova goddam asteroid was about to *come!*

And there we were again. Nowhere. I was kissing her, though. I knew that I was kissing her, even without the lips, without the tongue, without the *je ne sais quois*. “Kaybuffer, we’ve nailed them, haven’t we? The Rev is fricasseed, and even the tenth one has quit lying.”

“What about that eleventh, Arnby?”

My Kaybuffer was curling all around me, in and out of her body, as only Cepheans can do. “Wait a minute,” I said, “before we get carried away here. Why were you laughing back there? And while we’re at it, what *was*

priming the pump, if the Pop Twoers had all the cards? If the Cepheids were blocked, who was pumping out the rhythm for all that rhythmic friction, huh?”

“You were, Chuck. That’s why I was laughing.”

“Wanna read me back that testimony?”

“The vapor – it wasn’t sweat, Chuck.”

“Wait a minute, Buffo. Are you telling me that that was a transcategorical *orgasm*?” She didn’t say a word. “Then I’m not the *tail* after all, am I? I’m...”

“Shut up and kiss me, transcat.”

I paused. I cased. I kissed. But as I distended, Kaybuffer slid away.

“Galactic business, Arnby! You have to do the rest *alone*...”

In the words of Mofo Tutman:

Mofo know what his mojo fo’

Love that mofo mojo so!

Yaas, Mofo love it so!

I don’t wear no cologne. In the solitude of the Buff’s OK I did my galactic duty.

THE MAGIC SPECTACLES

JAMES BLAYLOCK

Part Three of three

CHAPTER 10

What Danny Found in the Cave

Danny was deep into the cave when his first candle burned down almost to nothing. He held it against the rock wall so that the black smoke made a smudge. He would have to find his way out, and that meant making a mark at every tunnel that branched off from the main tunnel. He had read the book *Tom Sawyer*, and he knew a little bit about caves, and about how people get lost in them.

He set the candle stub down on the tunnel floor and sat down next to it in order to rest. Ahab kept standing, as if he was restless and wanted to be on his way. It couldn't be *that* far to the other end of the cave. If goblins were coming and going, carrying fish lunches, then just no way it could take anything like all day to get to the other side.

He pictured his house in his mind. Where would he come out? Beneath it? He imagined the look on his parents' faces when he and Ahab crawled out of the crawlspace after all this time, carrying a candlestick.

So far he hadn't seen any goblins in the cave, although there had been a pile of fish skeletons outside one of the big wooden doors, as if goblins

lived behind it and threw their garbage into the tunnel.

He had heard flute music twice and goblin laughter once, but all of it was just a far off echo. He didn't mind the music as much as the laughter. He loosened the rope that tied Ahab to his wrist, and, after lighting another candle on the dwindling flame of the first one, he set out again. His idea was to walk until he used up half the candles. If he discovered nothing by then, he would burn the other half of the candles on his way out, following the smoke marks. That meant lighting just three more candles before he started back, or maybe two and a half, just to be safe.

He didn't like the look of the doors in the cave walls. There was something about them – the way they were all locked from the outside, ages ago, as if there were things sealed up in there that should stay sealed up. And if one of the doors would lead him home, it wouldn't be a door with a key rusted in the lock.

There was a rustling in the darkness behind him. Ahab turned and growled, and Danny held his candle in the air as high as he could to throw light back down the tunnel. But there was nothing, just silence now. Ahab tugged on the leash, and Danny started walking a little more quickly than he had been, careful not to walk so fast that he put out the candle flame, and listening hard for the sound again.

Instead, he heard goblin laughter, just a short snatch of it, cut off sharp. It had come from some distance behind him. It was impossible to tell how far. There were enough twists and turns in the tunnel so that the goblins might not have seen him yet. He thought about blowing out his candle so as to hide himself in the darkness. But it would be too awful to be surrounded by goblins in the dark, to feel their snaky little hands on his neck....

Could goblins see in the dark, like cats?

He walked faster yet. The candle flame guttered and nearly went out, but he didn't slow down. There was a scurrying sound behind him, like leather scuffing a rock floor – goblins in rat shoes.

He came to another of the doors in the cave wall. This one had a key in it, like the rest, but the key was clean, as if polished by many hands. The door had an iron latch, and the latch also was shiny-black with use. Quickly, without thinking twice, Danny passed the candle across the door, making a wavery looking "D" in candle smoke. Then, getting set to run if he had to, he turned the latch and pulled the door open. Ahab slipped through it and Danny followed, pulling the door shut again behind him as smoothly and silently as he could.

He turned around, holding the candle out in front of him. A broad cav-

ern spread away on every side. Tall columns of stone rose toward the distant ceiling. There was the sound of the ocean somewhere near, and the wind smelled salty and wet, like a sea wind.

But Danny only paid a moment's attention to the wind. Glittering in the candle light was the most astonishing thing he had ever seen: heaps and heaps and heaps of treasure, more than any pirate treasure he had ever read about. There were piles of necklaces and broaches and rings and bracelets encrusted with every color and size of jewel. There were diamonds and rubies and emeralds and pearls and purple amethysts and all manner and type of glass bauble, and all of it was heaped on the floor and piled up against the rock walls, spilling out of chests and boxes and bags. The jewels reflected the candle light, over and over, a thousand million times, and the cavern glinted with rainbow light.

It was goblin treasure, tons of it, piles of it, lakes and rivers of it. And right in the middle of all of it sat an immense black iron kettle, just like the one that had sat in the woods. Foggy steam leaked out of it, wisping toward the distant ceiling.

And next to the kettle, sitting on a spindly black table built of twisted iron rods, was a fishbowl half full of marbles.

CHAPTER 11

The Mark on the Final Door

It wasn't until they stopped running that John realized they had left the basket behind them along with his candle and candlestick. Polly still had her candle, but only a couple of inches of it were left. Besides that, they had the matches in John's pocket. That was all – enough, maybe, for twenty more minutes, then darkness. John struck one of the matches, and they lit the piece of candle and looked at the tunnel around them.

Nothing had changed. They might as easily have been ten feet into the cave or ten miles. There was no going back after the basket, either – not now that they had stirred up the shadow thing beyond the second door. Maybe there was no going back at all.

But there was no going on, either – not far, not without light to see by.

John looked behind, back into shadows that were as deep and dark as the ocean at midnight. He strained to hear something, anything. The creature in the tunnel of creaking doors had seemed to be nothing but darkness and cobweb and dust, and it had been silent as death as it rushed toward them down the tunnel. If it was loose, they wouldn't hear it come.

Was the air growing cooler now?

He looked at Polly, who had moved farther down the tunnel and stood now before another door. John didn't care about the doors any longer. He wasn't going to open another one without a very good reason. Doors and windows had been nothing but trouble for him, and the doors deep in the cave here seemed to hide nothing but Mr. Deener's sad memories.

But then Polly held the candle flame near the door itself, and there, clearly smudged against the wood, was the smoky outline of the letter "D."

CHAPTER 12

The Fishbowl Full of Marbles

Danny knew straight off what bowl of marbles it was. John had been right: the marbles in the fishbowl were not regular marbles at all; they were Mr. Deener's lost marbles. That's what the little man in the curiosity shop had been talking about. Along with the marbles in Mrs. Barlow's flour sack, they made up the bits and pieces of Mr. Deener's past, hardened into glass.

There was the sound of hushed, whispering voices in the cavern, just like the voices in Mrs. Barlow's bag, and he could hear the click, click, click of the marbles knocking together in the bowl. They seemed almost to be boiling, as if they wanted to jump out of the bowl. Danny stepped down into the cavern and walked toward it, past heaps of treasure and fish bones. He ought to simply take the whole bowl. It was his, after all. He had paid for it with the moon penny. He would grab it and get out of there, leaving the rest of the treasure behind. He didn't want stolen treasure.

But just as he reached for it a scuffling noise sounded beyond the cavern door. There was laughter and the low gobble of goblin voices. A key turned in the lock. The door swung wide open. Six goblins stood there, holding lighted torches. One of them was big – a head taller than Danny. His mouth hung open stupidly, and in the torchlight Danny could see that his teeth were sharp like an animal's teeth.

The goblins saw him at the same time, and with a wild cry they rushed into the room, yapping and hooting. Danny held onto Ahab's leash, and, forgetting about the marbles, the two of them ran straight across the top of the treasure, crunching and smashing, wading through piles of jewels. Danny ducked in among the high stone columns, dodging first behind one and then another.

The goblins crowded toward him. One snatched at his wrist, knocking the candlestick out of his hand, and another grabbed onto the cuff of his pants and tried to pull him over. He kicked his foot, and the goblin went sprawling. Ahab yanked hard on his leash, pulling it out of Danny's hand.

And then, barking and growling, he leaped into the middle of the goblins, snapping his teeth in their faces as they turned with a shout and ran back the way they'd come.

Danny whistled once, then turned and ran deeper into the cavern, back into the darkness. He couldn't fight all the goblins, but he could outrun them. Ahab would follow him. He still had candles and matches in his pocket....

Suddenly, right in front of him, the biggest of the goblins stepped out from behind a stone pillar. His hair was wild, and his eyes seemed to be spinning like tops. He wore what looked like Mr. Deener's cast-off clothes, dirty and ripped, and he gnashed his teeth together as he reached out and clutched Danny's jacket. Then, laughing out loud and slobbering, he began to drag Danny back out toward the torchlight and the treasure.

