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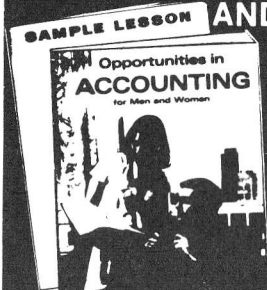


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ALL STORIES NEW AND COMPLETE

NOVEMBER, 1975

Vol. 49, No. 3

49th Year of Publication

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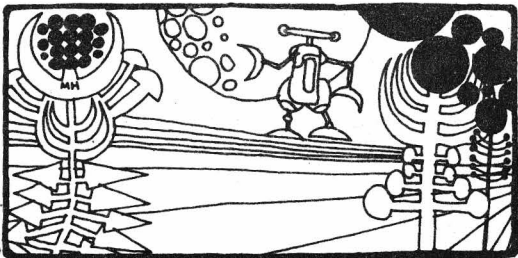
PRINT ADVERTISING REP., INC. Advertising Manager

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AMAZING, Vol. 49, No. 3, November 1975 is published bi-monthly by ULTIMATE PUBLISHING CO. INC., 69-62 230 Street, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364. Editorial office: Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364. \$1.00 a copy. Subscription rates: One year (6 issues) United States and possessions: \$5.00; Canada and Foreign (surface mail): \$6.00; Europe (surface mail): \$7.00; Japan (surface mail): \$8.00; elsewhere (surface mail): \$9.00. Single copies: 25¢. Second class postage paid at Flushing, N.Y., and at additional mailing offices. Copyright 1975 by Ultimate Publishing Co., Inc. All rights reserved. Editorial contributions must be accompanied by return postage and a handling fee of 25¢ and will be handled with reasonable care; however, publisher assumes no responsibility for return or safety of art work, photographs or manuscripts.

**TED
WHITE**

EDITORIAL



This issue I'm turning this space over to my long-time friend and professional rival (we seem to end up competing for the Best Professional Editor Hugo each year . . . but someone else always steals it away from us . . .), Terry Carr. The piece which follows was originally delivered as a speech at the Science Fiction Symposium at Oregon State University on March 5th, 1975, and Terry calls it You've Come A Long Way, Baby.—TW

I WISH I'd been able to arrange to have a screen set up here, and a slide projector, because I'd like to be able to illustrate what I say tonight with pictures. As it is, I guess I'll have to wave my hands a lot.

You know those ads for Virginis Slims cigarettes, the ones that say "You've Come A Long Way, Baby"? They always start with a faked photo from about 1910, done in sepia tone, showing Mrs. Elspeth Suffragette sneaking a cigarette in the wings after the premiere performance of *Rite of Spring*, only to be discovered by her husband, who turns her over his knee and spansks her. Then they go on to show us how much improved women's position is today—a sleek and sexy model stands in the midst of a group of admirers, boldly smoking a cigarette while several of the men try to cop feels on her pack of Virginia

Slims.

Well, I don't know about you, but I find these ads extremely funny, in a black-humor way. What they're really saying is that we've progressed so far in the last 65 years that we now allow women the right to kill themselves however they see fit to do it.

There's been a lot of discussion lately about how science fiction, always in the forefront of western culture, has reflected the growing emancipation of women. People point to writers like Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Pamela Sargent and Vonda McIntyre as examples of how much serious attention we're giving to women authors these days, and they say that the time when male thoughts and male values defined the ideas of science fiction has gone forever. There is, in fact, a lot of truth in that—we've always had women science fiction writers, from Leigh Brackett to Margaret St. Clair to Zenna Henderson, but their acceptance and popularity in science fiction has usually been based on traditional sexist values; i.e., Leigh Brackett was and is such an accomplished writer of adventure stories that she's earned the Ultimate Accolade, "she writes like a man"; Margaret St. Clair broke into science fiction writing stories about a suburban married couple of the future named Oona and Jik, who faced fire prob-

lems like garbage disposals that sucked their whole kitchen into the fourth dimension; and Zenna Henderson has always written stories about rural lady schoolteachers who showed their feminine sensitivity toward telepathic alien children.

Modern sf novels like *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Female Man* are a great step forward, but the suspicion remains that these presentations of non-male consciousness have been so widely accepted by the men in the audience because they just seem like views into the minds of one other kind of alien creature: women. (Years ago James Gunn wrote a story built around the idea that women actually are aliens from another world—after all, women are able to find things their husbands can't, like socks and ties they've misplaced; and women have cold, clammy feet at night in bed.)

Well, it's true that the revolution hasn't completely won out in science fiction, but I can tell you that women really have come a long way. See, I'm editing an anthology for Harper & Row titled *Classic Science Fiction: The First Golden Age*, which will reprint the best stories from 1940 to 1942, and naturally this has required me to read all the science fiction magazines published during those years. Some of the things I've run across in those old stories are *really* eye-opening, and in the spirit of good clean black humor I'd like to share them with you.

The early 40's were the heart of the pulp-magazine era in science fiction, when every magazine seemed to have a cover showing a half-naked woman wearing only a skimpy brass brassiere and a brass chastity belt, with a huge alien monster leering and clutching at

her with his tentacles. This might sound, offhand, like a typical scene in the life of any woman, but those covers were aimed at men, not women—so in addition to the woman and the monster, they always features a heavily-muscled hero who swept the lady behind him as he pointed his ray-gun at the beast.

(In case the women in the audience miss the archetypal relevance of this scene to men, I refer you to a novel by Dan Greenberg titled *Chewsday*, in which the hero wakes up in the middle of the night imagining he hears some slimy monster emerging from the coal cellar, obviously come to rape his wife, and he breaks into a cold sweat, because *who knows*, maybe this monster has better technique in bed than he does.)

Most of the women in those stories of thirty-five years ago were either delicate flowers who cried "What does it all *mean*, Rock?" and then fainted dead away, or, if they had any strength of character, they were cold-hearted temptresses who were out to take over the Earth and do unspeakable things to men, like telling them their peepees were too small. Some representative titles from the period were "*The Dragon-Queen of Jupiter*," "*Princess of Chaos*" and "*Prisoner of the Brain-Mistress*."

You see, thirty-five years ago science fiction was almost the exclusive province of male readers. John W. Campbell, who was at that time the king of the science fiction editors, always wrote long chatty editorials in *Astounding* that had the style of an after-dinner speaker at the Elks Club. When he previewed van Vogt's "*Slan!*," he wrote, "Gentlemen, it's a lulu!"

The best one-line summation I've
(cont. on page 122)

In the past several years Joe Haldeman's stories of The Forever War have built for him a considerable reputation as one of the best of the newer sf authors; those stories—originally published in Analog—have been collected into a novel of the same name: The Forever War (the St. Martin's Press edition has already sold two printings and it's due in paperback from Ballantine next January). But that novel was not all Haldeman wrote. As he explains in his Author's Note, the following novella is something in the way of an Apocrypha—part of the overall story, but never before published anywhere. In it we follow the protagonist of The Forever War back to the Earth he helped defend—a world no longer like the one he left—as he discovers for himself—

YOU CAN NEVER GO BACK

JOE HALDEMAN

I WAS SCARED ENOUGH.

Sub-major Stott was pacing back and forth behind the small podium in the assembly room/chop hall/gymnasium of the *Anniversary*. We had just made our final collapsar jump, from Tet-38 to Yod-4. We were decelerating at 1½ gravities and our velocity relative to that collapsar was a respectable .90c. We were being chased.

"I wish you people would relax for a while and just trust the ship's computer. The Tauran vessel at any rate will not be within strike range for another two weeks. Mandella!"

He was always very careful to call me "Sergeant" Mandella in front of the company. But every-

body at this particular briefing was either a sergeant or a corporal; squad leaders. "Yes, sir."

"You're responsible for the psychological as well as the physical well-being of the men and women in your squad. Assuming that you are aware that there is a morale problem aboard this vessel . . . what have you done about it?"

"As far as my squad is concerned, sir?"

"Of course."

"We talk it out, sir."

"And have you arrived at any cogent conclusion?"

"Meaning no disrespect, sir, I think the major problem is obvious. My people have been cooped up in this ship for fourteen . . ."

"Ridiculous! Every one of us

Illustrated by RICHARD OLSEN



has been adequately conditioned against the pressures of living in close quarters *and* the enlisted men have the privilege of confraternity." That was a delicate way of putting it. "Officers must remain celibate and yet *we* have no morale problem."

If he thought his officers were celibate, he should sit down and have a long talk with Lieutenant Harmony. Maybe he just meant line officers, though. That would be just him and Cortez. Probably 50% right. Cortez was awfully friendly with Corporal Kamehameha.

"Sir, perhaps it was the detoxification back at Stargate;

maybe—"

"No. The therapists only worked to erase the hate-conditioning—everybody knows how *I* feel about that—and they may be misguided but they are skilled.

"Corporal Potter." He always called her by her rank to remind her why she hadn't been promoted as high as the rest of us. Too soft. "Have you 'talked it out' with your people, too?"

"We've discussed it. Sir."

The sub-major could "glare mildly" at people. He glared mildly at Marygay until she elaborated.

"I don't believe it's the fault of the conditioning. My people are

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THERE ARE nine and ninety ways to write a novel, and most of them are right, but only two basic plans of action: the organized and the instinctive.

An organized novelist works from an outline, which may or may not be detailed, which may or may not change as the book develops. An instinctive novelist makes up some people and puts them in a situation and lets them generate the story for him.

I prefer the second way, maybe out of simple laziness, but it does have its drawbacks.

It's rather like starting out on a journey through new territory, without encumbering yourself with a map. Every day is full of fresh surprises; there's a wonderful sense of freedom. But you do run the chance of one day coming to a broad swift river or an impassable canyon, of having to retrace your steps back to the last fork in the road, and starting over.

"You Can Never Go Back" represents about a month's worth of tramping through the territory that became a novel called *The Forever War*. It did not appear in the final version of the novel because it eventually became clear that, for the novel's purposes, I had painted too bleak a picture of 21st Century Earth. But I think it holds up well enough as an independent story, for those of us who are entertained by bleak futures.

Some ten per cent of this novella appears in the book version of *The Forever War*, and was also published in *Analog* magazine as part of the story "We Are Very Happy Here." That portion appears here through the kind permission of the book's publishers, St. Martin's Press and Ballantine, and of *Analog's* editor, Ben Bova.

"They *will* get off the ship," he said, allowing himself a microscopic smile. "And then they'll probably be just as impatient to get back on."

I fingered the fresh T/O they had given us. It looked like this:

I knew most of the people from the raid on Aleph, the first face-to-face contact between humans and Taurans. The only new people in my platoon were Demy, Luthuli and Heyrovsky. In the company as a whole (excuse me, the "strike force"), we had twenty replacements for the nineteen people we lost from the Aleph raid: one amputation, four dead-ers, fourteen psychotics.

I couldn't get over the "20 Mar 2007" at the bottom of the T/O. I'd been in the army ten years, though it felt like less than two. Time dilation, of course; even with the collapsar jumps, traveling from star to star eats up the calendar.

After this raid, I would probably be eligible for retirement, with full pay. If I lived through the raid, and if they didn't change the rules on us. Me a twenty-year man, and only twenty-five years old.

Stott was summing up when there was a knock on the door, a single loud rap. "Enter," he said.

An ensign I knew vaguely walked in casually and handed Stott a slip of paper, without saying a word. He stood there while Stott read it, slumping with just the right degree of insolence. Technically, Stott was out of his chain of command; everybody in the Navy disliked him anyhow.

Stott handed the paper back to the ensign and looked through him.

"You will alert your squads that

preliminary evasive maneuvers will commence at 2010, 58 minutes from now." He hadn't looked at his watch. "All personnel will be in acceleration shells by 2000. Tench . . . hut!"

We rose and, without enthusiasm, chorused, "Hump you, sir." Idiotic custom.

Stott strode out of the room and the ensign followed, smirking.

I turned my ring to my assistant squad leader's position and talked into it: "Tate, this is Mandella." Everyone else in the room was doing the same.

A tinny voice came out of the ring. "Tate here. What's up?"

"Get ahold of the men and tell them we have to be in the shells by 2000. Evasive maneuvers."

"Crap. They told us it would be days."

"I guess something new came up. Or maybe the Commodore has a bright idea."

"The Commodore can stuff it. You up in the lounge?"

"Yeah."

"Bring me back a cup when you come, okay? Little sugar?"

"Roger. Be down in about half an hour."

"Thanks. I'll get on it."

There was a general movement toward the coffee machine. I got in line behind Corporal Potter.

"What do you think, Marygay?"

"Maybe the Commodore just wants us to try out the shells once more."

"Before the real thing."

"Maybe." She picked up a cup

and blew into it. She looked worried. "Or maybe the Taurans had a ship 'way out, waiting for us. I've wondered why they don't do it. We do, at Stargate."

"Stargate's a different thing. It takes seven cruisers, moving all the time, to cover all the possible exit angles. We can't afford to do it for more than one collapsar, and neither could they."

She didn't say anything while she filled her cup. "Maybe we've stumbled on their version of Stargate. Or maybe they have more ships than we do by now."

I filled and sugared two cups, sealed one. "No way to tell." We walked back to a table, careful with the cups in the high gravity.

"Maybe Singhe knows something," she said.

"Maybe he does. But I'd have to get him through Rogers and Cortez. Cortez would jump down my throat if I tried to bother him now."

"Oh, I can get him directly. We . . ." she dimpled a little bit. "We've been friends."

I sipped some scalding coffee and tried to sound nonchalant. "So that's where you've been disappearing to."

"You disapprove?" she said, looking innocent.

"Well . . . damn it, no, of course not. But—but he's an officer! A *navy* officer!"

"He's attached to us and that makes him part army." She twisted her ring and said, "Directory." To me: "What about you

and Little Miss Harmony?"

"That's not the same thing." She was whispering a directory code into the ring.

"Yes, it is. You just wanted to do it with an officer. Pervert." The ring bleated twice. Busy. "How was she?"

"Adequate." I was recovering.

"Besides, Ensign Singhe is a perfect gentleman. And not the least bit jealous."

"Neither am I," I said. "If he ever hurts you, tell me and I'll break his ass."

She looked at me across her cup. "If Lieutenant Harmony ever hurts you, tell me and I'll break *her* ass."

"It's a deal." We shook on it solemnly.

2

THE ACCELERATION SHELLS were something new, installed while we rested and resupplied at Stargate. They enabled us to use the ship at closer to its theoretical efficiency, the tachyon drive boosting it to as much as 25 gravities.

Tate was waiting for me in the shell area. The rest of the squad was milling around, talking. I gave him his coffee.

"Thanks. Find out anything?"

"Afraid not. Except the swab-bies don't seem to be scared, and it's their show. Probably just another practice run."

He slurped some coffee. "What the hell. It's all the same to us,

anyhow. Just sit there and get squeezed half to death. God, I hate those things.”

“Maybe they’ll eventually make us obsolete, and we can go home.”

“Sure thing.” The medic came by and gave me my shot.

I waited until 1950 and hollered to the squad: “Let’s go. Strip down and zip up.”

The shell is like a flexible space suit; at least the fittings on the inside are pretty similar. But instead of a life support package, there’s a hose going into the top of the helmet and two coming out of the heels, as well as two relief tubes per suit. They’re crammed in shoulder-to-shoulder on light acceleration couches; getting to your shell is like picking your way through a giant plate of olive drab spaghetti.

When the lights in my helmet showed that everybody was suited up, I pushed the button that flooded the room. No way to see, of course, but I could imagine the pale blue solution—ethylene glycol and something else—foaming up around and over us. The suit material, cool and dry, collapsed in to touch my skin at every point. I knew that my internal body pressure was increasing rapidly to match the increasing fluid pressure outside. That’s what the shot was for; keep your cells from getting squished between the devil and the pale blue sea. You could still feel it, though. By the time my meter said “2”

(external pressure equivalent to a column of water 2 nautical miles deep), I felt that I was at the same time being crushed and bloated. By 2005 it was at 2.7, and holding steady. When the maneuvers began at 2010, you couldn’t feel the difference. I thought I saw the needle fluctuate a tiny bit, though.

The major drawback to the system is that, of course, anybody caught outside of his shell when the *Anniversary* hits 25 G’s would be just so much strawberry jam. So the guiding and the fighting have to be done by the ship’s tactical computer—which does most of it anyway, but it’s nice to have a human overseer.

Another small problem is that if the ship gets damaged and the pressure drops, you’ll explode like a dropped melon. If it’s the internal pressure, you get crushed to death in a microsecond.

And it takes ten minutes, more or less, to get depressurized and another two or three to get untangled and dressed. So it’s not exactly something you can hop out of and come up fighting.

The accelerating was over at 2038. A green light went on and I chinned the button to depressurize.

Marygay and I were getting dressed outside.

“How’d that happen?” I pointed to an angry purple welt that ran from the bottom of her right breast to her hipbone.

“That’s the second time,” she

said, mad. "The first one was on my back—I think that shell doesn't fit right, gets creases."

"Maybe you've lost weight."

"Wise guy." Our caloric intake had been rigorously monitored ever since we left Stargate the first time. You can't use a fighting suit unless it fits you like a second skin.

A wall speaker drowned out the rest of her comment. "Attention all personnel. Attention. All army personnel echelon 6 and above and all navy personnel echelon 4 and above will report to the briefing room at 2130."

It repeated the message twice. I went off to lie down for a few minutes while Marygay showed her bruise to the medic and the armorer. I didn't feel a bit jealous.

THE COMMODORE began the briefing. "There's not much to tell, and what there is, is not good news.

"Six days ago, the Tauran vessel that is pursuing us released a drone missile. Its initial acceleration was on the order of eighty gravities.

"After blasting for approximately a day, its acceleration suddenly jumped to 148 gravities." Collective gasp.

"Yesterday, it jumped to 203 gravities. I shouldn't need to remind anyone here that this is twice the accelerative capability of the enemy's drones in our last encounter.

"We launched a salvo of drones, four of them, intersecting what the computer predicted to be the four most probable future trajectories of the enemy drone. One of them paid off, while we were doing evasive maneuvers. We contacted and destroyed the Tauran weapon about ten million kilometers from here."

That was practically next door. "The only encouraging thing we learned from the encounter was from spectral analysis of the blast. It was no more powerful an explosion than ones we have observed in the past; so at least their progress in propulsion hasn't been matched by progress in explosives.

"This is the first manifestation of a very important effect that has heretofore been of interest only to theorists. Tell me, soldier," he pointed at Negulesco, "how long has it been since we first fought the Taurans, at Aleph?"

"That depends on your frame of reference," she answered dutifully, "Commodore. To me, it's been about eight months."

"Exactly. You've lost about nine years, though, to time dilation, while we maneuvered between collapsar jumps. In an engineering sense, as we haven't done any important research and development aboard ship . . . that enemy vessel comes from our future!" He paused to let that sink in.

"As the war progresses, this can only become more and more pronounced. The Taurans don't have

any cure for relativity, though; so it will be to our benefit as often as to theirs.

"For the present, though, it is *we* who are operating with a handicap. As the Tauran pursuit vessel draws closer, this handicap will become more severe. They can simply outshoot us.

"We're going to have to do some fancy dodging. When we get within five hundred million kilometers of the enemy ship, everybody gets in his shell and we just have to trust the logistic computer. It will put us through a rapid series of random changes in direction and velocity.

"I'll be blunt. As long as they have one more drone than we, they can finish us off. They haven't launched any more since that first one. Perhaps they are holding their fire . . . or maybe they only had one. In that case, it's we who have them.

"At any rate, all personnel will be required to be in their shells with no more than ten minutes notice. When we get within a thousand million kilometers of the enemy, you are to stand *by* your shells. By the time we are within five hundred million kilometers, you will be in them, and all shell compounds flooded and pressurized. We cannot wait for anyone.

"That's all I have to say. Sub-major?"

"I'll speak to my people later, Commodore. Thank you."

"Dismissed." And none of this

"hump you, sir" nonsense. The navy thought that was just a little beneath their dignity. We stood at attention—all except Stott—until he had left the room. Then some other swabbie said "dismissed" again, and we left.

My squad had clean-up detail, so I told everybody who was to do what, put Tate in charge, and left. Went up to the NCO room for some company and maybe some information.

There wasn't much happening but idle speculation, so I took Rogers and went off to bed. Marygay had disappeared again, hopefully trying to wheedle something out of Singhe.

3

WE HAD a get-together with the sub-major the next morning, where he more or less repeated what the Commodore had said, in infantry terms and in his staccato monotone. He emphasized the fact that all we knew about the Tauran ground forces was that if their naval capability was improved, it was likely that they would be able to handle us better than last time.

But that brings up an interesting point. In our only previous ground contact with the Taurans, we had a tremendous advantage: they seemed not to be able to understand exactly what was going on. As belligerent as they had been in space, we had expected them to be real Huns on the

ground . . . but instead they just lined up and allowed themselves to be slaughtered. One escaped, and presumably described the idea of old-fashioned infighting to his fellows.

But that didn't mean the word had necessarily gotten out to this particular bunch. The only way we know of to communicate faster than the speed of light is to physically carry a message through collapsar jumps. And there was no telling how many jumps there were between Yod-4 and the Taurans' home base—so they could be just as passive as the last bunch, or they might have been practicing infantry techniques for nearly a decade. We would find out when we got there.

The armorer and I were helping my squad pull maintenance on their fighting suits when we passed the thousand million kilometer mark and had to go up to the shells.

We had about five hours to kill before we had to get in our cocoons. I played a game of chess with Rabi and lost. Then Rogers led the platoon in some vigorous calisthenics, perhaps for no other reason than to get their minds off the prospect of having to lie half-crushed in the shells for at least four hours. The longest we'd gone before was half that.

Ten minutes before the five hundred million kilometer mark, we squad leaders took over and supervised buttoning everybody up. By the time my pressure dial

read 2.7, we were at the mercy of—or safe in the arms of—the logistic computer.

While I was lying there being squeezed, a silly thought took hold of me and went round and round like a charge in a super-conductor; according to military formalism, the conduct of war divides neatly into two categories, tactics and logistics. Logistics has to do with just about everything but the actual fighting, which is (are?) tactics. And now we're fighting, but we don't have a tactical computer to guide us through attack and defense. Just a huge, super-efficient cybernetic grocery clerk of a logistic computer.

And the other side of my brain, which was not quite as pinched, would argue that it doesn't matter what name you give to a computer; it's just a bunch of memory crystals, logic banks, nuts and bolts . . . if you program it to be Ghengis Khan, it is a tactical computer, even if its usual function is to monitor the Stock Market or control sewage conversion.

But the other side was obdurate and said that by that kind of reasoning, a man is only a hank of hair and a piece of bone and some stringy meat; and if you teach him well you can take a Zen monk and turn him into a warrior.

Then what the hell are you/we, am I, answered the other side. A peace-loving vacuum welding specialist-physics teacher snatched up by the Elite Conscription Act

and reprogrammed to be a killing machine. You/I have killed and liked it.

But that was hypnotism, motivational conditioning, I argued back at myself. They don't do it any more.

And the only reason they don't do it is because they think you'll kill better without it. That's logic.

Speaking of logic, the original question was, why do they send a logistic computer to do a man's job? or something like that . . .

The light blinked green and I chinned the switch automatically. We were down to 1.3 before I realized that it meant we were alive, we had won the first skirmish.

I was only partly right.

We were standing in the hall, stretching and groaning, when Bohrs came staggering down the corridor. His face was grey. I took his shoulder.

"What's wrong, Bohrs?"

"Negulesco's squad. They're all dead."

"What?" He didn't nod or anything, just stared at the wall.

"And the whole fourth platoon. Keating, Thomas, Chu, Fruenhaus . . . twenty-four in all, crushed to death."

I didn't know what to say. "At least they . . ." I let it trail off. I was going to say, at least they didn't feel anything, but who knows what you would feel?

"Attention, all personnel. Attention. All infantry personnel echelon six and above will assem-

ble in five minutes, in the assembly room." The speaker crackled for a few seconds and a new voice came on, a weary voice:

"This is the Commodore. We met and destroyed the enemy vessel at 0254. At 0252, the enemy launched a missile at us, and we expended seven drones intercepting it. It was destroyed . . . less than five hundred kilometers from the *Anniversary*, and many of the ship's electronic systems have sustained . . . considerable radiation damage. The life support units for squad bays 5, 6, 7, and 8 went out while the bays were fully pressurized, and all of the occupants perished." He paused a long time. "There will be a memorial service at 0800 tomorrow. That is all."

The other voice came back on. "All medical personnel report immediately to sick bay. All maintenance personnel report immediately to our prime stations. Lieutenant Pastori report to sick bay."

Marygay and Ching and Rogers and I got dressed and went up to the assembly area in silence.

At the meeting they explained what had happened, very little that we didn't already know, and assigned a burial detail. All squad leaders were on it, and we had to choose a person from each of our squads. I did it by casting dice, and Shockley went along with me. It wasn't too bad except for the ones whose suits had split.

WE WERE IN a synchronous orbit above the uninhabited side of the one planet-sized chunk in the ring of detritus that circled the cold black pit of Yod-4. From the other side of the frozen cinder, the Tauran base acknowledged our presence by periodically tossing bubble-missiles at the *Anniversary*. We knew how to handle those from the last time. Just touch them with a laser.

Since our attack plans, for what they were worth, were set up requiring four platoons, they took Ching's squad from my platoon and Al-Sadat's from the second platoon. They promoted Ching to prime-sergeant and put him in charge. Gave us four platoons of about thirteen people each.

We were all packed into the assembly area. Cortez came through the door and picked his way to the podium.

"All right, if you all want to shut up . . . quiet!" Cortez had been phenomenally ugly when we first met him, a year ago—or ten!—back on Charon. He didn't improve with age . . . grotesquely scarred, bald, little white beard, skin the texture of old leather; strong and tough and fast and always in control; hard and intelligent and very cruel in a calculating way. He had fought in the two last wars on Earth, before the United Nations broke down and reformed. He had been a soldier for almost forty years.

"Now the computer's going to show you a graphical picture of our path, the way we're going to approach the enemy base." He gestured and we turned to watch the holograph screen at the opposite end of the room. It showed a conventional picture of a sphere with lines of latitude and longitude, slowly rotating. The *Anniversary* was a tiny model up in one corner.

"We've stepped up the time rate by a factor of a hundred. Now watch." A bunch of little lights popped out of the *Anniversary* and dropped slowly to the planet, weaving around in a complex random pattern. "The four red lights are the scoutships, one for each platoon. The rest"—about twenty white lights—"are programmed decoys, like last time."

The attack plan was pretty simple. We'd drop almost to the surface, on the side of the planet opposite the enemy base. Then we'd fan out and approach the base from all different directions, maneuvering erratically but in a coordinated way, so we'd all hit the base at the same time. The ships would be pre-programmed; no manual control at all (that didn't sit too well).

"Now here's the best recon picture we have." The globe disappeared and an aerial holograph took its place. "Many of these features should look familiar to you, from last time. Of course, we know a little more about their functions, now."

A moving arrow pointed to the structures as Cortez talked about them. "The Flower. This is the first target; you remember, it's where the bubbles come from. We better get this out before the ground attack.

"Almost as important, here, these lines of white silo things, the ships. No Taurans are getting away alive this time, except as prisoners.

"These are the targets your scout ships—and the decoys—are programmed to knock out, before you land. Every ship has twenty missiles, class III tachs. The attack is coordinated so that every ship will release half of its missiles at once, timed for all 250 to converge on the base simultaneously.

"If this destroys the Flower and the ships, you'll land immediately and attack. If not, the decoys will continue to seek targets of opportunity while your scout ships concentrate on staying in one piece.

"Each ship also has a bevawatt laser, but we don't know whether we'll be able to maintain one bearing for long enough to burn anything. We'll see."

He rubbed his beard and smiled that funny little smile of his. "If the aerial attack isn't successful, and I have a hunch it won't be, we have to get in there with our launchers and lasers and do the job on foot. Same priority; first knock out the ships and the Flower.

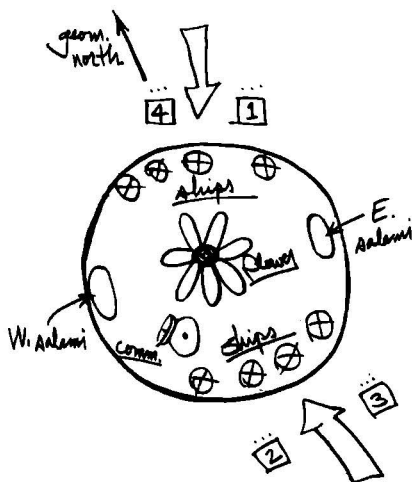
"It's going to be a fast and furious attack. We won't have more than thirty seconds from the time we let loose our bombs to the time we roll out on the ground. Be only two or three seconds if the initial salvo gets its targets."

He gripped the podium and said, almost in a whisper, "I will have to have *absolute, unconditional* blind obedience. I swear to God I'll burn anybody who doesn't follow my orders just like a robot.

"We still have to take a prisoner. Once we have one of the Taurans to interrogate and examine, maybe we'll be able to stop going in on foot. Maybe. The Commodore is sure that he could destroy that base completely, with the *Anniversary's* armament . . . but that remains to be seen.

"All right. We knock out the Flower and the ships and then, ladies and gentlemen, we go hunting. Once we get a live Tauran, I can whistle up the ships, we withdraw and the Commodore will see whether he can knock out the base. Assuming the Taurans will sit there and let us leave."

He pulled down the drawing sheet behind him, shook it to randomize the charge, then smoothed it against its backing. He drew a lopsided circle. "This is the base," he said, and drew in symbols showing where the various installations were. It looked like this:



"Now, this dead rock doesn't have a magnetic field, so your inertial compasses will be set pointing toward the geometrical 'north' of the planet. From the orientation of the base, it's obvious that the Taurans use the same system.

"First and fourth platoons will roll out about five hundred meters east-northeast of this line of ships at the top. Private Herz!"

"Sir?"

"You will be issued the heavy rocket launcher that belonged to the old fourth platoon. The instant you roll out of that scout ship, check whether any of the enemy ships are still standing. If they are, knock them out.

"After Herz has taken care of that, odd-numbered squads in both platoons advance about a hundred meters while the even-numbered squads lay down covering fire. Then evens come up and

pass them while odds cover. Herz, when you get within range of the Flower, kill it."

He pointed to the two sausages. "We know from Aleph that these structures are living quarters. Don't fire on them unless you have to. Not until I say to.

"Second and third platoons, you'll be doing about the same thing. Who's got the heavy launcher in third?"

"Right here." Corporal Conte.

"While you're taking care of the ships on your side, knock out their communications dome. They may have forces elsewhere on the planet, though it seems unlikely. Still, we don't want them to be able to call for reinforcements.

"Once we knock out the Flower, first and fourth assemble near the east sausage; second and third take the west. Don't bunch up; everybody just get within good striking range and try to find cover and wait for my orders.

"Questions?"

"Lieutenant," I asked, "all of this seems to assume that their defensive setup is the same here as it was on Aleph—but Aleph was a jungle world—"

"—and this one is a hard-frozen stone. Sergeant, you know there's no answer to that. Aleph is all we have to go on. The structures look similar, and we have to assume they serve similar functions. It's all guesswork until we attack.

"It's possible that our biggest danger won't be from the Taurans, but from the planet it-

self. Charon and Stargate are similar worlds, of course, and we've done hundreds of maneuvers on them . . . but never against a live, unpredictable enemy. You all know what happens if you stumble into a pool of Helium II, or touch a cold rock with the fins of your heat exchanger. Nobody's suspending the laws of physics just to help you concentrate on the enemy."

Somehow I'd managed not to think about that too much. When we left Stargate the second time, the total number of people killed in training exercises—all three strike forces—was forty-one. That's under controlled conditions, where a hundred people are ready to drop everything and help you. Most of them were heat exchanger detonations, though; nothing you can do to help in those cases.

"You platoon leaders and squad leaders get together with your people and make sure they know exactly what they have to do. We'll have full gear inspection tonight at 1900, after chop. Unless there are any gross deficiencies, we'll be on ready status from then on."

"Sir," Kamehameha asked, "Do you have any idea when the attack is going to be?"

Anybody else, he would have chewed out. "If I knew, I'd have told you," he said mildly. "Within a couple of days, I suspect. Depends on the logistic computer. Anybody else?"

No response. "Dismissed." Then the litany.

5

I WAS UP in the NCO lounge, trying to concentrate on a game of O'wari with Al-Sadat, when we got the word. Everybody had been on edge for the past three days.

The speaker crackled and Al-Sadat looked up at it, letting his handful of pebbles trickle to the floor. We both knew the game was over.

"Attention all personnel. Planetside operations will commence in exactly one hour. All infantry and active support units report at once to your scoutship bays. Attention all personnel. Planetside operations will . . ."

My stomach flipped twice and, getting out of the chair, I had to swallow back nervous bile. I'd felt about the same, every time the speaker had crackled in the two days since the first muster. It wasn't simply fear of going into combat—that was bad enough—but also the terrifying uncertainty of the whole thing. This could be a milk run or a suicide mission or anything in between. Al-Sadat and I ran down the corridor and jumped into the lift, hoping to beat our squads to the scoutships.

Marygay was already there and getting into her suit when I slipped through the lock. I had one glimpse of Marygay's white flesh before she closed the front plate

and dogged it. I stripped and backed into my own suit, and while I was making the attachments it occurred to me that that one flash might have been the last time I'd see her alive. She meant more to me than anybody else on this ship, probably more than anybody on Earth; but all I felt was a dulling empty *better you than me dear* and I hated myself for thinking it, but it was true.

The relief tubes went on all right but the biometrical monitors wouldn't stay put on my sweat-drenched skin. I could just reach my tunic without getting out of the suit; managed to dry the spots sufficiently for the silver chloride electrodes to stick. The first platoon was coming through the lock by twos and threes by the time I got everything hitched up and put my arms in the suit's arms and closed up the front. The babble of conversation stopped and then continued, muted, sound conduction through the metal floor. I chinned Marygay's frequency.

"Ready, dear?"

"William? I guess, I—no, I'm not . . . why couldn't they have given us more warning? I was so nervous anyhow, to have it come all of a sudden like that . . ."

"I know. Maybe it's better, though, rather than worry about it for days."

"All right get a move on let's go goddammit!" Cortez on the general frequency. Must have been on external monitor, too; all the people getting into their suits

turned to look at him. "Let me have Sergeants Rogers and Mandella, and Corporal Potter on my freak."

Cortez began a second after I chinned his frequency: "I'll be riding down with your platoon but, Rogers, remember that you're in charge, don't look my way for any kind of help. I've got three other platoons to worry about, and yours is supposed to be the best. And you others, listen up. If Ching gets it, one of you has to take over the fourth platoon. Mandella first, Potter if Mandella gets it. Understood?" We roger'd, but why the hell hadn't he told us sooner?

He clicked back to the general frequency. "Platoon leaders sound off." One at a time: Rogers, Akwasi, Bohrs, Ching. "All right, I'll give it to you and you can pass it on to your platoons after they're all dressed. We attack at 1131—that is, at 1131 we rip over the horizon and let loose all those good bombs. That means we've got to drop out of orbit in . . . exactly nine minutes, twenty seconds. So make your people move."

I couldn't control my shakes, so before I cut in the waldo circuits I swallowed a trunk. Otherwise, trembling, I might have broken something. After the trunk calmed me down, I took a stimtab to fire the old carcass back up to fighting order, activated my arms and legs and began walking down the scoutship.

It seemed so big. The *Anniversary* itself was two kilometers long, but you could only visualize it in an abstract way. A scoutship was nearly a hundred meters of gleaming black metal, and inside the bay you never got far enough away that perspective didn't deform the streamlined shape and make it seem even longer.

Rogers waited back at the assembly area to make sure everybody got their suits and weapons in order. Marygay and Cortez and I entered the ship and strapped in and, speaking for myself, tried to relax a little.

After a few minutes, everybody was strapped down and waiting. Through the skin of the ship you could hear a high-pitched, fading whistle as they evacuated air from the bay. Then a slight bump and, through the porthole by my shoulder, I could see the struts and catwalks slide away and we were in space. It was 1027.

The descent to the surface, which had looked so smooth and graceful on Cortez's simulation, was a bone-wrenching ordeal as the ship twisted and swooped in the predetermined evasive pattern. There was a swabbie pilot up front, but he never touched the controls.

Skimming along the surface was a little easier to take. But the enemy must have been keeping pretty close tabs on our position, because six or seven times the laser flared out at a bubble. You couldn't see it happen, of course;

just a green flicker on the tortured landscape rushing below and static electricity making your hair rustle.

1130: "Filters down. Prepare to disembark." Cortez's voice was flat with just a trace of controlled eagerness. He actually liked this crap.

Then a series of quick shudders as the bombs took off toward the enemy. I saw one streak to the horizon and explode in a glare so bright it hurt the eyes, even with the filter. It must have run into a bubble; the bombs didn't have the capabilities for defense and evasion that a scoutship had.

I turned on the pink light on the back of my suit that would identify me as a squad leader and tried to prepare myself mentally for the ejection. The trunk was still holding pretty well; the fear was there, but it seemed detached, a memory. I wanted a smoke in the worst way.

Suddenly the base rolled over the horizon and I could see rubble strewn all over the plain; our ships, no way to tell whether they were drones—the Flower was still intact, spewing out bubbles. Ten or twelve ships flared by in different directions. Only two enemy ships were standing.

We decelerated to zero abruptly and my buckles unsnapped themselves, the side of the ship slid away and I was falling free, less than ten meters from the ground. I was still falling when the ship flared and jumped away.

I landed kind of sloppily on hands and knees and chinned the squad frequency. "First squad soundoff!"

"One." Tate.

"Two." Yukawa.

"Three." Shockley.

"Four." Hofstadter.

"Five." Rabi.

"Six." Mulroy.

Rogers: "Mandella, get your people on line, your squad goes up first."

"First squad line up on me," They were almost in position already. "Shockley, you're too close to Yukawa. Move this way about ten meters."

In the few seconds we had before advancing, I tried to figure out who was winning. Hard to tell. One of the standing enemy ships exploded as I watched, but the Flower was still bubbling away.

Something looked different about the bubbles—at first I thought it was just a trick of perspective, but then I saw that some of them were actually rolling along the ground! They'd been enough trouble on Aleph, where you just had to keep your head down to avoid them. Cortez shouted over the general frequency for everybody to watch out for the goddam bubbles, they were coming in low.

I supposed there was a chance that they had thought that up independently, but most likely it meant that they had been in contact with the one Aleph survivor.

By inference, that meant they'd probably be capable of infighting, if it came to that.

Herz and the other heavy launcher fired round after round at the Flower, without success. The bubbles were too thick and maneuverable that near their source.

Bubbles kept rolling toward us, but—the same as on Aleph—one brush with a laser would pop them.

Somebody managed to destroy the last ship. At least none of them would be getting away. Would any of us?

Cortez came on the general frequency in the middle of a sentence. "—the casualty report for later, I don't have time—listen once, everybody! We can't reach the Flower with the heavies. Have to move in, move in fast to grenade range and saturate the area. Second platoon, can you salvage the bevawatt from your ship?" So at least one scoutship was down.

"All right, forget it. Odd-numbered squads, move out!"

I got up and started to jog, the rest of my squad spread out in a shallow V-formation behind me. Covering laser fire lanced around us, stopping bubbles—good thing; it's almost impossible to use a laser-finger while you're moving. You're liable to hit almost anything except what you're aiming at.

After thirty or forty meters, we went to ground. The second

squad advanced and slipped through us while we did target practice on the bubbles.

Then Bergman got it. He topped a small rise and there was a bubble, so close that his body shielded it from our fire. He fired one wild burst and then the lower half of his body dissolved into crimson spray and Marygay screamed. Even with explosive decompression, he didn't die right away but hopped a dozen meters, his death tremors magnified by the suit's waldo circuits. The bubble rolled on, glowing more brightly with its grisly fuel, until Tate recovered and popped it. I was dazed but kept covering my sector automatically.

Second squad went down and we advanced again, trying to ignore the splash of dark-red crystal where Bergman had died. We were within about four hundred meters of the Flower and Cortez cut in:

"All right, everybody hold your positions and grenadiers, open fire on the Flower. Everybody else cover."

Pretty soon we didn't have any bubbles to shoot at, up close. With eight grenadiers firing at once, it was all the Flower could do to protect itself. We walked forward without any resistance, and started using our lasers on the building. They were attenuated considerably by the distance, but we managed to pop a few bubbles even that far away. That may have been what made the difference—

four microton grenades hit the Flower simultaneously, each one a bright flash and a spray of debris. The bubbles stopped coming out.

"Hold your fire—hold it!" One last grenade sailed in and hit the building right at the ground-line, causing one petal to collapse.

"Maybe we'll get our prisoner here . . . first squads out of the first and second platoons, move in fast and take a look."

Goddam, why us? On Aleph, all of the Taurans were holed up in the Flower when we attacked, though we later discovered that the "sausages" were their living quarters. That had been a surprise attack, too; they'd had plenty of warning this time. I chinned Tate.

"Tate, what the hell is the combination for first squad, second platoon?"

"Two left, one right." Of course. Getting addle-brained.

I chinned it as we advanced toward the nearest petal. "Al-Sadat, this is Mandella. Which of us goes first?"

"You're senior, Mandella. Besides, I was ahead at O'wari."

"Yeah. Crap. Okay. Hell, I don't even know how to get into the goddam thing. Burn it down, I guess."

"Mandella, this is Cortez. Don't you burn that door down if you can get in without depressurizing the petal. Once we get our prisoner, you can rape and pillage all you want. Kid gloves until then, understand?"

"Roger, Lieutenant." Maybe

they'd open the door *for* me. That'd be jolly.

I decided a simple plan would be best. Hard to think; scared and suddenly tired. Swallowed another stim-tab knowing I'd pay for it in a couple of hours. But I figured that in a couple of hours, I'd either be back in the ship or dead. "Al-Sadat, hold your people back for cover until we get inside, then follow us."

"Roger."

Chinned my squad frequency. "Tate, Yukawa, Shockley come with me—no, Tate, you stay behind in case . . . rest of the squad give me a half-perimeter about ten meters from the entrance. And for Chrissake don't get trigger-happy."

While they were assembling I took Yukawa and Shockley to the entrance. It was obviously a door, wide and squat with a small red circle painted in the exact center; windowless and with no hardware. Didn't look much like our complicated airlocks.

"Why don't you push on the circle, sergeant?" That was Shockley, who was technically the most expendable. Smart, though; I'd look pretty silly now, ordering him to do it.

I checked to see that everybody was in position and pressed the circle. The door slid open.

No airlock. Just a long, well-lit corridor full of vacuum and cold. Lots of similar doors lining the corridor. With the uneasy feeling that it was some kind of a trap, I

stepped inside.

"Okay, Squad, follow me." Change frequency. "Al-Sadat?"

"I'm coming."

"Leave your second-in-command with Tate at the door."

"I've got a better idea—why don't I send my second up with you and—"

"Knock it off, Al. It's lovely in here. Soothing. Tauran dancing girls."

Cortez: "Will you all cut the crap and get me a prisoner?"

When all thirteen of us had crowded into the corridor, I touched the first door and it slid open. It revealed a softly lit cubicle empty except for a strung wire hammock and what looked like a piece of abstract sculpture in one corner. I described it to Cortez.

"All right. Leave it alone and go on to the next."

The next cubicle was exactly the same, and so were all the rest, along both sides of the corridor. I would have guessed that they were living quarters, except that they didn't look at all like the dormitory affairs we found on Aleph, inside the Salamis. The inside of the Flower on Aleph had been filled with arcane machinery, most of which was still a total mystery to the technical boys.

We approached the end of the corridor with caution. Corridors from all of the other petals converged there in a large circular hall. In the center was a vertical metallic tube, two meters thick, that was connected with the bub-

ble generator. The hall was littered with rubble and the tube seemed to be standing at a slight angle.

"Al, get your people on the left side of the corridor. I'll take the right. We'll move out along the walls and see what happens."

We spread ourselves evenly around the edge of the circular hall and waited for something to happen. Nothing did. I decided to maybe precipitate some action by having a grenadier launch one down one of the halls. Rabi was well-positioned.

"Rabi . . ." I didn't finish because suddenly we were all floating a meter off the ground and slowly rising.

"What the hell, Mandella—"

"Shut up, Al. Everybody! Get ready to open fire—we'll burn this thing to the ground if we—"

"What's going on in there, god-dammit?" Cortez.

"We're going up." That sounded inadequate. "Floating up. Under their control."

Cortez was silent for a second. "Ah . . . all right. Do what you have to do to protect yourself. But remember I do need a prisoner. We get one and we're home free."

We floated to a second level and stopped. Everybody jumped onto the rail-less balcony. Only one corridor on this level. I walked around to it.

"Hofstadter, Rabi, come along with me." We walked down about ten meters to a door at the end of

the corridor, just like the ones downstairs.

It also slid open at a touch, but instead of the hammock and sculpture, there were rows of what looked like library-style bookcases, covered with overlapping metal shingles. Each row was a different shade of blue. At the end of one row was a Tauran, looking at us.

The only movement was in his too-many-fingered hands, which undulated nervously. I felt a mixture of revulsion and pity at seeing his bloated/scrawny hourglass-shaped orange body, all huge swellings and ridiculously flimsy limbs—I'd seen so many of those bodies laser-slashed and smoldering in the slaughter at Aleph . . . but still, they weren't human even though they were upright bipeds. You could feel more kinship with an egret.

"Keep an eye on him, Tate." I walked up and down the rows to see whether there were any others. The room was a large doughnut-shaped affair. I hadn't been in its counterpart on Aleph, but Fruenhaus had described it to me as being similar. It was evidently their computer. At last report—I had to keep reminding myself that it had been nearly a decade ago—they hadn't yet figured out what made it work.

The rest of the place was deserted. I made a report to Cortez.

"Good. You and three others stay and guard him. Send the rest back down and we'll go ahead

with the battle plan, take the sausages. They must be in there."

"If they haven't already left, sir."

"That's right. What do you think they would have left in, sergeant? A matter transmitter? We got all the ships."

Possibly, I thought. They might have a matter transmitter out in the back yard; just didn't think to use it before.

"Let me have Tate, Mulroy, Hofstadter. We're going to stand guard on this . . . prisoner. Sergeant Al-Sadat—" that sounded too military—"Al, you're in charge of everybody else. Take them down and join up with your platoons."

"Sure, Mandella. How the hell do we get down?"

"I've got a rope, Sergeant." That was Wiley, demolition "man." Somehow, it wouldn't sound right to call her a "demolition woman."

They filed out and we surrounded the Tauran. His clustered eyes didn't follow Tate and Mulroy as they went behind him; he just kept staring straight ahead, either unconcerned or paralyzed. The soap-bubble that held his personal environment shimmered slightly in the light that seemed to come evenly from ceiling, floor and walls.

There was a meter-wide ribbon of window running all around the outside wall. I could see Cortez and the two platoons taking up positions around the east Salami.

It occurred to me that perhaps that was what the Tauran was staring at, not us. I switched to the general frequency and positioned myself so that I could watch the Tauran and the Salami at the same time.

Al-Sadat and his men had just left the Flower and were moving toward Cortez when everything started to happen at once.

The far end of the Salami opened and Taurans, seemingly hundreds of them, came boiling out. And they came out shooting.

Each one of them had a box that looked incongruously like a suitcase, handle, clasps and all, and held a flexible tube that led into the box. They handled it like a laser, fanning it back and forth.

Our bright laser beams danced through their ranks. If they had stayed bunched up, they would have all been dead in a couple of seconds. But they spread out quickly and took what cover the terrain and buildings allowed.

One touch with a laser would pop their life-support bubble, but to my horror I saw that their weapon was no less effective. All over the plain men were whirling and jerking in waldo-amplified agony, dying too slowly. Cortez was screaming.

"Pick a target and *hit it!* Stay with it till you hit it! Grenadiers, use your fingers—second platoon, third platoon, who the hell's in charge over there? Akwasi! Bohrs! Report!"

I turned to look at the west

Salami, farther away, and it was obvious the same thing was happening there.

"Busia! Maxwell! Who the hell's in charge?"

"Busia here, Lieutenant—I don't know, maybe I'm in charge, I can't raise Akwasi or Bohrs. I—ai!" A short yelp and no more transmission.

"Second platoon, third platoon, listen up. You've got weapons superiority, so use it. Everybody—just-pick-a-target. And stay with it until you kill it! We're winning over here and you should be winning too—heavies! Herz! Conte! Knock down those fuckin' Salamis, there might be more inside."

Two quick rockets reduced the west Salami to rubble. The east stood.

"Lieutenant, this is Ching. Herz is dead."

"Well then pick up the launcher and do it yourself. God . . . damn!"

"Luthuli here, I've got it." The first rocket went in low and scooped out a big crater in front of the building. The second knocked off a rounded corner and the third hit it dead-center and collapsed it.

I chinned Marygay's frequency. "Marygay, this is William. Are you all right?"

Nothing.

"Are you all right?"

Cortez's voice cracked over the general freak. "Goddammit cut the private jawin', we haven't won yet. That includes you spectators

up there. Luthuli to your right watch out! Good!"

The Tauran was still staring impassively.

My count showed only six Taurans alive to the east, and one of them got caulked while I was counting. I cranked my image amplifier up to twenty log two and looked west, but from this angle it was hard to tell what the score was. Plenty of activity going on.

"All right, that's it," Cortez yelled. "Follow me, let's help the second and third."

What was left of the first and fourth platoons sprinted across the plain after Cortez. They left ten inert figures behind. One of them was Marygay.

Numb, I raised my finger and pointed it at the Tauran. But I couldn't get up any hate for him. I tried to hate Cortez, but that didn't work either. It was as if we were all just caught up in some impersonal catastrophe, and you couldn't blame some individual person or creature for the wrath of the elements.

The battle to the west was over by the time Cortez and his men got there. They had lost twelve. Cortez called for the ships.

I had expected that if we were going to have any trouble with the Tauran, it would be now, trying to get him outside and into a ship. But he seemed to understand our gestures and went along quietly. Whatever it was that had lifted us to the second floor worked both

ways; following him, we just stepped over the edge and drifted gently down.

He walked to the ship without any protest, and seemed to know what an acceleration couch was. We tried to strap him in, but the belt only encircled his bubble. The swabbie said that was all right; he was going to take it easy anyhow, not knowing how much tolerance a Tauran had for acceleration.

You couldn't help wondering why the Tauran was so docile. It occurred to me that perhaps he was a boobytrap; a bomb that could walk into the middle of the *Anniversary* and explode. Somebody else had thought of that too, for there was a portable fluoroscope waiting for us when we docked. It didn't show anything unusual.

All things considered, the *Anniversary* was pretty well equipped for taking a Tauran prisoner. We had a special "brig" which duplicated the atmosphere we had found in the Salamis of Aleph, and a case of food containers from the same source. We turned the Tauran over to the xenobiologists and retired to lick our wounds.

We had come to Yod-4 with 73 people, and were leaving with 27, by my count. They hadn't released the casualty figures yet. But there were a lot of familiar faces missing. I had to find out sooner or later, so I went to Cortez. I rapped on the door of his cabin.

"Who is it?" he said gruffly.

"Sergeant Mandella, sir."

"All right. Enter."

He was sitting on his spartan bunk cradling a coffee cup in both hands. There was a bottle at his feet that I recognized as being some of Lieutenant Bok's home-made booze. "Well?"

"Sir, I wanted to—I had to know . . . know how Marygay died."

He looked at me for a long moment, without expression. Then he took a drink and snorted. "Corporal Potter is not dead."

"Not dead! She was . . . wounded?"

"No. Nobody was wounded. Nobody was wounded and lived."

"Then . . . sir? What happened?"

"Catatonic." He poured a slosh of liquor into the cup and twirled it around, stared at it, sniffed it. "I don't know exactly what happened. I don't really care. She's in sick bay. You may check with Lieutenant Pastori."

She was alive! "Thank you, sir." I turned to leave.

"Sergeant."

"Sir?"

"Don't get your hopes up. Depending on Lieutenant Pastori's evaluation, she may still face a court martial. There is only one penalty for cowardice under fire."

"Yes sir." Even that couldn't blunt my relief, my happiness.

"You may go."

Halfway down the corridor I met Kamehameha. She had on a

fresh tunic and even some cosmetics, God knows where she got them. I threw her a salute and a wink and whispered, "Carry on, Corporal."

6

THE ONLY OTHER PERSON in the sick bay waiting room was Ensign Singhe.

"Good afternoon, Ensign."

"In a way, Sergeant. Have a seat."

I sat down. "Heard anything?"

"About Corporal Potter? No."

I crossed to the bulletin board and read a dozen different things that had nothing to do with me. Then Pastori came out. Singhe jumped up but I got him first.

"Doctor—how is Corporal Potter?"

"Who are you, that I should give you a progress report?"

"Uh . . . sir, I'm Sergeant Mandella, from her platoon."

"You'll be reporting to Lieutenant Cortez?" he said with just a faint hint of sarcasm. He knew who I was.

"No, uh, sir, my interest is personal. I'll be glad to report if you—"

"No." He wagged his head loosely. "I'll take care of the red tape. My aide needs something to keep him busy. Sit down. Who are you, Ensign?"

"Personal interest too."

"My, my. Such charms my patient must have had. Still has," he added quickly. "Neither of you

ought to worry about this too much. It's a common enough malady among soldiers; I've treated a couple of dozen cases like it since Aleph. Responds very well to hypnotherapy."

"Battle fatigue?" Singhe asked.

"That's a polite term for it. Another is 'neuresthenia.' I think the Sub-major calls it cowardice."

I remembered what Cortez had said and a ripple of fear ran up my back and crawled over my scalp.

"In Corporal Potter's case," he continued, "it's quite understandable. I got the details from her under light hypnosis."

"When the Taurans attacked, she was one of the first to see them coming out of the building. She went to ground immediately, but a couple of other people in her squad didn't. They were cut down in the first instant of the attack. They died horribly and she just couldn't handle it; she felt she was in some way responsible, both because she was their squad leader and because she hadn't said anything by way of warning. Actually, I doubt that there was any time to warn them."

"I suppose she also feels some guilt simply because she lived and they died. At any rate, she went into a state of shock right there, and just withdrew completely. In civilian life, and in layman's terms, you would say she'd had a profound nervous breakdown."

That didn't sound so good. "Then, doctor . . . what will your

recommendation be?"

"Recommendation?"

"To the court martial board. Sir."

"What, are they really talking about trying her? For cowardice?" I nodded. "Ridiculous. A normal reaction to an insupportable situation. This is a medical condition, not a moral one."

I guess my relief was obvious. "Now don't you go telling tales. Sub-major Stott is a good soldier, but I know he thinks discipline is getting poor and he's probably looking for a sacrificial lamb. Nothing you say is going to help her. Just wait for my report. That goes for you, too, Ensign. The word is, you didn't get to see her, you don't know anything except that she's resting comfortably."

"When will I—" he looked at me, "we get to see her?"

"Not for at least a week, maybe two. I'm going to . . ." he shook his head. "It's impossible to explain without using technical terms. In a way, it's just making her look at the incident rationally, with a full knowledge of . . . what part of her psychological makeup made her react the way she did. To do this I have to make her regress to infancy and grow up again, pointing out stops along the way that have bearing on the situation. It's a standard technique. 99% successful."

We exchanged politenesses and left.

I COULD HAVE slept the clock

around, reaction from the stimulants, but we had an announcement saying that all infantry personnel would assemble after chop. I skipped chop and asked Tate to wake me up in time.

When I got to the chop hall, everybody was sitting in one corner, the empty seats crowding in on them like tombstones. It hit me with new force: we had left the training center in Missouri with one hundred people, and had picked up twenty more along the way. And now this little cluster of survivors.

I sat and listened to the talk without joining in. Most of it concerned going home; how much the world would have changed in the nearly twenty years we'd been gone; whether they'd have to retrain to get into the job market . . . Alenandrov pointed out that we had twenty years' pay waiting for us, and it had been drawing compound interest. Plus a retirement pension. We might never have to work again. Nobody mentioned re-enlisting. Nobody mentioned the fact that they might not let us go. It costs a lot to haul twenty-seven people from Stargate to Earth.

Stott walked in and as we were rising, said "Sit down."

He looked at the little group and I could tell by his dark expression that he was thinking the same thing I had. He walked around in front of us.

"I'm not a religious man," he rasped. "If there is anyone here

who would like to offer a prayer or a eulogy of some kind let him do so now." There was a long silence.

"Very well." He reached into his tunic and pulled out a small plastic box. "Normally of course smoking is forbidden on the *Anniversary*. However I have made a special arrangement with the Maintenance people." He opened the box and inside there was a stack of factory joints. He set them carefully on the table. I wondered how long he'd had them.

He walked back to the door, very stiffly and without his usual briskness, and stopped. Facing out, he said, almost to himself, "You fought well." Then he left.

After a year of abstinence, and as tired as I was, the marijuana hit me hard. I smoked half a joint and fell asleep in the chair. I didn't dream.

AFTER A WEEK, waiting for the analysts to finish up planetside, we dropped through Yod-4 and popped out of Tet-38. We had to make a quarter-light-year circle around Tet-38 to position ourselves for the jump to Sade-20 and thence to Stargate.

It was during this long loop that we were first allowed to see Marygay.

She was in bed, the only person in sick bay. She looked very drawn and appeared to have lost considerable weight. *Won't be able to wear her fighting suit*, I

thought inanely.

I sat by her bed for half an hour, watching her sleep. Ensign Singhe came in and nodded at me and left again.

After a while she opened her eyes. She looked at me for a long moment without expression, then smiled.

"Does this mean I'm well, William?"

"Better, anyhow."

"I thought so. The therapy . . . he took me back to where I was a little baby again, made me grow up again. Yesterday we finally got back to the present. I think it's the present—William, how old am I?"

"Ship time . . . I think you're 22."

She nodded without raising her head from the pillow. "I wonder what the year is on Earth."

"Last I heard, it'll be 2017 when we reach Stargate."

She giggled. "I'll be a middle-aged lady."

"You'll never be a lady to me, dear." I patted her bare arm.

"That reminds me," she said, dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "I'm horny."

"You mean that wasn't included in the therapy?"

"Nuh-uh."

"What do you expect me to do about it?"

"The obvious. Or maybe call up Ensign Singhe."

"Here? What if Pastori comes in?"

"He'd just take notes. You can't

shock a psychiatrist."

The one good thing about these floppy tunics is that you can get out of one in half a second.

7

PASTORI'S REPORT saved Marygay from a court martial. The next seven months were uneventful, going from Tet-38 to Sade-20 to Stargate. We still had the regular rounds of calisthenics and inspections, though even Stott must have known that none of us intended to stay in the Force; none of us would ever fight again. It worried me a little, this insistence on maintaining the military life. I thought it might mean they weren't going to let us out.

The more likely explanation was that it was the easiest way to keep order aboard the ship.

The Tauran prisoner had died two days after he was captured. As far as anyone could tell, it wasn't suicide; he seemed to be cooperating with the xenobiologists—maybe he was one himself—but they learned very little, watching him waste away. An autopsy revealed that he had become totally dehydrated, although we had kept him well supplied with water. For some reason he just didn't assimilate it.

And, of course, with the Tauran dead, there went the only reason for our going planetside rather than sitting in a safe orbit and dropping missiles.

Things had shifted around a lit-

tle bit, so it was 2019 when we arrived at Stargate.

Stargate had grown astonishingly in the past twelve years. The base was one building the size of Tycho City, housing about ten thousand people. There were 78 ships the size of the *Anniversary* or larger, involved in raids on Tauran-held portal planets. Another ten guarded Stargate itself, and two were in orbit waiting for their infantry to be out-processed. One other ship, the *Earth's Hope II*, had returned from fighting while we were gone. They also had failed to bring home a live Tauran.

We went planetside in two scoutships.

GENERAL BOTSFORD (who had only been a full major the first time we met him, when Stargate was two huts and twenty-four graves) received us in an elegantly-appointed seminar room. He was pacing back and forth at the end of the room, in front of a huge holographic operations chart.

"You know . . ." he said, too loud, and then more conversationally: "You know that we could disperse you into other strike forces and send you right out again. The Elite Conscription Act has been changed now, five years' subjective in service instead of two.

"And I don't see why some of you don't *want* to stay in! Another couple of years and compound in-

terest would make you independently wealthy for life. Sure, you took heavy losses—but that was inevitable, you were the first. Things are going to be easier now. The fighting suits have been improved, we know more about the Taurans' tactics, our weapons are more effective . . . there's no need to be afraid."

He sat down at the head of the table and looked at nobody in particular. "My own memories of combat are over a half-century old. To me it was exhilarating, strengthening. I must be a different kind of person than all of you."

Or have a very selective memory, I thought.

"But that's neither here nor there. I have one alternative to offer you, one that doesn't involve direct combat.

"We're very short of qualified instructors. The Force will offer any one of you a lieutenantcy if you will accept a training position. It can be on Earth; on the Moon at double pay; on Charon at triple pay; or here at Stargate for quadruple pay. Furthermore, you don't have to make up your mind now. You're all getting a free trip back to Earth—I envy you, I haven't been back in fifteen years, will probably never go back—and you can get the feel of being a civilian again. If you don't like it, just walk into any UNEF installation and you'll walk out an officer. Your choice of assignment.

"Some of you are smiling. I

think you ought to reserve judgment. Earth is not the same place you left."

He pulled a little card out of his tunic and looked at it, smiling. "Most of you have something on the order of four hundred thousand dollars coming to you, accumulated pay and interest. But Earth is on a war footing and, of course, it is the citizens of Earth who are supporting the war. Your income puts you in a 92% income tax bracket. \$32,000 could last you about three years if you're careful.

"Eventually you're going to have to get a job, and this is one job for which you are uniquely trained. There are not that many jobs available. The population of the Earth is nearly nine billion, with five or six billion unemployed.

"Also keep in mind that your friends and sweethearts of two years ago are now going to be twenty-one years older than you. Many of your relatives will have passed away. I think you'll find it a very lonely world.

"But to tell you something about this world, I'm going to turn you over to Captain Siri, who just arrived from Earth. Captain?"

"Thank you, General." It looked as if there was something wrong with his skin, his face; and then I realized he was wearing powder and lipstick. His nails were smooth white almonds.

"I don't know where to begin." He sucked in his upper lip and looked at us, frowning. "Things

have changed so very much since I was a boy.

"I'm twenty-three, so I was still in diapers when you people left for Aleph . . . to begin with, how many of you are homosexual?" Nobody. "That doesn't really surprise me. I am, of course. I guess about a third of everybody in Europe and America is.

"Most governments encourage homosexuality—the United Nations is neutral, leaves it up to the individual countries—they encourage homolife mainly because it's the one sure method of birth control."

That seemed specious to me. Our method of birth control in the army is pretty foolproof: all men making a deposit in the sperm bank, and then vasectomy.

"As the General said, the population of the world is nine billion. It's more than doubled since you were drafted. And nearly two-thirds of those people get out of school only to go on relief.

"Speaking of school, how many years of public schooling did the government give you?"

He was looking at me, so I answered. "Fourteen."

He nodded. "It's eighteen now. More, if you don't pass your examinations. And you're required by law to pass your exams before you're eligible for any job or Class I relief. And brother-boy, anything besides Class I is hard to live on. Yes?" Hofstadter had his hand up.

"Sir, is it eighteen years public

school in every country? Where do they find enough schools?"

"Oh, most people take the last five or six years at home, or in a community center, via holoscreen. The UN has forty or fifty information channels, giving instruction twenty-four hours a day.

"But most of you won't have to concern yourselves with that. If you're in the Force, you're already too smart by half."

He brushed hair from his eyes in a thoroughly feminine gesture, pouting a little. "Let me do some history to you. I guess the first really important thing that happened after you left was the Ration War.

"That was 2007. A lot of things happened at once. Locust plague in North America, rice blight from Burma to the South China Sea, red tides all along the west coast of South America: suddenly there just wasn't enough food to go around. The UN stepped in and took over food distribution. Every man, woman and child got a ration booklet, allowing them to consume so many calories per month. If tha went over ther monthly allotment, tha just went hungry until the first of the next month."

Some of the new people we'd picked up after Aleph used "tha, ther, thim" instead of "he, his, him," for the collective pronoun. I wondered whether it had become universal.

"Of course, an illegal market developed, and soon there was

great inequality in the amount of food people in various strata of society consumed. A vengeance group in Ecuador, the *Imparciales*, systematically began to assassinate people who appeared to be well-fed. The idea caught on pretty quickly, and in a few months there was a full-scale, undeclared class war going on, all over the world. The United Nations managed to get things back under control in a year or so, by which time the population was down to four billion, crops were more or less recovered, and the food crisis was over. They kept the rationing, but it's never been really severe again.

"Incidentally, the General translated the money coming to you into dollars just for your own convenience. The world has only one currency now, calories. Your 32,000 dollars comes to about three thousand million calories. Or three million k's, kilocalories.

"Ever since the Ration War, the UN has encouraged subsistence farming wherever it's practical. Food you grow yourself, of course, isn't rationed . . . it got people out of the cities, onto UN farming reservations, which helped alleviate some urban problems. But subsistence farming seems to encourage large families, so the population of the world has more than doubled since the Ration War.

"Also, we no longer have the abundance of electrical power I remember from boyhood . . .

probably a good deal less than you remember. There are only a few places in the world where you can have power all day and night. They keep saying it's a temporary situation, but it's been going on for over a decade."

He went on like that for a long time. Well, hell, it wasn't really surprising, much of it. We'd probably spent more time in the past two years talking about what home was going to be like than about anything else. Unfortunately, most of the bad things we'd prognosticated seemed to have come true, and not many of the good things.

The worst thing for me, I guess, was that they'd taken over most of the good park land and subdivided it into little farms. If you wanted to find some wilderness, you had to go someplace where they couldn't possibly make a plant grow.

He said that the relations between people who chose homolife and the ones he called "breeders" were quite smooth, but I wondered. I never had much trouble accepting homosexuals myself, but then I'd never had to cope with such an abundance of them.

He also said, in answer to an impolite question, that his powder and paint had nothing to do with his sexual orientation. It was just stylish. I decided I'd be an anachronism and just wear my face.

I don't guess it should have surprised me that language had changed considerably in twenty

years. My parents were always saying things were "cool," joints were "grass," and so on.