Just then Ahab ran out from among the stone columns. He snarled and jumped just as Danny twisted away, shrugging out of the jacket. The big goblin staggered backward when Ahab slammed into him. Ahab's teeth closed on the goblin's shirt, tearing a wide hole in it, and the goblin threw up his hands and hooted in fear, ducking sideways and trying to scuttle away, pushing at Ahab with his hands.

Danny whistled again, and at the same moment he turned and ran. Ahab followed behind him, turning around once to bark, and then coming along fast again. The shadows deepened. Danny stopped and searched in the darkness for Ahab's leash, feeling around with his hands. He found it, and, slipping his hand through the loop, he ran as fast as he dared, letting Ahab lead him down the tunnel, away from the treasure room.

Almost at once there was a great lot of gobbling and wailing behind them and the stamping of goblin feet. They were coming. He could see the flicker of torchlight back along the tunnel. He couldn't run any faster, not in the darkness. He trailed his right hand against the stone wall, squinting his eyes to see into the gloom.

The sounds behind him grew more distant. They were outrunning the goblins. Ahead of him a light sprang up, like a slash of yellow fire along the floor. Something was there, maybe blocking the tunnel. He tugged on the leash, and Ahab slowed down, growling and looking behind them into the darkness. Danny put out his hand. A door blocked the tunnel. There were no branching tunnels. This was it – the end.

He heard the sound of breaking waves – a distant hissing and booming. He could smell sea air leaking up through the sunlit crack beneath the door. Goblin noise filled the tunnel, and torchlight danced on the stone floor. Ahab's fur stood up along his back. His back legs tensed, ready to

spring. The six goblins appeared from around the bend in the tunnel. They let out a whoop and rushed howling toward Ahab, holding the burning torches out in front of them, champing their teeth and hissing.

Danny grasped the key and turned it. The door swung outward, and sunlight flooded the cavern, nearly blinding Danny as he jumped through the door with Ahab following. The two of them ran out onto a grassy hillside just as the goblins closed in behind them, clutching hands reaching out to haul the two of them back into the darkness.

CHAPTER 13

Through the Green Light

John stood looking at the mark on the door, thinking about the little piece of candle that was left and the few paltry matches in his pocket, thinking about what might lie behind them down the tunnel and about the darkness that surely lay ahead.

Had Danny marked this door because he had opened it, and *knew* that it led home? Or had he chosen it for no good reason at all, just as Polly and John had chosen the door with the terrible shadow locked behind it? John put his hand on the key. Unlike most of the others doors, this one was well-used. *Something* was coming and going through it.

And right then he knew that it didn't matter what lay beyond the door. It was enough that Danny had gone through it. His brother had met whatever danger lurked on the other side, and now John would too. He didn't have any choice.

Cautiously he twisted the key in the lock. It turned with a loud *thunk*, just as the others had done. The door opened outward, and for a moment he and Polly waited, ready to slam it shut again. But this time there was no creaking and slamming. There was no music playing. There was only the faint smell of the ocean and the restless, distant sigh of breaking waves. A flickering light shone from within, out onto the tunnel floor.

He grasped the cold iron that sheathed the door and looked past it. Unbelieving, he blinked his eyes hard and opened the door wider. For there on the floor of the cavern, illuminated by the light of burning torches, lay a vast sea of treasure, piled into every sort of chest and box and bag, spilled out in multicolored pools. Polly looked past his shoulder, and he heard her catch her breath in surprise.

And then he saw the steaming kettle and beside it the fishbowl full of marbles.

So the marbles weren't lost to them after all! John could get them back.

He *would* get them back, and right now. He stepped into the room, past the half-open door.

A hand shot out from along the wall and grabbed his wrist. Another hand caught his ankle. There was a hoot of wild goblin laughter.

“Run!” he shouted to Polly, and tried to twist away. But it was too late. Polly didn’t run, she grabbed his arm and tried to yank him loose. Goblins pushed the door open and swarmed through. Goblin hands latched onto their wrists and ankles clothes. The goblins dragged them into the cavern, and the door slammed shut behind. More goblins rose from behind treasure boxes and rocks and crept out of the deep shadows and from holes in the cavern floor and walls. There were dozens of them, like an army of little Mr. Deeners, all shriveled and dirty and dressed in the skins of bats and rats.

An enormous goblin stood up from behind the kettle. He nodded his head slowly and squinted his eyes. He looked like a Mr. Deener badly made up out of spare parts. His arms were too long, like ape arms, and he had a face like a pudding. He was at least as fat as Mr. Deener, and looked as if he had been dumped into his clothes with a shovel. He wore a bow tie made out of tree bark, and his hat, or maybe crown, was tied up out of old rags and sticks and leaves. Wild strands of hair waggled out from beneath it. Clearly he was the king of the goblins, and was proud of it.

The goblins marched John through the treasure, up to where the king stood waiting. The king made the glasses sign with his fingers.

“I don’t have them,” John said, and shook his head.

“Ugh,” the king said, still looking through the finger glasses.

“Ugh yourself,” John said. “I don’t have the glasses. Mr. Deener ground them up and the wind blew them away.”

The king nodded and made a sort of pickle face, as if finally he understood and was studying what John had told him. Then he grinned. His teeth were filed to points. He made the glasses sign again. He didn’t understand anything.

“The...glasses...*broke*,” John said, talking slowly and clearly.

“Roke!” the king said, grinning even wider, showing his teeth.

“That’s right,” John said. “Roke.”

The king bent down and picked something up off the ground. It was a flat circle attached to a long stick and with a hole in the middle. But the hole wasn’t empty. Even in the flickering torchlight John could see that the hole was in fact a piece of pale green glass. The light shining through it cast a green glow on the cave-wall behind.

It was the lost spectacles lens, fitted into the hole in a flattened, dried-

out glazed doughnut. Then the doughnut had been tied onto a broken stick. The goblin peered at John through it as if he were looking through a magnifying glass or monocle. His eye was immense.

He shoved the end of the stick through a rip in his shirt and made the glasses sign again, saying, “Roke!” and then nodding happily and holding his open hand out, as if maybe John would understand him now and give up the spectacles.

John shook his head and held his own hands out. Then he remembered the empty wire rims that he’d picked up in the weeds of the clinker garden. They were still in his jacket pocket. He thought about them for a moment before taking them out. With his hand hiding one of the lens holes, he held them up for the king to see.

“Roke! Roke!” the king shouted, dancing and pointing. A great cry went up from the rest of the goblins – cries of “Roke! Roke!” that sounded like the croaking of happy frogs. John put the spectacles back into his pocket and crossed his arms.

The king’s smile collapsed, as if it had been made out of wet sand that had suddenly dried out. He reached out his hand and opened and closed his fingers. “Roke,” he said, and then something that sounded like, “Gimme.”

“Nope,” John answered. “No roke. Not unless you let us go.” He pointed to himself and then to Polly and made little walking-finger movements with his right hand.

“No roke?” the king said. He frowned, studying things out again in his dimwit way. With a sly grin he picked something else up off the floor and held it up.

It was Danny’s jacket.

Suddenly nothing was funny anymore. “Where is he?” John shouted, and he started forward. He didn’t know why – maybe to take the jacket away, maybe just to push the king over backward. At once a dozen goblins rose up on either side of him, and before he had taken two steps they dragged him down onto a pile of treasure. He wrestled and fought and kicked, and for one brief moment he caught a glimpse of Polly pulling herself free of the goblins that were guarding her, but then he was buried under goblins and half sunk in a heap of jewels.

He felt goblin hands snake into his jacket pockets and heard a goblin shout “Roke!” The other goblins piled off again, and John sat up. A goblin stood in front of him, waving the empty spectacles rims. The king snatched them out of his hand. He took one look at them, and then, finding the lenses empty, he shouted with rage and pushed the little goblin over backward.

He poked two fingers through the rims and then threw them hard into the kettle. Then he flung Danny's jacket in after them. Then he picked up the little goblin that he'd pushed over and threw *him* into the kettle too. A great reek of steam rose toward the ceiling. The rest of the goblins stepped back a few paces, gabbling nervously. The king pointed a shaking finger toward John and drew his finger across his throat. He pointed at the kettle, gnashing his teeth together, rubbing his stomach. A crowd of goblins pushed John forward, giggling now, and smacking their lips and pinching John's arms as if to see how fat he was.

The king turned around and shoved the doughnut monocle into the mist rising from the kettle. The green circle appeared on the cavern wall again – bigger this time, like a green moon against a night sky. He plucked a marble out of the fishbowl and dropped it into the kettle. There was a great bubbling and popping and another reek of steam. Then suddenly there were shapes and shadows within the green light shining on the cave wall.

As if a door had opened, John heard the noise of traffic. He heard a horn honk and a cat meow. The shapes in the green light grew clear, and he saw that it was the front porch of his house. Something about it was different. There was no swing. And where the swing ought to be there was a long wooden planter full of flowers.

Someone stood outside the door, just then reaching for the knob. It was Mr. Deener, looking very young. He had just got home, it seemed. The door opened, and a woman appeared, and stood there.

That's her! John said to himself. It was the woman at the end of the tunnel, the woman from the kitchen on the moon. It was Mrs. Deener, and her happy laughter sounded on the breeze as Mr. Deener went in and the door clicked shut.

The goblin king put his free hand over his heart and shook his head fondly, as if recalling happier days. Then he plucked another marble out of the bowl, nodded at John, and dropped it into the kettle.

There was the front porch again, but in a different season. It was fog-shrouded now, so that he could barely see the front window or make out the color of the paint on the wooden siding. There was the wet smell of fog on concrete. And then, very clearly, he smelled that something was burning, like a pie left too long in the oven....