We had to wait several weeks before we could get a ride back to Earth. We'd be going back on the *Anniversary*, but first she had to be taken apart and put back together again.

Meanwhile, we were put in cosy little two-man billets and released from all military responsibilities. Most of us spent our days down at the library, trying to catch up on twenty-two years of current events. Evenings, we'd get together at The Flowing Bowl, an NCO club. The privates, of course, weren't supposed to be there, but we found out that nobody argues with a person who has two of the fluorescent battle ribbons.

I was surprised that they served heroin fixes at the bar. The waiter said that you get a compensating shot to keep you from getting addicted to it. I got really stoned and tried one. Never again.

Sub-major Stott stayed at Star-gate, where they were assembling a new Strike Force Alpha. The rest of us boarded the *Anniversary* and had a fairly pleasant six-month journey. Cortez didn't insist on everything being capital-M military, so it was a lot better than the trip from Yod-4.

8

I HADN'T given it too much thought, but of course we were

celebrities on Earth; the first vets home from the war. The Secretary General greeted us at Kennedy, and we had a week-long whirl of banquets, receptions, interviews and all that. It was enjoyable enough, and profitable—I made a million K's from Time-Life/Fax—but we really saw little of Earth until after the novelty wore off and we were more-or-less allowed to go our own way.

I picked up the Washington monorail at Grand Central Station and headed home. My mother had met me at Kennedy, suddenly and sadly old, and told me my father was dead. Flyer accident. I was going to stay with her until I could get a job.

She was living in Columbia, a satellite of Washington. She had moved back into the city after the Ration War—having moved out in 1980—and then failing services and rising crime had forced her out again.

She was waiting for me at the monorail station. Beside her stood a blond giant in a heavy black vinyl uniform, with a big gun-powder pistol on his hip and spiked brass knuckles on his right hand.

"William, this is Carl, my bodyguard and very dear friend." Carl slipped off the knuckles long enough to shake hands with surprising gentleness. "Pleasameecha Misser Mandella."

We got into a groundcar that had "Jefferson" written on it in bright orange letters. I thought

that was an odd thing to name a car, but then found out that it was the name of the high-rise Mother and Carl lived in. The groundcar was one of several that belonged to the community, and she paid 100 k per kilometer for the use of it.

I had to admit that Columbia was rather pretty. Formal gardens and lots of trees and grass. Even the highrises looked more like mountains than buildings; roughly conical jumbles of granite with trees growing out at odd places. We went into the base of one of these mountains, down a well-lit corridor to where a number of other cars were parked, and parked. Carl carried my solitary bag to the elevator and set it down.

"Miz Mandella, if is awright witcha, I gots to go pick up Miz Freeman in like five. She over West Branch."

"Sure, Carl, William can take care of me. He's a soldier, you know." That's right, I remember learning eight silent ways to kill a man. Maybe if things got really tight, I could get a job like Carl's.

"Righty-oh, yeah, you tol' me. Whassit like, man?"

"Mostly boring," I said automatically. "When you aren't bored, you're scared."

He nodded wisely. "Thass what I heard. Miz Mandella, I be 'vail-able anytime after six. Righty-oh?"

"That's fine, Carl."

The elevator came and a tall skinny boy stepped out, an unlit

joint dangling from his lips. Carl ran his fingers over the spikes on his knuckles and the boy walked rapidly away.

"Gots ta watch out fer them riders. T'care a yerself, Miz Mandella."

We got on the elevator and Mother punched 47. "What's a rider?"

"Oh, they're just young toughs who ride up and down the elevators, looking for defenseless people without bodyguards. They aren't too much of a problem here."

The 47th floor was a huge mall filled with shops and offices. We went to a food store.

"Have you gotten your ration book yet, William?" I told her I hadn't; but the Force had given me travel tickets worth a hundred thousand "calories" and I'd used up only half of them.

It was a little confusing, but they'd explained it to us. When the world went on a single currency, they'd tried to coordinate it with the food rationing in some way, hoping to eventually eliminate the ration books, so they'd made the new currency k's; kilocalories, because that's the unit for measuring the energy equivalent of food. But a person who eats 2,000 kilocalories of steak a day obviously has to pay more than a person eating the same amount of bread. So they instituted a sliding "ration factor," so complicated that nobody could understand it. After a few weeks

they were using the books again, but calling food kilocalories "calories" in an attempt to make things less confusing. Seemed to me they'd save a lot of trouble all around if they'd just call money dollars again, or rubles or sisterces or whatever . . . anything but kilocalories.

Food prices were astonishing, except for grains and legumes. I insisted on splurging on some good red meat: 1500 calories worth of ground beef, costing 1730k. The same amount of fake-steak, made from soy beans, would have cost 80k.

I also got a head of lettuce for 140k and a little bottle of olive oil for 175k. Mother said she had some vinegar. Started to buy some mushrooms but she said she had a neighbor who grew them, and could trade something from her balcony garden.

At her apartment on the 92nd floor, she apologized for the smallness of the place. It didn't seem so little to me, but then she'd never lived on a spaceship.

Even this high up, there were bars on the windows. The door had four separate locks, one of which didn't work because somebody had used a crowbar on it.

Mother went off to turn the ground beef into a meatloaf and I settled down with the evening fax. She pulled some carrots from her little garden and called the mushroom lady, whose son came over to make the trade. He had a riot gun slung under his arm.

"Mother, where's the rest of the *Star*?" I called into the kitchen.

"As far as I know, it's all there. What were you looking for?"

"Well . . . I found the classified section, but no 'Help Wanted.'"

She laughed. "Son, there hasn't been a 'Help Wanted' ad in ten years. The government takes care of jobs . . . well, most of them."

"Everybody works for the government?"

"No, that's not it." She came in, wiping her hands on a frayed towel. "The government, they tell us, handles the distribution of all natural resources. And there aren't many resources more valuable than empty jobs."

"Well, I'll go talk to them tomorrow."

"Don't bother, son. How much retirement pay you say you're getting from the Force?"

"20,000k a month. Doesn't look like it'll go far."

"No, it won't. But your father's pension gave me less than half that, and they wouldn't give me a job. Jobs are assigned on a basis of need. And you've got to be living on rice and water before the Employment Board considers you needy."

"Well, hell, it's a bureaucracy—there must be somebody I can pay off, slip me into a good—"

"No. Sorry, that's one part of the UN that's absolutely incorruptible. The whole shebang is cybernetic, untouched by human

souls. You can't—"

"But you said you *had* a job!"

"I was getting to that. If you want a job badly enough, you can go to a dealer and sometimes get a hand-me-down."

"Hand-me-down? Dealer?"

"Take my job as an example, son. A woman named Hailey Williams has a job in a hospital, running a machine that analyzes blood, a chromatography machine. She works six nights a week, for 12,000k a week. She gets tired of working, so she contacts a dealer and lets him know that her job is available.

"Some time before this, I'd given the dealer his initial fee of 50,000k to get on his list. He comes by and describes the job to me and I say fine, I'll take it. He knew I would, and already has fake identification and a uniform. He distributes small bribes to the various supervisors who might know Miss Williams by sight.

"Miss Williams shows me how to run the machine and quits. She still gets the weekly 12,000k credited to her account, but she pays me half. I pay the dealer 10%, and wind up with 5400k per week. This added to the nine grand I get monthly from your father's pension makes me quite comfortable.

"Then it gets complicated. Finding myself with plenty of money and too little time, I contact the dealer again, offering to sublet half my job. The next day a girl shows up who also has 'Hailey

Williams' identification. I show her how to run the machine, and she takes over Monday-Wednesday-Friday. Half of my real salary is 2700k, so she gets half that, 1350k, and pays the dealer 135."

She got a pad and a stylus and did some figuring. "So the real Hailey Williams gets 6000k weekly for doing nothing. I work three days a week for 4050k. My assistant works three days for 1115k. The dealer gets 100,000k in fees and 735k per week. Lopsided, isn't it?"

"Hmm . . . I'll say. Quite illegal, too, I suppose."

"For the dealer. Everybody else might lose their job and have to start over, if the Employment Board finds out. But the dealer gets brainwiped."

"Guess I better find a dealer, while I can still afford the 50 grand bite." Actually, I still had over three million, but planned to run through most of it in a short time. Hell, I'd earned it.

I WAS GETTING READY to go the next morning when Mother came in with a shoebox. Inside, there was a small pistol in a clip-on holster.

"This belonged to your father," she explained. "Better wear it if you're planning to go downtown without a bodyguard."

It was a gunpowder pistol with ridiculously thin bullets. I hefted it in my hand. "Did Dad ever use it?"

"Several times . . . just to scare away riders and hitters, though. He never actually shot anybody."

"You're probably right that I need a gun," I said, putting it back. "But I'd have to have something with more heft to it. Can I buy one legally?"

"Sure, there's a gun store down in the Mall. As long as you don't have a police record, you can buy anything that suits you." Good; I'd get a little pocket laser. I could hardly hit the ground with a gunpowder pistol.

"But . . . William, I'd feel a lot better if you'd hire a bodyguard, at least until you know your way around." We'd gone all around that last night. Being an official Trained Killer, I thought I was tougher than any clown I might hire for the job.

"I'll check into it, Mother. Don't worry—I'm not even going downtown today, just into Hyattsville."

"That's just as bad."

When the elevator came, it was already occupied. He looked at me blandly as I got in, a man a little older than me, clean-shaven and well dressed. He stepped back to let me at the row of buttons. I punched "47" and then realized his motive might not have been politeness; turned to see him struggling to get at a metal pipe stuck in his waistband. It had been hidden by his cape.

"Come on, fella," I said, reaching for a nonexistent weapon. "You wanna get caulked?"

He had the pipe free but let it hang loosely at his side. "Caulked?"

"Killed. Army term." I took one step toward him, trying to remember. Kick just under the knee, then either groin or kidney. I decided on the groin.

"No." He put the pipe back in his waistband. "I don't want to get 'caulked.'" The door opened at 47 and I backed out.

The gun shop was all bright white plastic and gleamy black metal. A little bald man bobbed over to wait on me. He had a pistol in a shoulder rig.

"And a fine morning to you sir," he said and giggled. "What will it be today?"

"Lightweight pocket laser," I said. "Carbon dioxide."

He looked at me quizzically and then brightened. "Coming right up, sir." Giggle. "Special today, I throw in a handful of tachyon grenades."

"Fine." They'd be handy.

He looked at me expectantly. "So? What's the popper?"

"Huh?"

"The punch, man; you set me up, now knock me down. Laser," he giggled.

I was beginning to understand. "You mean I can't buy a laser."

"Of course not, Sweetie," he said and sobered. "You didn't know that?"

"I've been out of the country for a long time."

"The world, you mean. You've been out of the world a long time." He put his left hand on a

chubby hip in a gesture that incidentally made his gun easier to get. He scratched the center of his chest.

I stood very still. "That's right. I just got out of the Force."

His jaw dropped. "Hey, no bully-bull? You been out shootin' 'em up, out in space?"

"That's right."

"Hey, all that crap about you not gettin' older, there's nothin' to that, is there?"

"Oh, it's true. I was born in 1975."

"Well, god . . . damn. You're almost as old as I am." He giggled. "I thought that was just something the government made up."

"Anyhow . . . you say I can't buy a laser—"

"Oh, no. No no no. I run a legal shop here."

"What can I buy?"

"Oh, pistol, rifle, shotgun, knife, body armor . . . just no lasers or explosives or fully automatic weapons."

"Let me see a pistol. The biggest you have."

"Ah, I've got just the thing." He motioned me over to a display case and opened the back, taking out a huge revolver.

"410-gauge six-shooter." He cradled it in both hands. "Dinosaur-stopper. Authentic Old West styling. Slugs or flechettes."

"Flechettes?"

"Sure—uh, they're like a bunch of little tiny darts. You shoot and then spread out in a pattern.

Hard to miss that way."

Sounded like my speed. "Anyplace I can try it out?"

"'Course, of course, we have a range in back. Let me get my assistant." He rang a bell and a boy came out to watch the store while we went in back. He picked up a red-and-green box of shotgun shells on the way.

The range was in two sections, a little anteroom with a plastic transparent door and a long corridor on the other side of the door with a table at one end and targets at the other. Behind the targets was a sheet of metal that evidently deflected the bullets down into a pool of water.

He loaded the pistol and set it on the table. "Please don't pick it up until the door's closed." He went into the anteroom, closed the door and picked up a microphone. "OK. First time, you better hold on to it with both hands." I did so, raising it up in line with the center target, a square of paper looking about the size of your thumbnail at arm's length. Doubtful I'd even come near it. I pulled the trigger and it went back easily enough, but nothing happened.

"No, no," he said over the microphone with a tinny giggle. "Authentic Old West styling. You've got to pull the hammer back."

Sure, just like in the flix. I hauled the hammer back, lined it up again and squeezed the trigger.

The noise was so loud it made

my face sting. The gun bucked up and almost hit me on the forehead. But the three center targets were gone; just tiny tatters of paper drifting in the air.

"I'll take it."

He sold me a hip holster, twenty shells, a chest-and-back shield and a dagger in a boot sheath. I felt more heavily armed than I had in a fighting suit. But no waldos to help me cart it around.

The monorail had two guards for each car. I was beginning to feel that all my heavy artillery was superfluous, until I got off at the Hyattsville station.

Everyone who got off at Hyattsville was either heavily armed or had a bodyguard. The people loitering around the station were all armed. The police carried lasers.

I pushed a "cab call" button and the readout told me mine would be #3856. I asked a policeman and he told me to wait for it down on the street; it would cruise around the block twice.

During the five minutes I waited, I twice heard staccato arguments of gunfire, both of them rather far away. I was glad I'd bought the shield.

Eventually the cab came. It swerved to the curb when I waved at it, the door sliding open as it stopped. Looked as if it worked the same way as the autotaxis I remembered. The door stayed open while it checked my thumbprint to verify that I was

the one who had called, then slammed shut. It was thick steel. The view through the windows was dim and distorted; probably thick bulletproof plastic. Not quite the same as I remembered.

I had to leaf through a grimy book to find the code for the address of the bar in Hyattsville where I was supposed to meet the dealer. I punched it out and sat back to watch the city go by.

This part of town was mostly residential; greyed-brick warrens built around the middle of the last century competing for space with more modern modular setups and, occasionally, individual houses behind tall brick or concrete walls with jagged broken glass and barbed wire at the top. A few people seemed to be going somewhere, walking very quickly down the sidewalks, hands on weapons. Most of the people I saw were either sitting in doorways, smoking, or loitering around shopfronts in groups of no fewer than six. Everything was dirty and cluttered. The gutters were clogged with garbage and shoals of waste paper drifted with the wind of the light traffic.

It was understandable, though; street-sweeping was probably a very high-risk profession.

The cab pulled up in front of "Tom & Jerry's Bar & Grill" and let me out after I paid 430κ. I stepped to the sidewalk with my hand on the shotgun-pistol, but there was nobody around. I hustled into the bar.

It was surprisingly clean on the inside; dimly lit and furnished in fake leather and fake pine. I went to the bar and got some fake bourbon and, presumably, real water for 120k. The water cost 20k. A waitress came over with a tray.

"Pop one, brother-boy?" The tray had a rack of old-fashioned hypodermic needles.

"Not today, thanks." If I was going to "pop one," I'd use an aerosol. The needles looked unsanitary and painful.

She set the dope down on the bar and eased onto the stool next to me. She sat with her chin cupped in her palm and stared at her reflection in the mirror behind the bar. "God. Tuesdays."

I mumbled something.

"You wanna go in back fer a quicky?"

I looked at her with what I hoped was a neutral expression. She was wearing only a short skirt of some gossamer material, and it plunged in a shallow V in the front exposing her hipbones and a few bleached pubic hairs. I wondered what could possibly keep it up. She wasn't bad looking; could have been anywhere from her late twenties to her early forties. No telling what they could do with cosmetic surgery and makeup nowadays, though. Maybe she was older than my mother.

"Thanks anyhow."

"Not today?"

"That's right."

"I can get you a nice boy, if—"

"No. No thanks." What a world.

She pouted into the mirror, an expression that was probably older than *Homo Sapiens*. "You don't like me."

"I like you fine. That's just not what I came here for."

"Well . . . different funs for different ones." She shrugged.

"Hey, Jerry. Get me a short beer."

He brought it. "Oh, damn, my purse is locked up. Mister, can you spare forty calories?" I had enough ration tickets to take care of a whole banquet. Tore off a fifty and gave it to the bartender.

"Jesus." She stared. "How'd you get a full book at the end of the month?"

I told her in as few words as possible who I was and how I managed to have so many calories. There had been two months' worth of books waiting in my mail, and I hadn't even used up the ones the Force had given me. She offered to buy a book from me for ten grand, but I didn't want to get involved in more than one illegal enterprise at a time.

Two men came in, one unarmed and the other with both a pistol and a riot gun. The body-guard sat by the door and the other came over to me.

"Mr. Mandella?"

"That's right."

"Shall we take a booth?" He didn't offer his name.

He had a cup of coffee and I

sipped a mug of beer. "I don't keep any written records, but I have an excellent memory. Tell me what sort of a job you're interested in, what your qualifications are, what salary you'll accept, and so on."

I told him I'd prefer to wait for a job where I could use my physics; teaching or research, even engineering. I wouldn't need a job for two or three months, since I planned to travel and spend money for a while. Wanted at least 20,000k monthly, but how much I'd accept would depend on the nature of the job.

He didn't say a word until I'd finished. "Righty-oh. Now. I'm afraid . . . you'd have a hard time, getting a job in physics. Teaching is out; I can't supply jobs where the person is constantly exposed to the public. Research, well, your degree is almost a quarter-century old. You'd have to go back to school, maybe five or six years."

"Might do that," I said.

"The one really marketable feature you have is your combat experience. I could probably place you in a supervisory job at a bodyguard agency for even more than twenty grand. You could make almost that much, being a bodyguard yourself."

"Thanks, but I wouldn't want to take chances for somebody else's hide."

"Righty-oh. Can't say I blame you." He finished his coffee in a long slurp. "Well, I've got to run,

got a thousand things to do. I'll keep you in mind and talk to some people."

"Good. I'll see you in a few months."

"Righty-oh. Don't need to make an appointment. I come in here every day at 11:00 for coffee. Just show up."

I finished my beer and called a cab to take me home. I wanted to walk around the city, but Mother was right. I'd get a bodyguard first.

9

I CAME HOME and the 'phone was blinking pale blue. Didn't know what to do so I punched "Operator."

A pretty young girl's head materialized in the cube. "Jefferson operator," she said. "May I help you?"

"Yes . . . what does it mean when the cube is blinking blue?"

"Huh?"

"What does it mean when the 'phone—"

"Are you serious?" I was getting a little tired of this kind of thing.

"It's a long story. Honest, I don't know."

"When it blinks blue you're supposed to call the operator."

"Okay, here I am."

"No, not me, the *real* operator. Punch 9. Then punch 0."

I did that and an old harridan appeared. "Ob-a-ray-duh."

"This is William Mandella at 301-52-574-3975. I was supposed

to call you."

"Juzza segun." She reached outside the field of view and typed something. "You godda call from 605-19-556-2027."

I scribbled it down on the pad by the 'phone. "Where's that?"

"Juzza segun. South Dakota."

"Thanks." I didn't know anybody in South Dakota.

A pleasant-looking old woman answered the 'phone. "Yes?"

"I had a call from this number . . . uh . . . I'm—"

"Oh, Sergeant Mandella! Just a second."

I watched the diagonal bar of the holding pattern for a second, then fifty or so more. Then a head came into focus.

Marygay. "William. I had a heck of a time finding you."

"Darling—me too. What are you doing in South Dakota?"

"My parents live here, in a little commune. That's why it took me so long to get to the 'phone." She held up two grimy hands. "Digging potatoes."

"But when I checked . . . the records said, the records in Tucson said your parents were both dead."

"No, they're just dropouts—you know about dropouts?—new name, new life. I got the word through a cousin."

"Well—well, how've you been? Like the country life?"

"That's one reason I've been wanting to get you. Willy, I'm bored. It's all very healthy and nice, but I want to do something

dissipated and wicked. Naturally I thought of you."

"I'm flattered. Pick you up at eight?"

She checked her watchfinger. "No, look, let's get a good night's sleep. Besides, I've got to get in the rest of the potatoes. Meet me at . . . the Ellis Island jetport at ten tomorrow morning. Mmm . . . Trans-World information desk."

"Okay. Make reservations for where?"

She shrugged. "Pick a place."

"London used to be pretty wicked."

"Sounds good. First Class?"

"What else? I'll get us a suite on one of the dirigibles."

"Good. Decadent. How long shall I pack for?"

"We'll buy clothes along the way. Travel light. Just one stuffed wallet apiece."

She giggled. "Wonderful. Tomorrow at ten."

"Fine—uh . . . Marygay, do you have a gun?"

"It's that bad?"

"Here around Washington it is."

"Well, I'll get one. Dad has a couple over the fireplace. Guess they're left over from Tucson."

"We'll hope we won't need them."

"Willy, you know it'll just be for decoration. I couldn't even kill a Tauran."

"Of course." We just looked at each other for a second. "Tomorrow at ten, then."

"Right. Love you."

"Uh . . ."

She giggled again and hung up.

That was just too many things to think about all at once.

I GOT US two round-the-world dirigible tickets; unlimited stops as long as you kept going east. It took me a little over two hours to get to Ellis by autocab and monorail. I was early, but so was Marygay.

She was talking to the girl at the desk and didn't see me coming. Her outfit was really arresting, a tight coverall of plastic in a pattern of interlocking hands; as your angle of sight changed, various strategic hands became transparent. She had a ruddy sun-glow all over her body. I don't know whether the feeling that rushed over me was simple honest lust, or something more complicated. I hurried up behind her.

Whispering: "What are we going to do for three hours?"

She turned and gave me a quick hug and thanked the girl at the desk, then grabbed my hand and pulled me along to a sidewalk.

"Um . . . where are we headed?"

"Don't ask questions, Sergeant. Just follow me."

We stepped onto a roundabout and transferred to an eastbound sidewalk.

"Do you want something to eat or drink?" she asked innocently.

I tried to leer. "Any alterna-

tives?"

She laughed gayly. Several people stared. "Just a second . . . here!" We jumped off. It was a corridor marked "Roomettes." She handed me a key.

That damned plastic coverall was held on by static electricity. Since the roomette was nothing but a big waterbed, I almost broke my neck the first time it shocked me.

I recovered.

We were lying on our stomachs, looking through the oneway glass wall at the people rushing around down on the concourse. Marygay passed me a joint.

"William, have you used that thing yet?"

"What thing?"

"That hawg-leg. The pistol."

"Only shot it once, in the store where I bought it."

"Do you really think you could point it at someone and blow him apart?"

I took a shallow puff and passed it back. "Hadn't given it much thought, really. Until we talked last night."

"Well?"

"I . . . I don't really know. The only time I've killed was on Aleph, under hypnotic compulsion. But I don't think it would . . . bother me, not that much, not if the person was trying to kill me in the first place. Why should it?"

"Life," she said plaintively, "life is . . ."

"Life is a bunch of cells walking around with a common purpose. If that common purpose is to get my ass—"

"Oh, William. You sound like old Cortez."

"Cortez kept us alive."

"Not many of us," she snapped.

I rolled over and studied the ceiling tiles. She traced little designs on my chest, pushing the sweat around with her fingertip. "I'm sorry, William. I guess we're both just trying to adjust."

"That's all right. You're right anyhow."

We talked for a long time. The only urban center Marygay had been to since our publicity rounds (which were very sheltered) was Sioux Falls. She had gone with her parents and the commune bodyguard. It sounded like a scaled-down version of Washington; the same problems, but not as acute.

We ticked off the things that bothered us: violence, high cost of living, too many people everywhere. I'd have added homolife, but Marygay said I just didn't appreciate the social dynamic that had led to it; it had been inevitable. The only thing she said she had against it was that it took so many of the prettiest men out of circulation.

And the main thing that was wrong was that everything seemed to have gotten just a little worse, or at best remained the same. You would have predicted that at least a few facets of every-

day life would improve markedly in 22 years. Her father contended the War was behind it all; any person who showed a shred of talent was sucked up by UNEF; the very best fell to the Elite Conscriptio Act and wound up being cannon fodder.

It was hard not to agree with him. Wars in the past often accelerated social reform, provided technological benefits, even sparked artistic activity. This one, however, seemed tailor-made to provide none of these positive by-products. Such improvements as had been made on late-twentieth-century technology were—like tachyon bombs and warships two kilometers long—at best, interesting developments of things that only required the synergy of money and existing engineering techniques. Social reform? The world was technically under martial law. As for art, I'm not sure I know good from bad. But artists to some extent have to reflect the temper of the times. Paintings and sculpture were full of torture and dark brooding; movies seemed static and plotless; music was dominated by nostalgic revivals of earlier forms; architecture was mainly concerned with finding someplace to put everybody; literature was damn near incomprehensible. Most people seemed to spend most of their time trying to find ways to outwit the government, trying to scrounge a few extra K's or ration tickets without putting their lives

in too much danger.

And in the past, people whose country was at war were constantly in contact with the war. The newspapers would be full of reports, veterans would return from the front; sometimes the front would move right into town, invaders marching down Main Street or bombs whistling through the night air—but always the sense of either working toward victory or at least delaying defeat. The enemy was a tangible thing, a propagandist's monster whom you could understand, whom you could hate.

But this war . . . the enemy was a curious organism only vaguely understood, more often the subject of cartoons than nightmares. The main affect of the war on the home front was economic, unemotional—more taxes but more jobs as well. After 22 years, only 27 returned veterans; not enough to make a decent parade. The most important fact about the war to most people was that if it ended suddenly, Earth's economy would collapse.

YOU APPROACHED the dirigible by means of a small propellor-driven aircraft which drifted up to match trajectories and docked alongside. A clerk took our baggage and we checked our weapons with the purser, then went outside.

Just about everybody on the flight was standing out on the promenade deck, watching Manhattan creep toward the horizon.

It was an eerie sight. The day was very still, so the bottom thirty or forty stories of the buildings were buried in smog. It looked like a city built on a cloud, a thunderhead, floating. We watched it for a while and then went inside to eat.

The meal was elegantly served and simple: filet of beef, two vegetables, wine. Cheese and fruit and more wine for desert. No fiddling with ration tickets; a loophole in the rationing laws implied that they were not required for meals consumed en route, on intercontinental transport.

We spent a lazy, comfortable three days crossing the Atlantic. The dirigibles had been a new thing when we first left Earth, and now they had turned out to be one of the few successful new financial ventures of the late twentieth century . . . the company that built them had bought up a few obsolete nuclear weapons; one bomb-sized hunk of plutonium would keep the whole fleet in the air for years. And, once launched, they never did come down. Floating hotels, supplied and maintained by regular shuttles; they were one last vestige of luxury in a world where nine billion people had something to eat, and almost nobody had enough.

London was not as dismal from the air as New York City had been; the air was clean even if the Thames was poison. We packed our handbags, claimed our

weapons and landed on a VTO pad atop the London Hilton. We rented a couple of tricycles at the hotel and, maps in hand, set off for Regent Street, planning on dinner at the venerable Cafe Royal.

The tricycles were little armored vehicles, stabilized gyroscopically so they couldn't be tipped over. Seemed overly cautious for the part of London we travelled through, but I supposed there were probably sections as rough as Washington.

I got a dish of marinated venison and Marygay got salmon; both very good but astoundingly expensive. At first I was a bit overawed by the huge room, filled with red plush and mirrors and faded gilding, very quiet even with a dozen tables occupied; and we talked in whispers until we realized that was foolish.

Over coffee I asked Marygay what the deal was with her parents.

"Oh, it happens often enough," she said. "Dad got mixed up in some ration ticket thing. He'd gotten some black market tickets that turned out to be counterfeit. Cost him his job and he probably would have gone to jail, but while he was waiting for trial a bodysnatcher got him."

"Bodysnatcher?"

"That's right. All the commune organizations have them. They've got to get reliable farm labor, people who aren't eligible for relief . . . people who can't just lay

down their tools and walk off when it gets rough. Almost everybody can get enough assistance to stay alive, though; everyone who isn't on the government's fecal roster."

"So he skipped out before his trial came up?"

She nodded. "It was a case of choosing between commune life, which he knew wasn't easy, and going on the dole after a few years' working on a prison farm; ex-convicts can't get legitimate jobs. They had to forfeit their condominium, which they'd put up for bail, but the government would've gotten that anyhow, once he was in jail.

"So the bodysnatcher offered him and Mother new identities, transportation to the commune, a cottage and a plot of land. They took it."

"And what did the bodysnatcher get?"

"He himself probably didn't get anything. The commune got their ration tickets; they were allowed to keep their money, although they didn't have very much—"

"What happens if they get caught?"

"Not a chance," she laughed. "The communes provide over half the country's produce—they're really just an unofficial arm of the government. I'm sure the CBI knows exactly where they are . . . Dad grumbles that it's just a fancy way of being in jail anyhow."

"What a weird setup."

"Well, it keeps the land farmed." She pushed her empty desert plate a symbolic centimeter away from her. "And they're eating better than most people, better than they ever had in the city. Mom knows a hundred ways to fix chicken and potatoes."

After dinner we went to a musical show. The hotel had gotten us tickets to a "cultural translation" of the old rock opera *Hair*. The program explained that they had taken some liberties with the original choreography, because back in those days they didn't allow actual coition on stage. The music was pleasantly old-fashioned, but neither of us was quite old enough to work up any blurry-eyed nostalgia over it. Still, much more enjoyable than the movies I'd seen, and some of the physical feats performed were quite inspiring. We slept late the next morning.

WE DUTIFULLY watched the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, walked through the British Museum, ate fish and chips, ran up to Stratford-on-Avon and caught the Old Vic doing an incomprehensible play about a mad king and didn't get into any trouble until the day before we were to leave for Lisbon.

It was about 2 AM and we were tooling our tricycles down a nearly-deserted thoroughfare. Turned a corner and there was a gang of boys beating the hell out of someone. I screeched to the

curb and leaped out of my vehicle, firing the shotgun-pistol over their heads.

It was a girl they were attacking; it was rape. Most of them scattered but one pulled a pistol out of his coat and I shot him. I remember trying to aim for his arm. The blast hit his shoulder and ripped off his arm and what seemed to be half of his chest; it flung him two meters to the side of a building and he must have been dead before he hit the ground.

The others ran, one of them shooting at me with a little pistol as he went. I watched him trying to kill me for the longest time before it occurred to me to shoot back. I sent one blast 'way high and he dove into an alley and disappeared.

The girl looked dazedly around, saw the mutilated body of her attacker, and staggered to her feet and ran off screaming, naked from the waist down. I knew I should have tried to stop her, but I couldn't find my voice and my feet seemed nailed to the sidewalk. A tricycle door slammed and Marygay was beside me.

"What hap—" she gasped, seeing the dead man. "Wh-what was he doing?"

I just stood there stupified. I'd certainly seen enough death these past two years, but this was a different thing . . . there was nothing noble in being crushed to death by the failure of some electronic component, or in having

your suit fail and freeze you solid; or even dying in a shoot-out with the incomprehensible enemy . . . but death seemed natural in that setting. Not on a quaint little street in old-fashioned London, not for trying to steal what most people would give freely.

Marygay was pulling my arm. "We've got to get out of here. They'll *brainwipe* you!"

She was right. I turned and took one step and fell to the concrete. I looked down at the leg that had betrayed me and bright red blood was pulsing out of a small hole in my calf. Marygay tore a strip of cloth from her blouse and started to bind it. I remember thinking it wasn't a big enough wound to go into shock over, but my ears started to ring and I got lightheaded and everything went red and fuzzy. Before I went under, I heard a siren wailing in the distance.

FORTUNATELY, the police also picked up the girl, who was wandering down the street a few blocks away. They compared her version of the thing with mine; both of us under hypnosis. They let me go with a stern admonition to leave law enforcement up to professional law enforcers.

I wanted to get out of the cities; just put a pack on my back and wander through the woods for a while, get my mind straightened out. So did Marygay. But we tried to make arrangements and found that the country was worse than

the cities. Farms were practically armed camps; the areas between ruled by nomad gangs who survived by making lightning raids into villages and farms, murdering and plundering for a few minutes and then fading back into the forest, before help could arrive.

Still, Britishers called their island "the most civilized country in Europe." From what we'd heard about France and Spain and Germany, especially Germany, they were probably right.

I talked it over with Marygay and we decided to cut short our tour and go back to the States. We could finish the tour after we'd become acclimated to the twenty-first century. It was just too much foreignness to take in one dose.

The dirigible line refunded most of our money and we took a conventional sub-orbital flight back home. The high altitude made my leg throb, though it was nearly healed. They'd made great strides in the treatment of gunshot wounds, in the past twenty years. Lots of practice.

We split up at Ellis. Her description of commune life appealed to me more than the city; I made arrangements to join her after a week or so, and went back to Washington.

10

I RANG the bell and a strange woman answered the door, opening it a couple of centimeters and

peering through.

"Pardon me," I said, "isn't this Mrs. Mandella's residence?"

"Oh, you must be William!" She closed the door and unfastened the chains and opened it wide. "Beth, look who's here!"