A shadow fell across the porch – someone coming up the walk. It was Mr. Deener again. He was fatter now, and bald on top, and he seemed to be in a terrible hurry, brushing against a flower pot at the edge of the porch and knocking it down onto the walk. The pot broke, spilling out a

lot of dirt and a green and red Christmas cactus. Mr. Deener didn't even look at the fallen cactus, but fumbled in his pocket for the door key. Finding it, he worked the key into the lock, calling his wife's name in a loud and frantic voice. He pushed the door open and went in. John could hear his voice calling and calling through the house until the voice died away and there was silence.

The goblin king wiped his eye, as if it had been him crying, and then stepped across into the green light, reached down, and picked up the Christmas cactus from where it lay on the walk in front of the house. He turned around, brushing dirt off the roots, then twisted the cactus up in his hands, bit the end off it, and stepped back into the cave as if he were stepping through a door. He began to laugh. Bits of chewed cactus fell out of his mouth. With a flourish of his hand, he pointed the stick-end of the doughnut monocle at the kettle, and then pointed it at John. "No roke," he said, and shook his head sadly.

Before John had time to think or talk or move, he felt himself lifted into the air by a dozen goblins. He twisted and shouted and kicked, managing to jerk his hand free. He pushed one goblin over backward, then grabbed at another one. His hand closed over a jeweled pin on the goblin's shirt. He held on, trying to twist out of their grasping little hands as the rest of the goblins carried him up the stone stairs toward the kettle. The pin tore loose from the goblin's shirt, and John held onto it, closing it in his fist. The king scooped up dead fish and leaves and heaps of treasure and dumped it all into the pot.

"Roke, roke, roke," he sang, and he ran his tongue across the tips of his pointed teeth. He picked up another crown, just like his own, made of leaves and twigs and rags, and then, bowing like Mr. Deener, he said, "Prince-cess Pol-ly," and held the crown out toward her.

"Stop!" John shouted. "Wait!" The boiling kettle steamed beneath him, and the rising mist rose up around him like a heavy gray curtain. He looked down at the bubbling muck. There were bones in it, big ones. A fish head rose to the surface, stared at him through empty eye sockets, then disappeared again. He heard Polly scream, and at that moment he felt himself falling.

CHAPTER 14

The Broken Clinker Flower

Danny ran down the hillside, away from the cave door. He looked back over his shoulder when he heard a wailing noise behind him, like the

sound of a tormented ghost. He skidded to a stop, falling forward onto his knees and letting go of the leash. He rolled into a crouch, ready to jump up and run again. But there was no need to. Two of the goblins were crawling back toward the cave mouth on their hands and knees, as if they couldn't stand the bright sunlight. The others stood inside, back in the darkness, hiding from the sun and peeking out through their fingers.

The two goblins on the ground stopped moving toward the door. They looked like dark, goblin-shaped ghosts, like frozen root beer, and Danny could see grass and rocks through them. They uttered one last terrible wail and vanished, and there was nothing left where they had been but patches of dead grass dusted with black ashes. The goblins in the cave hooted in fear, and then turned and ran back into the darkness.

Danny looked around to see where he was. A valley lay spread out below him, green with grass and bordered by deep woods. At the bottom of the valley, about a quarter of a mile distant, sat a lonesome house. It was a wooden house, yellow and white, and it took only a single, startling moment for him to realize that it was his house.

The camelia bushes along the side were covered with red and white flowers and with dark green leaves that shone against the yellow-painted boards. Wisteria vines, purple with blossoms, drooped from the edge of the front porch roof. Smoke rose from the chimney even though it was a sunny day.

He closed his eyes and opened them again.

It was still there.

Beyond it, past the grassy bluffs that made up the front lawn, lay the ocean, vast and green and with breakers crashing along a rocky shore. There were no other houses in sight. There was no street, no neighborhood, no cars or people, only the house sitting all alone at the edge of the sea.

The lawn behind the house was clipped and green, with a patch of vegetable garden at the back of the grass and then a deep woods running away uphill to where the trees and everything else in the world disappeared in cloud drift. All was silent except for the cry of sea gulls and the sighing of the ocean.

Danny followed Ahab across the hillside toward the edge of the woods. He knew that he hadn't gotten home; he was as far away from home as ever. He had found another piece of Mr. Deener's magic. There was something false and unnatural about it, and it was no more like his house than a bat is like a bird.

Suddenly it struck him then that he couldn't see any seagulls even

though their cries repeated themselves every half minute or so, like a recording. And the sea waves broke on the rocks with the same hissing and sighing and crashing, over and over, as regular as breathing.

The trail from the cave struck a bigger path leading down from the top of the valley. He and Ahab followed it along the edge of the trees toward the back of the house. When they got to the garden Ahab stopped and wouldn't go any farther, but sat down and put his head on his paws. What had looked like a vegetable garden from up on the hill was nothing but a patch of weeds. Danny watched the back of the house, not wanting to get any closer.

Someone moved beyond the kitchen window. Danny pulled on Ahab's leash, stepping back in among the trees at the edge of the woods. It was a woman in the kitchen, working at the sink. Even though Danny hadn't looked at the clinker flowers or seen the moon up close, he knew she was Mr. Deener's dead wife; what was her name? – Velma.

Then, just as suddenly as she had appeared, she disappeared, blinking away like a goblin fire. There she was again, in the back bedroom now, sweeping the window sill clean with a whisk broom. Beneath that window, spread out over the grass, were odds and ends of Mr. Deener's apparatus. There were china plates on forked sticks and big globes of clear glass and strings of prisms hung on kite string. And there was more apparatus beyond the corner of the house, back by the garage. On the driveway sat a pyramid built out of jars full of glass chips that shone like goblin jewels in the morning sunlight.

More glass magic; that's all it was. It was worth about as much as a hat full of dirt, except that you could wear the hat once you emptied the dirt out. A house built of magic wouldn't even keep out the rain. Danny suddenly had enough of it. Goblins or no goblins, it was time to go back into the cave and try again. He didn't want anything more to do with Mr. Deener and his magic.

He looked away up the hill. From where he stood it looked almost round, like the top of Mr. Deener's head. The door into the cave stood open like a dark eye looking out onto the sea. "Let's get out of here," he said to Ahab, and then stepped forward into the garden. There was a crunching under his foot, and he looked down to see a broken piece of what must have been a gigantic clinker flower. Its edges were dark with dirt and soot. More fragments lay scattered in the weeds, as if the clinker flower had burst apart like a ripe toadstool.

Holding onto Ahab's leash, he took off running, back up the path along the woods, cutting off across the grass toward the door in the hillside. He

slowed down only when the hill got steeper, but he didn't stop. Ahab ran ahead of him now, yanking him along. It was just when he got to the open door that he saw someone come out of the woods up the valley, walking down the path toward the ocean. He stepped into the darkness of the cave and watched. It was Mrs. Barlow.

At first he thought the wind had started up and was blowing stuff out of the trees, because she was surrounded by big sycamore leaves that dipped and twirled and flew in wide circles around her head, darting down the path and back up it again. Then he knew it was henny-penny men, charging along in front of her as if trying to make her hurry up.

He almost stepped out into the sunlight and waved at her, but he stopped himself. He still had five candles left to burn. Nothing had changed. Mr. Deener had pretty clearly gone off his chump, as their father would say. Let Mrs. Barlow see to him. The best thing to do was try the cave again. If the goblins were still messing around in the treasure room, then he and Ahab would run right through the middle of the silly little creeps and straight out through the other door.

He let go of the leash in order to light a candle, and then he set out down the shadowy corridor. As the tunnel curved, the sunlight disappeared behind him, and the darkness settled in. He walked slowly and softly, ready to run.

Then, suddenly, there arose a sort of mad cheering from the treasure room ahead. He heard the terrible laughter of the big goblin. A shout followed the laughter, and not a goblin shout, either. There was a scream....

Ahab barked and leaped forward, into the darkness, dragging the leash behind him. The tags on his collar jingled once, and then he was gone.

CHAPTER 15

The Runaway Marbles

John threw his hands out and twisted in the air, grabbing for the edge of the cauldron. In that moment he saw a gray blur and felt something smash into him, and suddenly he wasn't falling anymore. He was knocked backward, slamming into the goblin king and bowling him over, and the two of them tumbled through the dozen goblins that a moment ago had tried to throw him into the pot.

There was a wild barking and growling and goblins fled away on every side, pushing and shoving and poking each other, stumbling over the piled up treasure. John realized suddenly that it was Ahab they were running from. Ahab had come to save him! John pushed himself to his knees,

looking around for Danny. Maybe the lost jacket didn't mean anything at all....

The king scrambled toward where Polly was trying to yank herself out of the grip of three yowling goblins. He was hooting and yipping waving the doughnut monocle in one hand and the sticks-and-rags crown in the other. Just then Danny ran out of the darkness at the back of the cavern. He waded straight across the top of the treasure, knocking helter skelter through the goblins.

The king tried to shove the crown onto Polly's head and to hurry her toward the cavern door, but Danny leaped from atop a pile of treasure and landed on his back and the two of them stumbled forward as Polly pulled free of the king's grasp. The king threw his hands out to catch himself, and the doughnut monocle flew into the air, turning over and over in the glow of the torches so that a kaleidoscope of green light flashed and flared on the cavern walls.

John leaped for it: he took one step up onto a wooden crate of treasure and threw himself into the air, reaching upward. His fingers touched the twirling stick. He closed his hand over it as he fell, rolling into a gunnysack stuffed with dead fish and jumping straight to his feet. With his free hand he picked up the sack, spilling out fish, and twirled it around and around his head, aiming to throw it at the pack of goblins that were rushing to help the king.