My mother came into the living room from the kitchen, drying her hands on a towel. "Wil-ly . . . what are you doing back so soon?"

"Well, it's—it's a long story."

"Sit down, sit down," the other woman said. "Let me get you a drink, don't start till I get back."

"Wait," my mother said. "I haven't even introduced you two. William, this is Rhonda Wilder. Rhonda, William."

"I've been so looking forward to meeting you," she said. "Beth has told me all about you—one cold beer, right?"

"Right." She was likable enough, a trim middle-aged woman. I wondered why I hadn't met her before. I asked my mother whether she was a neighbor.

"Uh . . . really more than that, William. She's been my roommate for a couple of years. That's why I had an extra room when you came home—a single person isn't allowed two bedrooms."

"But why . . ."

"I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to feel that you were putting her out of a room while you stayed here. And you weren't, actually; she has—"

"That's right." Rhonda came in

with the beer. "I've got relatives in Pennsylvania, out in the country. I can stay with them any time."

"Thanks." I took the beer. "Actually, I won't be staying long this time. I'm kind of en route to South Dakota. I could find another place to flop."

"Oh, no," Rhonda said. "I can take the couch." I was too old-fashioned male-chauv to allow that; we discussed it for a minute and I wound up with the couch.

I filled Rhonda in on who Marygay was and told them about our disturbing experiences in England, how we came back to get our bearings. I had expected my mother to be horrified that I had killed a man, but she accepted it without comment. Rhonda clucked a little bit about our being out in a city after midnight, especially without a bodyguard.

We talked on these and other topics until late at night, when Mother called her bodyguard and went off to work.

Something had been nagging at me all night, the way Mother and Rhonda acted toward each other. I decided to bring it out into the open, once Mother was gone.

"Rhonda—" I settled down in the chair across from her. I didn't know exactly how to put it. "What, uh, what exactly is your relationship with my mother?"

She took a long drink. "Good friends." She stared at me with a mixture of defiance and resignation. "Very good friends. Some-

times lovers.”

I felt very hollow and lost. My mother?

“Listen,” she continued. “You had better stop trying to live in the nineties. This may not be the best of all possible worlds, but you’re stuck with it.”

She crossed and took my hand, almost kneeling in front of me. Her voice was softer. “William . . . look, I’m only two years older than you are—that is, I was born two years before—what I mean is, I can understand how you feel. B—your mother understands too. It, our . . . relationship wouldn’t be a secret to anybody else. It’s perfectly normal. A lot has changed, these twenty years. You’ve got to change, too.”

I didn’t say anything. She stood up and said firmly: “You think because your mother is sixty, she’s outgrown her need for love? She needs it more than you do. Even now. Especially now.”

Accusation in her eyes. “Especially now with you coming back from the dead past. Reminding her of how old she is. How—old I am, twenty years younger.” Her voice quavered and cracked and she ran to her room.

I wrote Mother a note saying that Marygay had called; an emergency had come up and I had to go immediately to South Dakota. I called a bodyguard and left.

A WHINING, ozone-leaking, battered old bus let me out at the in-

tersection of a bad road and a worse one. It had taken me an hour to go the 2000 kilometers to Sioux Falls, two hours to get a chopper to Geddes, 150 kilometers away, and three hours waiting and jouncing on the dilapidated bus to go the last twelve kilometers to Freehold, an organization of communes where the Potters had their acreage. I wondered if the progression was going to continue and I would be four hours walking down this dirt road to the farm.

It was a half-hour before I even came to a building. My bag was getting intolerably heavy and the bulky pistol was chafing my hip. I walked up a stone path to the door of a simple plastic dome and pulled a string that caused a bell to tinkle inside. A peephole darkened.

“Who is it?” Voice muffled by thick wood.

“Stranger asking directions.”

“Ask.” I couldn’t tell whether it was a woman or a child.

“I’m looking for the Potter’s farm.”

“Just a second.” Footsteps went away and came back. “Down the road 1.9 clicks. Lots of potatoes and green beans on your right. You’ll probably smell the chickens.”

“Thanks.”

“If you want a drink we got a pump out back. Can’t let you in without my husband’s at home.”

“I understand. Thank you.” The water was metallic-tasting but wonderfully cool.

I wouldn’t know a potato or

green bean plant if it stood up and took a bite out of my ankle, but I knew how to walk a half-meter step. So I resolved to count on 3800 and take a deep breath. I supposed I could tell the difference between the smell of chicken manure and the absence thereof.

At 3650 there was a rutted path leading to a complex of plastic domes and rectangular buildings apparently made of sod. There was a pen enclosing a small population explosion of chickens. They had a smell but it wasn't strong.

Halfway down the path, a door opened and Marygay came running out, wearing one tiny wisp of cloth. After a slippery but gratifying greeting, she asked what I was doing here so early.

"Oh, my mother had friends staying with her. I didn't want to put them out. Suppose I should have called."

"Indeed you should have . . . save you a long dusty walk—but we've got plenty of room, don't worry about that."

She took me inside to meet her parents, who greeted me warmly and made me feel definitely overdressed. Their faces showed their age but their bodies had no sag and few wrinkles.

Since dinner was an occasion, they let the chickens live and instead opened a can of beef, steaming it along with a cabbage and some potatoes. To my plain tastes it was equal to most of the gourmet fare we'd had on the dirigible and in London.

Over coffee and goat cheese (they apologized for not having wine; the commune would have a new vintage out in a couple of weeks) I asked what kind of work I could do.

"Will," Mr. Potter said, "I don't mind telling you that your coming here is a godsend. We've got five acres that are just sitting out there, fallow, because we don't have enough hands to work them. You can take the plow tomorrow and start breaking up an acre at a time."

"More potatoes, Daddy?" Marygay asked.

"No, no . . . not this season. Soybeans—cash crop and good for the soil. And Will, at night we all take turns standing guard. With four of us, we ought to be able to do a lot more sleeping." He took a big slurp of coffee. "Now, what else . . ."

"Richard," Mrs. Potter said, "tell him about the greenhouse."

"That's right, yes, the greenhouse. The commune has a two-acre greenhouse down about a click from here, by the recreation center. Mostly grapes and tomatoes. Everybody spends one morning or one afternoon a week there.

"Why don't you children go down there tonight . . . show Will the night-life in fabulous Freehold. Sometimes you can get a real exciting game of checkers going—"

"Oh, Daddy. It's not that bad."

"Actually, it isn't. They've got a

fair library and a coin-op terminal to the Library of Congress. Marygay tells me you're a reader, that's good."

"Sounds fascinating." It did. "But what about guard?"

"No problem. Mrs. Potter—April—and I'll take the first four hours—oh," he said, standing, "let me show you the setup."

We went out back to "the tower," a sandbag hut on stilts. Climbed up a rope ladder through a hole in the middle of the hut.

"A little crowded in here, with two," Richard said. "Have a seat." There was an old piano stool beside the hole in the floor. I sat on it. "It's handy to be able to see all the field without getting a crick in your neck. Just don't keep turning in the same direction all the time."

He opened a wooden crate and uncovered a sleek rifle, wrapped in oily rags. "Recognize this?"

"Sure." I'd had to sleep with one in basic training. "Army standard issue T-16. Semi-automatic, .12-calibre tumblers—where the hell did you get it?"

"Commune went to a government auction. It's an antique now, son." He handed it to me and I snapped it apart. Clean, too clean.

"Has it ever been used?"

"Not in almost a year. Ammo costs too much for target practice. Take a couple of practice shots, though, convince yourself that it works."

I turned on the scope and just got a washed-out bright green.

Set for night-time. Clicked it back to log zero, set the magnification at 10, reassembled it.

"Marygay didn't want to try it out. Said she'd had her fill of that. I didn't press her, but a person's got to have confidence in their tools."

I clicked off the safety and found a clod of dirt that the range-finder said was between 100 and 120 meters away. Set it at 110, rested the barrel of the rifle on the sandbags, centered the clod in the crosshairs and squeezed. The round hissed out and kicked up dirt about five centimeters low.

"Fine." I reset it for night use and safetied it and handed it back. "What happened a year ago?"

He wrapped it up carefully, keeping the rags away from the eyepiece. "Had some jumpers come in. Fired a few rounds and scared 'em away."

"All right, what's a jumper?"

"Yeah, you wouldn't know." He shook out a tobacco cigarette and passed me the box. "I don't know why they don't just call 'em thieves, that's what they are. Murderers, too, sometimes."

"They know that a lot of the commune members are pretty well off. If you raise cash crops you get to keep half the cash; besides, a lot of our members were prosperous when they joined."

"Anyhow, the jumpers take advantage of our relative isolation. They come out from the city and try to sneak in, usually hit one place and run. Most of the time,

they don't get this far in, but the farms closer to the road . . . we hear gunfire every couple of weeks. Usually just scaring off kids. If it keeps up, a siren goes off and the commune goes on alert."

"Doesn't sound fair to the people living close to the road."

"There're compensations. They only have to donate half as much of their crop as the rest of us do. And they're issued heavier weapons."

MARYGAY AND I took the family's two bicycles and pedalled down to the recreation center. I only fell off twice, negotiating the bumpy road in the dark.

It was a little livelier than Richard had described it. A young nude girl was dancing sensuously to an assortment of home-made drums near the far side of the dome. Turned out she was still in school; it was a project for a "cultural relativity" class.

Most of the people there, in fact, were young and therefore still in school. They considered it a joke, though. After you had learned to read and write, and could pass the Class I literacy test, you only had to take one course per year, and some of those you could pass just by signing up. So much for the "eighteen years' compulsory education" they had startled us with at Stargate.

Other people were playing board games, reading, watching the girl gyrate or just talking.

There was a bar that served soya, coffee or thin home-made beer. Not a ration ticket to be seen; all made by the commune or purchased outside with commune tickets.

We got into a discussion about the war, with a bunch of people who knew Marygay and I were veterans. It's hard to describe their attitude, which was pretty uniform: They were angry in an abstract way that it took so much tax money to support; they were convinced that the Taurans would never be any danger to Earth; but they all knew that nearly half the jobs in the world were associated with the war and if it stopped, everything would fall apart.

I thought everything was in shambles already, but then I hadn't grown up in this world. And they had never known "peacetime."

We went home about midnight and Marygay and I each stood two hours' guard. By the middle of the next morning, I was wishing I had gotten a little more sleep.

The plow was a big blade on wheels with two handles for steering, atomic powered. Not very much power, though; enough to move it forward at a slow crawl if the blade was in soft earth. Needless to say, there was little soft earth in the unused five acres. The plow would go a few centimeters, get stuck, freewheel until I put some back into it, then move a few more centimeters. I finished a tenth of an acre the first

day, and eventually got it up to a fifth of an acre a day.

It was hard, hardening work, but pleasant. I had an earphone that piped music to me, old tapes from Richard's collection, and the sun browned me all over. I was beginning to think I could live that way forever, when suddenly it was finished.

Marygay and I were reading up at the recreation center one evening when we heard faint gunfire down by the road. We decided it'd be smart to get back to the house. We were less than halfway there when firing broke out all along our left, on a line that seemed to extend from the road to far past the recreation center; a coordinated attack. We had to abandon the bikes and crawl on hands and knees in the drainage ditch by the side of the road, bullets hissing over our heads. A heavy vehicle rumbled by, shooting left and right. It took a good twenty minutes to crawl home. We passed two farmhouses that were burning brightly. I was glad ours didn't have any wood.

I noticed there was no return fire coming from our tower, but didn't say anything. There were two dead strangers in front of the house as we rushed inside.

April was lying on the floor, still alive but bleeding from a hundred tiny fragment wounds. The living room was rubble and dust; someone must have thrown a bomb through a door or window. I left Marygay with her

mother and ran out back to the tower. The ladder was pulled up, so I had to shinny up one of the stilts.

Richard was sitting slumped over the rifle. In the pale green glow from the scope I could see a perfectly round hole above his left eye. A little blood had trickled down the bridge of his nose and dried.

I laid his body on the floor and covered his head with my shirt. I filled my pockets with clips and took the rifle back to the house.

Marygay had tried to make her mother comfortable. They were talking quietly. She was holding my shotgun-pistol and had another gun on the floor beside her. When I came in she looked up and nodded soberly, not crying.

April whispered something and Marygay asked: "Mother wants to know whether . . . Daddy had a hard time of it. She knows he's dead."

"No. I'm sure he didn't feel anything."

"That's good."

"It's something." I should keep my mouth shut. "It is good, yes."

I checked the doors and windows for an effective vantage point. I couldn't find anyplace that wouldn't allow a whole platoon to sneak up behind me.

"I'm going to go outside and get on top of the house." Couldn't go back to the tower. "Don't you shoot unless somebody gets inside . . . maybe they'll think the

place is deserted."

By the time I had clambered up to the sod roof, the heavy truck was coming back down the road. Through the scope I could see that there were five men on it, four in the cab and one who was on the open bed, cradling a machine gun, surrounded by loot. He was crouched between two refrigerators, but I had a clear shot at him. Held my fire, not wanting to draw attention. The truck stopped in front of the house, sat for a minute and turned in. The window was probably bulletproof, but I sighted on the driver's face and squeezed off a round. He jumped as it ricocheted, whining, leaving an opaque star on the plastic, and the man in back opened up. A steady stream of bullets hummed over my head; I could hear them thumping into the sandbags of the tower. He didn't see me.

The truck wasn't ten meters away when the shooting stopped. He was evidently reloading, hidden behind the refrigerator. I took careful aim and when he popped up to fire I shot him in the throat. The bullet being a tumbler, it exited through the top of his skull.

The driver pulled the truck around in a long arc so that, when it stopped, the door to the cab was flush with the door of the house. This protected them from the tower and also from me, though I doubted they yet knew where I was; a T-16 makes no flash and very little noise. I

kicked off my shoes and stepped cautiously onto the top of the cab, hoping the driver would get out on his side. Once the door opened I could fill the cab with ricocheting bullets.

No good. The far door, hidden from me by the roof's overhang, opened first. I waited for the driver and hoped that Marygay was well hidden. I shouldn't have worried.

There was a deafening roar, then another and another and the heavy truck rocked with the impact of thousands of tiny flechettes. One short scream that the second shot ended.

I jumped from the truck and ran around to the back door. Marygay had her mother's head on her lap, and someone was crying softly. I went to them and Marygay's cheeks were dry under my palms.

"Good work, dear." She didn't say anything. There was a steady heavy dripping sound from the door and the air was acrid with smoke and the smell of fresh meat. We huddled together until dawn.

I had thought April was sleeping, but in the dim light her eyes were wide open and filmed. Her breath came in shallow rasps. Her skin was grey parchment and dried blood. She didn't answer when we talked to her.

A vehicle was coming up the road, so I took the rifle and went outside. It was a dumptruck with a white sheet draped over one

side and a man standing in the back with a megaphone repeating, "Wounded . . . wounded." I waved and the truck came in. They took April out on a makeshift litter and told us which hospital they were going to. We wanted to go along but there was simply no room; the bed of the truck was covered with people in various stages of disrepair.

Marygay didn't want to go back inside because it was getting light enough to see the men she had killed so completely. I went back in to get some cigarettes and forced myself to look. It was messy enough, but just didn't disturb me that much. *That* bothered me, to be confronted with a pile of human hamburger and mainly notice the flies and ants and smell. Death is so much neater in space.

We buried her father behind the house and when the truck came back with April's small body wrapped in a shroud, we buried her beside him. The commune's sanitation truck came by a little later, and gas-masked men took care of the jumpers' bodies.

We sat in the baking sun and finally, Marygay wept, for a long time, silently.

11

WE SPENT THAT NIGHT in a hotel room in Sioux Falls, talking more than sleeping. It went like this:

Earth was not a fit place to live, and by all signs it was getting

worse rather than better. And there was nothing to hold us here.

But the only people allowed in space were members of UNEF.

Therefore we had to either join up again or try to learn to live with the crime and crowding and filth and so on.

We had been promised training positions if we reenlisted. We could be assigned to the moon if we asked, and would have commissions. All of these things would make army life a lot more tolerable than it had been.

And except for the combat, we had been happier in the army than during most of our stay on Earth.

We took the morning flight to Miami and monorailed to the Cape.

"IN CASE you're interested, you aren't the first combat veterans to come back." The recruiting officer was a muscular lieutenant of indeterminate sex. I flipped a coin mentally and it came up tails.

"Last I heard, there had been nine others," she said in her husky tenor. "All of them opted for the moon . . . maybe you'll find some of your friends there." She slid two simple forms across the desk. "Sign these and you're in again. Second lieutenants."

The form was a simple request to be assigned to active duty; we had never really gotten out of the Force, since they extended the draft law, but had just been on inactive status. I scrutinized the paper.

"There's nothing on this about the guarantees we were given at Stargate."

"That won't be necessary. The Force will—"

"I think it's necessary, Lieutenant." I handed back the form. So did Marygay.

"Let me check." She left the desk and disappeared into an office. After a while we heard a printer rattle.

She brought back the same two sheets, with an addition typed under our names: "GUARANTEED LOCATION OF CHOICE [LUNA] AND ASSIGNMENT OF CHOICE [COMBAT TRAINING SPECIALIST]."

We got a thorough physical checkup and were fitted for new fighting suits, made our financial arrangements and caught the next morning's shuttle. We laid over at Earthport, enjoying zero-gravity, for a few hours and then caught a ride to Luna, setting down at the Grimaldi base.

On the door to the Transient Officers' Billet some wag had scraped "abandon hope all ye who enter." We found our two-man cubicle and began changing for chow.

Two raps on the door. "Mail call, sirs."

I opened the door and the sergeant standing there saluted. Just looked at him for a second and then remembered I was an officer and returned the salute. He handed me two identical 'faxes. I gave one to Marygay and we both gasped at the same time:

****ORDERS**ORDERS**ORDERS**

THE FOLLOWING NAMED PERSONNEL:

Mandella, William 2LT [11 575 278] COCOMM D Co GRITRABN AND

Potter, Marygay 2LT [17 386 907] COCOMM B Co GRITRABN

ARE HEREBY REASSIGNED TO:

LT Mandella: PLCOMM 2 PL STFTHETA STARGATE

LT Potter: PLCOMM 3 PL STFTHETA STARGATE.

DESCRIPTION OF DUTIES:

Command infantry platoon in Tet-2 Campaign.

THE ABOVE NAMED PERSONNEL WILL REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO GRIMALDI TRANSPORTATION BATTALION TO BE MANIFESTED TO STARGATE.

ISSUED STARGATE TACBD/1298-8684-1450/20 Aug 2019 SC:

BY AUTH STFCOM Commander.

****ORDERS**ORDERS**ORDERS**

"They didn't waste any time, did they?" Marygay said bitterly.

"Must be a standing order. Strike Force Command's light-weeks away; they can't even know we've re-upped yet."

"What about our . . ." She let it trail off.

"The guarantee. Well, we were given our assignment of choice. Nobody guaranteed we'd have the assignment for more than an hour."

"It's so dirty."

I shrugged. "It's so army."

But I couldn't shake the feeling that we were going home.

—JOE HALDEMAN

CLAY SUBURB

Robert Young's most recent appearance here was "Lord of Rays" (July). Now he turns his hand to a story of multiple personalities, time-travel, and murder most foul . . .

ROBERT F. YOUNG

Illustrated by JOE STATON

I hazard the guess that man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens.

—R. L. Stevenson: "Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde"

Saturday, 8:51 P.M.; Roger Norbrook C:

Again I experience the sensation of falling through successive layers of ever more tenuous mist. (I say "again", although this is the first time I have experienced it directly.) It lasts but a moment—actually it is a mental ploy designed to soften the shock of instantaneous retro-location—and I emerge in the by-now familiar alley. After looking around to see whether anyone observed my materialization (no one is present: no one ever is—it's that kind of an alley), I make my way to the street, cross to the other side and enter the Arabian Nights Cafe. The Cafe, owing partly to its

nearness to the nexus, has been first on the list of my quarry's Saturnalian itineraries ever since his first pasttrip.

I eliminated the alley as a potential *mise en scène* from the beginning. Although unfrequented, it is out of range of the nearest streetlight and much too tenebrous.

The street too, for obvious reasons, was out of the question. My quarry's arrival in the past, per se, will virtually guarantee that I won't be apprehended, but for me to risk being apprehended would be to break the rules. It is true they may no longer apply; but to be on the safe side, I intend to play the game as though they do.

(Roger Norbrook D: *If posterity remembers my host, it will be less for his having invented a means of traveling into the past than for the effect his invention has had upon his multiple personality and for the unique use to which he has ul-*

timately put it.

(Recently, for the sake of my sanity, I designated his various aspects as "A", "B" and "C", "A" representing Roger Norbrook proper, and "B" and "C" his secondary selves. Ironically, this has led me to think of myself as "D"—an outrageous misnomer indeed!)

Roger Norbrook C: After entering the cafe, I proceed directly to an unoccupied booth from which both the bar and the street door can be observed. The obsolete horn-rims I am wearing bother the bridge of my nose, and I cannot help feeling ludicrous in the outdated brown pinstripe I have on. But it was imperative that I employ at least a modicum of disguise.

I sit down to wait.

As I sit there, I sift my thoughts for any signs of moral turpitude. I find none, nor did I expect to. I was certain when I stepped into the field that my impassibility would immunize me against the side-effects of retro-location my quarry attributes his freedom to.

Presently the waitress espies me and comes over to the booth. I order a glass of beer. After she brings it, I force myself to take a small swallow, then set it back down on the table. All of the lights in the room are shaded and/or on low beam: a sort of bluish gloom prevails.

Any moment now my quarry will step unsuspectingly into the



room. While he is here I'll keep him under surveillance, and when he leaves I'll follow him. Eventually he will provide me with an optimum opportunity to accomplish my purpose.

I lock my gaze on the street door.

I wait.

Saturday, 9:00 P. M.; Roger Norbrook B:

That evanescent feeling of falling through diaphanous mist; that sweet sense of freedom as the trans-temporal forces unleashed by my passage tear my winter garment of repentance away. The delirious ecstasy of being reborn . . .

I leave the alley, cross the street and enter the neon-inscribed oasis of the Arabian Nights Cafe. Launching Saturday night from this sequestered spa has become a Roger Norbrook tradition.

Retro-location used to leave me with a shaky feeling inside. It doesn't any more. Six successful pasttrips—this makes my seventh—have made me a veteran. I'll never forget my first time out, though. I didn't know then that the two ends of the induced photic loop—or warp—had joined at a spatially congenial materialization-point; I knew only that they had come together somewhere within a two or three mile radius of the apartment complex where my workshop is located and that the gravitational

guidelines incorporated in the generating field had seen to it that the juncture was at ground level. I had to take a chance, and I did so. (While it's true that time and space are independent of each other—a fact that I demonstrated myself in a series of experiments at the Institute of TIMEstudy—there is nevertheless a slight lateral deviation in the former.)

(Roger Norbrook D: *B has never truly distinguished himself from A, not even during his pasttrips. By his very nature, he has always been blithely ignorant of the existence of C. C, of course, is keenly aware of both B and A. On occasion, A has sensed C's presence and identified him as a self-destructive urge; however, he has refused to take him seriously.*

(It need hardly be added that neither A nor B nor C has ever been aware of me.)

Roger Norbrook B: After entering the cafe, I walk over to the bar and sit down on a barstool next to an unescorted hausfrau. There's a fair crowd present and a handful of patrons in the dim-lit booths along the wall. The hausfrau has a vodka-and-orange sitting on the bar before her. I tell the bartender, whom I know by face, if not by name, from my previous visits, to bring me a Seagram's & 7.

I go easy on the first drink—it's too soon after breakfast to start tossing them off. That's the trouble with pasttrips (their only trou-

ble as far as I'm concerned): they louse up your body's timetable. Tonight for some reason I feel even more loused up than usual. Not only that, I'm so tired my bones ache. Which is crazy. I know I didn't get much sleep, but I got *some*.

Oh well, after a few drinks I shan't know the difference.

I finish the first and am about to adjourn to another dive, as is my custom, for the second, when I perceive that the hausfrau sitting next to me is looking meaningfully in my direction. I have nothing against hausfrauen, especially when they're as readily available and as furry-soft as this one is, and I am delighted to have flushed quail so early in the hunt. I signal the bartender to bring me another Seagram's & 7.

The hausfrau keeps her left hand hidden behind her purse, apparently reluctant to reveal the tangible tokens of her connubial state. She laps her screwdriver like a big lissom cat. It's easily her tenth. Her name turns out to be Salome. I am shaken with silent laughter. Salome getting up early and fixing his breakfast; Salome dutifully mending his socks; Salome fetching his slippers like a big purring tabby when he comes home at night, tired and grumpy from his grueling grind at the office—

Salome, solo, lapping up screwdrivers in the Arabian Nights Cafe—

The outrageous *non sequitur*

adds zest to my silent cynical laughter. But it turns out to be only technical: her dearly beloved's out of town. A *salesman* no less! Bless 'em, every one. Come, Salome, we will climb into your car and a-cabareting we will go! We'll wine and dine and dance, and afterward we will screw. Tomorrow you can be served my head upon a platter if you wish, but tonight you shall serve me a rose!

Saturday, 9:57 P.M.; Roger Norbrook A:

In my aerie high above the motley city I make a final visual inspection of the warp-generating field to whose development I gave three precious years of my life and which has given me nothing but heartbreak in return.

The pulsing portal looks back at me enigmatically, half-blinding me with its infinitudinous scintillations.

Six Sunday mornings I have stepped through those self-deactivating photic panels, believing them to constitute a doorway to yesterday; six Sunday mornings, after an ephemeral sensation of falling, I have been tossed contemptuously into another part of the present, overwhelmed with inexplicable self-loathing; exhausted, debilitated, lost.

(Roger Norbrook D: *A's grandfather blew his brains out at the age of thirty-eight. A's father despised sex with the fervor of an Essene, regarded the Eighteenth*

Amendment as an Act of God and its repeal as an Act of Satan. Both these bills of goods were rammed down A's throat daily till his father died of a coronary at the age of forty-two. Not long afterward, A and his mother took up residence in the apartment A now inhabits alone. He obtained his degree at the nearby University of R—, obtained a position at the Institute of TIMEstudy and settled down to a life of staid respectability. Throughout, he kept B imprisoned in a dark oubliette in the Gothic castle of the Norbrook unconscious. His mother died of uremia during his thirty-eighth year; soon afterward he began work on his time machine. It was not till after he perfected it and embarked on his first trip that B escaped from his oubliette. Naturally he behaved as he did—i.e., like a sex-starved, booze-bent sailor on shore leave—and naturally he continued to do so on each successive trip. Unlike C, however, B is not completely autonomous; nevertheless, the effect is the same as if the dissociation were total, for A, refusing to accept B's weekly escapes from the castle, blacks out all memory of the pasttrips. But he cannot, of course, black out the physical effects of B's debaucheries, nor the self-loathing accruing from his unconscious awareness of them.)

Roger Norbrook A: Tomorrow at exactly 9:00 A.M., I shall play the guinea pig again. I do not want to; it is as though I am compelled by

some inner force.

As before, the nexus will be minus twelve hours. The field's potential is considerably greater, but it is unlikely that success will more readily crown my efforts if I try a longer loop. By the same token, it is unlikely that a shorter one will stand me in any better stead. (In either case, the nexus's original co-ordinates would remain approximately the same, but this can hardly be construed as a safety factor when the original co-ordinates are unknown to me.)

The synchronous clock on the workshop wall registers 10:07 P.M. I deactivate the field and turn tiredly toward the door. There is nothing more I can do here. I have already done everything possible to ensure success. Success indeed! Dejectedly I leave the little room (originally it was a commodious closet), extinguishing the light and locking the door behind me. In the living room, I sit down in my fauteuil and resume watching TV.

I work the channel changer in vain: not one of the pallid programs gets past the threshold of my mind.

This is not because they are pallid. It is because my mind keeps masochistically reverting to my successive failures to achieve retro-location, to the scabrous locales to which I have been successively shunted instead. One time, to my horror, I found myself in bed with a strange and utterly naked woman, indubitably a

harlot, in a section of the city I had never seen before; another time, I found myself lying in a filthy gutter, my clothes in abject ruin; still another time, I found myself pounding on the door of what subsequently turned out to be a Blind Pig. And the self-loathing! My God!—the self-loathing!

Of late, I have been the victim of depression—a depression so acute sometimes as to border on desperation. I would unhesitatingly ascribe its cause to my repeated failures to backtrack in time, but to a certain extent I felt depressed before I began my experiments—for that matter, even before I conceived of a way in which light could be bent and time breached. Thus, while my failures have undoubtedly intensified my black broodings, they cannot be the sole cause.

Equally as distressing, I have of late been suffering from brief memory lapses. During one of them I purchased a handgun and a box of cartridges. I know I must have, although I haven't the slightest recollection of the transaction, because only yesterday I discovered the ugly weapon and the frightful little box in my filing cabinet. On another occasion I must have exhumed from somewhere a brown pinstripe suit I haven't worn for years. I *know* I must have, because I saw it just this morning hanging in the hall closet.

I become aware that my hands

are trembling, that the electronic channel changer has slipped from my fingers and fallen to the floor. This will never do. Somehow I must get hold of myself and put to rout the monstrous shadow that keeps looking over my shoulder. I concentrate with all my mental might on the in-color but somehow colorless mini-world before me. At last I am rewarded: the meaning behind the seemingly pointless actions of the players gets through to me; I begin to catch on to the clichés that repeatedly pass their lips.

Relieved, I settle back in my fauteuil. Later in the evening, I will turn on an old movie and watch it till I am no longer able to stay awake. Then I will prepare myself a glass of warm milk and go to bed.

Saturday, 11:55 P.M.; Roger Norbrook B:

Flesh-satiated for the nonce, we lie in bed (His & Hers no less) and chat. No Seagrams & 7 now, nor vodka-and-orange; however, resourceful Salome has fetched a bottle of Burgundy from a kitchen-cupboard cache, so we do not want for wine. She has a teenager in highschool who's off to Aunt Jane's or Aunt Mame's and won't be back till Monday. Red wine. Her eleven-year old son's at Camp. Wine red. On the wall opposite our inner-spring Eden hangs a painting of a clown. Red wine, wine red. The face is serio-comic, multicolored, grotesque. A

portrait of her cornuted husband? She laughs at my little joke; I join her. The two of us rock with laughter on the bed. More wine. Wine red, red wine, wine red, red is the rose you gave me, my love, the red red rose I fondle reminiscently now as we lie here side by side in the roseate light of your bedlamp talking like two teenage lovers in the night. Red wine, wine red, red rose . . . I slaved for three long years, Salome, building the doorway that made this night and others like it possible; I slit the texture of light and sewed it back together again a hundred, a thousand times, and at last I found a way to make it bend; and I said, "Open sesame!"—and lo! the bright and blinding portal seemed to part, and I stepped through and plummeted into the past. Again and again and again. Seven—count them—times. And every time I go back, Salome, the trans-temporal forces my passage inadvertently sets free inadvertently set *me* free, rip asunder the puritanical strait-jacket I ordinarily wear to work and church and bed, acetylene the Victorian bars of my cold cruel cell till they melt into molten puddles at my feet; and I step forth reborn into the once-forbidden vineyard and gorge myself upon the saccharine grapes of life. Wine red, red wine, wine red.

Sunday, 12:07 A.M.; Roger Norbrook C:

I have a good view of the house (it is American Colonial Suburban) from the shadows of the high hedge behind which I slipped after the cab deposited me and drove off. The adjoining two-car garage had by that time already swallowed the woman's station wagon; the downstairs light that came on a few minutes later still burns. The light in the upstairs window that came on not long afterward also still burns. The latter is a wan light, rendered more so by drawn blinds.

My best bet, I think, will be to make my entry from the rear. But before trying any of the windows I'll try the back door. People are always hiding housekeys in the most ingenious—and most obvious—places: on porch ledges, in milk boxes, under doormats. However, I'll hold off for a while. By now he's probably recuperating from his co-operation in the evening's first beast-of-two-backs; it will be some time before he's up to the second. He's not young any more. After the second, if he remains true to form, he'll fall asleep. That should be around three o'clock. I'll wait till then.

Afterward I'll remove whatever items he has on his person that might lead to his immediate identification; then, on my way back to the apartment, I'll drop them into an ashcan or down a storm sewer. There will be a witness to the crime, of course, but it can't be helped. Hopefully, my quarry hasn't told his bedmate his full

name.

There is a lawn chair lying on its side in the middle of the lawn. I drag it into the shadows and make myself comfortable. I touch the butt of the snub-nose .38 in my right-hand coat pocket. I yawn. There must be a pond somewhere in the neighborhood: I can hear the *korak-korak* of frogs.

Sunday, 1:10 A.M.; Roger Norbrook A:

The old movie I have been watching at last drags to a close. A clutch of 30-second commercials ensue.

I must get to bed. I have a hard day ahead of me tomorrow—

A hard day's sleep.

For if the pattern repeats itself and at 9:00 A.M. I am re- rather than retro-located, I shall be as tired as though the opposite were true; and if it does not repeat itself and I am retro- rather than relocated, I shall probably be equally as fatigued.

There is a connection there somewhere (why should money be missing from my wallet every time I am shunted to another part of the present?) but I am unable to make it. Perhaps because the lateness of the hour has fogged my brain. Perhaps because the evening's cathodic fare has dulled it.

(Roger Norbrook D: *The moral metamorphosis A undergoes each time he essays a pastrip is totally unrelated to the trans-temporal forces past-travel involves. He*

merely realizes each time he arrives in the past that officially he doesn't exist, that stretching before him are twelve hours of the purest freedom ever known to man. Pretentiousness, self-righteousness, self-deceit, fear—all fall away: he rips off his persona and becomes B.)

(Roger Norbrook A: I turn off the television set, go into the kitchen and prepare my glass of warm milk. I carry it into the bedroom, undress and remove my contact lenses. Once again, thoughts of my successive failures to achieve past travel assail me. Perhaps, after all, I erred in not conducting my experiments at the Institute, in not taking my associates into my confidence. The burden might not be so hard to bear if others shared it.

But *would* they share it?

Would they not instead, as I feared in the first place, shrug free of it and call me a fool behind my back? I, whose shoelaces they aren't fit to tie? I, who sit at home while they go out and guzzle gin? I, who sleep alone while they fornicate with one another's wives?

No, I was right in acting as I did. Noble endeavors deserve the services of noble men.

Sunday, 3:01 A.M.; Roger Norbrook B:

*"Come, fill the Cup, Salome,
and in the fire of Spring
Your Winter garment of Repen-
tance fling:
The Bird of Time has but a lit-*

*tle way
To flutter—and the Bird is on
the Wing!"*

Sunday, 3:10 A.M.; Roger Norbrook C:

Aha! In the milk box, just as I thought.

Sunday, 3:23 A.M.; Roger Norbrook A:

Something has awakened me! Someone.

I can feel his presence in the room.

No, not in the room. In *myself*.

The depression I took to bed with me has vanished. Hatred has taken its place. Hatred so cold and inhuman it cannot even be classified as an emotion . . .

My God! what's happening to me? It's as though someone is taking over my thoughts, my mind, my body—look, stock and—

Roger Norbrook C:—and barrel. I turn on the bedlamp, get up, divest myself of his pajamas and don his underwear and socks. Ignoring his contact lenses, I leave the bedroom and go into the den.

I have prepared for my role well—

Sunday, 3:26 A.M.: Roger Norbrook B:

Our second time around, Salome concatenates. The clown looks down with sad and weary eyes. A *Weltschmerz*, his. He's monitored scenes like this before. My love is but a red dead rose . . .

The clown is in Poughkeepsie, Salome assures me. Far, far away. We doze off side by side. In what

seems to be a post-coital dream I hear his footsteps on the carpeted stairs. Salome stirs beside me, turns and throws her smooth soft thigh across my stomach. There is a faint whisper, as of a door opening; aeons later there is a soft *click!* and the room is blasted with brightness. But it is not the clown who advances, pistol pointed, into the room. It's—it's—"My God!—no! It can't be! But why? *Why?*" Salome begins to scream. I try to scramble over her to the other side of the bed. There is a curious cracking sound and something heavy smashes against my left shoulder blade. There is a second, similar sound, a second numbing blow. I cannot move. The redness, the advancing blackness . . . Suddenly a light appears, grows brighter. O lovely light! O quiddity of Time: Time is Light, Light Time—that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know . . . Go through the light, the light and the dark and the red wave rising, go through it to the other side *go through the light!* . . . there, it's better here—I'll sleep . . .

Sunday, 3:29 A.M.; Roger Norbrook C:

After entering the den, I put on the old-fashioned horn-rims I spotted yesterday in a cluttered desk drawer. Fortunately, there is only a minimum of difference between their prescription and that of his contact lenses.

Returning to the bedroom, I get a dress shirt out of the chest of drawers, and a brown tie. I put them on.

From the hall closet I take down the brown pinstripe I exhumed two days ago from a trunk in the dusty room that formerly belong to his beloved mother and that he now uses for storage. I put the suit on.

His everyday shoes will do.

Fully dressed, I re-enter the bedroom, where I transfer the contents of his pockets into mine. Afterward, I'll transfer everything back, return the suit to the closet and the horn-rims to the desk drawer. He will not remember my tenure no matter how many clues I leave behind, but for optimum results the game should be played according to the rules.

Returning to the den, I unlock the filing cabinet, remove the .38 I bought last week, load it and slip it into my right-hand coat pocket. I will replace both the gun and the unused shells (if any) after I finish my night's work.

From the den I proceed directly to the workshop, let myself in and lock the door. I flood the little room with fluorescence, set the retro-locator for 3:51 A.M. minus seven hours and activate the field. This will place my arrival in the past at a temporal point preceding my quarry's by about nine minutes. The photic warp, when it forms, will make whatever compensations that are necessary to keep the nexus spatially constant.

After turning out the light, I take up my position before the field. Presently the first photic particles appear. They multiply rapidly and a faint hum begins emanating from the energy converter.

I focus my gaze on the luminous face of the synchronous clock on the opposite wall.

I wait.

I am not in the least disturbed that I have not yet returned from my mission. Indeed, I would be disturbed if I had, since I do not plan to come back to the apartment via orthodox travel till after I depart from it via the field. There may be a limit to the number of paradoxes Time can sustain over a given temporal period: one more might be one too many.

When I do return, I will replace the suit in the hall closet, the horn-rims in the desk drawer and the weapon and unused shells in the filing cabinet and then go directly back to bed. In the morning I shall awake as *him*. Only when *he* steps into the field will my mission be truly accomplished.

The clock on the wall registers 3:51. Unhesitatingly I embark upon my journey.

(Roger Norbrook D: *The single-mindedness with which C planned and carried out the murder of B is misleading, because A—not B—was—is—his intended victim. But C, for all his coldbloodedness, was too squeamish to do the job directly, since it would have involved inserting the muzzle of the .38 into his mouth or placing it against his temple and pulling the trigger. Happily, the presence of a modern technological device provided him with a means of circumventing this unpleasantness. Thus, in one sense, Roger Norbrook's time machine can*

be classified as a sort of impersonal and highly humane self-executional apparatus analogous to the hangman's noose, the guillotine and the electric chair.

(It is interesting to speculate whether this may not have been his real motive for inventing it.)

Sunday, 8:25 A.M.; Roger Norbrook A:

I've overslept! I'll have to hurry!

It is imperative that I enter the field at exactly 9:00 A.M.

(Why is it imperative? And why am I so exhausted? And why am I so badly in need of a shave?)

No matter.)

I put coffee on to perk while I dress. The clock radio that failed to wake me earlier is talking earnestly to itself on the bed table. Something about a murder. I listen idly as I dress. Shortly before 3:30 A.M., Mrs. Alfred Hewett of 86 St. James Place was beset by two prowlers, the second of whom fatally shot and robbed the first, who, unquestionably a rapist, had managed to remove all his clothing and crawl into bed with her without awakening her. The police are skeptical about Mrs. Hewett's hysterical account. Thus far, they have been unable to identify the victim or to get a line on his accomplice/slayer, but—I do not catch the rest of the item because by this time I am in the bathroom operating my electric razor.

(Roger Norbrook D: C did not

kill B. I did.

(Oh, the crime was committed by C's own hand—I do not mean that. But I could have averted it.

(Simply by destroying C.

(For that matter, I could have destroyed him long ago. But I didn't.

(Even now, I can void B's murder. Simply by denying C his target. All I have to do is supersede A and stop Roger Norbrook from entering the field. I can wipe the entire episode from the pages of Time.

(I can, but I won't.

(I want Roger Norbrook to enter the field.

(This multiple mud-hut of a man I have inhabited all my life, while atypical in certain respects, is probably no better or worse than the multiple mud-huts of my confreres. But to me it is a prison—as, perhaps, theirs are to them.

(I cannot depart from it soon enough.)

Roger Norbrook A: Returning to the kitchen, I drink my coffee as fast as its temperature will permit. I glance at the clock above the stove: 8:47.

I hurry to the workshop, unlock the door, enter and lock it behind me. I turn on the light and set the retro-locator for 9:00 A.M. minus twelve hours. I activate the field and go over and stand before it.

The first faint particles of light appear. 8:54.

I become aware that I am

sweating. It is a cold, clammy sweat.

8:56. The humming of the energy converter fills the room. The photic portal has taken on the aspect of a scintillating waterfall. It seems to beckon to me.

8:58.

Anticipation effervesces deep within me. I would interpret it as a good omen had I not experienced the same false foretaste before.

9:00.

Pray God I do not fail again!

Roger Norbrook B:

Open sesame!

Roger Norbrook C:

Mission accomplished.

(Roger Norbrook D:

Why, if the Soul can fling the Dust aside,

And naked on the Air of Heaven ride,

Is't not a Shame—is't not a Shame for him

So long in this Clay Suburb to abide?)

Exeunt

—ROBERT F. YOUNG

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HEEL

RICHARD E. PECK

Richard Peck, whose "Deliveryman" appeared here last issue, returns with a new twist on an old theme, as he explores the ramifications of sexual role reversals in a world turned upside down . . .

Illustrated by TONY GLEESON

Click, click, click.

Carl Boyce sat huddled in the recessed doorway of an abandoned sporting goods shop. Two signs, one torn and peeling loose from the glass, showed through the grimy window to his left: "Hunting and Fishing Licenses," and a hand-lettered "Available—Newton Realty."

Click, click, click, click.

The sound of each marching stiletto heel striking the pavement drove shivers through him. He cursed his own carelessness. The pale gray dawn had caught him unescorted, several blocks from the nearest Shelter. And then it had been too late to run. They would have seen him at once, converged on him with the instinct they had all developed so quickly. Another man might have tried; Carl Boyce didn't dare.

If he tried to brazen it out now and walked calmly through the nearly deserted streets, there would be questions. He couldn't face the questions again.

Nor could he hold out much longer where he lay. He had not eaten since yesterday noon. A tic plucked at his left eyelid and his stomach growled discomfort, a burning acid rumble that gnawed at him. He doubled over, pressed both knotted fists into his gut, and tried to think rationally. He felt dizzy with hunger, light-headed. He had to plan something soon. Even now he was not certain he could outrun them.

He risked another glance outside. There were more of them now. Eight women, "cruising"—their word for it. Across the street one of them paced the sidewalk and smiled vacantly into each store window she passed, hoping that someone inside might respond. She couldn't have been more than sixteen but already wore the look of a predator. Her eyes glittered cold, and the taut cords of her neck belied the carefully rehearsed, soft smile she wore.

Not her, he decided. The

young ones were too demanding. Better to wait for one of the more matronly sorts who strolled the city's empty canyons. Like that one a month ago who had wanted nothing but conversation. They all said that, but she had actually meant it. He had spent four days with her, until a neighbor became too inquisitive. Then he had run again.

Nearly seven months of running.

He searched the street for inspiration. Suddenly his problem solved itself. A woman standing across the street was staring his way. He huddled deeper into the darkened doorway but it was too late. She had seen him. He had nothing to do but wait.

She walked slowly toward him. He recognized the caution that slowed her stride. If she hurried, the others might understand.

Or perhaps she delayed for his sake. It was a nice touch, not to rush him. She walked like someone approaching a wary colt. It gave him the chance to size her up. Long auburn hair framed a maturing face, neither young nor old. She looked to be in her thirties, though Carl had never been good at guessing their ages. On her, the transparent coat they all wore spoke modesty; beneath it she wore pasties and bikini briefs. She was too heavy for his taste—a bitter laugh bubbled in his throat: as if his taste mattered any more. And the high heels on which she clicked toward him did little to



disguise her thick ankles. With each step, the dimpled flesh of her thighs trembled.

She stopped on the sidewalk in front of his hiding place and stared away down the street as if searching for something. Without looking his way she asked, "Waiting for a friend?" Her low voice carried well.

He rose to his feet awkwardly.

"One minute," she whispered. She turned away and elaborately lit a cigarette. Her position screened him from two younger ones who clicked past. Then she backed into the doorway.

Still she didn't look directly at him. "I was just going to lunch. Join me?"

He crooked his elbow and let her grasp his bicep with one hand. They all enjoyed it that way.

"Call me Beth," she said.

He nodded, and they walked out into the sunlight.

His presence changed the street. The marching heels fell silent as women up and down the block caught sight of him. Some shrugged commiseration with one another. A few studied Beth with frankly puzzled appraisals. The young one he had noticed moments before crossed the street and posed in the center of the sidewalk ahead of them, blocking their path. She ran a thick tongue over parted teeth and ground her upthrust hips around an imaginary point hovering in mid-air between them.

"I know some fun threesies," she rasped.

Beth tightened her grip on his arm and urged him past the girl.

Raucous laughter followed them into the restaurant.

A designer's idea of masculinity dominated the place oppressively. It was dark and paneled, leather-lined and massive. In the cool darkness Carl felt weak again, as if their passage through the stares outside had sapped what little strength remained to him. Beth guided him possessively past the queue of waiting singles and toward the maitre d'.

With a smirk and raised eyebrows for greeting, he guided them officiously to a table where he pulled out a chair. The seat touched Carl behind the knees; he collapsed gratefully onto it. The maitre d' reached past to lay menus on the table and gently brushed a hand across the back of Carl's neck.

"Keep your goddamn paws to yourself!"

The silent women staring from all sides broke into smiles or nodded at one another with patronizing titters. Beth preened in the glow of attention she felt directed her way.

She waited till the maitre d' had sulked out of earshot. "You see more and more of them lately, don't you think, Mr. . . ?"

"Charley. My name's Charley." He watched the maitre d' mince toward the foyer and wondered why he couldn't learn to imitate

that gait. He had tried. God knows he had tried. For weeks, that time in Pittsburgh, he had affected a lisp, worn mascara and velvet, but nothing seemed to work for him. He couldn't fool the stalkers for long. He knew they were out there, somewhere, hunting him.

"... have, Charles?"

"What? Oh—uh, your order. It's up to you." Half-eaten meals decorating the tables all around him filled his mouth with saliva.

She ordered, then motioned the wine stewardess over and whispered to her.

Carl scrubbed his scarred knuckles and pulled his collar loose. He wished they wouldn't stare so blatantly. He was certain none of them could recognize him. He had shaved off his moustache as soon as the posters began to appear, and he had seen none of the posters since arriving in Chicago. But the stares still frightened him. The stalkers studied the wanted lists carefully, and they wanted *him*. Not any man, Carl Boyce.

Beth tried to engage him in conversation, talking about sports, feigning an interest he saw through at once, shifting rapidly from one "male" subject to another. He did little but nod in response. He had never been able to share in the banter and small talk that women seemed to expect of him, not even before . . . he blocked the thought.

While he waited for the meal to

arrive one thumb idly traced the grain in the table edge. The old feeling came through his hands to surprise him—the table was real wood, not plastic, not some cheap composition board. He leaned back in his chair to glance down and saw the long sweeping curl of split oak. He dug a nail into the grain but caught himself doing so and jerked back. No good. By now they all knew Carl Boyce had been a cabinet maker, before . . .

For a long moment he held his breath and waited, tensed.

No one had noticed.

Beth's broad smile frightened him suddenly, till he realized she was staring over his shoulder. He turned awkwardly to see the wine stewardess carrying a silver tray toward them. On it, a bottle of Michelob.

"Right from the bottle, Charles. That's the way my husband always drank it. Funny," her eyes grew vacant as she mused over some private memory. "I never—"

"Mine was the same way." A woman at the next table leaned close to interrupt and pat Beth's hand.

Beth froze, and Carl said, "Okay, lady. We're talking here. Want to butt out?"

The intruder jerked away as if stung.

"Thank you, Charles, but I understand. I didn't mean to mention my husband, but I *was* married, you know. Many of us were married, before . . ."

THE DISEASE first appeared in Iran, though no one considered it serious at the time. Neither did anyone suspect that something so simple as an unexplained outbreak of mumps among the frontline troops might have been "caused." The number of cases multiplied rapidly, unchecked, all but unnoticed in the medical reports, freighted down as they were with lists of the war-dead and seriously wounded. A Navy doctor in Tel Aviv doubted the first reports he noticed; he simply knew better than to accept as fact the unlikely statistics that crossed his desk. Virtually all American adults have already had mumps—simple parotitis—along with other relatively harmless childhood diseases; have had them, or been inoculated against them. Thus when the doctor read that 40% of our combat troops in Iran had contracted a particularly virulent strain of the disease, he did what seemed to him logical: he put the decimal point where he thought it belonged and forwarded the reports to Washington.

No one in Washington could be expected to concern himself with the lucky 4% sent to the rear to recover from mumps in row upon growing row of hospital tents.

The medics felt put upon by the added burden of malingerers who faked both lethargy and severe headaches; they were already swamped with combat casualties. When those same malingerers died in masses, it was too late.

The medics recorded the deaths on the proper forms and sent the bodies home.

In Cairo a curious doctor named Robert Shallot performed several unauthorized autopsies on corpses ostensibly in transit. He flew to Washington to report on his discovery of a disease he termed "Shallot's parotitis encephalitis." That small bid for immortality did little for him; within a month he died of "his" disease. The entire male staff of Walter Reed Hospital followed him a week later.

No one ever learned what the disease had been termed by the Chinese virologist whose sub-microscopic miracle had altered the structure of a simple virus. Perhaps it bore his name. It didn't matter. The inoculations which had protected most Chinese troops—all but the few infected volunteers who surrendered to the Americans to spread the disease—soon proved ineffectual. The virus continued mutating. The learned doctor's greatest success lay in the ease with which the virus spread not only through human contact but also from one arthropod vector to another. Within two months nearly every spider, crustacean, and millipede on the face of the globe was a carrier.

Whether or not the doctor intended his creation to behave as it did, women were less affected than men. Only twenty percent of American women died, no more

than twenty-two million. Men fared less well. They died in numbers so nearly approaching one hundred percent that only a carping statistician would quibble, at the third decimal point.

Too late, a reasonably effective antigen was developed by a pair of British virologists. Ganders and Price were their names. They were roommates and for weeks had merely discussed the headlines which forecast the end of the species as country after country saw its male population eliminated: mumps, followed by orchitis, followed by encephalitis, followed by death. As women, Ganders and Price were of the lucky eighty percent and immune; as lesbians, they pretended perverse pleasure at the thought of a manless world; as scientists, they attacked the merely intellectual puzzle involved in conquering a disease that promised to affect their own relationship in no important way.

In other days, they might have won the Nobel Prize. The Nobel Committee had disbanded with the death of all but two of its members. Two women.

Throughout the world chaos spread the truth of what Women's Liberation groups in America had long claimed: men ran everything. With men dead or dying, every major enterprise ground to a halt. The war in the Middle East was over.

President-by-default Bella Abzug signed a peace treaty with the

fifth Madame Mao, renegotiated non-aggression pacts with women representatives of all the major powers, and the world started over.

But some men proved naturally immune. Not many, and there appeared no common factor to designate them. But here and there a man survived. Because of the breakdown in communications that accompanied the chaos, no one was certain how many. The few female statisticians at work couldn't collect adequate data, but the number of surviving males was infinitesimal by any standards.

The Ganders-Price serum halted the spread of the disease though it effected no cures.

What few men survived were sterile.

"AFTER HARRY DIED, I didn't know what would happen to me," Beth said. "We'd only been married a few months. It just wasn't fair. Why him? I kept asking myself. Why him, and not all the others too?" She blushed suddenly and waved a helpless hand at Carl.

He nodded. Sooner or later they all said the same thing. He had no answer. No one had an answer. Some lived, some died. No sense looking for reasons. He bent low over his plate and shoved chunks of steak into his mouth. Out of the corner of his eye he could see them watching him but he was too hungry to

care. Besides, they liked it that way—a man should be coarse, hungry. It was part of the mystique.

"I'm sorry, Charles. It's just that . . . well. I hated you all, and that's the truth."

"I know," he mumbled. "For a couple months, maybe, you hated us."

She blushed again, and he remembered.

AT FIRST the neighbors avoided him. But his wife Irma knew what would eventually happen. She enjoyed those early days. She had status, her own man, her own household. They were the good days. Then the neighbors' hatred waned, replaced by tentative and uncertain attitudes that only Irma had expected. First there was Mrs. Kohl, their next-door neighbor, bringing over an occasional suet pudding. "I know you don't make it, Irma," she said. "And I've got nobody to do for anymore. What's it hurt? I just like to see a man eat."

It didn't stop there. Soon the invitations weren't casual or cryptic any longer. "Carl, come help me turn the mattress. I need a man." "Carl? Irma treating you all right? She's just a kid, don't know what a man really likes." Or, "I filled the pool today, Carl. You ever have it underwater? I'll show you a good time."

He and Irma quarreled about it at first. But to hold onto him she agreed to a compromise: four

nights a week he stayed home; three nights a week he visited his neighbors. That seemed to work out. Irma took pride in his reputation and began to expect favors from the neighborhood women who didn't want their names noted on the blacklist she forced Carl to respect. Once or twice she objected to neighbors inviting friends in on the nights Carl visited them, but not too strenuously. The census showed 287 surviving men in Philadelphia, few of them with Carl's following. It made Irma proud.

Carl's pride waned slowly. Whenever he tried to talk to them they pretended interest, but not very well. He loved hockey; he never found a woman who had the slightest understanding of the game. He was a cabinet maker, an artist of sorts. He offered to build a china cupboard for that one named Irene—something who had her bedroom lined with mirrors. She agreed, then couldn't keep her hands off him while he worked. They were all the same, one thing on their minds. None of them respected him as a person, not even Irma. He had become her prize possession, more important to her than the pink Thunderbird he had earned from a Ford dealer's widow. It all began to disgust him.

" . . . DISGUSTING, at first, if you don't mind my saying so. But times change, I guess. If men can stand the way they're treated, it's nothing to me. Would you like

another beer?"

Carl shook his head. "No thanks." He leaned back to loosen his belt. Because they were all watching, he belched loudly. "That was good." He watched the maitre d' hovering beside a table nearby where three women had long since finished but sat dawdling over coffee. It was clear they wouldn't leave until Carl did.

"What kind of work did you do, before. . . ?"

"Doesn't matter, does it?" He saw the hurt blossom in her eyes. "Okay, I'm sorry. I sold insurance." The lie came easily. The truth might have identified him. Even here in Chicago telecasts would have given his biography. Beth might have heard them, might have seen the posters. For a week after leaving Pittsburgh on his escape west he had carried one of the posters, folded in his wallet, in a way proud of the reward offered. That Mexican boy—the one they caught in Dallas—had been posted at \$50,000. The reward for Carl Boyce was nearly a quarter of a million dollars. And he was worth it.

He had often wondered how the Mexican kid had accepted his capture. He'd been on the run, as Carl was. Since being caught, he had disappeared. No word at all. The Dallas Population Board had hidden him away.

"**S**URE I'M SURE. Martinez was his name. I seen him once on the

tv, when they started playing him up so big like they did. Kid must have been nuts to run. He had everything he wanted."

Carl sat in the lounge of the Philadelphia Men's Shelter and stared at the ceiling, hands clasped behind his head. He listened to the argument but stayed out of it. He couldn't afford to draw attention to himself, even here, in the comparative safety of the Shelter. The Stalkers had spies everywhere. Anyone might turn him in, if they learned the truth about him. He had just discovered it himself.

"This Martinez kid stood there next to a whole row of cribs. Twenty-some kids that little greaser had the first year. They treated him like he was a little tin god. Can you feature a white woman letting him get in her knickers? But some of them done it."

"You're bitching 'cause you keep firing blanks like the rest of us."

"So what? Don't I get everything I need? Not all of them wants kids."

"**W**E COULD have had children, did I say that?" Beth looked at him with pain evident in her expressive eyes. "We were only waiting till Harry got another raise."

"Must have been tough," Carl muttered. Still the stares surrounded him. Tension returned to settle in his left eyelid, it tugged at his concentration and twitched

like a metronome. He might have to leave with Beth, if only to keep the others from following him and waiting outside the Shelter. It was risky being seen entering any Shelter; they immediately began parading before the closed-circuit TV cameras that sent video to every room. Carl had once enjoyed sitting in the comfort of a private room, or in the common lounge, examining the silent lineup of eager women waiting for him to make a choice among them. And with no audio in the system, he couldn't hear the constant clatter of their heels. Now that pleasure was behind him. Even the Shelter was no longer a haven; they knew about Carl Boyce.

He shuddered at the memory. The day he discovered . . .

"CARL! What do you think?" Irma tapped his shoulder and woke him. He had fallen asleep watching another re-run of the '75 Super Bowl. Each afternoon, when women were off at work, the networks ran shows intended to entertain the few men in the audience. Carl had seen all the reruns several times, but nothing else on TV interested him—certainly not the soap operas that filled prime time, with women playing men's parts, acting out fantasies he had grown sick of hearing whispered in his ear by every lonely woman he favored with his attention.

"What do I think about what?"

"Lana Kohl. She's pregnant!"

"Bullshit. She's faking it. You know her imagination. Or maybe it's only whadayacallit, 'psychosomatic.' "

"No. I mean it. She's seen three specialists. There's no doubt."

"Okay then, who's the hero?"

"That's what I'm saying. It's *you!* She swears it. There wasn't anybody else there could of been."

"Yeah, sure." He waved her away and turned back to the TV screen. Less than thirty seconds left in the game. Time for the winning fieldgoal. If he concentrated hard enough he could almost pretend it might be blocked this time.

In two days he knew. Irma had been right. There were three pregnancies on his block, another in Germantown. The woman there claimed he had done it at one of Lana Kohl's parties.

He was an instant celebrity. Of the 287 adult males in Philadelphia, only one other had caused conception, and Carl hadn't heard a word about him in nearly three months. Some doctors had begun to hope for spontaneous remission of the sterility in all men, though none believed very seriously in that possibility. A few men had survived the plague; fewer yet could father children. Carl was one of those few.

Somehow women learned his unlisted phone number. Changing it did no good. Within hours, they had the new number. He tore out

the phone.

Lines formed outside his house.

Irma tried to delude herself for a few tense days but finally had to accept a new definition: *she* was barren; *she* couldn't conceive. In the midst of her anguish she slashed her wrists and quietly bled to death in the bathtub while Carl was busy on the couch with one of the applicants who had caught his fancy.

To protect him from the swelling mobs, the Philadelphia Population Board drugged him and took him to a hospital in the Poconos. When he regained consciousness, the psychiatrists began to "redefine his role."

"DO YOU HAVE the time?" Beth asked.

"Sure. It's—"

"Almost two," the woman at the next table interrupted. "If you have to go somewhere, I can drop your friend at the Shelter."

"I'm not staying at the Shelter, lady. Beth and me are going home now. Is that okay with you?"

Beth turned wide eyes to him. "Really? I was *hoping* you . . . Never mind. Let me pay the check."

He watched her scatter bills on the table and stumble to her feet. Through the room sighs crested to a droning murmur. He walked to the door, eyes straight ahead. The code would protect him, till they escaped this mob. None of the others would grow too aggressive

so long as he stayed with Beth.

She clutched his arm at the door and looked a silent question at him.

He felt sympathy for her. "Why not?" he answered. "I was married, too, before . . . Only my wife, she kil . . . She's dead." Her hand tightened on his arm. "It's okay now. I was just thinking. It must of hit you hard, to lose your man. Some of them don't know about that." He waved a thumb back toward the scores of heads turned his way. "We should all try and understand each other."

"UNDERSTANDING, Mr. Boyce," the psychiatrist said. She bridged her fingertips and looked at Carl with a self-assurance that irritated him. "Try to understand the way a woman feels when her biological nature is denied. Life is meant to beget life."

"I'm not arguing, am I? I'm just saying, sex isn't the only thing there is. A man has his work to do. You ever see a piece of cherrywood that's been oiled and hand-rubbed till it looks like glass? Well, that's what I'm talking about. But you, all you want me for is to breed, like some god-damn stud horse. I'll do my share, but I've got a life to live, too."

"No one plans to deprive you of anything, Mr. Boyce. We quite understand. We're only suggesting that science offers more efficient ways than nature. You could scarcely be expected to—uh—'visit' more than a dozen or so

women a week, and with such frequent activity, there'd be little chance for viable spermatazoa to develop. It's not that we expect *more* of you. Rather, I'd say, less. But through artificial means we could multiply the positive effects a hundred-fold. And with no ill-effects to you. How can you object?"

"I'm not objecting. Just let me make up my own mind. Stop pushing."

"You have to think beyond yourself." She raised her voice as if lecturing to a large class. "Mankind is more important than any individual."

"Uh-huh. The last time somebody tried giving me that line it was a Top Sergeant in Nam. I was a dumb kid he wanted to stick out on point on a night patrol. Well, I'm telling you what I told him. That's all well and good, except *I'm* the individual you keep talking about."

For nearly five days he floundered through weaker and weaker rationalizations. Then he gave in.

They isolated him for forty-eight hours.

They took him to a lab. It was cool. It was antiseptic. The walls were all white. Everything was impersonal. No one called him by name. Two doctors were there. Three others entered to observe. He was nearly unable to cooperate. They induced ejaculation mechanically. They dismissed him.

Their unsmiling thanks made

him feel dirty, stained.

The orderly conducting him back to his room down the long empty corridors propositioned him. He let himself be led into a linen closet. He removed her smock and eased her back onto a pile of blankets. Then he kicked her twice in the groin and left her pale and gasping where she lay.

He drove the stolen ambulance nearly a mile before he was sick. For two days the stench of vomit burned his nostrils, but by then he was seventy miles away and running hard.

HE SAT in the car beside Beth and shook his head at the cautious way she threaded her way through the slight mid-town traffic toward the Outer Drive.

"When did you say you left the East Coast?"

"I never said I did."

"Sorry. It's your accent. Sort of eastern."

"Look. Maybe you ought to let me out here."

She bowed her head over the wheel. "I was just making conversation."

They drove in silence.

She stopped before one of the highrise condominiums towering beside Lake Michigan and handed the car keys to the doorgirl. She clicked across the sidewalk and Carl followed her inside.

Her apartment was rich-looking without the fussiness Carl expected. He shuffled through the deep-pile carpet and stood looking

out through sliding glass doors across the balcony toward the lake. He waited for her to "change."

She surprised him by reappearing in a long cotton housecoat and carrying a drink in each hand.

"Let's talk, all right?"

He took the glass and sat next to her on the couch.

She talked. After a few confused moments he understood what she was saying. "I've heard about it. Artificial insemination—just using those poor men. No one ever stops to think how they must feel, to be treated like breeding stock. And the rewards they post! I couldn't face myself in the mirror if I took that kind of money. I'd feel like a bounty-hunter."

He looked warily at her for a long moment and then felt something inside let go. Before he could catch himself he had launched into the tirade he had muttered to himself so many times during the past lonesome, running months. He heard little of what he said, his fear and anger and bewilderment spewed out in gobbets of strangled curses and complaints and left him drained.

Then she was holding his hand, and they were both quiet.

"I knew that, Carl. Of course you feel that way. But please don't let it make you bitter. Think of their point of view. Not only the women who want children, though there are enough of those I guess, but all the others too, the ones who can't let themselves

consider the feelings of one man when the race is threatened. They've got their minds bent on rebuilding a world. Ambition does terrible things to people."

"How did you know my name?"

She smiled wryly. "Slipped out, didn't it? But after thinking of you as Carl all these months, it had to happen."

"How long have you been after me?"

"Quite a while. But it's not what you think."

His back-handed slap caught her high on the cheek. "Don't snow me, lady. That's been tried by experts." He lunged to his feet and started toward the door.

"Carl? Wait. Look there, to your left."

He followed her pointing finger to an old-fashioned chiffonier visible through the bedroom doorway. And recognized it. Cross-grained maple rubbed to a silky luster, brass fittings on the drawers. His. An early piece, lovingly crafted over a winter of evenings in his own basement workshop. He knew it as he knew himself: all mortise and tenon joints, not a screw or nail in it—a creation, not a construct.

He turned a puzzled look toward her.

"I bought it from a woman in Philadelphia over a year ago. It wasn't till later that I read about you in the papers. Now, if you don't believe that, you can leave."

"What's your point? Am I supposed to fall down in a faint from

(cont. on page 115)

John Shirley's first sale to us was the short, surreal "Silent Crickets" in our companion magazine, FANTASTIC STORIES (April). This time he takes a very different tack as he explores the counter-culture of the near future and the messianic figure of Samuel Whistler, as seen through the eyes of Aaron Dunbar, who gave the man—

WHAT HE WANTED

JOHN SHIRLEY

Illustrated by STEPHEN E. FABIAN

When the music's over, turn out the lights.

—Jim Morrison

MOST PEOPLE NOTICED his eyes first. His eyes were shadowed and cateye green and they went through you like a searchlight through fog. Even when he wasn't deified on stage, anyone seeing him on the street would comment on "the funny look that guy gave me." His stare. The rest of his face, constantly animated, would twist grotesquely with every emotional nuance, while his eyes seemed to be fixed on *something* no one else ever saw. No one else except me.

His name was Samuel Whistler and when I met him at Eggman's party it was only by proxy; he was stamped into the grooves of a black vinyl disk. He was lead musician and composer for an agony rock band called *Whistler*. I

had never seen him or heard his music until the first night. The first night of the Submerged Apocalypse. He was smeared all over the news magazines, because he'd garnered an incredibly avid, even fanatical following; but I had given up reading newspapers and magazines after my parents, my dear father the publisher whose fingers are dirty with newsprint ink, canceled my subscriptions and stopped sending college money. I cancelled my obsequious subscription to my old man and his drugged half-zombie third wife that same day.