Ahab's furious barking filled the air as he ran in circles around the kettle, chasing goblins. The kettle rocked and shuddered, and black water and fish skeletons and no end of jewelry and dead leaves and bones and muck washed over the side, hitting the floor with a whoosh of boiling steam. John let go of the bag, and it flew out of his hand like a meteor. But instead of bowling over the mob of goblins, it sailed straight toward the kettle, which was just then rocking forward and spilling out a dark wave of goblin brew, dangerously close to crashing down from its rocky shelf.

The bag hit the side of the kettle with a wet *whump*. The kettle tilted, balancing on edge for one long moment, and then dropped to the floor and cracked to pieces like an iron Humpty Dumpty. The spindly little stand that held the fishbowl was knocked flying. The fishbowl itself flew like a ball through the uprushing steam, high overhead toward the back of the cavern where it shattered against the rock wall.

A great cry went up from the goblins and at the same time a billow of cold fog whirled from the broken kettle and from the lake of dark water on the floor. Jewels began to pop and snap like ice cracking, and the fog rose so thick and dense that it began to rain little crystal droplets of cold glass.

John ran toward the broken fishbowl and so did Polly. Danny whistled for Ahab, and then took off in the same direction, away from the goblin king, who covered his head with both hands, leaping and dancing as if the falling droplets were bumblebees.

John snatched a burning torch from its niche in the wall and waved it over the ground. The marbles were gone. Shards of fishbowl glass lay everywhere, but on the smooth rock floor of the cavern there wasn't a single marble to be seen. At first he thought they had vanished, but then, from the direction of the overturned kettle, eight little marbles came rolling in a line, right past the toe of Danny's shoe and straightaway down the dark tunnel.

"There they go!" John said, pointing at the marbles as they rolled past and disappeared into the darkness. But he could see that these were smaller than the fishbowl marbles – a couple were pee-wees, as tiny as the eyes of a fish. They were marbles out of the kettle, partly boiled away. Everyone set out running, following after them, John carrying the torch in one hand and the doughnut monocle in the other. Faster and faster the marbles rolled, downhill now in a neat little line.

"They're heading for the door!" Danny shouted, and just about then they rounded the last bend in the tunnel and the door appeared ahead of them, still wide open, the sun shining through and the green grass of the hillside visible beyond. John tossed the torch away. He wouldn't need it now.

Already the marbles were gaining speed, pulling ahead. They rolled straight out through the open door, down the trail that led to the sea. And no more than twenty feet ahead of them rolled another line of marbles, maybe a hundred of them, glinting in the sunshine. It was the marbles out of the broken fishbowl. They bounced and leaped, hopping over stones and twigs.

It was no use trying to keep up. John was out of breath. Danny and Ahab passed him, and he quit running. Clearly they weren't going to catch up with the marbles. Polly quit running too, and walked along beside him. It was then that John looked around and saw the house on the ocean. He stopped in his tracks and stared at it.

It was his house; there could be no doubt about that. He looked at the wild and lonesome scenery roundabout, and at Mr. Deener slowly sweeping the front walk with a broom, and at the marbles racing downhill toward him, and at the empty ocean stretching away as far as he could see.

"That is my house," he said to Polly.

"I don't think so," she said. "I think it's Mr. Deener's house."

CHAPTER 16

In the House of Dreams

They found Mrs. Barlow in the garden, sitting on the bench alone. Her head leaned on her hand, as if she was weary and sad. The bag of doughnuts lay in the dirt among broken pieces of clinker flower. The full moon shone overhead, flat and white like a painting on vast sheet of blue window glass.

“It’s all up with the Deener,” she said to them. “His head’s as dense as a cabbage.”

“Does he have the bag of memories?” Polly asked. “He hasn’t thrown them into the ocean, has he?”

“Oh, he’s still got them all right,” Mrs. Barlow said. “He walks to the edge of the ocean and stands there staring. Then he walks back into the house. He’s done that three times. I spoke to him, but he won’t say a thing. He just stares, like his head’s already lost in fog. Maybe he used to listen to me a little bit. I thought he did. Not now, though. Not anymore. You can shout in his ear, but the words just rattle around in his head like rocks in a can. And he’s...she’s...”

Mrs. Barlow couldn’t finish the sentence. Her breath caught in her throat. She shook her head and tried again. “There’s the clinker ghost of poor Velma Deener inside.”

Polly put her hand on Mrs. Barlow’s shoulder. “We’ll talk to him,” she said. “Don’t worry. Maybe we can still make him see.”

She shook her head. “He’s lost in magic,” she said, gesturing toward the house and the ocean. “He’s stupid with it. He meddled with it so long that his brain turned into moonbeams and toadstools. He’s a hopeless old fool, and so am I. I’ve plumb run out.”

“Well I haven’t,” Danny said. “I’m going in there.”

“And I’m going with you,” John said. His brother’s eyes seemed suddenly to be smouldering, just like when he had stared down Harvey Chickel in the driveway – when was it? Day before yesterday? It seemed like the distant past. “Let’s go,” he said, and with Danny, Ahab, and Polly following he led the way around the side of the house.

Henny-penny men hovered outside the windows, looking into the kitchen, their leaves darting this way and that way through the air, Mrs. Deener worked at the counter inside, washing dishes in a sink overflowing with pink soap bubbles. The bubbles rose from the sink and drifted straight through the windows even though they were closed tight, as if the window glass was simply another one of Mr. Deener’s illusions. The

henny-pennies sailed their leaves into the glass trying to get through, but the leaves bounced off, and the soap bubbles popped roundabout the little men, answering them with pink drops.

Mr. Deener himself crouched on the walk in front of the house. It was a little concrete path that ended on the weedy beach. An old broom was tilted against a hibiscus bush with big orange flowers on it, and half the path was swept clean. The line of fishbowl marbles lay in the grass, bumped up against the edge of the walk, and Mr. Deener, wearing a beatup old hat on his head, held the bag of memories open in his hand, one by one picking up the marbles and putting them into the bag with the others. The bag rattled and jumped as if it were full of live mice, and Mr. Deener's face seemed to shift and squinch up and leap around with it, like the face of a man being stung by bees.

From the front yard, it was clear that something was wrong with the house, something off-key, like goblin music. A misty sort of ghost light swirled around it, and the windows themselves seemed one moment to be glass, with sunlight shining off the panes, and the next moment to be dark, empty air, like the shadows of windows. Smoke tumbled up out of the chimney like steam out of a kettle.

Mr. Deener didn't even see them. He tied off the mouth of the bag, then turned and looked for a moment at the ocean. Like the moon in the sky, the sea looked like a painting on a window, and it seemed to John as if shadows moved beneath its surface – maybe the shadows of vast, dark whales, or maybe the shadows of evening traffic moving along the roads and avenues of another world.

Mr. Deener swung the bag in his hand, and for a moment John thought that he was going to pitch it into the sea. Then, without a glance in their direction, he walked into the house and shut the door, taking the marble bag with him. Ahab lay down on the lawn then and put his head on his paws. When John and Danny and Polly walked up onto the porch he didn't follow, but turned around and ran back up along the side of the house toward where they had left Mrs. Barlow.

John knocked on the door. The knock echoed through the house like the tolling of a clock. He could barely feel the door if its insides had against his knuckles. The wood was papery, as if it had been eaten by termites. A minute passed and nothing happened.

John knocked again, harder, and Polly shouted, "It's us, uncle Deener. We've come for a visit!"

There was the sound of footsteps. The door swung open and there stood Mr. Deener. He seemed barely to recognize them. He didn't smile,

and he didn't look like a happy man.

"We were just out taking a walk," Danny said.

"First rate," Mr. Deener said. "What a capital idea. A good day for it." He started to shut the door, but Danny put his foot in the way. Mr. Deener smashed his face up, pulling his head down into his collar, as if he were going to have one of his fits.

"Won't you let us in, uncle Deener?" Polly asked.

"I know that voice," Mr. Deener said, opening one eye. "Is it really Miss Polly?"

"Of course it is," John said. "You remember Polly. It's us, too – the Kraken brothers."

Mr. Deener looked hard at John. "What an absurd name," he said. "I don't remember it."

"Yes you do," Danny said. "Try."

"I remember...what I choose to remember," Mr. Deener said. "You can come in for a moment, but don't touch anything. No mud on the carpet, if you don't mind, and no fingerprints on the window glass. I can't offer you anything to eat, I'm afraid."

He swung the door open and let them in. Mrs. Deener moved back and forth in the kitchen, appearing and then disappearing, first at the counter, then at the kitchen table, then at the counter again. She didn't seem to know they were there. She wore an apron and yellow potholder gloves, which she shoved into the sink full of soapy dishes.

In the living room the furniture was covered with doilies, and there were flowers in a vase on the table. They weren't any kind of flowers that John had seen before, and when he sniffed them, they didn't smell like anything at all. Up close they looked as if they were made from cobweb or had been spun out of moonlight. Almost nothing in the house was really solid or was quite the right color. It was a ghost house, through and through, and it was dim and dark inside, like an aging memory.

"Nice flowers," John said, gesturing with the doughnut monocle at the vase.

Mr. Deener seemed to see the monocle for the first time, he turned his face away, as if he didn't like the look of it. "Won't look through it," he said.

"No one's asking you to," Danny said, and John shook his head at his brother. There was no use being impolite. Mr. Deener was like a piece of thread pulled very tight. Another little yank and he'd snap.

John put the monocle behind his back, and Mr. Deener sat down in a big, comfortable-looking chair, holding the bag of memories on his lap.

The chair seemed real enough, more solid than anything else in the room. Maybe that was because he had known it so well. He had sat in it ten thousand times, so he remembered it clearly. His eyes stared out the window now, toward the sea. The walls of the house didn't keep the sea breeze out very well at all.

After a moment John realized that Mr. Deener wasn't going to say anything.

"So you've moved out here?" John said.

"I've moved back home," said Mr. Deener. He said it in a flat sort of voice, almost an echo. There didn't seem to be anything much left inside him. He was like the flowers on the table. He had the appearance of Mr. Deener, but everything that ought to have been inside him had leaked out, into the marbles and goblins and henny-pennies.

Mrs. Deener came into the room. She was pleasant looking and smiling, still wearing the yellow potholder gloves. But she didn't seem to see anybody but Mr. Deener. He took the plate of food she gave him and said thank you, and then he put it down on the little table next to his chair. It was pork chops and mashed potatoes and cauliflower. All of it was covered with gravy that was perfectly white.

Mr. Deener scooped up a fork full of potatoes and poked it at his mouth. The potatoes blinked away and were gone, just like that, into nothing. He nodded, though, as if he liked the mouthful of air that he had eaten, and he forked up some cauliflower, which also disappeared. He had the look on his face of someone who hadn't eaten in ten years, but who had suddenly remembered how food used to taste, back in the good old days.

He cleaned his plate that way. When he was done there wasn't even a spot of gravy left. It was cleaner even than if Ahab had been at it. Mrs. Deener came back in and took the plate away, and Mr. Deener said the food was "delicious." Then he went back to staring out the window.

"Come with us" Polly said.

Mr. Deener sat staring, his mind gone to the moon. "I'm home," he said finally. "I've come home to stay."

"Mrs. Barlow's been making doughnuts," Danny said.

"Mrs. Barlow?" said Mr. Deener, as if he barely remembered Mrs. Barlow, maybe from a dream.

"Yeah," John said. "You remember Mrs. Barlow – cakes, doughnuts, cookies, pies...."

Mr. Deener didn't say anything for a long minute. Then he said, "I...I used to like a doughnut."

“Let’s all go for a nice walk,” Polly said. “We’ll find you a doughnut.”

Mr. Deener didn’t budge.

“Mrs. Deener could come along,” said John. “Maybe she’d like to come up to Aunt Flo’s for dessert.”

Mr. Deener seemed to be made of stone. They could hear the sound of running water and of plates clanking together in the sink.

“We were hoping to have another go at the moon ladder,” John said. “Or maybe you could try something else. I know, maybe you could make a flying carpet or build a moon car out of tin cans or something.”

“Or maybe we could skate home on doughnut grease,” Danny said. “Maybe we could all put on nightshirts and catch dead fish out of a dead river. What did you do that was so bad, anyway? Why don’t you just forget about it?”

Mr. Deener’s eyes were shut. Out in the kitchen, Mrs. Deener suddenly started to sing. She got the words wrong, started over, and then got the words wrong again. Mr. Deener squished his face up, looking as if he were going to pop. Suddenly there was a furious clanking noise from the sink as if an octopus were washing dishes, banging them all together at once. A tea kettle started to whistle. Pan lids rattled. Cupboard doors opened and closed with a bang. There was an orchestra of kitchen noises, and Mrs. Deener’s voice, singing like a madwoman.

“There’s nobody in the kitchen!” Danny shouted in a voice even louder than all of Mrs. Deener’s noises. “There isn’t even a kitchen!”

Mr. Deener smashed himself into his chair, remembering harder and harder. All at once there was the smell of flowers in the room, and the bouquet on the table stirred just a little, as if in a wind. The whole house was growing more solid. Colors were brightening. The tea kettle screeched. Suddenly they could hear heavy footsteps in the bedroom. It was Mrs. Deener in there too, moving around. There she was again, sewing something in the den. She was here, she was there – disappearing in one room, reappearing in another. The whole house, and Mr. Deener too, seemed ready to boil over.

Suddenly, without warning, Danny snatched the bag of memories off Mr. Deener’s lap, turned around, and ran toward the front door.

CHAPTER 17

The End of Mrs. Deener

“What!” Mr. Deener shouted, leaping from his chair and holding onto his hat. “Stop! Thief!” He gestured helplessly and took a half step forward.

Danny pulled open the door and stood there, ready to run. "Come on and get them!" he shouted, holding up the bag.

"Yeah!" John said. "Go get him, Mr. Deener!"

Polly grabbed Mr. Deener's arm and tugged on it, trying to pull him forward. "Don't be a chicken!" she yelled. "Don't just give up!"

But all of the fire went out of Mr. Deener's eyes, and he slumped back down in the chair like a heap of wet ashes and began muttering. The smell of the flowers faded, the tea kettle hissed and fell silent, the light in the room dimmed.

Mrs. Deener floated out of the kitchen, drifting past them like an air-borne jellyfish. Her feet were three or four inches from the floor. Her head was cocked over sideways and her eyes were nearly closed. She sailed in through the den door, and John heard her bumping around among pieces of furniture. There was a heavy *thud*, as if she had knocked finally into the wall.

Out over the sea the sun turned dark. The house fell into shadow. John could see stars shining overhead, right through the ceiling – stars that were perfectly round, like glass marbles, like holes cut out of a black paper sky.

After a time, Mr. Deener began to hum. He sat up a bit straighter, and his fingers traced patterns on the arm of his chair. Slowly the darkness lifted. He hummed louder. The sun shone again. The walls of the house turned solid. The stars disappeared. He began to sing a song without words, but with a lot of tum-tee, tum-tee, tums. The tea kettle started up and Mrs. Deener reappeared in the den door, still floating, but with her eyes wide open now. She waved her potholder-covered hands like a dancing puppet as she headed back in toward the kitchen. Her jaw clacked up and down, and a hollow-sounding noise came out of her throat.

"Would...you...like...sup-per...Art-ty?" she croaked, hovering in the air behind his chair. "Some...nice...white...grave-ey...and...spuds?"

Mr. Deener nodded happily and said, "Why, yes, my dear," without looking around, and she drifted on into the kitchen where pots and pans immediately began clanking and the oven door banged open and shut like the windblown doors in the cave with the shadow in it. "I love a mashed spud," Mr. Deener said, smacking his lips.

"Let's get out of here," John said. He shuddered. This was worse than he had imagined. They weren't going to talk Mr. Deener into anything. His head was full of pond water, like one of the jars out on the back lawn.

"Come on," John said, and he and Polly went out through the door, following Danny. "I've got an idea," he said when they were out on the front

walk again.

“Good,” Danny said. “What is it? I hope it’s not a moon car built out of tin cans again. That was one of the dumbest....”

“Nevermind that,” John said “I’ll show you what it is.” He headed around the side of the house, toward the back yard where Mrs. Barlow’s china plates were lined up on the lawn, one after another. “Watch this,” he said, and he jumped on one of the plates, cracking it in half. He knew what needed to be done. Mr. Deener didn’t need his sympathy any more. Mr. Deener didn’t need anybody’s sympathy. Mrs. Barlow was right. He needed someone to shout into his ear and wake him up.

“All right!” Danny said. “Now you’re talking!” And he swung the flour bag full of marbles, knocking apart the pyramid of jars.

Polly picked up a plate and zingged it off across the lawn and into the ocean, and John kicked another like a football. Danny picked up two more and banged them together like cymbals. They went after the rest of the bottles of pond water and mint tea next, unscrewing the lids and dumping water out onto the lawn. Right then Ahab came running from the woods. There were a dozen henny-pennies on his back. Two more rode on his head, steering him by pulling on his ears. They ran through a glass bowl full of green cheese, knocking it flying, then kicked over the jars of glass chips. Other henny-pennies threw stones at mirrors and glass bottles and swung like apes on the strings of prisms until they came clattering down in a heap.

Mrs. Barlow got up from her bench to help. “That’s it!” she shouted. “Wreck the house! *We’ll* fix his wagon! *We’ll* clean his plow!” She picked up the last whole plate and held onto it, keeping it safe while she watched the rest of them destroy Mr. Deener’s apparatus.

The web of light that encircled the house shimmered and shuddered. The air was full of the noise of tea kettles and slamming cupboard doors. Pink soap bubbles poured out of every window, bursting in the air. The chimney faded and vanished, and the roof along with it. The garage blinked away. The windows were nothing but dark holes, and the wood siding on the house seemed to crumble into termite dust and blow away on the sea wind.

In the space of a few moments, the whole house was gone, and Mr. Deener sat smashed into his favorite chair, holding onto the stuffed arms of the thing as if he were holding onto a rowboat on a tossing sea. The ghost of Mrs. Deener drifted back and forth where the kitchen had been, moving her arms as if she were still opening cupboard doors and stirring pans on the stove.

Slowly she lost all color and substance, and the grass and sky and sea shone through her. There was a small pop, like the bursting of one last soap bubble, and then there was nothing left of her but an apron and two potholders floating over the meadow.

CHAPTER 18

The Marbleston Pie

The sea wind caught the apron and the potholders and blew them away over the treetops like leaves, and the last little bits of Mrs. Deener were gone. For some reason Mrs. Barlow was crying again. A half hour ago she had been sad that Mrs. Deener had come back; now she seemed to be sad that Mrs. Deener was gone. She looked out at where Mr. Deener sat alone in the wind, heaved a great sigh, wiped her eyes, and took the bag of memories from Danny.