I culled tension churning in the arabesques of smoke at Eggman's party. The party-goers were faceless, amorphous blobs, but the smoke-patterns became leering faces as I came in the front door. A few people acknowledged my coming by leaving the room. The rest tried to ignore me. But I

heard a sneer curl around a red-eyed joint: "Oh fuck, Dunbar is here. We begin the downhill slide." Hearing that, I smiled. I carefully cultivated their distrust of me.

I wore clean virgin-white leotards that night. I made sure they noticed me: I walked like a cop with my painted-on bloodstain red on my chest for a badge. Sleeping downer freaks, corners itching with couples or triples under blankets, dopers squatting in cathartic clusters doing unfunny imitations of professors they didn't like. Typical college crowd.

City traffic sounds honked from the record player. Conversation like a wasp trapped in a bottle.

And there was a telephone booth in the center of the living room's Persian rug, six people smoking kief crammed into the booth with the door shut. Eggman had spent an evening with some friends stealing the booth from a park. I put a bicycle lock around the booth's doorhandles so that it couldn't be opened from the inside. A black light in the booth made the smoke luminous ectoplasm. Realizing that they were locked into the booth, they began to rock it back and forth, screaming at me to let them out. The booth fell over onto one side, shattering glass panels. I thought I saw Lucy's face in the shattered glass on the floor. One of the girls in the booth was screaming at the top of her lungs, blood from a glass shard, her cheek secretly cut

WHAT HE WANTED



by Lucy's. I left the room hastily.

I went to the party annex in Eggman's basement room. Larry Eggman's bedroom-dungeon was decorated in heavy chains dangling from the black and red painted walls and ceiling, and with iron bars jutting at dangerous angles, dull blades protruding from corners. He knew the way through the maze reflexively without once brushing the iron bars only dimly seen in the dark room, so he was the only one really at ease there. I crawled under the waist-high lengths of thick black chains guarding the doorway, scuttling like a spider on all fours until I could sag into the worn colorless couch by the stereo.

The stereo was forging iron bands of rock sound with a group called Sore Throat. It sounded like electrified sandpaper. Nice. The song was a big hit, one of their warmhearted, humane tunes, so popular it had been adapted by Muzak:

*... Don't turn your back
Don't turn your back the knife
is behind you
Don't take a chance they'll steal
your wife
Before they get through
Don't let them get behind you
He may have a gun even if he's
your son . . .*

The song fit the resonance of the submerged apocalypse. General paranoia. I became aware of the submerged apocalypse as a ship learns about an erupting vol-

cano miles beneath the ocean surface before its shockwave has arrived: Sonar. I sent out questing vibrations which bounced back with innuendoes. A storm was growing in the city's back alleys and tenements and bars and dormitories and discotheques. I could feel it coming:

The exorcism fad was reaching unsettling proportions. I was once a rampant public exhibitionist. I would put my head through plate glass store windows just to see what the crowd's reaction would be. No more of that; it was becoming dangerous to be noticed. I saw a fat lady scream in the middle of the street: "O Christ Jeezus help me, one of 'em has got mel" No one on that crowded street-corner was surprised. Three or four people pulled small vessels of Holy Water from coat pockets and sprinkled it on the newly possessed. Carrying tapwater in a bottle labeled "Holy Water" was becoming more common than first aid kits.

And there was the mass paranoia about supermarkets. No one would go into them because of the accidental poisonings of two hundred people from bad canned food in Los Angeles. Four Safeways burned during the Housewife Riots. Then the Jeezus Freaks rioted and tore most of the downtown department stores to shambles, calling them servants of the Babylon Whore. And if I'd bought stock in electric fences and handguns three years ago I'd be a

rich man now.

The newspapers were heavy with blunt headlines, my father's fingers grew blacker with editorial ink calling for reprisals against the rioters, and the air grew oppressive.

I couldn't guess the outcome then, though Whistler's face was plastered all over town on posters advertising his coming Immersion Show.

I was harvesting all this from the snaking smoke and buzzing chatter in Eggman's black box when a head I hadn't met staggered over to me, sat down on the arm of the couch to my right, the overhead light making his bush of red-blond hair into a corona. His face was crowded with freckles which seemed to cling as if they were afraid of falling off.

"Hey blood I'm really stoned," he intoned in the universal greeting of six years past.

"I'm really interested," I replied. But he took my sarcasm seriously.

"Wow, that's great. Nobody's ever interested. People should care about each other, *relate* to each other as individ—" he had to pause for a rest and a breath between all those syllables in one word "—uals . . ." It was obvious I was saddled with one of the old-guard hippies from the late sixties. A real relic in 1979. He'd babble in my ear all night if I didn't press the ejection button. I saw Eggman on the other side of

the room, his face caged in iron as if the smoke had suddenly solidified. Eggman-ego was laughing at my irritation. He thought it was *funny*. I wanted to smash Eggman's face against the derilict hippy's, like cymbals. But I just stood up and started to walk away. The fossil laid a hand on my arm, saying,

"Hey, man you got to be interested in your brother—"

"Do you hear the man on the record player talking to you?" I asked, picturing my tongue as a lash flaying the skin from his back.

"What?"

"He wants you to shut up for awhile so he can hear himself play." The derilict just stared at me. I shook his hand loose. I was thinking of screaming in his ear but just then Lisa came in. Better game.

She was always good for some spine-twists. She was shaking, as usual. Little heart palpitating. She was pale, her eyes sunken deeply, hiding insects. She walked in tiny, mincing steps, ludicrously bird-like under her spindly legs. She spotted me, and her nervousness visibly increased.

"Hey Lisa!" I yelled so that everyone would hear. "Don't cut yourself or the *worms* will get out!"

"What?" Her face screwed itself up as if it were trying to retreat into her eyesockets.

"I said that you have *worms* in your veins now. They fit in per-

fectly, slide real cute right through just like little subways. Slimy though. You probably have to clean out your arteries with a toothbrush." She put a finger between her lips and bit. "Don't bite your fingers," I said, making my words slither from my mouth like worms. I had heard that she was pregnant and I guessed she thought she could feel something crawling around in her uterus. "Don't bite your fingers or they'll get out for sure and leave little slimy trails on your skin and—"

And on. I asked myself why. But I went on.

She stuttered but couldn't spit a word out whole. Her eyes said she wanted to say something that would hurt me, but she was afraid that I would turn it back against her. She backed off and ran, tripped over a chain, fell against another chain, her sobbing sharing a resonance with Lucy's.

"There, the worms have you!" I shouted doggedly, and turned away. You couldn't hear her cry much over the noise of the record player.

I slumped down next to Eggman. "You've gathered together a menagerie," I remarked, leaning back, not looking at him. My eyesockets fixed in luminous brotherhood on the lightsockets. The wires in the house were so old and dilapidated the lights cut and flickered, on and off, the record player speeding up and slowing down with the vacillation in power. When Eggman didn't re-

ply, I looked up.

Lucy was standing there, just looking at me. I smiled at her, wanting to run. Eggman sensed my discomfort.

"What's wrong, Dunbar? The worms getting to you?"

The lights flickered, the record player droned faster/slower like an old man on the verge of death, indecisive.

Lucy was wearing a wrap-around sari about her hips, her tight conical breasts bare above it. Her shoulders and neck were painted in red glitter; her long black hair was pinned into a bun behind her head. The fey light that usually flared in her small, faun features was extinguished in her black-ashes eyes.

I still loved her, I told myself, trying to make it wholesome. It was the love of a familiar for its witch.

She didn't waste words. "Aaron, I don't want the abortion. My mind is made up. I want to keep the baby."

I looked away, pretending to study the torn posters hanging from the walls like loose bandaids. I shook my head. "No, your mind is *pinned* up. Let it go. Unfasten it. A kid would pin you down even more."

"You mean it would hold *you* down, don't you?"

I had no answer. I hate being caught without a quick comeback.

She moved like a breezed willow, sat down next to me on the edge of the couch. She looked

diminutive, her head not even reaching my shoulders.

"Aaron, the kid means something to me. I thought we made an alliance? Well Christ, what *comes* from an alliance? The proof of the pudding, the product of my thesis and your antithesis . . . the kid is our synthesis. We can't go on without a synthesis to build another—"

"Cut it *out*. You can prove anything with syllogisms. Our alliance is synthesis enough. We survive in it. That's enough." Why was Eggman still sitting there, listening? I put an arm around her. She shrugged it off. Not angry, but stiff, withdrawn. She had given up on me before coming here. My retaliation: "Maybe you're just afraid of the operating table, afraid to have that hose—"

"Shit, come off it, Aaron," Eggman spat in, rolling his eyes heavenward. "You get cornier by the hour."

"Butt out, Eggman." Pain painted itself into a corner of Lucy's face.

He snickered. I turned to Lucy but she was already getting up.

"Wait, Lucy—" We were in free fall and she was drifting away, tugged into another orbit . . . "People want children as an ego-thing, that's all, actually. They see their kids as extensions of themselves and they live vicariously through them. It's an unfair ego-thing." I felt degraded: She was forcing *me* to appeal to *her*. She turned her back, hesitated.

"Oh, all right then, do it that way," I said, hoping my fear was well hidden under the forced tone of disdain. Lucy, all I had left now that my parents had cancelled me, left without replying, gracefully negotiating Eggman's iron maze. The lights flickered, the record player sank, sound submerged, emerged.

"Shut up, Eggman," I said, though Eggman hadn't uttered a sound. But he was grinning from ear to ear, where his throat should have been slit. Eggman thought it was *funny*. He changed the subject.

"Are you going to the Whistler concert?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Aaron boy, I didn't think I cared much for agony rock. I think most of it is redundant and unoriginal," he intoned like a lecturer with his usual ego-centricity. "Most of it is merely creative afterbirth. But Whistler bypasses all boundaries. He's really *new* but it's still rock. You know? It's hard to explain. It evolves backwards, sucks you in."

Just then Dreyfus came through the room, dodging chains and bars haphazardly, chasing his little brother with a lit cigarette. Dreyfus tripped on a chain and fell against an iron rod, catching it full in his ample gut. He slid to the floor, choking. Eggman grinned, wiry lips pulled over jutting teeth, blotchy gums. Tall and skinny with brown hair the consis-

tency of alfalfa and black eyes above a prodigious proboscis.

"Hey, I've got one of Whistler's albums here," he said.

He got up to put the record on. I didn't want to listen to it with him around because he'd sit too close to me and tell me to listen, then continuously interrupt my listening with comments like, "Did you hear *that*? Where he alternated chords? Did you?" I was prepared for Eggman-ego, but not for Whistler.

Whistler made the first move.

He let the bass begin with lugubrious coughs. He tacked the bass up loosely onto the rhythm guitar, leaned the drums against both and wove them into an impatient guitar lead. Then his keen-ing violin burst through the propped fabric like a circus panther leaping through a paper hoop. An electric violin is sharper, more piercing than an acoustic. And the honed, razored bow stung shrill, like tinfoil on a toothfilling. A violin has an orbit, a gravity well and a belt of radioactivity surrounding it. Whistler's violin could grit its teeth and make a face and spit juices. Most good musicians play their instruments as extensions of themselves. Whistler was an outgrowth of his violin. He was stuck there, bound by the wierds of possessing talismans: His eyes, his violin, his violence. The violin rose and fell in quivering extremes, my feet and hands trembled apart from me, rhythms bandied like a hand winding an alarm

clock. Violence from his violins, he fenced with the lead guitar for a time, feinted, bluffed past and thrust.

I began to see pictures.

Images formed right from the music. There was only one song on the album with lyrics, but everywhere was rhetoric expressed musically. Whistler, in the hot railroad track framework of rock, was one of those rare musicians who emphasized the distance between the notes as much as their arrangement. He used emptiness. I was engulfed in his spaces and floating there I saw: The pictures. The Plaid Forest, ribboned hues of its terraced trees cross-hatching in leafy plaids of green indigo amber red. A crazy quilt labyrinthine forest. There was no sun anywhere in this world, and the sky was blueblack above the hovering Lamps. The Lamps were the source of daylight; glowing ovoids of luminosity hanging unsupported at regular intervals thirty feet above the soft forest humus. I was riding a zebra, Whistler straddled his own zebra to my right on the narrow, shady trail. Whistler was of medium height, with red bushy hair, green eyes, round pug face barren of sympathy, broad chest, forthright posture. His face was ringed in red beard, thin lips clamped. He wore a long black robe, mail armor glinted at the neck and loose sleeves. A cool breeze tantalized my conspicuously beardless cheeks, heralding

the Season of Reason. Here the fall season is called Season of Reason; winter is Season of Treason; spring is Season of Passion and summer is the Season of Fashion.

The Lamps cast a homogenous light over the Plaid Forest. Between the Lamps a speckling of black dots seemed to congeal and reproduce itself, becoming a swarming dark mass. Noting the swarm, Whistler unfolded a rainslick from a saddle pouch, put it over himself and tossed another to me. The mist collected into clouds. The lumpy clouds went from grey to flat black, seemed to appear from nowhere in the space between the Lamps. Tentacles of mist reached toward one another until the clouds were joined between the Lamps in a dark network jeweled with islands of light. A rumble, and the clouds let go sheets of heavy rain. Falling in intersecting sheets the cloudburst was refracting the lamplight into an orchard of myriad rainbows. All the visible world was a corruscating patterning of plaids and rain filtering the colorful patchwork foliage with soft curtains of auroras. Keeping a mournful cadence with the rhythm of whirling rainfall, Whistler began to sing:

*. . . His body they staked and
covered with pitch
and they set afire the red-
maned witch
during the season of Passion*

*They all agreed it was a fine
deed
to burn clean the witch's bad
seed
during the season of Fashion*

*But later the Plague still raised
agony and cries
though the witch was burned,
blamed for giving it rise
during the season of Reason*

*The Red-maned witch might
have stopped the plague
But they'd drunk the cask to its
last dregs
And now it was the Season of
Treason . . .*

The rain and the song stopped simultaneously. The forest faded, vanished.

"Did you catch that lead? Amazing, eh?" Eggman reached to change the record to the other side. "I don't know if I like those lyrics about the 'red-maned witch', but they're practically the only words he's ever written."

"Don't touch that record," I said, dazed by what I'd seen. Eggman interfered. I had seen it so *clearly*, like a movie over my eyes.

Eggman waved me off impatiently and put his hand on the turntable—

I kicked him in the stomach. He doubled up, his thin face mottling and changing colours like the Plaid Forest. He wheezed. I felt a smile climbing my mouth but I pulled it down. "Leave the record alone," I said.

"That was a childish reaction," he gasped. "You're getting more unstable all the time."

"Just becoming more appreciative, bag-of-wind. I'm learning to respect art enough to defend it."

"Sure you are. Is that what you were doing, defending art, when you fucked over Lisa?" He sat up, his face a red stoptlight. "You knew how gullible she is. She's always on the edge of a paranoid breakdown and you make it worse. Maybe it's because she's pregnant like Lucy? Lucy's been pregnant for a month now and ever since you heard about it you've grown worse and worse. It's pathetic—"

I kicked him in the ribs, asking myself *why*. He fell onto his side, yelling, his nasal voice like a honking bicycle horn. The others were staring but no one wanted to interfere. I had cultivated their mistrust. Carefully.

"You enjoy making me squirm, don't you?" Eggman asked, head thrust forward, shoulders slumped, one hand on his bruised side. I reached into a large jar containing half of Eggman's bottlecap collection and began to flip the bottlecaps one by one into a wastebasket. But he went on:

"You string Lucy and the other women along till they get dependent on you, then you let them know they're obsolete. I think you start the whole alliance in the first place so you can watch them squirm—"

"Straighten up, I didn't kick

you that hard," I said, flipping bottlecaps.

But he had resurrected what I'd said to Lucy: Maybe you're just afraid of the operating table maybe you're just afraid of the operating table maybe you're afraid (the words in a repeating tapeloop in my head) maybe you're afraid . . .

Side one of the record ended.

The lights made the shadows into dark birds with the flickering on and off, good and evil, maybe you're just afraid of the operating table . . . I realized that I'd been listening to Whistler while arguing with Eggman, the music providing a sort of martial cadence for our mutual anger.

Sulking, Eggman left the room clutching at his side.

I put on the record, flip side. I had never seen a picture of Whistler, to my recollection.

But the man on the album cover was unmistakably the man of my vision. The man with the red hair, riding the zebra.

Listening to Whistler, shaking in his grip, waiting for his fingers to close tight and crush me, I felt as if I had been casually riding through the House of Horrors at a carnival, unconcerned until I discovered that the tracks wouldn't bring me to an exit.

Pictures came again. A great throbbing grey brain toted in a wooden cart with six-foot wheels, harnessed to a team of six checker-coated comedians telling burlesque jokes and slapping their

knees as they strained under the whip of the animated stone gargoyle perched on a frontal lobe. The brain procession rolled by an operating table and a girl with a swollen abdomen impaled on the prosthetic pincers of a whirring robot doctor. And in the smoky distance on the mountain top, Whistler with red hair flaming, strapped to a wooden post that was propped in a heap of burning bones, a witch condemned to the stake. His face, haloed in greasy blue-grey smoke, was calm, almost timorous and apologetic. And there was an appeal in his eyes, an asking.

His music rose from the flickering flames, spotlighting that dark place into and out of light like the unsteady lamps in Eggman's room—

I was hollowed-out, a ballbearing was rolling around and around where my innards should be, vertiginous. I squeezed my eyes shut, banishing the vision. It faded but the feeling of asking lingered like a ringing telephone begging to be answered. The electric violin, shaking its treble, had the same whipping tonal brevity heard from a shrieking woman.

Sometimes during physics classes at school, or while embalmed in the quiet of the library, I'd shriek simply for celebration. Or maybe contrition.

I was asked to leave my physics class when I stood up and screamed at the top of my lungs:

"I'm proud to live in the coun-

try that invented the atomic bomb!"

And I wrote essays about screaming. I felt that it should be performed as an aesthetic exercise.

But Whistler had a screaming woman imprisoned in his violin.

Since Lucy left the room I had been repressing thoughts of her. But a bullet needs compression before it can fire.

. . . Lucy moving with me like light on the surface of an underground river . . .

I stood up, trying to shed the memory with movement. But—

. . . Lucy feeding her fish, feeding her cat, riding a horse, tossing bread to pigeons . . .

—her image recurred in the susurrations of Whistler's violin. I was a part of his music before he composed it. I wanted to scream, so the music screamed with me. Lucy might still be upstairs. Maybe I could—

. . . Lucy holding the child, loving it like I never could . . .

I saw Eggman come into the room. He glared at me from the doorway. I began to shriek with the woman hidden in Whistler's violin.

Alerted, startled, the others in Eggman's Black Hole of Calcutta looked at me, at my face shining like an iron in a forge.

Their surprise changed to derision when they saw it was only me.

Eggman gave me a sour look and left the room.

II.

I eat with my eyes. I see with my ears.

—Samuel Whistler

I RESEARCHED Whistler's past for my psychology One term paper. His parents had been in show business, night club singers. They were divorced when he was nine and just learning to sing himself. His mother went through three more husbands before her son left her at eighteen to play first string violin in a Junior Symphonic Orchestra. After two years with the orchestra he joined a jazz band in New Orleans where he was addicted to heroin and a black woman who later left him for a Black Panther. He left the band and moved to New York. He worked his way through several bands in the early seventies, first achieved notoriety with a band called Paper Lust which emphasized morbid rock theatre in the tradition of Alice Cooper.

He became famous for his violin first, his singing second and eccentricities third. He funded a psychic research organization which he contracted to contact his dead father. A dozen mediums tried and failed before he dissolved the organization in 1975.

He was addicted to speed at thirty and temporarily dropped from the music scene, living off royalties until 1977 when he broke his addiction and formed a band like an oyster forms a black pearl. He was notorious for his

self-centered attitude, so no one was surprised when he named the band Whistler.

He was avidly and overtly hated by every member of the band, who remained with him, according to rumor, because his was the highest paying show on the agony rock circuit.

III.

The motto of the artist is this: "I am willing to be used."

—Samuel Whistler

I RAN INTO my psychology class ten minutes late and interrupted Mr. Cage during one of his pontificative lectures.

"I've brought you my term paper, Mr. Cage!" I shouted, brandishing the typewritten sheets like Thomas Jefferson waving the Declaration of Independence. I slapped the papers down in front of him on the silvery-flecked top of his fiberglass desk. "It's about a form of telepathy using a performer as—"

"What makes you think the class is interested, Dunbar?" Cage asked in his brittle tone. The class was twelve fatuous faces looking embarrassed about attending a psychology class as if they were afraid that someone would accuse them of being there for therapy. "Your constant self-centered interruptions are entertaining no one but yourself," Cage concluded.

"You see there? You've proven my point. I said that telepathy is not limited to the communication

of raw brainwaves but that since individual brains are only neurons of the collective world-brain—" (I had rehearsed this little speech earlier) "—any image occurring simultaneously in two minds at one instant, for whatever reason—suggestion or otherwise—is a species of telepathy. Even if it comes from a conversational motivation. The only criterion is that it appears in both at once . . ."

"And how did I prove your point, Dunbar? I wish you'd get down to it because you're boring the hell out of us with all this pompous panegyric."

"Your title as professor of psychology doesn't privilege you to use psychiatric techniques on your students when they don't conform, Mr. Cage." I was enjoying the match. "There is no need for you to lance my ego, Mr. Cage, my mind is not a boil, it does not fester and pustulate like yours, sir."

Mr. Cage's earlobes and wattles were bright red.

The old therapist allowed his emotions to show only on the perimeter; they worked their way in from there. There was a ring of red anger haloing his face when I said:

"And the reason you have illustrated my point? Because I knew that you would be piqued toward me and say something remarkably like 'What makes you think the class is interested—' and I realized that you would say it al-

most exactly at the same moment you realized you would say it. That is the sort of telepathy I'm talking about."

Behind me, someone murmured, "Botulism." Someone else said, "Possessed, perhaps?"

An impulse guided my hand to my manuscript and my legs to frog-leap high in the air. I alighted noisily on Mr. Cage's desk. Shocked, Cage jumped back. I began to read from my thesis dramatically, with many flourishes, to the nervously tittering class:

"Okay me beauties, this is from page three, fourth paragraph. . . . researchers from Duke university took an interest in Whistler's agony rock performances due to the large degree of collective psychic manifestations reported to occur there. Collective telepathy, a phenomenon ordinarily classed with mass hysteria, had been noted at rock concerts for years, especially where the psychological tone was characterized by uniform uninhibited exuberance and unanimous elation. As far back as Woodstock synchronization of mental images had been common at rock gatherings, especially in crowds steeped in hallucinogens—"

Here I had to leap from my desk-perch to a nearby table top because Cage was hysterical, cutting viciously at my leg with a wooden pointer. The class began to throw wadded paperballs at me. But I read on with barely a

hesitation and without stumbling, orating louder and louder to drown out Cage's whining protests, stabbing an index finger in the air for dramatic punctuation:

"'Evangelists use it, the technique substituting one identity as the surrogate for a mass of people! The audience focuses all of its attention on a single centralized hypnotic figure who links them into a chain which circles back upon itself as a closed system!'" I took a breath, dodged the pointer, uplifted the paper above Cage's snatching fingers and continued unabashed: "'A team of federally funded researchers documented the levitation of a performer at a rock concert in 1976. The singer, who had his eyes closed, later said that he did not notice his elevation until he was fifteen feet above the stage. When he opened his eyes his surprise severed him—'"

"You can forget about graduating!" Cage shrieked.

"I'm leaving. What an asinine display!" A mass-production-perfect young coed commented, leading three others out the door. It was working.

To further embroider the delectable tapestry of chaos I injected irrelevant, off-the-top-of-my-head phrases like: "Box lunch for a tyrannosaurus! Keeps a prayerbook in his underwear! . . ."—severed him from the rapport with the audience and he fell, breaking an ankle. Even when not so obviously

demonstrated one can feel an overwhelming congregation of passions, an exchange of identities between concert-goers until there is no one independent activity. The moments when the degree of group passion needed to convey overt collective psychic phenomena are rarefied and usually last for a maximum of ten seconds. During those brief intervals the collective mind can be, in this highly unstable malleable state, remolded by the charismatic figure dominating the stage—"

Cage had gone from the room, followed by half the class. I could glimpse him now through the open door returning with a campus security guard. I concluded hastily, shrilling my voice:

"'—becoming what he wants!'"

I hopped off the table, causing the incoming Cage to stagger backwards into the security guard. I laughed and tossed the sheets in their red faces and dashed down the hall, lost myself in the cafeteria crowds. The perimeter of red had contracted to the dead center of Cage's round face like the crimson center of a dartboard.

IV.

I'm sick of this stupid, infested planet. Physical laws are at best only a consolation.

—Samuel Whistler

I STRUTTED BUOYANTLY through Peter Max decorated halls of Imaginary University. Sliding through the cloying, spurious

good will emanating from the herding students I was pleased as a tapeworm in the bowels of a fat cow. Cow was not carrying the metaphor too far, since I swung toward the financial aid office to milk the school. As usual my head was full of plans to dynamite the school or at least set it afire.

I was in a good mood having left Cage staggering in a poisonous wake of murmurs and my good foot followed my evil foot with insipid regularity. I made it a habit when trampling the innocents in the halls of Imaginary University in the heart of downtown Imaginary city of chanting aloud: "*Good! Evil! Good! Evil! Good, Evil, Good, Evil, Good, Evil,*" Slurring faster into, "*Godevil! Godevil! Godvl! Godvl! Godvl! Godvl! Godvl! Gdvl, Gv, Gv, Give. . . Give!*" Perpetually and loudly.

Chanting good/evil/god-devil/good/evil/give I tuned in on the milquetoast frequency of the university, scooping up vibrations soaking from floors and dripping from walls, reverberations coded with an embryonic divination. The sonar resonance good/evil struck the skulls racing past (gaping mouths, sneering lips, furtive eyes) ringing blows like a xylophone's tintinabulation.

Gold-panning from my good/evil sonar I began to construct an eidetic vision picturing the dark hunching threat on the horizon, like a spider diminutive on a far wall, seeming from here only a

dot, a vague blur that sharp focus discloses as an eight-legged hairy carnivore.

Whirlwinding good/evil down the hall I heard them mutter my nickname, furbelow to their diffident laughter like the fringe of a gypsy skirt: *Botulism*. My chanting was timed by my mental replaying of Whistler's *Knife Life*, a song that seemed to burst into full bloom—I could recall every note and tonal nuance clearly!—when I felt again the concealed corpus of the submerged holocaust. The Indians say Death watches, waiting for its chance, from over your left shoulder, and if you turn around fast enough you'll see—

The submerged holocaust. I could see the submerged holocaust:

A) in the way the students all seemed to be leaning slightly to the left as they walked.

B) the way the cheerleaders always seemed to be looking over their shoulders, fearfully.

C) the undeniable fact that everyone was blinking their eyes in the same Morse code. The decoded Morse message was: *Danger, apocalypse*.

I decided to forego financial aid for the time being. I wasn't in the mood to pretend humility. Looking carefully about for the campus security guards, I retreated into the library, thinking calmly that many people would be killed when the holocaust was no longer submerged. And over all was the redolence of Whistler.

Lucy was sitting cross-legged ten yards outside the library window on a knoll of a small shady park usually thronged by lovers. There was a man sitting beside her. The man was bending over to kiss her; I couldn't see his face. He had bushy blonde hair and wore a red satin sash and an ancient tie-dyed shirt. I felt awful. I felt rotten. I couldn't look away.

He turned from her to mash out his cigarette in the trampled grass. There were as many cigarette butts as blades of grass. It was the derelict hippy from Eggman's party. I almost felt better. Surely she wasn't taking *him* seriously. I went outside to make sure.

I stood a few feet from her, glaring, while the hippy-fossil rummaged in his leather bag for weed and rolling papers. He hadn't noticed me yet, as he probably hadn't noticed anything unpleasant since marijuana and peyote had been legalized in 1977.

Lucy looked at me without speaking, only ashes for me in her eyes.

"Could I talk to you for just a second, miss?" I asked, petulant because she'd forced me to make the first move.

"No," she replied placidly, summing up. The hippy stereotype still hadn't noticed me, engrossed in his rolling. Perhaps he was partially blinded by long exposure to black lights. With one hand he fiddled with the dial of a

portable radio.

"I just want to speak to you alone for a few minutes, Luce."

She shook her head emphatically.

Her companion looked up, phony affability melting from his eyes as he recognized me.

"What do you want, Dunbar?" he asked, his voice as monotonous as his face.

I ignored him and looked at Lucy. "Will you be over tonight like we planned?" I asked, trying to pretend nothing has gone wrong.

"No. Not anymore and not at all, Botulism." I started. *She* had never called me by that name before. "I have a new alliance."

I didn't look at her new amour. I knew he'd be smug. Just the type she wanted and needed. He'd be willing to take care of her baby, to show paternal responsibility, yessir, a real good-natured Joe.

A submerged holocaust cooked up inside me. I began to hear *Knife Life* in my head again. I turned and walked blindly away down a park path.

No, the song wasn't in my head. I was hearing *Knife Life* on the derelict's FM radio.

The sunshine thickened, becoming so dense I had to plow laboriously through it, hearing the song dwindle behind me. Closing my eyes, I saw Whistler's world of lamps and Plaid forests again. In battle gear Whistler danced through a knife and armor stip-

pled battlefield beneath the islands of light. He wore a helmet, with antennas and mandibles and green-jeweled eyes, fashioned in the likeness of the head of a giant insect. He wore a black skirt, girded by a silver belt and scabbard. His bare chest bristled with wiry red hairs, shone with sweat. Each of his muscles was one in a crowd of rock-concert dancers. He wore a vest of barbed wire, points turned inward resting on but not raking his skin, though he moved in a thousand snaky contortions, his sword effortlessly flashing in and out of the white-garbed warriors who swung their pikes as ineptly at him as Cage had cut at me with his pointer.

V.

I'm the only ant in this ant-farm with a glass-cutter.

—Samuel Whistler

I CLIPPED the two articles from the newspaper and laid them side-by-side on the grimy tabletop. I read them, re-read them, then stared out my apartment window at the clouds that seemed knotted, releasing late afternoon sunlight only reluctantly in pale shafts between grey tangles.

The first article related that Whistler's alliance, Trash, had committed suicide. The woman, a mestizo, was the same colour as his violin. Whistler had named her Trash. Trash had never spoken to anyone but Whistler. Two nights prior she had run on stage

during a performance, shouldered in front of him and shot herself through the head with a small pistol. I was sure that Whistler's scheduled concerts would be canceled. But the radio announced that the show was still scheduled. Maybe Whistler could mourn only on stage. The story about Trash made me think bitterly of Lucy.

The second article quoted a parapsychologist who had been appointed to investigate mass psychic manifestations alleged to occur at Whistler's Immersion Show. '... Mr. Whistler gave us every cooperation, though he didn't seem much interested in our project. Of course, when I first met the man I somehow got the impression he was mentally ill or demented. I was told that mine was a common mistaken reaction. I didn't permit my unease to deter my investigation, at first. However, I have been forced to give the entire project up completely. The whole thing. They can assign someone else if they like, but I doubt if they will stay with it for long, either. I'm a veteran of many rock concerts, from before the Rolling Stones were accidentally trampled to death by their fans in '76... But I couldn't remain in Mr. Whistler's company for more than an hour, frankly. I felt I'd be pulled apart. It was frightening. His music is engaging, certainly, but I don't think that's what gives him his marvelous control over them. It's his will. I have to admit his willpower

is frightening . . .'

I put the two articles in my Whistler scrapbook, right under the interview with Whistler's former drummer. The interview was characterized by this passage:

q. *Why exactly did you quit his band?*

a. *Like you said it, because it was his band, and no one else's. But there was another reason. I couldn't stand to be around him long. He just steals something from you. Maybe he's a kind of vampire. He's crazy, for sure. The guys still in the band with him would like to leave but they can't. I don't know. But I felt like in spite of his all-the-time ego-thing he was always kind of pathetically asking me for something. But he wouldn't tell me what it was . . .*

Three-thirty PM. Sitting alone in my room toying with grains of salt spilled on the greasy table. My room was a glove-box ten by twenty, with kitchenette and use of the bathroom down the hall. I was thinking about the interview and wondering where I was going to get the fifteen bucks for the concert. I stood up and kicked my way through the clumps of unwashed clothing and candy wrappers, tin cans, books of philosophy and comic books, till I got to the stereo. For the fourth time that day I put on Whistler's second album, *Void Gnashing Its Teeth*. I went to the window to watch the

crowds sweating through the hot July afternoon. I worried about being dead-broke, quailed at the thought of panhandling. I could either borrow money from my parents or panhandle, both degrading.

But when the record started I began to feel smug. I would get in somehow. He would take care of his own. The tickets would come to me without invocation. I had four hours before the concert. Plenty of time for Whistler to arrange for the tickets to get to me. His way.

He told me personally. He let me know the tickets would come, while I wandered at his side through the Plaid Forest in the last of floating lamps.

VI.

Our music is the score for the real-life documentary movie about the end of the world. Music for Armageddon. Mood music.