"I've been saving them up," she said, looking into the bag, "so that the Deener can one day have them back, when he's ready for them. Maybe I kept them too long." She caught sight then of the doughnut monocle in John's hand and asked, "What's that thing?"

"That's what's left of the magic spectacles," John said, holding it in the air like a sceptre. "We took it from the goblins."

"Keep it safe," she said. "We might need it yet."

"Let me carry it," Danny said, taking the doughnut monocle. John let him have it without arguing.

Mrs. Barlow stood thinking, then held the bag of memories up and looked at it, then stood thinking again. Finally she shrugged her shoulders and pointed at the ocean. "Fetch me a pile of periwinkles off the rocks. And while you're at it, bring me the Deener's hat. I'll get things going back in the woods. We'll give it one last try." She walked away then, still deep in thought.

"His hat?" Danny said to John.

"Periwinkles?" Polly asked.

John shrugged. Mr. Deener sat now on top of a moss-covered rock in the grass. His chair was gone. His eyes were still smashed shut. His hair stuck straight out under the brim of his hat. The henny-pennies landed on his shoulders and tugged on his ears. One of them climbed up onto his nose and pushed one of his eyelids open as if he were opening a garage door. Ahab licked his face.

"Mr. Deener!" John shouted.

He wouldn't budge.

The henny-pennies yammered at him with their tiny voices, and Mr. Deener clapped his hands over his ears, nearly squashing one of the little men. He kept his hands there, pressing out the sound of their yelling.

They swarmed around, shouting “Deener! Deener! Deener!” but Mr. Deener might as well have been a lump of painted chalk.

The wind blew off the ocean, and the sun and the moon hung in the sky, unmoving. It was as if the world was stopped dead. Goblin steam rose out of the hilltop behind them, and the door to the caves stood open. There was a rumbling back in the hills, as if the ground was unsettled, and the sound of the waves rose and faded as if it came from a radio and someone were turning the volume up and down. The land passed in and out of shadow, even though there were no clouds in the sky. Mr. Deener sat there as ever, seeing and hearing nothing. Mrs. Barlow waved at them from up at the edge of the forest. She pointed to her head.

“Oh, yeah,” John said, “his hat.” He shrugged, there was no use asking for it. He simply reached out and took it.

Mr. Deener clapped his hand to his head, but it was too late. When his ear was uncovered, the henny-pennies yammered at him like little pieces of his conscience, giving him advice. He closed his ears and sat unmoving again, his eyes mashed shut, as if all his magic had turned him at last into stone and he would sit forever here at the edge of the ocean, at the uttermost end of all things.

Polly stepped down toward the water, walking out among the black rocks along the shore. John and Danny followed, carrying the hat, and together they plucked periwinkles off the rocks and dropped them in until the hat was full. The periwinkles looked like black snails. Waves rolled up to their feet, never quite touching them, and then soaked away into the sand. The rocks and sand stayed dry, as if the water wasn’t water at all, but was just a dark and restless shadow.

They carried the hat up the beach, walking past Mr. Deener. Even the henny-pennies had deserted him. Mrs. Barlow worked in the weedy garden. She had kicked aside the pieces of clinker flower and scooped a hole out of the dirt, then lined the hole with rocks. Henny-penny men flew back and forth through the forest trees, gathering up twigs and dried leaves and dumping them into the hole. The flour sack lay empty nearby along with the plate that Mrs. Deener had saved from destruction.

“Where did the marbles go?” Danny asked, handing her the hat full of periwinkles.

She nodded at a round bundle lying against a fallen log. It was her apron, gathered around the marbles, the apron strings tying it closed.

“We’re going to bake the Deener one last pie,” she said.

“A periwinkle pie?” John asked. It sounded horrible, especially when there was a basket full of doughnuts to eat.

“Nope,” Mrs. Barlow said. “We’ll bake him a marbleston pie. It’s like a cottleston pie, only it’s stuffed with marbles instead of cottles.”

“What’s a cottle?” Polly asked.

“Nobody knows,” Mrs. Barlow said, dumping the periwinkles into the flour sack. She winked, closing up the top of the bag and hefting it in her hand. “Just heavy enough,” she said. “Now, give me that basket of doughnuts.”

John opened the doughnut basket that Mrs. Barlow had brought down from the house. She took out the doughnuts one by one, smashing them flat between her hands and then laying them into the hat, one over the other until the inside was lined with flattened doughnuts. Danny lit a fire in the pit, and he and Polly threw sticks onto the fire until it was burning. Mrs. Barlow said that they would want hot coals and not flames, so they let the fire burn down until the bottom of the pit was red and glowing.

They found a round flat rock that they laid carefully over the coals, and Mrs. Barlow set the doughnut-lined hat upside down on the rock and poured all of the fishbowl marbles into it. Then she flattened more doughnuts, laying them over the marbles like the top crust of a pie. After soaking her apron in cold water, she folded it up and laid it over the crust, spread an inch of dirt on it, and then heaped hot coals on top so that the pie would cook evenly, from top to bottom.

Soon the pie started to smoke, and there was the terrible smell of burning hat. Voices mumbled out from inside it, rising and falling, gobbling and yammering, shouting snatches of words that made no sense but were full of pain and regret and sadness.

Shapes appeared in the rising smoke. The ghostly outlines of old automobiles and faces swirled up into the air, stretching and pulling themselves into smoky wreaths in the sea wind. The gray images of plates of food and of radios and television sets rose like spirits from a grave. The shapes of houses and trees and shoes and fishing poles wisped out, followed by a furry-looking dog with no tail. The dog seemed to look out at the ocean, and as if he suddenly saw Mr. Deener sitting out there alone, he opened his mouth in a silent bark before disappearing forever in the air over the forest.

Flames licked up along the sides of the hat, and the brim suddenly caught fire like a burning wheel. The marbles inside glowed like a hot red circle, and the smoke poured out, streaming up into the sky.

“Done,” Mrs. Barlow said at last. She shoved two sticks into the flames, one on either side of the hat, and lifted it out of the pit. The burning brim fell away onto the ground, and John stamped it out in the dirt.

“All the pie that’s fit to eat,” Mrs. Barlow said. “Enough is as good as a piece. Hand me that plate.”

Danny did, and Mrs. Barlow set the plate on top of the pie and then flipped the whole thing over so that the pie sat on the plate with the round side up. Mr. Deener’s hat was a wreck, what was left of it. She pulled fragments of it away from the doughnut crust, which was scorched black in the spots where the hat had burned through. Finally the pie sat there finished, round on top, like the hill with the caves in it, exactly the size and shape of Mr. Deener’s head. Hot marbles shone from between the rings of doughnut crust.

“We’ll let it cool for a bit,” Mrs. Barlow said. “Some pies are good hot, but this isn’t one of ‘em.”

“What are we going to do with it?” John asked, kicking dirt in to the pit full of hot coals in order to put out the fire.

“We’re going to feed it to the Deener,” Mrs. Barlow said.

CHAPTER 19

The Deener Blows His Top

Out on the front lawn, Mrs. Barlow put down the basket with the pie in it. Ahab lay down next to it, as if to guard it, and Mrs. Barlow shook the flour sack in Mr. Deener’s face. The periwinkles inside clattered together like marbles. Mr. Deener’s hand shot out and he grabbed the sack, quick as a snake striking, as if someone would try to snatch it away again.

“Mine,” he said.

“That’s right Deener,” Mrs. Barlow told him. “They’re yours. Time’s wasting. What’ll it be?”

“It’ll be mirrors and smoke,” Mr. Deener said. “The world is mirrors and smoke. Now the mirrors are broken and the smoke has blown away on the wind. There’s nothing left but to throw these into the deep ocean. Nothing else left.”

“We’re left,” Danny said.

“Nothing’s left!” He shook his head, his eyes clamped tightly shut. “I’ve made a hash of it. Breaking things up and casting them away. I had choices to make. Too many choices. I want to rest from them. No more choices. No more questions.”

He swung the bag slowly, back and forth, listening to the periwinkles

clacking inside. For a long time he said nothing. Then, with a sigh, he said, "I loved her. That was worth something."

"It was worth everything," Mrs. Barlow said.

"And yet I betrayed her."

"You betrayed yourself. In your heart, Deener, you don't have any enemies except yourself. Quit pulling your own hair out. Love was worth everything, wasn't it? Do you think you've used it up? You can't use it up. Blame isn't worth dirt. It's a fraud. But you keep carrying it around, like a fifty dollar bill. All this idiot magic, and you still haven't got rid of it. That's what you want to throw away, Deener – the blame."

"Then I'll truly have nothing," Mr. Deener said.

"You'll still have your memories," Polly said. "The good ones. And you can get more good ones."

"And you'll have us," John said.

"That's right," Danny said. "you'll have us as friends. That's a start."

But he shook his head as if he wasn't convinced, as if it was too late for starting. He had tried to give away all the old memories, all the old regrets, but he was still holding them in his hand, tied up in a sack. He rattled the bag again, listening to the clacking from inside. "Sounds like a lot of old bones," he said.

Abruptly he stood up, planting his feet widely, as if the sea wind would knock him over. He opened his eyes a little, squinting out at the ocean. The sun dimmed and the sky grew dark. The wind blew fiercely, and the cries of the unseen seagulls were drowned by the sound of pounding surf, Waterspouts rose and fell beyond the waves, barely visible now in the twilight.

Taking the flour sack in both hands, he swung it slowly in a circle around his head. There was the sound of a low *whump, whump, whump*, as it passed through the air. The black waves rolled in toward shore over the murky rocks, higher and higher, as if within Mr. Deener himself a shadow was rising that would fill him with darkness. Around and around the sack swung as the sky grew darker and the ocean rose over the beach.

Suddenly Danny raised his hands as if he would grab the sack away, and John cried, "No!" at Danny and Mr. Deener both.

The sound of his voice seemed to break the spell. The spinning sack slowed, the tide fell away, the sun shone again. Mr. Deener let the sack fall at his feet. He looked utterly worn out, like a man come home at last from a dark journey. Suddenly he began to cry, and he hugged Polly to him. His glasses fogged up from the crying. He took them off and wiped them with the hem of his coat. Then he kicked the memory bag with the toe of his

shoe. The bag flew open, and periwinkles rolled out of it.

Mr. Deener looked at them, horrified. "They've rotted!" he cried. "Black and rotten! I've waited too long!"

"They're just periwinkles," Danny said, picking one up. "See. It was just a bag full of snails."

"*Snails*," Mr. Deener said flatly, taking the winkle from Danny and looked closely at it. "All my memories have turned into black snails." He looked around, trying to make sense of things.

"No they didn't," Danny said. "We tricked you."

"It tricked you, too," John said to Danny. "You were going to grab the sack, weren't you? You were going to stop him from throwing it away."

"Of course I was going to stop him," Danny said.

"What about what you said, about him making his own choices?"

"So it was a stupid choice. What can I say? And he didn't choose that anyway, did he?"

"Black crawling things," Mr. Deener said, bending over and poking at the periwinkles in the sand.

"You passed the test," John said to him. "You didn't throw everything away. It doesn't matter what was in the bag."

"That's right," Mrs. Barlow said. "Let's eat." And then, as if by accident, she reached across and knocked Mr. Deener's glasses off his nose, saying, "Oh my!" The glasses fell on top of the scattered periwinkles. Immediately Mrs. Barlow stomped her foot down on the glasses, and the hard shells cracked them to pieces. "I *am* sorry!" she said, as Mr. Deener groped after them. He held up the empty frames and wiggled his fingers through them.

Just then Mrs. Barlow opened the basket and took out the plate with the marbleston pie on it. It was maybe the awfulest looking piece of food that John had ever seen, all patchy and burnt and with melted sugar glaze from the doughnuts bubbled up through the marbles like dried slime.

Mr. Deener looked closely at it, blinking his eyes rapidly. "It looks..." he started to say. "I mean, without my glasses..."

Mrs. Barlow winked at Danny, who pulled the doughnut monocle out of his pocket. "Try mine," Danny said, slipping the monocle in front of Mr. Deener's face.

"I say!" Mr. Deener said, peering at the pie through the monocle. "Cherry! Fat as anything too, and with a crust like a cloud."

Vapor rose out of the pie, curling in a wispy line through the green glass lens in the monocle. Mr. Deener breathed deeply, smacking his lips. "Delicious!" he said. To John the pie smelled like something out of an incinerator. "I'm as hungry as two dogs!" he said. Then he looked at Ahab

and said, "No offense."

"Then don't wait for company, Deener," Mrs. Barlow said. "Dip in."

While Danny held the monocle, Mr. Deener scooped out a handful of pie and took a huge bite, chomping it down and making a terrible crunching noise. "Mmm," he said, as if he hadn't eaten anything that good in years. He paused for a moment to dislodge something that was stuck in his teeth, then went back to eating.

He scooped out another piece, and then another, and as he gobbled it all down, Mrs. Barlow nodded and smiled, very happy with herself.

"Filling," Mr. Deener said, pausing for a moment. "Very rich."

"Nutritious," Mrs. Barlow said. "Have another little dab."

He ate another piece, chewing very slowly now. The pie was almost gone. A few more marbles lay in the bottom among broken pieces of crust. He put his hand on his stomach and groaned a little, then sat down on the rock again and waved the pie away.

"I'm full," he said. "Not another bite."

"Nonsense," Mrs. Barlow said. "I've seen you eat pies twice this size. One more little nibble?" She gathered the last bits of the pie together in her fingers and shoved them into Mr. Deener's mouth. Then she wiggled his chin up and down, making him chew them up. "That's right," she said, "down they go."

Mr. Deener swallowed, then staggered backward as if he'd been punched in the stomach. "Ooh!" he groaned. "I've got a bellyache." He passed his hand in front of his eyes, then held it out in front of him as if he didn't quite know what it was. His eyes shot open, and a look of puzzlement came into his face, like a sleepwalker just waking up. His face began to bounce and twitch. He clutched his forehead with both hands and strode out toward the ocean, kicking through the shallow water until he was waist deep. "Cold!" he shouted. "Cold!" His arms jerked helplessly and his head bobbed up and down.

"He's digesting them," Mrs. Barlow said.

Polly nodded. "I don't think they agree with him," she said.

"They give him the fantods," Mrs. Barlow said. "I wish I had a bi-carb to give him."

Mr. Deener hooted something at the sky. His arms waved around his head like a windmill, and he came skipping back up into shallow water, his wet pants clinging to his legs. The waves sucked out to sea, leaving him high and dry. Hundreds of fish flopped around his feet, their scales glittering like jewels in the sunshine. Another wave washed through, rolling up around Mr. Deener's knees, clutching at him, trying to drag him backward

as it rushed away seaward again. He grabbed his stomach, reeling up the beach toward dry sand and making a fearful moaning noise.

“I think they’re making him sick,” Danny said.

“If only he can keep them down...” Mrs. Barlow started to say, but just then came a tremendous explosion from behind them, like a volcano erupting. The ground shook, and there was a tearing noise and a sound like an enormous tea kettle going off, louder and louder and louder until the whistling filled the air like the sound of the wind at the end of the world.

And then, as if the earth were blowing its top, the entire hill of caves flew into the air, end over end, sailing up into the sky on a tremendous, uprushing billow of steam.

CHAPTER 20

The Return of Mr. Deener

The earth beneath the hill looked like an ant colony under glass. Goblins ran this way and that way, up and down sunlit pathways that had once been dark tunnels. The heavy wood and iron doors toppled to the ground in clouds of rusty dust, shaking the earth. Some of the goblins tried to flee into the woods, but fell in the sunshine and simply evaporated into the air, leaving behind them black, goblin-shaped blotches.

A night-dark shadow lay over the ground like a heavy, low fog, right at the center of the hill. It surged back and forth, as if blown by a great wind, and dark swatches of it tore off and blew away, stretching into ghostly heads with wide, gaping mouths and hollow eyes. A terrible moaning noise came from the mouths of the ghosts, and from the shadow on the ground arose the sound of doors slamming, faster and faster and faster. The goblins that were left fled away from it with wild cries that echoed down toward the sea.

John knew what the shadow was; it was the thing he and Polly had seen in the cave. And right then, like the sudden touch of fear and sorrow, something wintry-cold and dark ran through him. His heart beat in his chest, and he threw his hands in front of his face. Ahab howled. Mr. Deener shouted one long, drawn-out, “Noooo!”

At the sound of Mr. Deener’s voice, the shadow tumbled up into the air like dirty smoke. For a moment the moon was blotted out and there sounded a thin and distant cry, like the windy shriek of a goblin flute. John put down his hands. The fear and the sorrow had passed away, swallowed by the moon. The sky was clear.

There was nothing left of the caves but toppled doors and the crawling shapes of the last few goblins. Like bad dreams, the goblins faded and vanished. The stony pathways disappeared, and the hundreds of wood and iron doors blinked away with a sound like the faint and distant popping of soap bubbles.

Where once the caves had stood, green grass billowed in the wind. At the far edge of the grass stood the fountain, with the oak woods rising behind it. Water flowed from the fountain now, and the sunlight shone on the spray as it blew away on the breeze. Beyond the fountain and woods lay the meadow, and beyond that stood the house with its diamond-paned windows and its weather vane like the skeleton of a fish.

John thought suddenly of Kimberly's treasure can, and the words written on it: "East, West, Home's Best," and he knew that what he was looking at now, from down at the edge of the sea, was the very scene that was painted on the lid of the can. Right then it seemed to him that he could see the window again, hanging small and distant over the meadow.

Mr. Deener lay on his back, staring at the sky. Sycamore leaves lay scattered on the ground roundabout him, but there wasn't a henny-penny man to be seen. Mrs. Barlow took his hand and rubbed it, and he blinked his eyes and sat up.

"It is a brand new day," he said, looking around. Then he stretched and yawned and said, "My heart feels like an alligator."

"Good man," Mrs. Barlow said. "How's your stomach?"

"Never better," he said.

"Teeth loose?"

"What?" he asked. "Why should my teeth be loose? I have the teeth of a hippopotamus." Then he winked at John and scratched his head. He stood up. "I've been thinking about the car built of tin cans," he said. "I believe you to be a man of science, and with your help I think we can build the thing, although I'm not certain we can get to the moon in it unless we have a driver." He looked hard at Danny.

Danny shrugged. "Sure," he said. "I'll drive."

"Well, that's settled then." Mr. Deener dusted off the seat of his pants. He shook Danny's hand and then shook John's hand. His grip was strong, and his eyes were clear. "I want to thank you both," he said. Then he hugged Polly again and wiped a tear from his eye. "You'll be staying," he told her. "You and Flo." It wasn't a question. He was simply telling the truth.

She nodded and took his arm. Mrs. Barlow took the other one. With John, Danny, and Ahab following, they set off across the grass. Danny car-

ried the doughnut monocle, but they left the basket and pie plate behind, along with the rest of the broken-up apparatus. By the time John remembered it and turned around, the sea had washed across the beach, and all of it was gone. Another wave rolled through, sweeping the beach clean of everything, even rocks. The sound of the seagulls was gone, too, and although the vast ocean still shimmered in the sunshine, it looked flat and still now.