—Samuel Whistler

AN HOUR before the concert, six thirty-two, I was wondering how Whistler would get me there. Sunset was behind me, someone pouring sour milk on the ulcerous tenements across from my flat. Through the crude faces traced in the grey film on my single window Eggman's face inflated as he loped up the steps three at a time. He burst through the door with a look that solicited gratitude.

"Okay Eggman-ego, what am I

supposed to thank you for that you haven't even told me about yet?"

"Be nice to me, smartass," he replied crisply, "I know the only way into the colliseum. And I know how much you want to go to that concert. All you ever talk about anymore is Whistler. Anyway, I can get us in free." I sneered and shook my head like I'd heard it all before. "N'shit, Aaron boy, my older brother showed me where. He's done it lots of times. I know the only way to get into the colliseum for free."

"Alright then. That's it. That's how."

"How what?"

"Tell me, Eggo," I asked, leaning back in my wicker chair till its squawking made me smile. "Did you know that Whistler collects shaman paraphenalia and African witchdoctor's masks? He wears them on stage—"

"Very interesting. You told me that last week." Eggman curled a supercilious lip.

"They say that he never has to call anyone he wants to get in touch with. They call *him*. But I'll tell you something, Eggman." I leaned forward and looked into Eggman's shallow eyes; it wasn't far to the bottom where coins worth a wish apiece glimmered. Eggman was getting uncomfortable, he pretended to look at his watch. "He can't be blamed for whatever happens." Somehow my voice was trembling but I clutched the arms of the chair and

got a grip on myself. "He can't be blamed no matter what. Even if Trash's suicide was his fault, or even if he murdered her somehow." A throbbing, roaring shook my temples, my eyes were fixed on Eggman's, locked. "Because this isn't his world and he has to make his own rules to get by. Our rules and laws make no sense to him. We're aliens. Because he isn't from *here*."

Eggman looked profoundly embarrassed.

I quieted the manic output and sat back, breathing deep. But I had to say it, "He's from another dimension of reality. And that other world is where his loyalty lies and rightly so. His presence here is sheer accident. I'll tell you something, *Ego*-man. He's going to take me back there with him, when he goes. To the land of floating lamps. Me and whoever I want to take with me." Here, I let Eggman see a false expression of regret on my face. I wanted him to mistakenly conclude just what he said next:

"It's Lucy, isn't it? Do you really imagine all this pseudometaphysical bullshit is going to bring her back?" He lowered his voice patronizingly. "I understand exactly how you feel about, uh, alienation . . . we all have to deal with it but . . ."

It was easy to plant suggestions in Eggman's chameleon mind. Let him think it was all an obsession with Lucy as long as he didn't take my slip of the tongue about

the land of floating lamps seriously. *Things must be kept in hand until the right moment*, I thought.

"What are we sitting around here for?" I asked petulantly. "Show starts in forty-eight minutes."

Forty minutes later, in the steaming dusk, Eggman and I were breathing heavily on a ledge four stories above the ground.

"A goddamn drainpipe." I moaned. "You didn't tell me we'd have to climb a drainpipe."

"Shut up. You're here. We just go down the ledge about twenty feet, there's a window. Lock's broken. Just shove it open."

Fresh elation budded in me then as I followed Eggman on hands and knees, kneecaps painfully grinding against the concrete. I'd known that somehow a way would come to me; but actually being *there*, I could almost feel his hand on my shoulder. The submerged apocalypse roiled subtly beneath the buzzing conversation and catcalls of the crowd waiting outside for the gates to open, below us. I heard hoarse shouts as the five doors opened. The night air lapped humidly over us, smelled of dogbreath. I glanced down reticently, nervous in the narrowness of the two-foot-wide ledge. The coliseum's exterior was a ribbed dome with great bent buttresses sheltering dope smokers and gang constituents, mostly Satanists, getting bombed, far beneath us.

Even Lucy is beneath me from

up here, I thought.

Their heads seen from above were as miscible as quicksand. I resisted the temptation to piss on them.

"Hurry up," Larry whispered urgently. "Don't let anyone see you or they'll all be up here and we'll never get to use this entrance again."

"We won't be able to use it if they see us but only because we'll be dead. They'll shoot us." A giddy wave of fear swept through me. I considered turning back. *Afraid of the operating table?* "Hurry up, go through the window. They have the legal right to shoot us because the crowds are so damned big and mean. They fixed the law so they can shoot us, after those four guards were wasted in Baltimore—"

But Eggman had already climbed through the window. I looked over my shoulder at the toothy city lights and wished I could see a mushroom cloud blossom over Imaginary City. Then I followed Eggman, expecting a club to connect with my skull as I climbed through. But I was met only by the scents of popcorn, dope, sweat, all glued together by cigarette smoke. We were at the topmost row in the mammoth auditorium, six rows above the highest filled seats. Eggman was already walking down the aisle. Someone large, greyclad and ominous was walking up towards us. A mercenary hired specially for this concert. He must have

seen us from below as we came in. He walked straight at us, unhurried but purposeful.

The cop looked right at me. I sprinted, stumbling over benches, to the left and down.

The cop angled into a run to cut me off and yelled something. I was running scared so I didn't look to see what became of Eggman. I saw another pig coming from my left.

My mouth bobbed open, my breath rasped. I stumbled, was almost trampled by the thickening crowd, smoke stung my eyes.

The audience bellowed and stood, arms and heads like wheat in a windstorm.

A barbituate freak blundered into the cop coming from my left and flailed mindlessly. The cop fell on his face and tried to extricate himself from the self-made moron.

I pumped down the stairs, caught a glimpse of Whistler picking up his violin, heard the accolade groan from the crowd.

Running around the perimeter of the wriggling masses under the stage, I tried to get close. A hard leather boot kicked into the hollows of my knees, I fell supine, rolled onto my stomach. A knee jabbed my spine, hands quick and hard pressed me sharply to the floor. I felt my nose get bloody. Other rough hands dragged my wrists painfully behind for handcuffs.

Magically, it ceased. The handcuffs never shut their jaws. I

looked up at the stage. Whistler's tormented face was turned toward me, but his eyes were still fixed on the space over our heads. He gestured frantically at the hired police. He had seen me run. He spoke into the microphone.

"I'll pay his admission. Let him be—let him stay." His voice was acid eating iron. I knew that this was going to be the last Whistler Immersion show. The submerged apocalypse tossed and turned in its uneasy sleep.

The pressure lifted from my back. I could breathe again. I coughed, tasting hot salty blood, hot like the growing expectancy of the audience.

The guards released me and Whistler locked me in.

The submerged apocalypse murmured in its sleep. Can a nightmare have a nightmare?

I looked around for Eggman, didn't see him. The painted faces around me wondered why I rated Whistler's intervention. They looked at me with respect but kept their distance. Many of them stood out in their imitation regal robes; the garb of royalty, costume jewelry crowns and rich ermin capes, was all the rage. Scattered in small constellations through the seething black pot of the coliseum's interior, multicoloured electric lights sparkled. Eggman still had a minor scar where his own light had been surgically imbedded between his eyes on his forehead. He had it removed because he said that the

blue electric light, powered by current generated by the brain, was making him hallucinate.

I took some tissue from the carrybag on my belt and put it to my bleeding nose and Whistler put his violin to his shoulder.

The muscles in his face spasmed; his lips were always either clamped hard or baring teeth like an angry gorilla. His face was ringed in a scarlet poppy-circle beard. His eyes were trapped on the far side of his music. When he played he leaned slightly toward where he stared. He seemed to be aiming and elevating his violin like a statue I once saw of a huntsman with a falcon perched on his shoulder.

Whistler began alone, his violin croaked solo into a funeral possession, commensurate in slow, fainting moth-notes. The backup band emerged by his command rather than pre-arranged timing. He would enunciate a stroke of the bow in a way that meant *drums now*. And he commanded the audience. We surrendered.

The auditorium was the largest on the west coast, capable of holding eighty three thousand people. Of course, from the back of the theatre the performer was barely visible, except on TV screens mounted every thirteen rows. Seventy five speakers were arranged so that sound was projected from every euphoniously possible angle, including from underneath, but channeled by sound-baffling screens hanging from the vast,

clear-domed roof so that acoustics were crystalline lucid. Computers backstage measured the audience's vocal reactions and keyed the volume and pitch of the speakers to intensify excitement.

The light show was a vast holographic projection, fifty feet by one hundred, appearing in mid-air over the mandala-shaped stage. Computers formulated the writhing apparition of three-dimensional projections moving them in rhythm with the music's backbeat. *Any given musical structure has a mental image as its correlate*, I claimed in my psychology one term paper. *Some people possess an inborn talent to unearth the musical image, communicating hypotheses with tonal inflection, messages generated in comparisons of melodic themes*. And the holos illuminated the melody's concealed eidetic snapshot. And as our circuits click into contact, a jolt of electricity awakens the submerged apocalypse.

Men in black robes dispensed peyote buttons and incense clamored in our throats. A black-robed blackman, the only thing light in him his glowing eyes, offered three buttons. I shook my head. I didn't need it. I was still on the ledge, far above the crowd. I didn't need dope or Eggman or Lucy. Or Lucy. But Whistler needed me.

African-style masks were a tradition at Whistler's concerts and about three-fourths of the crowd sported their own cheap plastic

witchdoctor's masks.

The holo was a billowing djinn whose body was storm-clouds bloated and ponderous like the huge balloons of cartoon characters held by thin wires at parades. The music became whimsical, looney tune, and the holo *was* a huge balloon of a cartoon character. I began to get my bearings.

Dancing was perfunctory for the first few songs. The crowd was embarrassed, because Whistler hadn't spoken yet. But conversation died down and they began to watch the stage pensively even between numbers. There were the few inevitable pocket riots around the fringes, sections of the right hand balcony were set afire and instantly doused, stifling both flame and rioters, with automatic ceiling firehoses.

Whistler stopped playing, his band lost steam behind him, moaning into crackling stillness like an exhausted locomotive. Whistler didn't acknowledge the shouts and catcalls. His eyes were funnels for the palpable mass of our enthusiasm. We followed the path of least resistance into the land of floating lamps. The crowd fell oddly silent. You could hear the air conditioners hum.

Whistler's face twisted, revved up, then he jerked a long, toothy green-red-black African mask from behind an amplifier. Other than the amplifiers and instruments, and the few taciturn, robed musicians behind Whistler, the stage was empty, with none of the

props common to agony-rock performers.

And when the last notes of his first song passed, the huge holo had vanished, shimmering slightly in its going exactly as the final note had wavered.

Now, the audience was all massive breathings like a sleeping dragon.

Whistler fitted the African mask over his head, the audience screamed and he began *Broken Bottles, Open Wounds, Arthritic Hands*. A holo appeared, a mammoth semitransparent three-dee image of a withered old man coughing and shaking on his deathbed. The old man looked mournfully down at us.

The audience roared with laughter, throwing bottles through the old man's image. The energy level rose. The submerged apocalypse began to surface, preparing to lift its sea serpent head above turbulent waters.

The crowd moved closer to stage. I was pressed perhaps forty feet distant from Whistler himself. People at the very front fainted from the pressure and lack of oxygen. The heat of the music melted the seated audience, trickling it down from the upper tiers. The swarming body on the dancefloor grew larger. The lights were very low so that the holos seemed more corporeal than the shadowy people around me.

The music was an uneasy sea with *something* darkening the surface as it rose from below. The

holo shifted into a gigantic, thrashing plesiosaurus plowing a green sea, its snaking neck dancing precisely to the music. The holo dinosaur quivered, its crusty fins rising and falling to the cadence of the bass. The energy level rose.

The crowd surged and collapsed into itself like a megalopolis traffic jam, kicking up a massive car wreck, eightycar pileup. As the thought drove through me, the holo became a traffic jam, and then a massive car wreck. The melody and backbeat and supporting rhythms violently intersected, collided with each other, sounds of feedback like steel savagely twisted. The music panted and squealed and I thought: I had a woman once who squealed like that. And at that instant the holo was a woman arching her back and howling in orgasm.

The audience: We were afraid. Whistler cut into us, our fear bled into the air and mixed.

We were ecstatic. The music shook our groins and our groans fled and mixed.

We wanted to hide. Notes like hailstones pelted our names off of our foreheads and we mixed.

Abruptly, the song ended. We looked at one another, embarrassed by our naked immersion.

I was just one of the audience, now.

Whistler began *Homing In Sin*. Rampant power ascended in periodic pulses for the next fifty minutes. The energy level rose,

fell a little, rose some more, fell a bit. We would begin to feel ragged and discouraged and used, as he loosened his grip on us minutely, allowing some play in the steering wheel. But he knew just when to tighten things up. He seemed to grow bigger and bigger until I thought the holo were pets playing affectionately at his feet, and the whole coliseum his dollhouse. He danced on stage because he had to, not because it was part of the show. Dancing like he was electrocuted, he was the fluttering neural impulse for the collective body of the crowd. The music was a mesh of wiring connecting us as transistors in an electric component. We were transistors receiving and amplifying the closed system, or capacitors discharging, electrocuting him. The music picked up, as he gradually turned up the amplifiers. The stage, the holo, the monolithic equipment, the performers, the crowd—all welded into a single solid state unit by the ubiquitous song. Through quivers shaking upward from the floor and resounding, good/evil, from distant walls of our self-contained world there soaked peripherally, subliminally—Whistler's personality. It was conducted first directly into our skeletons, radiating from bone outward into flesh, transmitted through dancing and Whistler made us dance because his was the first move. His loudspeakers were everywhere, saturating us,

making us loose and pliable. I began to detect through the haze rising from the combustion of exhaustion (the kindling) with adrenalin (the flame), that everyone was dancing each precisely like the other. Still wearing African-styled masks which bobbed over their shoulders like berserker spirits guiding their steps, each dancer taken individually was anarchic fury, as a whole regimental uniformity. I was fanatically aware of my every vein, capillary and pore, I felt my juices forced through rubbery pipes like liquid subways stuffed with drunken passengers. Blood, ideas, sweat and thought running into a common whirlpool. My feet wouldn't listen to reason when I felt them begin to painfully wobble under my ankles like poorly secured manequin's limbs; they refused to slow their drunstickin' roll. My arms were banners snapped wildly in a high wind. My chest heaved and I had to craftily pilfer breaths between chugging leaps.

The holo was now two fencing swashbucklers from an Errol Flynn film. The image of the swordsmen leaping nimbly about the ethereal balcony was interspersed with shots of Whistler, seventy five feet tall, writhing on stage under the violin's lash. The smaller but not realer Whistler on stage was dancing like a witchdoctor trying to cure us of inhibitions, his mask gleaming as if sweat were breaking out on the polished wood. The holo

swordsman runs the evil prince through the side and the crowd, a great swarming body of parasites on the decaying corpse of a beached whale, stands and cheers. The picture preposterously runs backwards to the instant just prior to the stabbing and the rapier unstabs the evil prince until the film is run forward and he is gutted again, the hero stabbing with a motion of his arm remarkably like that of Whistler stroking the strings of his violin. A holo collaging above the crowd, the images distorted through braids of blue incense smoke. The stabbing swashbucklers, Whistler, the dying old man, a woman naked and wriggling in climax, whales mating in a lagoon, a beached seabird dying in an oilslick, two lesbians interlocked in embrace so that they are hardly distinguishable from one another, a flock of birds taking to the air in a misty swamp, a stabbing swordsman, Whistler, a beached whale choked with scavenging sea-gulls—

The frenzy was beginning to peak, the music from every side was a landslide, then it was pressure crushing an astronaut fighting his way from gravity's grip, we were shouting, choking from exhaustion, for a split-second I wondered what had become of the usual intermission, he was playing right through . . . My side ached, knees sagged, but the accelerated impregnation of what Whistler wanted grew inside me, overcoming weariness.

Whistler at the center of this glittering nexus of adulation purred and poured his charisma unceasingly over the thundering retinue at his feet; the audience opened wide their uplifted fatuous faces like the legs of a cheap callgirl doing a free trick to pass the time. But I alone knew what he wanted.

Whistler altered us, neutered us, made us over in his own image. Released an aspect of him that had always been submerged in us. (As a child in a primary school's science demonstration I witnessed the transfiguration of a random sprinkling of iron filings into a striking mandala pattern on a plate of plastic placed over a magnet. Whistler=Magnet. Audience=iron filings.)

Air burned in my lungs. I hallucinated sans drugs. The floor was tilting, seeming to rise and fall like the abdomen of a breathing animal: the Loch Ness monster about to make itself known.

The audience pressed closer, my dancing was compressed with their nearness and I spun, digging myself into the grain of the music like screw threads biting wood. The bass was uniform but hastening, the lead guitar wah-wahed like an infant crying for its mother in a storm, the woman, the infant's mother, screamed from Whistler's violin as her child was carried away in a hurricane gust.

Whistler removed his mask and tossed it contemptuously into the

audience.

And for that lonely instant his face suddenly freed from the mask was the only reality. We looked at each other but saw Whistler, a gathering of seventy five thousand separate and distinct Whistlers dancing side by side. I felt the violin in my hands, solid as the floor underneath, alive as the thousands of counterparts of myself thronging in red-headed turbulence wherever I turned. When Whistler on stage bent his right leg each of us bent ours. Whistlers in the audience snapped butts out behind and tilted shoulders forward precisely when Whistler on stage snapped and tilted. We jostled and bumped to get closer to the demon on stage, forgetting fear of touching. We shared one territorial imperative and raised the flag. The flag was death's-head, white on black.

The holo was a full-scale pirate ship flying a giggling jolly roger and its decks brightened with the uplifted blades of a squalid crew. Another ship, a fat Spanish galleon, sailed across the vast spaces over the audience; bass and organs merged into their lowest notes as the cannons belched smoke from the pirate raider. The main mast of the galleon splintered, the captain's arm carried away by a cannonball. Whistler is on the bridge of the pirate ship, a woman beside him. At first, thinking the woman was Lucy, I wanted to stop dancing and run. *I was unable to stop.* But the wo-

man was Trash. The holo collaged ships on an eidetic image familiar to me: a wooden cart pulled by six laughing men, the cart holding a massive grey brain, the gargoyle capering and snapping the whip; a man—Whistler—tied to a stake, flames licking him like strains of the violin. The pirate ship above the cart rocked on the waves; on deck Whistler drew Trash near him like a violin, on stage Whistler hugged the violin closer like a woman.

Suddenly the music changed, became the sounds of bubbles popping and tumbling dice. Whistler on stage threw aside his black robe, his eyes glowing, under the robe he wore only a vest twined from barbwire, jags riding his naked skin but not ripping; a black belt and scabbard, sword. Seventy five thousand mouths shouted: Seventy-five thousand hearts converged and became one organ, and there was a holo of a fifty foot human heart, pumping a river of blood through the great wine-cask of the coliseum.

Without warning, the music calmed, simmered down, gave us opportunity to recover, without relinquishing its grip. The synthesizer's long sheets of sighing sound, horizons for the landscapes rolling out of the mooning violin and hills and valleys in the strumming of the guitar. The holo was a view from on high of the land of floating lamps. The Plaid Forest splashed onto the flanks of a volcano streaming purple

smoke. To its right, between a hulking sphinx-like plateau of obsidian and the low grey hills checkered by islands of light, two armies clash. One is an army of soldiers who look like the audience at the concert but carrying weapons. The other, pounding the first army back against the black mesa, are men on horseback, their faces hidden in the insect helmets. Whistler is at the fore, his vest of barbed wire flaring silver in light reflected off of flashing blades. Huge ants, each one larger than a man's arm, swarm between boots to drag off the bodies of the fallen.

My eyes hurt and I looked away from the holo. For an instant the thousands of Whistlers around me became seventy-five thousand young people once more, eyes glazed behind cheap masks.

Suddenly, the music stopped. They stopped precisely on the same note, leaving a ringing, startling silence. The crowd exhaled a massive sigh as one.

But there was shouting near the rear of the coliseum, below the seats. I glimpsed a gangfight between the Jeezus Freaks and the Satanists. Knives flashed between the white robes of the Satanists and the polished black leather of the Jeezus Freaks. Whistler's voice hammered the ceiling over the tussle; everyone froze. Both gangs dropped their knives, as he said:

"Stop fighting, *now*. Unless you want to fight *me*. Dance instead."

There was no murmuring, no disgruntlement. The gangs parted quietly. I wondered where the guards were. But I realized that they were hiding.

Whistler made a hand signal, and his band drew their black robes close about them and put something half seen over their faces, hidden in hoods. They turned up their amps, and the music, gathering itself together between them, prepared to leap. When it came it fell like a sledgehammer, all instruments converged in a single deep note.

"*Murder it,*" And the euphoria made my limbs light again as the crowd became once more thousands of Whistlers. A hundred thousand thoughts were the same *Murder it*. We heard it clearly, each one of us, though no one bothered to shout it aloud. *Murder it*.

The music hurried, built to a peak and abruptly cut once more into a silence filled with Whistler's scream:

"Jeezus Freaks told me I was demon possessed. I told them the Satanists say I'm a demon who is possessed. And there is no true difference between the possessor and the obsessed!"

A gong crashed and the cymbals simmered the song into locomotion. A webwork of shimmering bands of energy flashed between our waving heads. I looked at Whistler, the Whistler on stage, and he transferred his gaze from that *something*, to my direction.

He was looking back.

I was summoned. I fell slightly out of time. The music became thick liquid, choking me, throwing me off balance with violent currents. Howling, barking of wild dogs. I could see that Whistler was scared. He had brought me here, he could feel me here, primed and ready. He looked at the violin as if it were a tarantula crawling on his arm. It was alien and he feared it. In his own world, the land of floating lamps, he didn't have to play an instrument other than the sword. Here, he was forced to play forever, no matter what. He went higher and higher on the scale. He looked at me, begging, appealing. At a snapped nod from Whistler the bandmembers threw back the cowls of their black robes. They wore the rubber masks of Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, and Mick Jagger. Now all dead. Whistler's highest note keened and stuttered, careened and shuddered, like an over-tightened wire about to snap. Streamers of crepe paper fell in clouds from the ceiling, passing through the holo of a raging forest fire. A cop was striding nervously through the outskirts of the churning crowd. He could feel it too, though he wasn't directly involved. I ran to him from behind and snatched his gun from his holster. The cop was terrified but he looked at me without anger, all confusion. Nobody else noticed my taking the gun, all eyes were fixed on Whistler. I

pointed the gun at the silver badge on the cop's blue chest and he backed away, swiping sweat-soaked hair out of his eyes with unsteady thick fingers. I caught a stray eidetic image from the cop, it wafted to me on the rising tide of the seventy-five thousand Whistlers' accorded chant:

Murder it

The cop visualized our turning into an uncontrollable mob; he saw the mob turn on him to tear him to pieces. He bolted towards an exit, to call reinforcements. It was unnaturally hot. A girl fainted and was trampled a few feet from me. I laughed, clutching the gun while the composition raged like a forest fire out of control, uniting us in ashes.

I felt Whistler asking me again. I glanced up at him, his eyes locked with mine. But I was afraid of the operating table. I admit it. I threw my head back to drink guidance from the holo. Lucy? No, that was Trash on stage with Whistler. It was too hot. I had trouble breathing. He wouldn't stop asking. The holographic Trash raised the gun to her temples. Again Whistler asking; the shrieking woman in his violin implored. I vacillated. Maybe it wasn't the best thing. If he would first take me alone with him to the Plaid Forest to explain, in the shade of that calm place, between battles, why it had to be done . . .

Through a split-second breach in the crowd I caught a glimpse of

Lucy dancing with the derilict hippy. As the crowd swallowed them again my decision was made.

Trash, gargantuan projection overhead, fired her pistol at the instant tailored for the music—at that same instant I pulled the trigger.

I gave Whistler what his music asked me for, right between the eyes.

My hand seemed to explode like a wine glass shattered by the violin's highest note. The spaces between his notes swallowed me. Before I lost consciousness I saw a bright red bullethole on Whistler's forehead like a third eye.

Someone slapped me down. A thunderclap, a record skipped. Kind unconsciousness.

VII.

Consciousness is a disease.

—Dostoyevsky

I WAS GONE, I came back. The floor was hard and cold. Its cold surface pushed me unwilling, upward to consciousness. I rendezvoused with a grinding headache and a pain in my mouth, a pre-arranged business meeting. I stood up, shaking and dizzy, holding my head. A broken front tooth leaked blood onto my chin.

About eight thousand people were dead all around me. Eight thousand four hundred seventy three to be exact, if we can believe the newspapers. The re

mainder of the audience was temporarily unconscious, prostrate like sycophants on the floor. Everyone within three hundred feet of the stage died instantly, when he did. Haemorrhages. Blood clots in their brains, right between each pair of eyes. The band was dead. There was a puddle of vomit and blood reaching fingers to the stage verge to drip onto the floor with hollow clicks. The place was empty aside from myself and an acre of bodies.

The most suggestible, eight thousand four hundred seventy three, had for that split second peak, the concert's consummation, been extensions of Whistler himself as much as his arms and legs. An incomparable honor.

And when Whistler died, in that instant of perfect mental synchronization, they went with him. Why them and not me? Why do they deserve his favor? Hadn't I earned it? He took them, these ingrate Philistines, to the Plaid Forest in the land of floating lamps. The wind of his going sucked them along behind him. But why did he push me aside at the last instant? Maybe because what's left of him here needs an audience.

I came near him, blood sucking at my shoes, and I wasn't surprised to find his eyes closed, his face relaxed. The eyes of the audience's dead were open, staring, at that *something*. They didn't look at all at peace or asleep.

Like a warehouse full of mane-

quins smashed flat and contents scattered by a hurricane: the gaping interior of the coliseum. Already flies buzzed over the corpses. Vaguely I wondered how the authorities would explain all this. Probably blame drugs.

I could reach out and touch him. I still held the gun in nerveless fingers. I ached, head thumping about the central node of pain between my eyes, my ears rang, and all this din of my wracked body seemed to blend together into a sneering voice, Eggman's voice, nagging me to turn the gun against myself. I raised it to my head. I pulled back the hammer. My roving eyes located Eggman's dead body, lying like a squashed spider near the stage. I threw the gun at Eggman's insipid face and laughed. I thought it was *funny*.

I searched for Lucy and the derelict, didn't discover them. Probably still alive on the edge of the unconscious horde and it's just as well. They don't deserve to be with Whistler. I do. But he needs me here, to take care of his cast-off shell, to listen to him play.

The violin lay near him, intact. "Go ahead, Whistler," I said, my words hoarse whispers, echoing vastly, merging with the distant rising song of police sirens. "Play now," I said.

I heard booted footsteps, glimpsed police coming out of the corner of my eyes.

The cops were coming for me, but they were a hundred yards away. There was still time. I

leaned against the stage, crossed my arms on the platform and rested my chin on them. And waited for him to play again.

The police came. And took me.
But I'm still waiting.

—JOHN SHIRLEY

Heel (cont. from page 85)

gratitude?"

She touched her sore cheek gingerly. "No, you're not the type. I only hoped you might believe me when I say I was trying to find the man who made that. I thought he might be special. Someone I might like to know."

He let the silence stretch between them. When her expression didn't change, he smiled. Then laughed. Then ran to swing her off her feet in a wide circle, roaring his delight with her, and with himself, and with the sheltered corner of the world he'd found.

He enjoyed the slight resistance she feigned when he slipped the robe from her shoulders and forced her down to the couch.

THEY LAY TOGETHER on the floor, sated. Darkness outside had converted the glass balcony doors to a mirror in which he saw the chandelier flickering its mute yellow tongues. He was surprised to see the couch above them and couldn't remember having left it. "Good," he said. "Not like with the others."

"Frame of mind. That's the whole difference, they say." She ran a fingernail down his bare chest.

His foolish grin faded when a knock sounded at the door. "Who is it?" he whispered.

She stood and smiled at him. "I guess time's up, that's all."

He leaped toward the balcony door but saw two of them, in stiletto heels, standing outside, waiting in the darkness.

"They changed the reward," she said softly. "The day with you, *and* the money."

"But you said—"

"Believe me, I didn't do it for the money. Please believe that."

The apartment door opened. Two of them entered. One asked, "Where?"

"Sporting goods store—part of the pattern," Beth answered. "A 'masculine' hiding place, just as we thought."

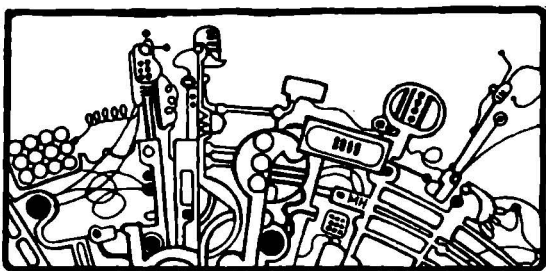
"Was it the bureau? What pinned him down?"

Beth shrugged. "They all give in. Just a matter of the right woman, the right time and place."

Carl searched his mind for an angry response but found only resignation.

When they converged on him their heels made no sound on the thick carpet.

RICHARD E. PECK



LIFE ON VENUS?

LAST ISSUE I outlined the long, torturous exploration of Venus, and how this continuing feedback between our speculations and the data shaped our new view of the solar system. Through the decades of this century, science fiction has influenced scientific speculation. Sometimes the interplay between the two was subtle; often scientists denied it. But it was there—the leafy Venusian jungle image came from a Nobel prize winner, not from a pulp magazine.

When Venus turned out to be an oven, not a paradise, there was an understandable reaction. Not only the public lost interest—so did the scientific world. After all, it *is* just about the most inhospitable spot in the solar system. A man in a pressure suit could survive at least a while on the surfaces of the moon and Mars. By staying in the shadows he might last a few hours on Mercury. And there might be layers inside the thick atmosphere of Jupiter which are, for us, relatively comfortable during a short visit. But Venus is a cauldron, and scientific interest in it seems to have slackened. This is unfortunate, because Venus can still teach us much about the possibilities for life in truly extreme environments, and about the way planets evolve in very un-

Earthlike ways.

1. The Runaway Greenhouse

WHEN Mariner x was designed to fly by Venus and photograph Mercury in 1973 the emphasis was clearly on Mercury. "If Mariner x hadn't carried imaging capability to look at Mercury, we never would've seen the turbulent upper layer of Venus," said Edward Danielson of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. "We went to NASA and pointed out that ultra-violet light won't go through ordinary glass optics. It was clear that if there was anything to see in the cloud layers of Venus, it would have to be in the ultra-violet. So we made a quartz system, which let the ultra-violet through. That's how we got to see the structure we found."

Mariner x confirmed vague sightings made from Earth: that viewed in the ultra-violet, the top of the Venus atmosphere swirls around and around the planet, repeating a basic pattern every four days. Apparently the driving force in this atmospheric circulation is the sub-solar region—the point at the top of the atmosphere closest to the sun. One would expect this area to be heated most effectively. At the sub-solar point the clouds seem mot-tled and turbulent. Around this point

a curious symmetrical flow pattern has developed. White jet-like streams spiral around the planet and seemed to move toward the poles. They are probably wave-like disturbances, and the motion bears a resemblance to the movement of a spiral on a barber's pole when the pole is rotated. Precisely how the heated sub-solar point drives atmospheric circulation is not clear. Winds at the equator seem to move about 200 miles per hour above the cloud layer. This may be a sign that slower currents are churning beneath the cloud deck. Such currents probably imply that substantial mixing occurs between the cooler outer cloud deck and the warmer interior.

We need to understand the motion of the atmosphere far better than we do, but the outstanding question about Venus is *why* it is so hot. Despite the fact that Venus receives twice as much sunlight as Earth, it reflects the sunlight so well that, without any other factors, it should be colder than the Earth. In recent years the so-called greenhouse model, championed by NASA's S.I. Rasool and C. deBergh, seems to have answered this question at least in principle.

The greenhouse effect helps trap the sun's radiation inside a planetary atmosphere. To begin with, visible light passes through the atmosphere of a planet and warms the surface. This light has relatively short wavelengths. Once heated, the planetary surface reradiates long, infra-red waves, which the atmosphere and clouds will not allow to pass. They absorb the infra-red, storing the energy as heat. If all the infra-red waves were trapped, the planet would continue to heat up. A balance is struck in which some of the infra-red waves do escape, stabilizing

the temperature. On Earth the surface temperature is maintained about 50°F higher than Earth would be without the greenhouse effect.

Actually, the greenhouse effect is misnamed. Though the glass walls of a greenhouse do stop infra-red radiation, the important heating effect that makes plants grow comes from the fact that the air inside, once warmed, cannot escape. The window panes help by stopping infra-red, but this point is not crucial. A greenhouse made of rock-salt panes—which let infra-red radiation pass through—would work just as well. In fact, such a greenhouse was built to test this point and it worked perfectly well.

Venus is a logical candidate for the greenhouse effect, because carbon dioxide is quite transparent to visible light, but quite opaque at many infra-red wavelengths. Carbon dioxide alone could not trap enough incoming sunlight to explain the Venus temperatures, however. But addition of a small amount of water vapor, quite close to the percentage abundance reported by Venera spacecraft, would do the job.

This explains why Venus can stay as hot as it is, but how did it get that way? Rasool and deBergh have made extensive calculations, trying to follow the evolution of the Venus atmosphere. Current thought about the terrestrial-type planets—Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars—show that atmospheres formed around these bodies because of fluids and gases percolating up from the interior and emptying onto the surface. Volcanic action supplies these liquids and gases at a steady rate. Venus, Earth and Mars may have seen this slow dribbling of carbon dioxide and water, plus other materials, onto the surface. The

gravitational field of the planet held the gases to it, so that atmospheric pressure increased. What happened next, according to Rasool and deBergh, depended crucially on the ground temperature. Liquid water can only exist in certain ranges of temperature and pressure.