In the dark patches of ground where the goblins had fallen, scattered bits of trash lay in the grass – broken bottles and rusty coat hangers, old clocks and radio tubes, broken phonograph records and scraps of old clothing. Mr. Deener kicked through some of it, as if he might find something useful or memorable there, but he didn't bother to pick any of it up.

Aunt Flo stood on the meadow, shading her eyes with her hand, watching them approach through the grass and wildflowers. The Sleeper lay nearby on his bed, dressed in his nightcap and nightgown. It seemed as if Mr. Deener couldn't quite bring himself to look at the Sleeper. He looked in the other direction, toward the now-distant ocean. It was a faraway look, as if he could still see the little house on the bluffs where he had lived for a time with the ghost of his wife.

“Look,” Danny said, pointing at the bed. Now that they were closer, the Sleeper didn't look like Mr. Deener anymore; he didn't look like a man at all. He was nothing more than a bundle of straw and rags dressed up in night clothes. Like the goblins and the moon ladder and the rest of Mr. Deener's magic, there was nothing to the Sleeper but junk and fakery.

The open window hung over the meadow again. Sunlight glinted from the sea-green glass, and the window curtains blew outward on the breeze. Ahab ran toward it, barking happily. Through it came the smell of cherry pies baking in the oven. The smell seemed almost to knock Mr. Deener over backward. “Pie!” he said.

“In we go,” Mrs. Barlow said, helping Ahab through the window. “Dogs first.” There was the sound of Ahab jumping down into the room, and then he stuck his head back out the window and barked.

“Okay, okay,” John said. There was no time to waste. He boosted himself over the window sill. Ahab licked his face, as if he was so happy to be home that he couldn't help himself; he had to lick something. John pulled himself forward, leaning into the room, trying to wiggle through. Ahab licked him again, and he let go to wipe his face and tumbled down onto the wooden floor.

Just then he heard his mother say something from out in the living-room. It was as if he had never been gone at all. “Hurry,” he said to Danny,

grabbing his arms and dragging him through the window.

“What?” he shouted to his mother. “Just a second.”

“I said did you ask Danny about my Christmas pin?” Her footsteps sounded on the floor of the hall.

Just then Mrs. Barlow appeared in the window. Mr. Deener helped push her from behind. She was a tight fit. John grabbed onto her arms and pulled. Danny dragged the beanbag chair across and under the window just as she popped through, falling face-first into the chair. “Oomph,” she said.

“What on *earth*?” Their mother stood in the hallway, looking in through the open bedroom door. Their father stood behind her. Their mouths were open in disbelief.

“We’re having some friends in,” John said.

“Through the window?” his mother asked. “What’s wrong with the door?”

“You can’t get here through the door,” Danny said, helping Mrs. Barlow out of the chair.

“Pleased to meet you, I’m sure,” she said, smoothing her clothes.

Mr. Deener looked in at the window then. He waved and said hello, and then, without waiting to be invited, he tilted across the window sill, kicking his feet as if he were swimming. Buttons popped off his coat. “Terribly sorry,” he said, falling into the beanbag chair and rolling off onto the floor. “The boy’s right. Door won’t work in this case.” His hair was wild when he stood up, and his coat and vest were pushed up under his armpits.

“Mr. Deener,” he said, by way of introduction, and he put his hand out. “Artemis Deener.” John’s father shook it.

“Artemis Deener?” John’s mother said. “Didn’t you used to....Didn’t we buy....Aren’t you...?”

“That’s entirely correct. I’ve come back. Your sons were kind enough to invite me in. Is that a cherry pie I smell cooking?”

“Deener!” Mrs. Barlow said. “Where’s your manners?”

“In fact it is,” said their mother. “I just put it on the counter to cool. We’d be happy if you’d join us for a piece. We’ve got ice cream too.”

“Tip top,” said Mr. Deener. “Someone fed me a pie a short time back that was apparently full of pits. Gave me the most awful indigestion.” He looked at Mrs. Barlow. “Tasted burnt, too.”

“Where’s Polly?” Danny asked, looking out the window.

John looked past him. What he saw was the front porch, the lawn, the street. Mr. Skink was raking leaves again. Penny the cat climbed the porch steps and jumped up onto the swing. “Aren’t they coming?” John asked.

Mr. Deener shook his head. “Not through the window.”

Danny took the doughnut monocle out of his back pocket. The doughnut fell off the end of the stick. John picked it up and handed it to him, and Danny peered through it, out the window. “Wait,” he shouted, but then was silent, as if there was no point in yelling. After a moment he waved. He handed the monocle to John.

Through it, John could see Aunt Flo and Polly, very far away now. The full moon was like a tiny white marble in the sky. In the hazy distance the hills were green, and the river flowed down onto the meadow, not dry white anymore, but like a blue ribbon. Far away rose what looked like chimney smoke, maybe from unseen farmhouses that had just awakened out of an autumn sleep. As John watched, the whole world beyond the window rushed away from him. Polly waved, and John waved back.

“Who is it?” asked their mother, stepping over to the window.

“Just some friends of ours,” Danny said.

She looked out. “Why that’s Kimberly and Florence Owlswick,” their mother said, and she shut the window and turned the latch.

“We’ll give them a piece of pie, too. There’s enough for everyone.”

“I’ll just let them in, if you don’t mind,” Mr. Deener said, looking past her out the window. John looked too. It *was* Kimberly and her aunt, heading up the walk. What a coincidence. Mr. Deener hurried from the room followed by everyone except John and his mother.

John slipped the doughnut monocle into his jacket pocket. There, lying inside, was the holly berry Christmas pin. He handed it to her.

“Wherever did you find it?” she asked, pinning it on her blouse. “I looked high and low for it.”

John blinked at her, wondering whether to tell her the truth – that he had snatched it off a goblin’s shirt when he was about to be boiled in a kettle full of bones and fog and glass jewelry. Maybe later he’d tell her.

“I found it outside,” he said.

“Outside?” She turned toward the door. A big hubbub was just then starting up in the livingroom over the return of Mr. Deener. “Outside. Isn’t that the strangest thing?”

“I guess it’s one of them,” John said.

CHAPTER 21

What Happened After That

Autumn passed away. Christmas came and went. In January Mr. Deener and Mrs. Barlow got married on a rainy Saturday afternoon and moved into a white wooden house near the library, on Center Street. That spring

Mrs. Barlow opened a doughnut shop where the curiosity shop had been. There had been nothing left in the empty shop but the one dusty green copy of the *Wise Fishermen's Encyclopedia*. She gave the book to John and Danny to keep.

Mr. Deener went into the business of making marbles in his garage. He set up complicated magnifying apparatus in order to heat his glass kiln with moonlight. The sleeping cat from Dr. Stone's office lived in the garage among the jars of colored glass chips. Only it wasn't asleep anymore; it had awakened on the afternoon of their return from the magic land, and Mr. Deener adopted it and was teaching it not to eat sparrows. On that same afternoon the fountain in the plaza had gurgled suddenly to life, as if, like the cat, it too had simply been asleep.

As an experiment one Saturday morning, John, Danny, and Kimberly gave Harvey Chickel some of Mrs. Barlow's doughnuts. At first he pretended he thought they were poisoned, and he wouldn't eat them. Then he forced himself to eat one and said that it "tasted like dirt." Then he ate two more and asked if that was all and got mad when they said it was. He didn't push anybody, though, and he didn't spit.

Instead he went over to the Deeners' house with everyone else, and all of them ate more doughnuts and listened to Mr. Deener explain his theory of tin cans and moon travel. Harvey made the pinwheel sign around his ear a couple of times, but he hung around all afternoon while Mr. Deener showed them how to make the rainbow spiral in a glass marble.

And he showed them how, if you had a clear eye and the right tools, you could learn to make the marbles round every time, as round as a soap bubble or the moon or the hole in a perfect doughnut.

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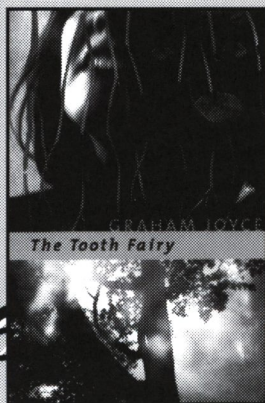
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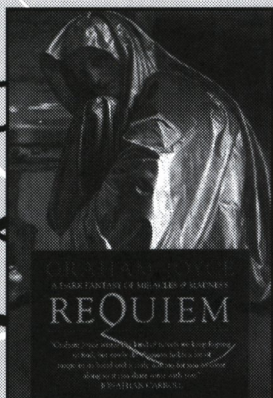
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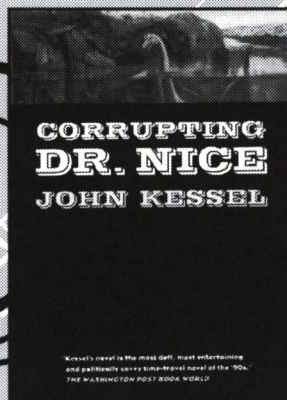
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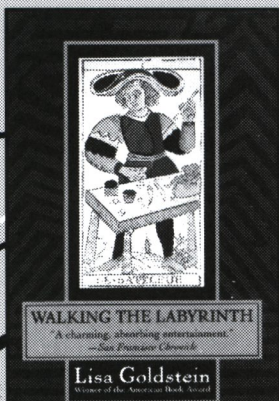


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