We do not know precisely what the early temperature of Venus was, because we do not know how fast it rotated (how long its day was). We do know that any reasonable choice for the ancient Venus day, given the distance of Venus from the Sun, leads to a temperature on the surface always above the boiling point of water at the pressures involved. This means that oceans on Venus would become unstable. As quickly as volcanos could empty liquid water onto the surface, sunlight would turn it to steam. Water vapor is quite opaque in the infra-red. A steam atmosphere above Venus would vastly increase the greenhouse effect, heating the oceans further, and thus creating more steam. This is a spiraling effect, a runaway greenhouse.

On Earth, presumably liquid water could form. In the presence of water the carbon dioxide in the air converted into carbonate rocks. On Venus there was no liquid water to speed this process, so the carbon dioxide was never trapped into rock. It is still there, in the atmosphere, acting as an insulating blanket which seals in the planet's heat. On Earth carbonate rocks contain enough carbon dioxide to give perhaps thirty to one hundred atmospheres of pressure, if the carbon dioxide were released. Thus the total concentration of carbon dioxide in both the atmosphere and the rocks is the same for both Earth and Venus. Venus simply retains all

its carbon dioxide (or most of it) in its atmosphere. In this sense the planets are quite alike.

Where Earth and Venus differ significantly is in the amount of water they retain. There is at least a thousand times more water on Earth than on the surface and in the atmosphere of Venus. Perhaps water on the surface of early Venus was broken up by sunlight into hydrogen and oxygen. Hydrogen, being light, escaped. Oxygen perhaps combined rapidly with the planetary surface and was trapped into rocks.

Earth, beginning with a considerably lower starting temperature, produced liquid water and trapped the carbon dioxide in its crust. It seems Earth only narrowly avoided the runaway greenhouse effect; if it were closer to the sun by 10,000,000 kilometers (a 7% decrease) it would have evolved into an inferno like Venus.

On Mars, the initial temperature was probably less than the freezing point of water, so the volcanic steam froze on the surface. Only carbon dioxide accumulated in the atmosphere. Mars is small and has relatively few volcanos (though large ones). Probably these volcanos have not given off enough gases to build a significant atmosphere so far. (Or if Mars is currently going through a cold period, a great deal of the atmosphere may be temporarily frozen out at the poles.) In the distant future volcanos may pump enough carbon dioxide and water vapor onto the surface to begin the greenhouse effect in earnest. Mars could then follow an evolutionary path resembling that of Earth. Perhaps in that far off time liquid water pools will form, carbon dioxide will be trapped into sediments and in

an atmosphere of mostly nitrogen, man (if he is still around) might find Mars a comfortable home.

II. Beneath the Clouds

WATER BOILS everywhere on the surface of Venus, even the tops of the highest mountains. In the blistering, corrosive heat organic molecules necessary for the origin of life would break apart quickly.

Billowly clouds of ice crystals above, a baked barren landscape below—but what lies in between? There could be water clouds aloft among temperatures close to that on Earth's surface.

Nothing could be said beyond this until the early 1970s, when detailed study of the clouds became possible. The American astronomer Andrew T. Young (who was an active sf fan in the 1950s) noted that the clouds absorbed one particular wavelength very strongly. He searched for a chemical compound which could explain the absorption feature. Others had tried various candidates to explain the feature—hydrocarbons, dust and oxides, ammonium chloride—but with only partial success. Young discovered that a 75% solution of sulphuric acid fit the data exactly. This corrosive mixture—three parts acid to one part water—could exist as a mist at the temperatures and pressures of the Venus clouds. Sulphuric acid absorbs water easily, which may explain why ground-based observers have found only traces of water vapor above the clouds. The roiling, churning clouds have sulphuric acid droplets floating among them. There must be gaseous sulphuric acid below. There may even be a high concentration near the surface; the Russian Venera probes could have found such acids, but they were

not designed to do so.

If there is a zone of moderate temperatures and water vapor between the clouds and the searing surface, rains of sulphuric acid would make it a seemingly difficult environment for life to begin. How biological processes could get under way amid these acid-choked clouds is still an unexplored question.

We could imagine some kind of life floating in this thick atmosphere; after all, some bacterial life floats freely in the clouds of Earth. Any Venus cloud creatures would have to be small, light and able to curvive in an acid environment. Recently there has been clear evidence for hydrochloric acid and hydrofluoric acid in thin gases among the upper atmosphere. Life would have to deal with all these virulent substances, and probably more. If it could, even then it would have to survive in a relatively narrow layer. Even though the atmosphere is thick and the clouds we see are forty miles above the surface, the ultra-violet photographs of Mariner X show a slow, steady churn in this vast blanket of carbon dioxide. This means currents constantly carry material from one level of the atmosphere to another. Only in some regions will the temperature be moderate and the pressure be high enough for small life spores to float on the updrafts. Something like a bladder fish might even live there, negotiating the winds. Or perhaps bacterial life might multiply there so quickly that it could survive its losses. There will always be winds to sweep life down into the scalding depths, or cast it upward into the freezing clouds.

It would be hard to imagine a more demanding place for life to arise.

But we know very little about the

precise conditions necessary for life, so any conclusions about Venus are premature. To paraphrase D. Deirmendjian of the Rand Corp., commenting on the lower atmosphere of Venus, "We know a little more than we did, much less than we should, and understand much, much less than we know."

The Venus Pioneer Program scheduled for 1977 and 1978 may correct some of this. Pioneer will orbit the shrouded planet, mapping the clouds in visible and ultra-violet light, and searching for clues to the temperature and water vapor distribution deep below the clouds sphere. The question of possible life can only be solved by a direct descent through the enigmatic clouds and into the warmer layers below. Pioneer is not designed to enter the atmosphere, but later probes undoubtedly will. What they find there will influence our ideas of planetary evolution, and may yield even more surprises in the Venus mystery.

III. Terraforming

MAN IS a meddler. Not only does he not leave well enough alone, he constantly tries to improve even hostile parts of his environment on Earth. It is natural to think that in the far future, with Earth crowded and overburdened, man might consider other places to live in our solar system. Mars is an obvious candidate. But surprisingly, there is even a chance that Venus might some day be gently altered until it resembles something like the early Earth.

Transforming an entire planet is as prodigious a task as we can envision, but it is not absurd. The work of Rasool and deBergh implies that Venus took a wrong turning early in

its evolution, following a track our own Earth might have chosen if it had been somewhat closer to the Sun. This is a clue that Venus might even now be diverted back toward more Earth-like conditions.

The crucial ingredient is life. The early atmosphere of Earth was a virulent mixture of methane, ammonia, carbon dioxide and other gases. We owe our present oxygen-rich air to the presence of life. It is possible that suitably engineered simple life forms could perform a similar task for Venus.

Suppose we begin by fertilizing the upper atmosphere of Venus with small, buoyant photo-synthetic algae. They would have to ride the turbulent currents there, feeding off any water present and surviving the choking mists of acid. Their life processes would be driven by photo-synthesis, just as on Earth. Carbon dioxide and water vapor from the clouds around them would be their food. These hearty algae could, if designed precisely, convert the surrounding gases into organic substances. They would leave behind a residue of oxygen.

Of course, in the turbulent winds of Venus the algae could not survive forever. We would have to inject them at a steady rate from above. They would inevitably be caught in downdrafts and fried in the lower levels. Heating algae releases carbon, simple carbon substances and water. Thus the water consumed at the first stage of an algae's life would be returned to the air when it was cooked below. The only net change due to the algae's existence would be a slight increase in the oxygen content.

Oxygen could not survive long. Inevitably it would be chemically combined with the desiccated, baked sur-

face. This would gradually extract matter from the atmosphere and store it in the crust of Venus. The crushing pressure of the atmosphere would gradually decline, and with it the atmospheric greenhouse effect would weaken. This would lower the temperature of Venus, probably expanding the zone of the atmosphere in which algae could survive. Thus these small creatures could expand their own life site in the clouds, fueling a spiraling process that converted the atmosphere.

To keep the algae going, we must inject them rapidly into the upper atmosphere or make them particularly good at reproducing themselves. Either course will give a runaway process which, in time, might convert the incredibly hostile environment into something resembling the early Earth. The water content of the present Venus atmosphere, if condensed out onto the surface with no losses, would give a shallow pond one foot deep. Not very much, by terrestrial standards, but a beginning. There may be more water locked up in the rocks.

With a subtle, delicate control of the process we might even be able to make an ozone layer appear above the Venus atmosphere like Earth's. This would shield out ultra-violet light and allow single celled green algae to thrive throughout the cooling atmo-

sphere, and perhaps eventually let them colonize the surface itself. At that point wholesale redesign of the Venus surface could follow, new life forms could be planted and mankind could begin deliberately a process that nature takes literally billions of years to perform.

Of course, this is a grandiose and literally astronomical project. But man has come so far in such a short time, and his knowledge is expanding so rapidly, that even such improbable feats may not lie beyond his capabilities. In less than one hundred years our knowledge of Venus has gone from a few comfortable illusions to a welter of hard facts with intriguing possibilities. We are just beginning to understand our newest neighbor, and by no means are all the returns in. We need to understand Venus because it represents a completely different course in planetary evolution. It is so similar to Earth in many ways, yet it is almost improbably hostile.

If we require an example of how planetary evolution can begin with nearly the same conditions and end with a completely different result, Venus is it. Since we are now tinkering with our own atmosphere by pouring smoke, fumes and smog into it, Venus may be a useful object lesson of where we could go wrong.

—GREGORY BENFORD

**ON SALE IN JANUARY AMAZING (Oct. 30th)
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SHORT NOVEL, THE DARK DESTROYER.**

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Editorial (cont. from page 5)

ever seen of the attitude of early science fiction toward women was in a story by Sewell Peaslee Wright titled "Priestess of the Flame," published in 1932; he wrote: "Women have their great and proper place, even in a man's universe."

But to get the real feeling these writers had toward women, you have to notice not the philosophical epitaphs of self-conscious pulp writers, nor even the amount of quivering female skin displayed on the covers of those old magazines, but rather, the offhand, taken-for-granted remarks that showed up in the course of the stories published then.

For instance, here's a conversation between a man and a woman that appeared in Frank Belknap Long's story "Brown," published in *Astounding* in 1941: The man is a space explorer, trying to explain to his fiancée why he feels he has to leave her side to go off on one more space trip:

He: "The urge to reach out, to cross new frontiers, is a biological constant."

She: "It isn't in me. A woman seeks new frontiers in a man's arms."

Or how's this?—from a story by S. D. Gottesman in a 1942 issue of *Future Fantasy & Science Fiction*:

"Art and I were desperately in love with Miss Earle. Despite her obvious physical charms, we discovered that she was a woman of much brain-capacity."

It makes you wonder if the standards of feminine beauty in those days included a sloping forehead and a small brain-pan.

(S. D. Gottesman, by the way, was a pseudonym usually used by C. M. Kornbluth, but in this case the story was a collaboration between Kornbluth, Frederik Pohl and Robert

W. Lowndes, so it's difficult to guess which one it was who had a lurch for Neanderthal women.)

Here's a quote from a story by Nelson S. Bond in a 1942 issue of *Amazing Stories*:

The heroine has just seen, for the first time, the time machine that her boyfriend has invented. The author writes, "Helen, being a woman, got right down to fundamentals. 'It's not streamlined,' she said. 'I don't like the color, and the dashboard isn't pretty. Where's the cigarette lighter?'"

Even when the women in these stories aren't behaving like Stepford wives—even when they figure out the solution to some problem that's baffled the hero—their thought-processes are shown as being no better than those of an actress in a commercial for some new instant coffee. David H. Keller wrote a story called "The Pit of Doom" that appeared in a 1942 issue of *Future*; it included a scene in which the hero and heroine were attacked by hideous flying monsters. After the hero has fought them off, the heroine tells him that the creature that attacked her was a female. "How do you know?" he asks, and she says:

"Feminine intuition. That one who had me when you killed it was not trying to tear my throat. . . . She was trying to get the jade necklace. . . . A man would not have acted that way."

Well, all right; these examples just go to show how little the male writers of those days knew about women. What about the female writers? Was their consciousness as badly in need of raising as the men's was?

To my mind, the greatest woman writer of the pulp era of science fiction was Leigh Brackett, who took the already hackneyed materials of space

opera and made from them a long series of quite beautiful and poetic stories. Her plots, her backgrounds and her characters were cut from the same cloth as the works of he-man adventure writers like Edgar Rice Burroughs and Robert E. Howard (who was such a he-man that he committed suicide when his mother died, but she was frequently able to transcend the form in which she wrote. In a 1942 *Astonishing Stories*, she wrote a story in which monsters come out of the Pacific Ocean to attack humans, and when one of the monsters wraps its slimy tentacles around the heroine, Brackett writes: "Her face was set with terror, but she didn't scream. She fought.")

A little later, after the monsters have been driven off, the hero asks her, "Why haven't you fainted?" The heroine says simply, "I haven't had time."

You might wonder why in the world any sensible man would want to hang around with women of such delicate temperaments that the merest touch of a slimy, malevolent beastie would be a good excuse for them to cop out into unconsciousness, but that would only show that you don't understand men any more than they understand women. These heroines were only the kind of women of whom pulp-magazine readers dreamed thirty-five years ago, after all; they have nothing to do with the kind of women men want today. To prove that, let me give you a description of the Perfect Woman, as described in a 1940 science fiction story. This is from one of the "Adam Link" series by Eando Binder, which recounted the adventures of a super-strong, super-smart robot—named Adam Link—whose only difference from the traditional robot was that he

had human emotions. Which meant, among other things, that he found one day that he wanted a wife.

At first, Adam Link didn't understand what it was that was lacking in his life; but finally his best friend, a human man, noticed the way he was moping around, shedding rust, and he reminded him that "... I suggested you make another robot, give it the feminine viewpoint, and you were automatically her lord and master!"

This struck Adam Link as a good idea, so he promptly went to his laboratory (every character in pulp science fiction stories had a laboratory, even the robots) and he made a robot with the feminine viewpoint. You'll probably be astonished to hear that he named her Eve Link. And what was she like, this perfect wife he created? Well, here's Binder's description of her:

"She was demure, but not meek. She was intelligent, but did not flaunt it. Deeper than that, she was sweet, loyal, sincere."

Now does that sound to you like the kind of wife a man of 1975 would manufacture for himself? No no, we've progressed far beyond such crude ambitions. Haven't we?

Last year Joanna Russ and Poul Anderson wrote articles in *Vertex* about the image of women in science fiction, and Poul pointed out that "already in its youth American science fiction was more favorable to women than any other pulp writing..." (What a nasty thing to say about other forms of pulp writing.) As one instance, Poul referred to the Gerry Carlyle series of stories, written in the early 40's by Arthur K. Barnes, as showing "a woman operating independently on the interplanetary frontier." So I made it a point to pay particular attention to the Gerry Carlyle

stories, and—in Poul's words about something Joanna said—"There is a measure of truth here, but also a great deal to mislead."

Gerry Carlyle was an interplanetary hunter, and she was the greatest of all interplanetary hunters, bringing back slimy-tentacles beastie after slimy-tentacled beastie with nary a faint. In one of his stories in a 1941 *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, Barnes wrote:

"Gerry Carlyle had fought her way to the top of the most exacting of all professions. Success was not won by resort to feminine strategem, nor by use of her amazing beauty. Gerry scorned such wiles. In a man's world, she competed with men on their own terms. Her success was due to hard work, brains, courage, and the overwhelming effect of her forceful personality."

Now *that*, by damn, is a description of a woman any of us could live with, even today. If Gerry Carlyle had worn aviator's glasses, she could've been Gloria Steinem.

I liked it so much that I kept on reading the story—and guess what happened? When the climactic fight-scene came, Gerry's fiancée Tommy Strike waded into the fray, and Barnes wrote:

"Gerry stood staring at Strike with her lips parted, her eyes shining. She was experiencing that strange emotion—a compound of awe, fright and admiration—that every woman knows when she sees the man she loves in two-fisted action."

Well, listen, this story was written thirty-five years ago for an audience of mostly adolescent pulp-magazine readers, so we shouldn't be too surprised. Anyway, in the end Gerry Carlyle outwitted the villain all by herself, so who cares if her boyfriend got in a few punches first?

Still, if that was the best science fiction could offer then in the way of depicting an "independent woman," you'll have to admit that we've really come a long way since. A couple of years ago Joanna Russ wrote a short story called "**When It Changed**," which appeared in *Again, Dangerous Visions*; it opened with a lost Earth colony on some distant planet where all the men died long ago and the women learned to reproduce parthenogenically. They've established a workable and happy society and pretty much forgotten, over the centuries, that men ever existed. Then a spaceship from Earth happens to land on the planet, rediscovering this lost colony, and the men in the crew go around looking amazed at how plucky and resourceful the little ladies have been, and telling them rather pityingly that their long exile is over. *The Men Are Here*. The women just look at them blankly and wonder what the hell they're talking about.

The story rightly won the Nebula Award as the best short story of the year.

Okay, so that's one blow for sexual rationality, struck by a woman science fiction writer. What are the *men* writing these days?

Well, at least they seldom have their woman characters faint at the drop of a tentacle. But there are still stories appearing that display some odd ideas about women. The most startling example of this was a novelette by Philip K. Dick that appeared last year in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, called "**The Pre-Persons**." As it happens, it's a very clever, witty story—as you might expect from Phil Dick, who's one of the best writers in science fiction today. But it's also—well, let me tell you a little about it.

The time is the not-too-distant fu-

ture, when the United States has passed a law making it possible for parents to have their children executed at any time up to the age of twelve, at which point a child is legally defined as having a soul and therefore ineligible for execution. (The rationale is that once a kid can do higher math, like calculus, then he or she has a soul.) Now, you might assume this has nothing to do with sexism, since it isn't only male children who get snuffed out, but girls too. However, the story is actually a protest against the liberalization of abortion laws, which is primarily a feminist issue, and the villain of the story is the hero's wife, who's depicted as a castrating bitch who's completely lacking in maternal instinct.

At one point she says to her husband, "Let's have an abortion! Wouldn't that be neat? Doesn't that turn you on?" She isn't even pregnant; she wants to have her I.U.D. removed so she can *get* pregnant, so she can have an abortion. She says, "It's the in thing now, to have an abortion."

A little later, the hero wonders to himself, "Where did the motherly virtues go to? When mothers *especially* protected what was small and weak and defenseless?" And he decides that the problem is "our competitive society."

When this story appeared, a number of women took exception to it. So did a number of men. Still, you have to admit it was a story that couldn't have been written for a 1940 science fiction magazine: even misunderstanding between the sexes has achieved a degree of sociological sophistication since the early days.

And there are some male writers in the field today who are able to show some insight into the female point of

view. A little over a year ago, James Tiptree published a story—again in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, the same magazine that published the Phil Dick story—called "**The Women Men Don't See.**" It tells of two women, completely alienated from our male-dominated society, who meet some creatures from another planet who've come here exploring; the women promptly, with no hesitation at all, ask to leave Earth with the alien's expedition. And they do.

As one of the women says to the narrator of the story, "I'm used to aliens." And he says, "Men and women aren't different species. Women do everything men do."

She says, "Do they? All the huge authoritarian organizations for doing unreal things. Men live to struggle against each other; we're just part of the battlefields."

He says, "Men hate wars too."

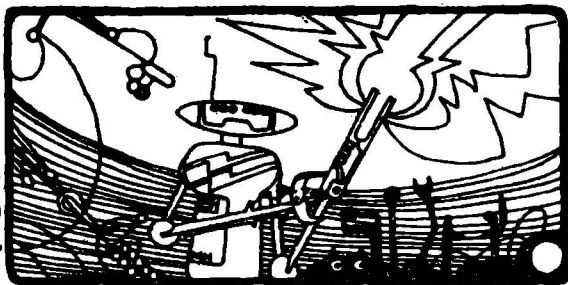
And she shrugs, and says, "I know. But that's your problem, isn't it?" Then she gets into the alien's ship and takes off for spaces unknown.

We really have come a long way, people.

And right here, more than at any other time, I'd like to have that slide projector and screen set up, so that I could show you my idea for a science fictional variation on those Virginia Slims ads. It would start with a reproduction of an old pulp magazine cover, done in sepia tone, showing Gerry Carlyle sneaking a smoke beneath a Venusian *tobac* bush while a slimy-tentacled monster roars down on her intent on doing God-knows-what. And it would end with Gerry going calmly off into the bushes with the alien beastie—because who knows, maybe he *does* have better technique than we do.

—TERRY CARR

...OR SO YOU SAY



Letters intended for publication should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of each sheet, and addressed to Or So You Say Box 409, Falls Church, Va., 22046.

Dear Ted:

There's undoubtedly plenty to complain about in "They've Got Some Hungry Women There," but Seth McEvoy complains inaccurately.

Queer Salvation LaRue isn't a person, she's a caricature of a type—a type I perhaps attempted to satirize but had no intention of demeaning. I didn't feel that Sal was a "loser"—she was an attempted portrayal of a *victim*, an outcast or scapegoat tormented by a decaying colonial society. That much I thought was obvious. McEvoy's inference is nonsense: "... a loser from beginning to end, a reject of society, whose only interest in life seems to be sex with women, treated as a perversion."

For one thing, I had damned little to say about her alleged sex-life, other than a rather sketchy outline of a somewhat more aggressive than usual female personality. If anything I *sympathized* with this unfortunate character, not out of pity but of empathy. I felt strong feelings of identifying with her while writing the story. If Sal's a "reject and loser," so am I—and with increasingly aggressive pride, even

belligerence. I wasn't "attributing her deficiencies (?) to her sex-life;" I was attributing them to *society*—her society, which (somewhat in disagreement with you, Ted) is at best a distorted reflection or magnification of our own. Similarities aren't difficult to find . . . sf daydreams of a thousand alternate futures, but all are based in present social reality, technological extrapolations, and so forth, and it's a little jejune to suggest one had the insight or prescience to conceive of a totally different world in what was really a pretty insignificant story, albeit one that made its point (apparently lost on McEvoy). The point was that decaying societies tend to seek out "losers" and scapegoats on whom to blame society's own sins—a point I hardly think the feminist movement would care to contest. If McEvoy is so appalled by the characterization of Sal and her world (admittedly juvenile and overblown in numerous respects; you have to remember I wrote the thing six years ago), is it because he's the staunch defender of the godalmighty Honor of womankind, or because he recognizes the distorted reflection of a sick world which has kissed his ass, protected him with repressive laws aimed at the lower classes, and lavished on him privileges available only to the ruling elite? The prick of conscience, one doth

fear . . . all carefully sublimated and concealed beneath a patina of self-evading, self-righteous indignation. (Parenthetically, East Lansing, from which he writes, is one of the country's more flagrant upper-middle-class ivory towers. What're we supposed to think he's doing there, scrubbing floors?)

On the other hand, I'm not in sympathy with homosexuality or its political manifestation (which indeed is developing power with alarming speed), but I don't believe that *individual* repression is the answer to that, nor that science fiction has much to gain by pretending that sex or sexual perversion doesn't exist. Sfs depiction of sex, however *graphic*, has tended towards caricature or cliché; I think there's nothing more sinister to this than the fact that sf writers, by and large, are lousy writers and lousy observers of life. (Go ahead and scream—it's still true.) If nothing else, "Hungry Women" admitted there *are* things like lesbians, colonial exploitation, and ruthless exploitation of both individuals and subject societies, and it can't be too huge a step from that germinal admission to a broader fictional examination of class oppression and intolerance, on Earth or off.

PG WYAL
San Diego, CA 92104

In response to my editorial comment on his July letter, Seth McEvoy writes, "You really know how to hurt a guy. I worry a lot these days about losing my sense of humor, but I just didn't think that "They've Got Some Hungry Women There . . ." was funny. Did you? . . . I didn't complain about "Border Town" because I hadn't read it—I took a look at it today but it didn't insult anything particularly except my sense of good writ-

ing. . . ." McEvoy also sent along a copy of his new fanzine, a single-sheet titled Pig Runner's Digest which is described in its colophon as "Intended as a discussion forum for writers on the topic of sexism and sexual preference in science fiction." In it McEvoy appears to be trying to present himself as stf fandom's #1 Feminist. In my opinion, feminism on this level is as meaningful as the student radicalism of the sixties was—that is to say, it is meaningful for the most part only to the participants, who end up lecturing each other on verities about which they already agree. The sense of humor revealed in Pig Runner's Digest is not what I'd call side-splitting, either; but then, True Believers are rarely known for their sense of humor.—TW

Dear Ted,

I have been a frequent reader and admirer of AMAZING and find you to be generally the most interesting and honest of the editors. I've been amused by your feuds and sometimes enraged by your all-too-frequent arrogance. But I cannot let what passes for the May issue go by in silence.

I'll give you this much: you do have guts but I don't want to hear you ever wondering again why your circulation is so low. The May issue says it all, highlighted by "Under the Mad Sun."

This is the first opportunity I've had to read any of your work and I assure you it will be my last. I do agree with you on one thing: the illustration was really beautiful. After that, all similarity to beauty abruptly ends. From start to finish, the story is riddled with problems in style and simple plot. You utilize the oldest techniques in history and it shows. And the ending reminds me of some satiristic writing advice I heard once:

when in doubt at the end of a story, have them all run over by a truck.

To be specific: the first offensive thing was the shower scene. Not, god knows, in an obscene sense but in a technical one. Ted! Is there no other way for you to describe your characters than for them to stare in the mirror at themselves? Even carbon copy gothic novel starts in the same exact way and makes about as much sense.

About halfway through the story I became aware your characters were acting very strangely. I had hoped for something more but your answer was certainly simple: they were all crazy. There are a few little holes in this also. For instance, if this red sun was affecting even the local race (as you claimed) wouldn't it have been noticed when colonization first began? How far does this insanity go? Wouldn't they all have been gibbering idiots? And what about Zyd's concern for the girl's feelings after the rape? Does that fit in with your scenario of egotistic neuroses? Or was it just an excuse for one of your puppet characters to make a long speech?

Well, I wasn't convinced. As I say, it takes a lot of guts to buy your own story and its lack of quality costs you a certain amount of respect in my eyes.

I still admire your editorial abilities but I think you'd better stick to them until you come up with a logical plot.

On the other hand, "Night of the Vampyres" was excellent and could easily have filled the featured position you so graciously gave yourself.

ROBERTA FLOYD-KRESSE

608 7th st.

Clarkston, Wa. 99403

Although "Under the Mad Sun" generated a largely favorable response from those readers who wrote in, quite obviously I'm not going to please all our readers all the time—and

didn't, this time. Nonetheless, I'll not apologize for the story, which I obviously liked better than you did, inasmuch as your criticism of it is on at least one count completely off base: Nowhere in the story do I claim that the red sun produces insanity in the native race, nor does it.—TW

Dear Mr. White,

Oh, good grief. Is it likely that a "great alien ship . . . involving forces too mighty even for . . . star traveling sciences to consider" would be "reduced to . . . fragments of tortured metal and twisted beams," leaving "warped and glassy sheets of . . . ruins" when it "went up in" its "blaze of glory," the result of being "almost certainly . . . destroyed by implosion, not explosion"? (Refer to AMAZING, July 1975, "The Way of Your Fathers", page 59.) I think not, not by implosion, almost certainly.

In reference to "Lord of Rays", page 75, there is no such thing as a one-way mirror which is transparent to light coming from one side and reflective to light coming from the other. One-way mirrors as we know them are equally partially transparent on both sides, but appear one-way when one side is in darkness relative to the other so that the brightness on the other side overwhelms whatever feeble illumination comes from the dark side, making whatever is happening on the dark side invisible to irises contracted by bright light. Thus, the outer hull of Helios 5 was not "analogous" to a one-way mirror. It was a truly new invention. Fine story, too. Robert F. Young is writing very well these days.

Harlan Ellison's "Starlost" tale is still amusing even though I have heard it on the radio twice. I shall support the Amazing Stamp. The rest of the issue was not worth reading,

AMAZING

except for "Marune" which I will be able to evaluate more fully after I have read.

STEPHEN HAMMOND
10000 Imperial Hwy, G103
Downey, CA 90242

Dear Ted,

I found Harlan Ellison's article *very* interesting as it answered most of the objections I had to *The Starlost* as well as explaining why there are so few good programs of any sort on TV. I also agree with Harlan that very few people have the Science Fiction mentality. This is one of the reasons that your slush pile stories all sound the same. Of course I only saw two episodes of *the Starlost*, the first one (I agree 100% about that six mile dome) and one in which the inhabitant of a local solar system had landed in and was exploring the Ark. Of course he could not help out in any way or bring someone else to help—yecchh.

I think your policy of charging 25¢ is reasonable. A couple of years ago I helped out a friend by correcting a lot of his English students composition and short story papers and I've never seen so much bad writing in my life. And these were by College upperclassman. I would imagine you get slightly better submissions as Science Fiction readers would be slightly more word orientated than is average. Also if the 25¢ helps pay someone's salary so that he is able to spend some time on each story, it is well worth it.

I'm always glad to see a Jack Vance story. He has the most bizarrely baroque imagination that I've ever come across. In his hands the strange becomes everyday. In fact, I even read the first half of the serial; something I usually don't do. Now if only you could get Marion Zimmer Brad-

ley to write for you. Your novelet in the May AMAZING was a nice twist on these "old, old planet under dying red sun" stories.

LYNNE HOLDOM
51 Leonard Place
Wayne, New Jersey 07470

Dear Ted White:

I heartily approve of your attempts at radicating the term 'sci-fi' from the vocabulary. Although stf may not be the answer, it is certainly preferable to 'sci-fi'. Even when that term is not used in a derogatory vein it can be irritating. For instance in a recent issue of *People* magazine they mentioned in an article on George MacDonald that he had written a few 'sci-fi' novels. Or when the Science-Fiction Book Club, in advertising the book *Early Del Rey* (can't let Asimov beat him out), called a 'sci-fi master'.

The July issue was quite interesting. Robert F. Young came through again with the story "Lord of Rays", although this might have fit better in *Fantastic*. There seems to be a growing interest in the mysteries of Egypt, that is showing up in the written media. For instance the recent series of articles by Ken Keasy in *The Rolling Stone* on the tombs of Egypt. Then too there is the excellent album by Ray Manzarek, formerly the organist for the Door, entitled *The Golden Scarab*, which combines Egyptian mythology with some really fine rock and jazz. It is hard to find, but it is worth the search.

I hate to dig up an old issue, but I would like to protest the proposed \$50 fee at the door for MidAmeriCon. It is definitely unfair to anyone (and that includes a lot of people) who can't plan ahead more than one full year, or for those prospective fans who will be totally turned off by this price. What makes this particularly

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unfair is that the Kansas City committee failed to mention that they would make this maneuver in their campaign for the bid. I sent in early to catch the \$6 membership, but already in May it was moved up to \$10, and by the time this letter sees print, God knows what it will be.

If the problem is trying to cut down the size of the con, that's absurd. Discon II was by anyone's standards *big*, and yet I had a great time. I met scores of authors, most of them of no small fame, and had a great discussion with Leigh Brackett on everything from writing to farmlife. I met many fans, and together we made the convention one of the best times we have had (I wonder if Ellison still remembers the empty beer can a rowdy

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group of us at the spectators end of the Awards Banquet awarded to him as the first 'Harlan Award') I managed somehow to talk my sister into going with me, and turned her from a slightly interested reader into a hardcore fan. But if the admission at the door had been \$50 that would never have happened.

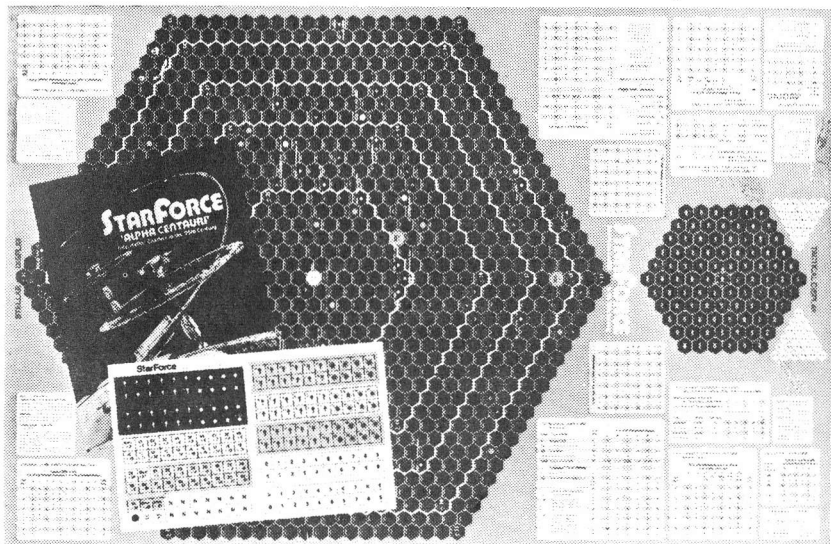
My point is that the outrageous door admission the MidAmeriCon is asking will exclude many present and potential fans from attending. And *no* one should miss a worldcon.

And finally, congratulations on fifty years!

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